

# What is sex... if love is possible?

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There have been already some studies on the common traits of the Slovene Lacanians (for example, Motoh and Irwin, 2014) – most notably on the work of the “troika” composed by Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič. Their shared project of extracting the political and philosophical consequences of Lacanian psychoanalysis spans now more than thirty years of work. What has been less investigated, however, are the subtle, but relevant distinctions in their diverse approaches to this project. In this short review of Zupančič’s latest book, *What is Sex?* (2017), I would like to focus on the singularity of her intellectual trajectory, devoting special attention to two interrelated aspects: Zupančič’s decision to situate psychoanalysis strictly within the field of sexuality and love and her distinctive engagement with Alain Badiou’s philosophy.

We will begin by examining an important ambivalence in the concept of “the sexual”, most apparent in the very first steps of her research on sexuality, in *Why Psychoanalysis?*, in order to introduce an underlying influence of Badiou’s philosophy that not always coincides with her explicit engagement with his project. This alternative thread will require us to take a short detour to examine an important difference between two forms of relating psychoanalysis and philosophy, one that owes more to the Millerian understanding of psychoanalysis, another derived from Badiou’s critique of Miller and Lacan. My wager is that it is only by considering the challenges posed by Badiou’s theory of the compossibility of generic procedures that one can understand some of the crucial contributions of Zupančič to the reconstruction of key psychoanalytic ideas, concerning its ontological, ethical and

aesthetic dimensions. This will lead us to a brief overview of the theme of tragedy and comedy between *Ethics of the Real* and her more recent works. Finally, we will return to the central theme of sexuality, but from an alternative perspective: I would like to conclude this review by arguing that even though Zupančič is probably the philosopher who took the furthest the theme of the “Two” in psychoanalysis, there is still one more step to take in this direction, only implicitly touched upon in her work - the one which thinks the “twoness” of psychoanalysis itself, caught up in an irreducible tension between the impossible as “cause” and as “consistency”.

### Where is sex?

The project of investigating “the very nature and status of sexuality” (2017, 1) was set out by Zupančič almost ten years before the publication of *What is Sex?*, with her previous book-length study, *Why Psychoanalysis?* (2008b). This short book serves as an important point of inflection in her intellectual trajectory. Divided into three “interventions”, the project not only condensed some of the crucial results of her previous investigations - an essay on causation and freedom recuperating themes already at play in *Ethics of the Real* (2000) and *The Shortest Shadow* (2003), and a study on the relation between comedy and the uncanny continuing the brilliant *The Odd One In* (2008a) - but it also sets out, through the opening essay, titled “Sexuality and Ontology”, the stakes for *What is Sex?*. However, more than simply juxtapose previous and future research projects, *Why Psychoanalysis?* helps us to recognize a certain *asymmetry* between the ethical, aesthetic and ontological investigations - a certain overdetermination of the first two by the latter.

The essay dedicated to the question of sexuality begins with a petition of principle:

“The question of sexuality should indeed be brutally put on the table in any serious attempt at associating philosophy and psychoanalysis. Not only because it usually constitutes the ‘hard core’ of their dissociation, but also because not giving up on the matter of sexuality constitutes the *sine qua non* of any true psychoanalytic stance, which seems to make this dissociation all more absolute or insurmountable” (Zupančič, 2008b: 6)

We could surely interpret this claim in line with the more general project of the Slovene Lacanians, but I believe that a much more productive reading is possible if we focus on the fact that Zupančič is not only joining the ranks to defend the concrete universality of psychoanalysis as a “theory and practice that confronts

individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence" (Žižek, 2006: 3), but rather affirming that sexuality is the operating concept which allows for the transitivity between the concrete and the universal *within* analytical matters. There is a subtle, but crucial difference between claiming, like Žižek does, that "neuroses, psychoses and perversions have the dignity of fundamental philosophical attitudes towards reality" (ibid 4) and affirming that sexuality is the "*sine qua non* of any true psychoanalytic stance". While the former statement already supposes that the universality of psychoanalysis is a matter for philosophy, the latter goes a step further, claiming that sexuality is what ties the particularities of analytical thinking to *its own* universality.

This might seem like a mere shift in emphasis – and, certainly, these are not incompatible claims - but what the above-mentioned passage renders intelligible is that the task of "associating" psychoanalysis and philosophy must face an additional challenge when we do not simply map these two fields onto the division between singularity and universality, but rather accept that psychoanalysis has its own access to universality. This challenge affects in a profound way the very delimitation of what pertains to the psychoanalytic realm: is philosophy convoked here because there is an *unthinkable* kernel in psychoanalysis - only accessible from an external point of view - or is philosophy interested in the analytic field on account of what it *thinks*? We will try to unfold some of the consequences of this distinction as we go along, but for now it is enough to that Zupančič's emphasis on sexuality places it in two "spaces" at once: as that which justifies the interest of philosophy in "associating" itself with psychoanalysis *and* as what functions, within psychoanalysis itself, as the marker of its own autonomy, the index of its "dissociation" and independence from philosophy. The problem with sexuality for philosophy, as Zupančič argues, is not that it is "too particular" to be of philosophical interest, as if philosophy was too serious to condescend to these "dirty matters" – if anything, philosophy has become increasingly obsessed with finding a place within itself for the small and the ordinary, very much in line with our "progressive liberalism of morals" (2008b:11). Rather, the reason why sexuality is both a necessary and an impossible dimension for philosophy to consider when it seeks to establish an articulation with psychoanalysis - the cause of their association *and* dissociation - is that it provides psychoanalysis with a different, non-philosophical *position* from which to think universality: an "operator of the inhuman" (ibid 12) that seems to bypass the mediation of the concept.

This double condition of sexuality in psychoanalysis, the crossing point between its singular and universal dimensions, is enriched by another, correlate

ambivalence, also mentioned in the early stages of Zupančič's research. Even though "Sexuality and Ontology" goes through a detailed analysis of Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* and important passages of Lacan's eleventh seminar, the question of the ontological import of sexuality begins and ends with the problem of where to position oneself *within* psychoanalysis. This is particularly clear in the concluding lines of the essay - which were later recuperated as part of the introduction to *What is Sex?* (2017: 3-4).

The greater part of the text is dedicated to introduce the sexual as "the concept of a radical ontological impasse" (2008b: 16), demonstrating that "Freud discovered human sexuality as a problem (in need of explanation) and not as something with which one could eventually explain every (other) problem" (2008b: 7), subverting the common idea that psychoanalysis would reach towards generality by filling the world with sexual meaning. Instead, Zupančič masterfully argues how, for both Freud and Lacan, sexuality is not something which renders our ethical and cultural motivations inconsistent, distorting our path towards some hidden satisfaction, but something which is itself inherently inconsistent and only "becomes what it is" through these mediations which seek to oppose or integrate it into a meaningful horizon - in one of her greatest one-liners: sexuality is "a paradox-ridden deviation from a norm that does not exist" (ibid).

What interests us here, however, is that, after arriving at the sexual as the concept of a "fundamental inconsistency of the objective world itself" (ibid: 16), she shifts her attention to the related, but irreducible, question of psychoanalysis' own relation to this paradoxical objectivity. This is a telling shift also because it brings into play one of the few mentions to Althusser and Marxism in her work:

"In any social conflict, a 'neutral' position is always and necessarily the position of the ruling class: it seems 'neutral' because it has achieved the status of the 'dominant ideology,' which always strikes us as self-evident. The criterion of objectivity in such a case is thus not neutrality, but the capacity of theory to occupy a singular, specific, point of view within the situation. In this sense, the objectivity is linked here to the very capacity of being 'partial' or 'partisan.' As Althusser puts it: when dealing with a conflictual reality (which is the case for both Marxism and psychoanalysis) one cannot see everything from everywhere (*on ne peut pas tout voir de par tout*); some positions dissimulate this conflict, and some reveal it. One can thus only discover the essence of this conflictual reality by occupying certain positions, and not others, in this very conflict.

What I would like to suggest is that the sexual is precisely such a 'position' in psychoanalysis." (Zupančič 2008b:19)

There is here a slight change of perspective here, from the analysis of the "concept" of the sexual – as the name of an ontological impasse *for a subject* – to the analysis of the sexual as a "position" which unveils a conceptual field – that is, the sexual as a site *for psychoanalysis*. Perhaps we could recuperate here a distinction dear to German Idealism (Hegel 1977: 155-173): to say that the sexual is the concept of a "conflictual reality" is to think the "objectivity of the subject-object" – to locate the indeterminate, inconsistent impasse of subjectivity within material reality – while to say that the sexual is "a position within psychoanalysis" is to think the "subjectivity of the object-subject" – to think how certain positions allow us to participate in the constitution of a space of thinking which both touches and constitutes something of the real. The question of the ontological import of sexuality – the problem of the "what" of sex – is here transformed into the question of a *site*, marked by the inconsistency at the heart of sexuality, from which the reality of the unconscious is thinkable – that is, turned into the problem of the "where" of sex.

This shift recuperates the ambivalence at stake in the Zupančič's introductory remarks to "Sexuality and Ontology", concerning the internal circuit between singularity and universality *within* psychoanalysis, dividing it into the analysis of a concept *within* psychoanalysis and the analysis of the position of psychoanalysis *within* reality. It is my wager that it is only when considering this ambivalence at the heart of Zupančič's treatment of the sexual – both as a concept and as a position – that the stakes of *What is Sex?* can be properly grasped. Were we to locate sexuality in psychoanalysis exclusively as the analytical name for an ontological impasse, then the universality at stake in psychoanalysis – the ontological import of sexuality conceived *as ontological* – would only be accessible for philosophers, and the passage from the singular to the universal would be isomorphous to the moving away from psychoanalysis. It is only when sexuality is also understood as a partisan position – an engaged stance which one must affirm in order to have access to a conflictual totality – that psychoanalysis emerges as a field capable of being the *address* – rather than only the *object* – of a claim to universality.

Even though this passage was reworked and utilized in the first pages of *What is Sex?*, the question of the sexual as the marker of an engagement which participates in the *consistency* of psychoanalysis is not often thematized in her latest book, nor in her work in general. However, rather than take this for a sign of its marginal status, I want to argue that it points to the underlying tension in her

trajectory, an oscillation between treating the universal import of psychoanalysis as an object for philosophy and as something which psychoanalysis itself is capable of thinking. A tension which is most clearly visible in her recourse to Badiou's philosophy.

## Alain Badiou as a condition for psychoanalysis

All of the members of the famous Slovene "troika" are known for their common project of extracting the philosophical consequences of psychoanalysis, which is then used as a basis for a profound rethinking of the ontological and epistemological commitments of Marxist politics, contemporary art, etc. They are also known for having recognized in Alain Badiou a "fellow traveler" and, in his work, an important interlocutor. Not only was Slavoj Žižek responsible for the introduction of Badiou's work to an English-speaking audience, through long critical essays and a whole chapter in his *Ticklish Subject* (Žižek 1999: 127-170), but both Mladen Dolar and Zupančič have also engaged with his work on several accounts, using his ideas both as a comparative stance against which to develop their own positions and as the example of another philosopher who shares some of their main intellectual and political commitments. However, unlike Žižek and Dolar, who concluded their studies in psychoanalysis with Jacques-Alain Miller in Paris and gravitated towards Badiou's project later on, Zupančič wrote her doctoral dissertation under his direct supervision – a thesis which would later be revised and published as the *Ethics of the Real* – and has not only referred to Badiou as a philosophical and political ally, but as a relevant interpreter of Lacan.

The trajectory and stakes of Badiou's engagement with Lacan remain poorly documented, and this is certainly not the place to fill this unfortunate lacuna<sup>1</sup>. It is important, however, to note that a common thread running throughout his work - from his confrontation with Jacques-Alain Miller, in the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, through the discussion of Lacan's "Logical Time" in *Theory of the Subject* (2009) all the way to *Being and Event* (2005) - has been the question of the *regionalization* of psychoanalysis, which, I would like to argue, is an innovative way to connect the "what" to the "where" of the unconscious. So let us take a quick detour and reconstruct the basic tenets of Badiou's position.

Let us consider, for example, how Badiou's early critique of the concept of "suture", proposed by Miller as the basic operator of Lacan's logic of the signifier (Peden and Hallward ed. 2012: 91-101), did not lead him to reject it, but rather to demonstrate that Miller's (and Lacan's) mistake was to generalize it beyond the

confines of properly psychoanalytic concern: “must we therefore renounce the concept of suture? It is, on the contrary, a matter of prescribing its function by assigning to it its proper domain” (ibid: 171). What this means is that, under specific conditions, proper to the analytic practice and theory, it is consistent to work through the vicissitudes of speech as if it was guided exclusively by a discursive principle which inversely articulates consistency and desire: within a certain domain, the perfect enchainment of statements does in fact imply the disappearance of the real as cause, and effectively points to the repression of the impossible kernel of desire. The ideological effect of psychoanalysis emerges when, disregarding its own *regional* conditions, it generalizes its conceptual framework to other domains, such as pure logic or revolutionary politics. This is not to say that psychoanalysis has nothing to add to non-psychoanalytic fields, but that this generalization cannot bypass the concern with the *partisan position* which analysts assume in order to *constitute* a totality structured according to the logic of the signifier.

It is this underlying theme - the double imperative to recognize both psychoanalysis' contribution to a general theory of the subject as well as its *regional* status as a theory and practice - that helps us to understand, for instance, his supplementation of Lacan's theory of the real, as proposed in *Theory of the Subject*. There, Badiou argues that the improper generalization of the role of structure in psychoanalytic practice has led to a conservative view of politics, espoused by many Lacanians: if we simply universalize the Lacanian theory of the “real as cause” – as that which only emerges as dispersion and impasse – we lose any capacity to think the possibility of durable political constructions which truly affect social structures (Badiou 2009: 245-247). But rather than dismissing Lacan's concept of the real, Badiou seeks, once more, to regionalize it, to treat it as *one mode* in which the real can be articulated to the symbolic - as he puts it: “I find no fault with all of this, except that I am not swayed by an order of things in which all thought is devoted to the inspection of that which subordinates it to the placement of an absence” (ibid: 110). In order to do absorb the innovations of the “structural dialectic” without accepting it as a general ontological framework, Badiou takes a step back to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, developing a general theory of variable relations between structure and otherness (ibid: 22-28), and then treats the situation in which the real emerges as “the absent cause” as a particular case of certain structures, a situation which now does not preclude the possibility of other modes of engagement with the real, as when the real emerges not as a dispersive force, but as a site for durable invention of a new consistency (ibid: 224-233).

A similar strategy of regionalization underlies Badiou's later work, beginning with the magnum opus *Being and Event*, where it leads to the theory of "generic procedures" (Badiou 2005: 16-17). The theory of the truth-procedures brings together the critique of improper generalizations - when an otherwise legitimate subjective procedure takes itself for the general theory of the subject - and the theory of subjective consistency, further developed in *Theory of the Subject*. The combination of these two principles - that there are fields capable of touching on the real of a situation, but that this is conditioned by their own partisan engagements - is translated here into the affirmation that the circuit between singularity and universality takes place immanently within each discipline, and that a philosophical apprehension of these non-philosophical claims to universality depend on philosophy's capacity not to "suture" itself to any of these procedures.

Let us take the example of politics: for Badiou, politics is a form of thought, which requires no recourse to political philosophy in order to establish for itself the measure of its inventions and failures, or to criticize its historical deadlocks. Philosophy is rather charged with a double task of "thinking the thought" which constitutes a political procedure and to do it in such a way that this does not prevent there being other forms of thought - art, love and science - nor other forms of political thinking still unknown to us. This double injunction is encapsulated in the operation of "compossibility" (Badiou, 1999: 61-68), which spells out his novel theory of how to articulate philosophy to its non-philosophical conditions. To think in terms of compossibility is to both admit the autonomy of a form of thought, the interior transit of its theory and practice, of its critical and constructive capacities, as well as the existence of other, heterogeneous forms of thinking - which also means that any "association" of a non-philosophical procedure to philosophy must respect and account for the "dissociation" or independence between this condition and its philosophical apprehension.

Even though Lacan played such a crucial role in the theoretical construction of the generic procedures and the theory of compossibility, the status of psychoanalysis in Badiou's philosophy is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Badiou defines Lacan as an "anti-philosopher" (Badiou 2013) - as a thinker who fused psychoanalysis' existential position with its philosophical consequences - but, on the other, he claims that psychoanalysis pertains to the procedure of love - "the only thinking of love since Plato" (Badiou 2008: 179). Many commentators have dispelled this ambiguity one way or another, either claiming that psychoanalysis *as such* is an anti-philosophy (Clemens 2013), or that Lacan himself was a philosopher (Žižek 2012: 18). Badiou, however, seems to dwell quite well in this disparity, having no



problem to accept a *third* option, namely, that *Lacan as a thinker* was incapable of accepting the status of *psychoanalytic thinking* as being part of a regional procedure – this is a position which clearly informs, for example, his take on Freud in *The Century* (Badiou 2007: 68-80), his debate with Lacan in *Subject and Infinity* (Badiou 2008: 211-227) and his confrontation with Jean-Claude Milner (Badiou 2013).

This brief reconstruction of Badiou's theory of compossibility is important not only because it helps us to further systematize the "ambivalence" we have recognized in Zupančič's work on sexuality, but also because it spells out a model of articulation that is informed by different commitments than Žižek's basic strategy of how to organize the relations between psychoanalysis and philosophy. Elsewhere, I have highlighted the "borromean structure" of Slavoj Žižek's theoretical space (Tupinambá in Hamza ed. 2015: 159-179) – the way Žižek establishes connections between philosophy, politics and psychoanalysis by adhering to a double principle: the principle of *immanent transition*, which states that each field formulates problems which are only consistently thinkable from the perspective of other fields of thought, and the principle of *non-complementarity*, which conditions the passage between any two of these fields to the mediation of a third. This is precisely the sort of formal arrangement between philosophy and psychoanalysis which leads Žižek to claim, as I have previously mentioned, that "neuroses, psychoses and perversions have the dignity of fundamental philosophical attitudes towards reality" (Žižek 2006: 4) - this special "dignity" is not thinkable *within psychoanalysis*, but it becomes consistent as an object of thought *for philosophy* – via the mediation of dialectical materialism.

To understand the novelty of Žižek's position, it is essential to recognize that his proposal is an alternative solution to the impasses of Miller's own previous solution to the relation between psychoanalysis and politics - the theory of suture, which, under the guise of relating these two "discourses of overdetermination" (Peden and Hallward, 2012: 80) through a "logic of the origin of logics" (ibid: 92), the logic of the signifier, improperly generalized psychoanalysis as the legislator of what politics can and cannot think. Instead of articulating psychoanalysis and politics via a general logic of discourse, Žižek introduced Hegelian philosophy as a third, equally standing field of thought, and de-stratified the articulation of the three fields into a space of possible transformations. It was, nevertheless, a solution conceived within the basic matrix set out by the Millerian reading of Lacan, given that *democratizes* rather than abolishes the possibility of one of the three fields to serve as the site for another's unthought kernel (Žižek 1989: 11-53).

My hypothesis is that Zupančič's work has been less interpellated by the impasses of the Millerian project than by the challenge of living up to the Badiouian conception of psychoanalysis as a condition of philosophy. As we have just seen, it is Badiou's theory of compossibility which requires philosophy to accept (a) that psychoanalysis is capable of articulating *for itself* its own inhuman excess, without extrinsic aid, (b) that this capacity does not entail that it thinks *inhumanity in general* and (c) that an association between philosophy and psychoanalysis must respect these two conditions. Accordingly, we have shown that Zupančič's emphasis on the role of sexuality in psychoanalysis as both the "concept" of an ontological inconsistency and the "position" which allows it to make this inconsistency thinkable (a) implies that psychoanalysis has access to the "conflictual reality" it inhabits, (b) that its claim to universality, being tied to a previous partisan engagement, does not entail a direct political, scientific or artistic pertinence, and (c) requires philosophy to not only think what psychoanalysis *is* – the unthought of its theoretical and practical existence – but to think what psychoanalysis *thinks* – that is, to reconstruct, out of its *own* conceptual fabric, the perspective from which it can be perceived as an autonomous procedure.

Zupančič's engagement with Badiou is thus overdetermined by a very interesting and somewhat paradoxical tension. On the one hand, the Badiouian project authorizes her to preserve the autonomy of psychoanalysis from philosophy, as well as from other procedures, in a way that is even more radical than the one we find in the works of Žižek and Dolar. But this means explicitly siding with Lacan *against* Badiou's system, insofar as one must remain *within* psychoanalytic thinking if we are to arrive at its ontological consequences, rather than relying on Badiou's conceptual apparatus. Hence the presupposition, recognizable throughout her work, that psychoanalysis concerns above all the procedure of love (Zupančič 2004: 200) – while we could say that Žižek privileges its relation to politics, and Dolar its relation to art. However, at the same time, Badiou also authorizes us to recognize that Lacan himself was incapable of fully preserving this autonomy, sometimes generalizing analytic concepts outside of their proper domains in order to guarantee their theoretical legibility (for example, through a more or less metaphorical recourse to mathematics). But this means that, in order to remain within psychoanalysis' own "conflictual reality", Zupančič must somehow re-encounter, or reconstruct, the paradoxical autonomy of psychoanalysis – as a theory of an ontological impasse and as a procedure which departs from this inconsistent site – *against* Lacan's own ideological commitments.

## The comedy of impossible consistency

But is psychoanalysis so amenable to a Badiouian treatment - to its consideration as a generic procedure or as part of the procedure of love? We have just seen the paradoxical status of this question: to merely map Badiou's concepts onto psychoanalytic categories - linking "signifier" to "count-as-one", "real" to "event", and so on (Žižek 1999; Chiesa 2006) - is not enough, for such a movement does not accept that Lacan himself already dabbled in a philosophical generalization of his own psychoanalytic theory. Furthermore, it accepts certain conceptual homonymies – like in the case of what Lacan and Badiou call "subject" – which obscure rather than facilitate this investigation. What is required, instead, is to find ways to *pose questions* to psychoanalysis which force it to spell out its own procedural quality, its own view of what it means to put the real of sexuation *to work*.

One of the ways to extract the tenets of a purely psychoanalytic theory of "real consistency" is to investigate the very "grammar" through which it connects and organizes the boundaries of its theoretical space. That is to say, the way psychoanalysis maps for itself the outer bounds of its theory and practice – a task classically associated with aesthetics, insofar as it concerns the way we represent that which lacks representation. This is in fact one of the most crucial traits of the Slovene Lacanians: an increasingly clear break with the "tragic grammar" of psychoanalysis which maps – and restricts – the reach of certain analytical ideas to the themes of the mystic, the sublime and the unsayable. But here too Zupančič's critique of the tragic paradigm and her alternative recourse to comedy – and to Hegel, for that matter – does not lead us outside of psychoanalysis, or outside of the question of love. It rather opens up the possibility for further enriching our comprehension of a possible theory of consistency for psychoanalysis itself.

In her reading of the great Lubitsch movie *Cluny Brown* (Novak, Krečič and Dolar 2014: 165-180), Zupančič analyzes the famous scene where Cluny comes to the train station to say goodbye to Belinski, one of her two love interests, and to tell him she has decided to stay behind with Mr. Wilson, in an idealized relationship in which her impossible desire has no place. After hearing her long soliloquy explaining her decision, Belinski simply tells her to board the train, which she does, without any reflection – and they go away together. Commenting on the paradoxical coincidence between Cluny's passive stance towards Belinski and her courage not to give up on her desire, Zupančič compares two approaches to psychoanalysis, distinguished by their aesthetic commitments:

“In its tragic paradigm ‘to not give up on your desire’ is a subjective and solitary business. It is an heroic enterprise of fidelity (“to a lost cause”), carried out by a subject in the unbroken continuity of her will and determination. This fidelity manifests itself in the fact that nothing comes close to the lost thing, which functions only as a firm criterion of elimination, leading us to conclude of each and every particular thing that “this is not IT”. In comedy, on the other hand, it is clear that “not to give up on your desire” is something more objective than subjective. It involves an interruption of the subject, her ‘absentness’ triggered precisely by an unexpected emergence of this “IT” (as the impossible object). The same time, and precisely because of this interruption, this discontinuity of the subject, it cannot be a solitary business, something that a subject can carry out all by herself. We could say: to not give up on your desire takes (at least) two. We need a little help with this - from, for instance, someone who helps us

Here Zupančič proposes a displacement, from the tragic to the comical paradigm, turning on the axis of a precise question: *how many people it takes not to give up on one's desire?* It is not hard to see that this question ties together, in an internal circuit, the two sides of the ambivalence we initially traced in “Sexuality and Ontology” – it asks: *what are the conditions for the sexual as an ontological impasse to become a partisan position?*

The first answer, articulated in a tragic grammar, organizes the conceptual categories of psychoanalysis in such a way that the ontological import of the sexual *interdicts* its “militant” aspect: the solitude of one’s confrontation with the impossible cause of desire also seals the impossibility of considering psychoanalysis as a procedure – given that there is no space in which this impossibility can be inscribed without suturing this “heroic enterprise” to some imaginary consistency. The second position, which is thoroughly based on the logic of comedy, recognizes that the subjective trajectory of an analysis is in fact mediated, through and through, by a shared objective partisanship with the analyst<sup>2</sup>, and therefore is, at least in principle, compatible with a Badiouian conception of fidelity as the weaving of a new consistency out of the “unexpected emergence” of the impossible.

From this perspective, it is in fact possible to reconstruct a useful arc that ties together the ethical, aesthetic and ontological lines of research in Zupančič’s work. For example, in Zupančič’s detailed engagement with Greek and modern tragedy in *Ethics of the Real*, we already find a critique of the limits of the tragic paradigm for the ethics of psychoanalysis. In a comparison between Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Claudel’s *Sygne de Coufontaine*, she writes:

“As for the ‘ne pas ceder sur son desir’, we can say: the ‘do not give up on your’ is not simply foreign to what the expression ‘to give up on’ implies. Rather, it implies that in order to preserve one thing, one is ready to give up on everything else. In the case of Antigone this implies that she gives (away) everything in order to preserve some final ‘having’. In the end, she realizes herself in this final ‘having’; she merges with it, she becomes herself the signifier of the desire which runs through her, she incarnates this desire. In the case of Sygne, this goes even further. She does not give up on her desire either, but she finds herself in a situation where this demands that she also gives up on this final ‘having’, the signifier of her being, and realizes herself in the ‘not-having’. In the case of Sygne de Coufontaine, ‘not to give up on her desire’ implies precisely that she ‘gives away’ everything.” (Zupančič 2000: 258-259)

The shift here is not one between tragedy and comedy, but between two sorts of tragedy: the Sophoclean paradigm, in which one “gives away everything in order to preserve some final ‘having’”, and the Claudelian one, in which “not to give up on her desire implies precisely that she gives away everything”. Lacan famously claimed that “desire is not articulatable, because it is articulated” (Lacan 2006: 681) – that is, in analysis one does not speak “about” one’s desire, it is desire that “speaks” through what we say. But what Lacan did not develop, and what emerges in Zupančič’s analysis of *Sygne’s* final act, is the question of the “objective” (or de-subjectified) space in which our desire – now subjectively inaccessible – articulates itself, that is, “stops not being written”. *Where* is desire articulating itself when we lose any access to its articulation? This is precisely what the tragic paradigm cannot think – and, appropriately, it is the place where *Ethics of the Real* interrupts its investigation. What the tragic view of psychoanalysis misses – with its absolutization of the singularity of desire, so tempting for us, in that it also assigns philosophy the monopoly of analytic universality – is precisely the comprehension of the ambivalence we have been tracking thus far: the idea that when we cease to *dispose* of desire – of a subjective access to the inconsistency of being – we can still *compose* it – write something of this impossibility in a consistency that only exists insofar as we participate in it.

Even though the “comic turn” remains within the bounds of Freud’s theory of the “witz” and Lacan’s own theory of comedy, it is not hard to recognize how the idea of that a *non-transferential space* whose consistency depends on both analyst and analysand has no name in Lacanian theory – in fact, the whole point of the theory of

the desire of the analyst is to think the removal of any attempt by the analyst to share in the consistency of the analysand's speech. From the standpoint of comedy, however, it is possible to recognize that one's engagement with psychoanalysis – the objective partnership between analyst and analysand, beyond all intersubjectivity – is the “forced pass” through the very real that psychoanalysis localizes as an impasse<sup>3</sup>.

Let us now skip ahead to *What is Sex?*, to see how the theory of comedy - thoroughly developed in *The Odd One In* – comes back as an immanently psychoanalytic answer to both Lacan's reliance on the tragic paradigm and to Badiou's theory of the procedures. In the concluding pages of the book, Zupančič engages in a confrontation between Lacan's and Badiou's projects, comparing their different takes on ontology, on the role of the “void” and on the concept of the real. The comparison does not stem very far, at this point, from other critical engagements by Lacanians with Badiou – specially from Dolar's and Žižek's critiques of Badiou, which are usually variations on the theme of denouncing Badiou's incapacity to consider the ontological import of the death drive. But after proposing several direct conceptual mappings between psychoanalysis and his philosophy, Zupančič analyses the concept of event as it appears *for Lacan*:

“What, then, would be a Lacanian definition of the Event? An Event occurs when something “stops not being written”, as he puts it in Seminar XX. But how? Not by making the impossible possible, but by performing a disjunction of the necessary and the impossible. (...) What takes place with an Event is thus a disjunction that affirms being in its contingency (rather than in its neutrality). Lacan brings in this definition with respect to the event of love, or rather of the love encounter. The latter can have as a consequence that the sexual relation “stops not being written”. Being no longer slips away, but coincides with the “you” that I love. “You are it!”, “You are the being I've always been lacking!” (2017: 134)

This is a slightly different construction: not a comparison between the Lacanian “real” and the Badiouian “event”, but a reconstruction of what Lacan himself has to say about events, the way psychoanalysis itself has thought the scene of engagement with the impossible. The theory of the encounter is Lacan's own theory of the sexual as a “position”, the Lacanian thinking of how the “ontological impasse” that is the lack of sexual relation can “stop not being written” and emerge as a site for partisanship and partnership. But it is at this precise moment that Zupančič also moves away from the mere defense of Lacan, recognizing his

attachment to the tragic paradigm of psychoanalysis, and using comedy to propose a different *psychoanalytic* perspective:

“After making this point, however, Lacan concludes in a rather pessimistic way beyond the temporal suspension of the non-relation, the love encounter has no means of sustaining this suspension in its contingency, hence it attempts to force its necessity. (..) This is, then, the move from contingency to necessity which ‘constitutes the destiny as well as the drama of love’. It is my (im)modest claim – developed elsewhere - that ‘drama’ is a significant word here, and that the comedy of love, or love as comedy, entails a different logic. But if it is indeed to work, the comedy of love is a much more demanding genre than the tragedy or drama of love. (...) What if we reintroduced here the notion of a ‘new signifier’ as precisely that which could make it possible, in this case, to build something on the basis of a love encounter, without obscuring the contingency of (its) being?” (ibid: 135-136)

Zupančič’s “(im)modest claim” is, to put it simply, that comedy is the psychoanalytic *operator of fidelity* – it is comedy that gives us the appropriate “grammar” to track the objective existence of the impossible when its inscription is no longer commensurate with our subjective ‘drama’. Comedy spells out the logic of how we participate in the consistency of something which “goes on not giving up in our desire” even when we no longer have subjective access to it. However, an essential condition for this perspective shift to be possible is for us to include the “comedy of love” within the “proper domain” of psychoanalysis – which, in turn, gives us new means to evaluate what sort of non-fantasmatic partnership is possible between the participants of an analytic setting. Furthermore, rather than extrapolating from psychoanalysis onto the sphere of religion or aesthetics, Zupančič’s theory of comedy forces the idea of *real love* (ibid: 137) into psychoanalysis, requiring no mediation through politics or any particular philosophical project. In fact, she goes as far as claiming that it was Lacan’s *extrinsic* commitments – his “general ‘pessimism’” or “something rooted in his political views” (ibid: 135) – that kept this development from emerging within his own thinking.

## The idea of love

We are now in a position to return to our initial remarks concerning the ambivalence of the sexual in Zupančič’s work with a richer conceptual apparatus. As I have

repeatedly claimed, the brief mention to Althusser in “Sexuality and Ontology” and again in the beginning of *What is Sex?* should not be taken for a mere side-note. They mark a line of enquiry that insists throughout her trajectory, even if rarely thematized as such – an investigation which ties her to the problem of psychoanalysis considered as what Badiou calls a “generic procedure”. After all, the theory of regionalization, in *Mark and Lack*, of the real as consistency, in *Theory of the Subject*, and of the compossibility of procedures, after *Being and Event*, are nothing but an increasingly sophisticated elaboration of what Althusser touched upon with his idea of “conflictual sciences”. What is rather surprising, however, is to realize that, having following this thread all the way through, we end up with two views of psychoanalysis, each “refracting” one of the senses of the sexual: a thinking which *disposes* of a concept of the impossible kernel of sexuality and a thinking which *composes* an idea of real love. More than one psychoanalysis, but less than two.

If we reduce concept of the sexual only to its first facet, we risk hypothesizing the singularity of desire, adopting a tragic attitude towards the theory of non-relation and treating every form of consistency as imaginary. We also let go of the conceptual resources which make the very existence of psychoanalysis as a procedure thinkable for psychoanalysis – assigning philosophy the role of keeper of its inner consistency. On the other hand, if we accept that the “comedy of love” is thinkable *within* the theoretical space of psychoanalysis, we are not “completing” our understanding of Freud and Lacan’s legacy, but rather opening a whole new problematic field.

As Zupančič summarizes it, “we started with sex (in its “impossibility”) and ended with love in its eventual dimension” (139). In other words, we began with the sexual as “concept of an ontological impasse” or inconsistency, and ended with the sexual as an engaged position which gives us access to a consistent treatment of this deadlock - that is, the comedy of love. But is this truly the “order of reasons” at stake here? Arguing what comes before, the objective fidelity to the idea of love or the theory of the sexual qua impossible might seem like a “chicken or egg” scenario, but it is far from it: what is at stake is recognizing that psychoanalysis is not only the theory which thinks the passage from the sexual to the love event, but a theory *which is only possible if an event has taken place*. After all, are we not following here the hypothesis that, were it not for Zupančič’s previous commitment to psychoanalysis as a thinking of the love-procedure, her investigation of the ontological import of sexuality would probably have remained within the limits of the “tragic” paradigm?



Throughout her many books and essays, Zupančič has insisted on thinking through the many expressions of the “irreducible Two” in psychoanalysis: the “two” of enjoyment in *Ethics of the Real* (Zupančič 2000: 249-260), the “two” of the semblance in *The Shortest Shadow* (Zupančič 2003: 150-163), the “two” of the phallic signifier in *The Odd One In* (Zupančič 2008: 183-218) and, finally, the “two” of the sexual itself, as both the impasse and the point of passage of sexuality, in *What is Sex?* (128-144). What I am trying to suggest in this study is that, underlying this trajectory, there also lies the “two” of psychoanalysis as such – both a critical and a constructive procedure, even if these two perspectives remain irreducible, and incommensurate, with each other. For the first, the event of love is, at best, still to take place, but somehow forever out of reach of analytic theory and practice – though its de-substantialized vision of the sexual as an ontological impasse *already presupposes* an engagement which no objective analysis of reality can account for. For the latter, the event of love has already taken place, as the very idea that something can derive the consequences of there being a veritable ontological fracture in our constitution as sexed beings – but this thematization of fidelity as pertaining to the analytic field *blurs the difference* between the engaged partnership that underlies the clinical setting and the one which binds lovers together, losing the specificity of clinical work (Zeihner and McGowan, 2017: 55).

I believe that this last irreducible “twoness” makes itself legible in Zupančič’s remarks on the “capacity of naming” and the role of a “new signifier”, just before the concluding pages of *What is Sex?*. At first, she brings up the question of the “new signifier” as a crucial operation within the procedure of love, as that which would be “capable of naming, and hence sustaining, the minimal difference (contingency) on account of which my lover keeps reminding me of himself” (Zupančič, 2017: 138). Countering the “sublime expectations” of what a new signifier might look like within the love procedure, she uses the example of intimate nicknames given by lovers to each other in a relationship as a use of the signifier which does not work by closing the minimal distinction between the love object and the existing object, but rather “works at generating and maintaining the space for construction at the precarious point of the Event” (ibid). This might be an ordinary example, but it is far from banal or unimportant: what is at stake in such nicknames – when they do serve this particular function - is precisely the shift from the drama of love to its comedy. From the standpoint of the sexual as impasse, signifiers function as a means to represent the subject to the Other – hence the “drama” of the *che voi?*, of finding out what the Other wants from me if I have such and such nickname. However, from the standpoint of the sexual as the possibility of real love, signifiers function as a means

to incorporate the individuals into a love procedure – a loving nickname inscribes us not in the Other, but in the very relationship constituted through our adherence to it. The difference here lies not in the novelty of the signifier – every signifier is both old and new, in a way – but rather on the *form of otherness* in which it “stops being not written”: if it seeks to signify the lack of sexual relation or if it is declared *from that position*.

Zupančič's last word on the topic, however, does not concern the comic interiority of the couple's intimacy, but rather the more general challenge of finding signifiers “that name something about our reality for the first time, and hence make this something an object of the world, and of thought” (ibid: 139). This shift, I believe, is a good example of the sort of open question which considering psychoanalysis as a thinking of real love brings to the fore: what distinguishes, if anything, the role of naming in the aftermath of a love-encounter from the act of naming “something about our reality for the first time” which constituted the Freudian event to begin with? Not the quality of signifiers, but rather the space in which that difference makes a difference – a couple is a certain form of partnership built out of the Other's inconsistency, but could we not say that psychoanalysis itself, as a certain institutional space, is another? After all, has psychoanalysis – spread across its many couches everywhere – not constituted itself an alternative address, a partner which is capable of joining us in the inscription of impossible names in the world?

The proposal that the “two” of psychoanalysis – its existence oriented by an impossible cause and by an impossible consistency – is more than an underdeveloped ambivalence in the way sexuality appears in analytic thinking, has the strange implication that psychoanalysis, as a clinical practice, might rely more than it knows on the organized commitment of both analysts and analysands to the forcing of new form of love into existence. It is a strange idea, but it is also quite funny.



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- <sup>1</sup> Though an important contribution is about to be published, Reza Naderi's *Infinity and the Subject*.
- <sup>2</sup> There is a fundamental ambiguity, in fact, in Lacan's own original formulation of this famous statement in his seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: even though it has been taken as a sort of general ethical imperative, it was first formulated in the context of a theory of the desire and position of the *analyst*. A study of this ambiguity can be found in my contributions to Hamza (ed.) 2014 and Zeiher & McGowan (eds.) 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> See Tupinambá 2014: 247-287.
- <sup>4</sup> It is my wager, in fact, that a truly novel use of Badiou's project for psychoanalysis should depart not from the homonymous category of the subject, but from the further differentiation that the grammar of infinity allows us to impose onto the concept of the Other and the object a.

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