

Yes! And...

Between freedom and constraints
in improvisational comedy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the question: Why does improvisational comedy make people feel free? By drawing on psychoanalysis, in dialogue with comedy studies and Marxist political economy, the thesis surveys the structure of improvisational comedy and discovers the productive tension that exists between freedom and constraints. The thesis charts the psychoanalytic approaches to freedom in order to problematise the signifier “freedom”. It argues that the sense of freedom that improvisers, or “players”, experience in improv arises from a range of factors. Drawing on Lacanian approaches to language, the thesis argues that the indeterminacy of language and the functions of metaphor and metonymy are central to the generation of incongruous meaning and comic effects. It maintains that improv allows for making “impossible choices”, acts that set players apart from everyday life. It suggests that the retroactive fixing and refixing of meaning of signifiers creates an unusual temporality of meanings. The “event-like” structure of improv is a significant factor in allowing both players and audience to experience a measure of freedom in the improvising space.

Furthermore, the thesis argues that incongruity is a motor of the comic in improv and is generated by ambiguities in language and the retroactive transformation of meanings that improv encourages. Laughter in improv is ambivalent – it can both guide and ratify the realities created by improvisors, but also mock them, or reward one over others, thus interrupting the imaginary unity of the improvising group. It further argues that the real limits of freedom in improv lie outside the improv space in the logic of capital accumulation which has commodified improv and transformed it into an industry. The thesis suggests that overcoming this limit will require lessons that can be learned from improv, in terms of making impossible choices and improvising new worlds.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction: why improv?

Improviseational comedy, or improv as it is commonly known, first caught my curiosity in 2011, when I attended an Upright Citizens Brigade show called *ASSSSCAT* in New York. Up until then I had a strong interest in stand-up comedy, but I had not experienced a live improvised show. There was an almost ritualistic element to getting into the show; I had to queue for at least 45 minutes outside the venue for a free standby ticket and in the queue, I got talking to people that went to the show every Sunday afternoon, as if it were a religious experience, and they spoke of the cast as if they were old friends. As the show began there was a build-up of excitement about what to expect; for both performers and players, there was a sense that improv was something you could go to regularly, repeatedly, with wildly different outcomes every time. The performers come out to the stage and asked the audience for a suggestion, which one performer then improvised a monologue with. The suggestion and the performer's monologue were then used by all the other performers to improvise a series of scenes. Observing it was electrifying in a way, since I had no idea what I was watching, but it felt fun and chaotic. The way in which the performance was delivered in a naturalistic setting without props, and the colloquial language used, created a safe and familiar space. The performers seemed confident, but they were also trying out things they had not done before and therefore were at the mercy of each other and the audience. Not being able to figure out what the improvisers were going to do next created in me a sense of wonder about this form of entertainment.

Since then, I've gone to several improv shows and my interest in it led me to an improv class myself. I signed up with 'Funny Women', a group that runs comedy workshops and events for women. When I got to my class, I was greeted by the

instructors and was introduced to the group. We had the opportunity to learn how to improvise through the structure of games. The first game we performed was “New Choice”, in which the instructor gives us a scenario and we then improvised a scene around that. In the middle of the performance the instructor would yell ‘new choice’, then we had to change at least one thing we are doing as our character. This would be repeated for a little while and the time between each ‘new choice’ would get gradually shorter. My performance felt clunky, and I worried I was in at the deep end with strangers. The next game was called “Status”; we were grouped into pairs in which one participant was a doctor and the other a patient and were expected to act according to our given social status. I was the patient, and I was given 80% status (100% being the highest status) and the next scene had to switch my patient status from 80% to 20%. Therefore, if my performance was not funny until then, it was surely going to be funny since I had to flip the way in which I presented myself. Switching status during a performance created a funny moment as I had to figure out where I stood in the performance and what I had to do next, and the shift in perspective created a moment of incongruity in the scene as a whole. The last game we performed was called ‘Translation’, in which my partner spoke in gibberish and I had to translate what they said. By then, I was comfortable with the people in the room and eased into character a little bit more. I was still nervous about speaking on behalf of my partner and translating their nonsense into a sensible speech for the audience. This awkwardness must have been funny since the audience were laughing and it felt good to hear that.

During the translation game, it struck me that while I had the freedom to say anything during my translation of my partner’s speech, I was nervous because I did not want to offend them. This got me thinking about how much freedom performers and comedians really have during a performance. While the group professed to creating moments of freedom, the experience made me realise that there were in fact a range of constraints in place. Obviously, the games’ structures, the rules of the game, but also the laughter of others and the presence of others in the space, whether playing or watching, had an influence on what I did. I was able to reflect on my own enjoyment of being in a group, creating something together and hearing laughter from the audience. It also got me thinking about *ASSSSCAT*, the queue outside the theatre, indicating its popularity and the transformative energy inside it. It raised in me the question – what is it about improvisation that makes people feel “free”, despite the evidence of multiple constraints on this supposed freedom?

In this thesis, I will answer this question by exploring the structures of improv and the way in which freedom and constraints operate in and through them. My research indicates that the desire for freedom and the constraints imposed exist in a highly productive tension; indeed, that without the constraints, there would be no freedom at all. However, I also find that there exist fundamental limits to this productivity; that at a certain point, some constraints become a limit to the exercise of freedom in improv. In doing so, this thesis makes a contribution to the study of improv, since, as I will show in this and later chapters, the question of freedom in improv and the relationship between freedom and constraints is rather taken for granted – that is, it is accepted but not explained, nor theorised. In theoretical terms, this thesis makes an original contribution by bringing into dialogue improvisational comedy and psychoanalysis, which is the main framework that I work through. While there are a number of examples of the dialogue between psychoanalysis and the study of comedy in general (Freud 1905; Zupančič 2008; Gherovici and Steinkoler 2016; McGowan 2017; Bown 2018), there has been almost nothing written bringing psychoanalysis into dialogue with improv; this is particularly unusual since, as I will explain throughout the thesis, there are striking affinities between psychoanalysis and improv at the level of structure and practice. Moreover, the two other key theoretical areas that contribute to my analysis, comedy studies and Marxist political economy, assist in making a further contribution towards the role that capitalism – or more specifically, as I will explain in Chapter 5, *capital* – plays in the improvisational comedy industry. This results in an interdisciplinary thesis which sheds new light on improv and opens avenues for further dialogue between disciplines.

The rest of this introduction will proceed as follows: I will next offer a review of some literature relating to performance in as much as it relates to improvisational comedy. This exposes an initial gap in the academic literature – that there is a paucity of literature that examines improv *qua* improv. Most academic writing on improv is focused on the application of games and techniques developed in improv to other areas. Next, I will provide a brief account of the history of improvisational comedy and its antecedents in order to situate the object of research historically and in dialogue with research that has been conducted into these antecedents. Then I will discuss my rationale for utilising psychoanalysis and Marxist political economy in the context of a piece of research that sits within the field of comedy studies. Finally, I will discuss my research questions, methods and the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Literature and context

Improvisation and performance

What is improvisation and why does it matter? As Toop suggests, improvisation can be found “[h]umming in the background of all life” and that “Humans must learn to improvise, to cope with random events, chaos and accident in order to survive even the most mundane encounter” (2008: 119). Similarly, Hodgson and Richards suggest some of the contexts that demand improvisation, for instance the need for makeshift creations, for thinking through unexpected situations, drawing on imagination to achieve something new and continually having to adjust to things around us on a day-to-day basis (1966: 1). Conformity and continuity are often associated with the status quo; this is challenged when something occurs and disrupts the status quo, necessitating moments of improvisation (Barber 2007); as Peters suggests, improvisation is a makeshift solution during a moment of crisis (Peters 2009: 9). Thus, improvisation can be seen as both an aspect of our everyday lives and as that which we rely upon in moments of surprise, incongruity, and challenge. In his work on improvisational comedy and theatre, Johnstone suggests that “The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future” (1989: 116). While this might indicate that improvisation is unconcerned with the future, I would rather suggest that it relates to the way in which any useful understanding of what is to come can only be gleaned from what has passed – to see the future, we must of necessity focus upon what has gone before. This insight is relevant to art. All art forms, in some manner, develop through improvisation or accidental discoveries. This kind of improvisation is not one in which something that arrives from *nothing*, rather it always begins from *something*; any piece of artistic creation depends on something, has its antecedents (Benson 2016: 159). Although not purely based on artistic style, improvisation is a “dynamic principle” that is utilised in different forms and is a “transformative way of being, knowing and doing” (Frost and Yarrow: 2007: 3). Scholarly work on improvisation in the West has focused on music, especially jazz, dance, and theatre; there has been significantly less focus on the practice of improvisational comedy, or improv as it more commonly known (Lewis and Piekut 2016: 3).

Whether improvisation is performed on the stage, in a community class or on the street, “meanings are created in performance, as a process occurring in the present

moment” (Frost and Yarrow 2007: 207). Osipovich (2006) observes that theatrical performance consists of an interaction between performers and observers in a shared physical space, and this is certainly true of improvisational comedy – the improvising space is the arena within which meanings are created and laughter is generated. Dolan (2001) asks the important question of why people continue to seek out going to a show to watch people perform when there are other forms of representations available. Dolan asks whether the desire to be there in the moment is an expression of a utopian impulse and suggests that people gather together to witness live performances with the hope of transformation that will help reconsider and change the world outside the theatre. Furthermore, Dolan argues that being “in the moment” during a performance can help people to think of possibilities for a common future together. As we shall see throughout the thesis, this notion of transformation occurs again and again, whether in terms of the transformation of meanings (Chapter 3), the transformation of those within the improvised space (Chapter 4) or the hopes of transforming audiences that the early practitioners of improv attested to (Chapter 5).

In improv, one never knows what to expect at a given performance; this means that the likelihood of the show going wrong or failing is also high. The director Herbert Blau has suggested that in viewing a performance we face “the fact that he who is performing can die there in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so. Of all the performing arts, the theater stinks most of mortality” (1982: 83). While, of course, all human performance is liable to failure at some points, unlike traditional theatre, improv is much more prone to failure; this is part and parcel of the performance. According to Schechner, a performance can fail in two ways: if it does not please the audience or if it does not achieve what it intends to do (2002: 242). This is complicated in improv, as we shall see, since what is “intended” cannot be gleaned from the outset – intentions change and shift as the performance goes on, and different improvisors, and forms of improv, can have quite different intentions. In improvisational comedy, failure or success can be measured by the audience reception through laughter. The show can have both funny and excruciating moments, both of which can be enjoyed. While Blau is right to point to the possibility – indeed, the actuality – of dying on stage, in improv the player is resurrected in the next scene.

Performance for Schechner (2004: 13-14) consists of rules that set apart the performance from everyday life. In performance, a special world is formed whereby one can change the rules, transform time and values, and work for one’s own pleasure.

This special world is a vital part of human life, providing an antidote to productive work. Schechner argues that the world of performance is Freud's pleasure principle – the maximisation of pleasure and minimisation of unpleasure – institutionalised. Schechner writes that the social function of performance, with its rules and regulations, is distinct from ordinary life in that it both idealises it (by saying that in these scenarios people play by the rules) but also by criticises it (by asking why all life cannot be a game). There are very clear resonances between this conception of performance and that of improv; the creation of a special world and the elevation of rules that both anchor and detach the practice from everyday life. Yet the notion of the pleasure principle is somewhat unsettled by the previous discussion – if improv so results in failures, what is pleasurable about this? It perhaps indicates that there is something beyond pleasure, an excess of enjoyment or *jouissance*, that is also at stake in people's enjoyment of improv.

Nachmanovitch has argued that any formal attempt to define improvisation is necessarily "a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation, which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation" (1990: 12). It is therefore difficult to experience improv after the fact. While documented improvisational performances are helpful in constructing a historical narrative, the comedy often gets lost when re-watching documented live performances. This echoes the saying when someone retells a joke that does not land—"you had to be there!". It is challenging to represent improvisation definitively, and it remains slippery to analyse. Critical improvisation scholars have acknowledged this problem and have explored ways to negotiate a way out of the deadlock. Lewis and Piekut (2016) produced a two-volume edited collection that investigated how improvisation can be portrayed in both artistic and non-artistic ways in subjects such as planning, music, creativity, media, literature, theology, critical theory, anthropology, philosophy, mobility, and cultural history. In the *Handbook*, instead of following a one-size-fits all definition of improvisation, the contributors critically scrutinise "improvisation's effects, interrogate its discourses, interpret narratives and histories related to it, discover the implications of those narratives and histories, and uncover its ideologies" (Lewis and Piekut 2016: 3). Yet, remarkably, in these two volumes there is only one chapter on improvisational comedy (Seham 2016). In the next sub-section, I will recount a very brief history of improv and its antecedents before examining scant literature that focuses on improvisational comedy.

A brief history of improv

In what follows, I will briefly trace the development of improv from ancient traditions through to its current manifestation as a hugely influential cultural industry. This brief history places the emergence of improv in the 1950s in the context of a specific lineage of improvised comedy and performance dating to Ancient Greece and with the practice of *commedia dell'arte* as its most important historical antecedent. Improv is a largely a descendant of forms of improvisational theatre that emerged in Europe and developed in North America. This will thus be the focus of my research and this section, but it is important to establish that there exist also many non-western traditions of theatre that deploy improvisation. For instance, improvisation is found in Japanese Noh, South Indian Kathakali, Beijing Opera, Balinese Gambuh and Topeng and West African performances, and these involve performance and audience participation to some degree. Improvisation can also be found in Chinese court jesters, Japanese renga poetry, South American Newspaper Theatre, Boalian Forum Theatre and Nigerian Aipdan Theatre (Frost and Yarrow 2007: 5, 63).

Improvisational performance can be traced back at least as far as Ancient Greece. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (1902) suggested that improvisation is at the root of both tragedy and comedy, tragedy from dithyrambs (choral hymns to Dionysus) and comedy from phallic songs that were sung to accompany processions where obscene phallic icons were represented in ritualistic contexts. Although it is not clear how performed improvisations originated, one of the scholarly explanations was that the pattern of improvisation followed Hellenic customs, which consist of a leader and a chorus group that responds to the leader. The leader begins the performance by improvising or composing orally on stage and the response of the group is a pre-composed piece spoken by the Chorus (Handley 1985: 362). Later, Homeric verse was subjugated to a specific meter, dactylic hexameter, that guided bards in their improvisation. Dactylic hexameter line consists of six dactyls, yet some of the syllables of the dactyl may contract, leaving a spondee. Spondees tend to be irregular and can be substituted by another position, a metonymical substitution (Parry 1930). Therefore, as long as the bard describes the original word from the text, the Homeric bard can improvise when arriving at the spondee. Improvisation is permitted as long as the bard abides by the rules of the rhythmic metre and the metonymical rules – the bard, then, enjoys freedom within constraints created by form, structure and language.

The ancient Greek dramas had variations on performances, one of which was the Dorian Mime. The Dorian Mimes were actors who performed “tiny farces on everyday subjects” (Nicoll 1963: 106), which would play out “on a rude platform erected in the midst of the orchestra in front of the permanent stage” (Frost and Yarrow 2007: 6). The masked actors were primarily known as *autokabdaloi*, translated as ‘buffoons’ or ‘improvisors’ and later called *iamboi* (Rotstein 2010: 275). Dorian Mimes tried to fuse obscene parody with the sacred myth using the body as an instrument to navigate this juxtaposition between the sublime and the ridiculous. According to Otto (2001: 198-199) mimic playwrights such as the Greek Epicharmus (ca. 530-ca. 440 B.C.) and the Roman Decimus Laberius (ca. 105-43 B.C.) heavily relied on the improvisations of mimes. Even though they had scripts, the mimic actors were given the freedom to mock anything that was remotely revered. The oscillation between obscenity and the sacred through bodily gestures and movements opens incongruities—a concept I will discuss in Chapter 4. Around 100 BCE in Rome, we encounter Atellan farce (*fabulae atellanae*), which relied on simplistic plots, stock situations, masked characters and improvisational dialogue. The characters were Bucco the braggart, Maccus the greedy blockhead, Dossenus the clever hunchback and Pappus the stupid old man (Ducharte 1966: 17). The use of masks and stock characters from this theatre tradition and the Homeric oral tradition of storytelling informed the much later practice of *commedia dell’arte* as well as some contemporary practice of improvisational comedy.

The next significant movement that incorporated practices of improvisation and comedy followed hundreds of years after the fall of Rome: the practice of *commedia dell’arte* in Europe. The movement began to take shape in 1545 in Padua, Italy, blending orality and literature, holding a tension between well-constructed plots and improvisations (Henke 2002: 1). Their performances were often held on the streets or in marketplaces and normally consisted of about eight actors, who had to get the attention of a crowd and create a spectacle. Most of these companies consisted of a mix of professional and amateur actors. According to de Gay, few cultures allowed women to act or be involved in public life; therefore, earliest involvement of women in European theatre was through “private performances...or in unregulated, travelling troupes” (2014: 25). One of these troupes produced actor Isabella Andreini (Italy, 1562-1604). While theatre sought to reproduce the oppressive conditions for women that society set, *commedia dell’arte* was able to create a site for women to freely participate.

The performers did not memorise a script but rather based their performances on a basic structure known as a scenario or a *canovaccio* (Chaffee and Crick 2015). They incorporated the events of the everyday and current affairs into their performances and attempted to create a dialogue with the spectators. Plays had only basic instructions and a topic and did not have any dialogue for the characters. The example below taken from Andrews (2008: 42) is typical in Scala's plays:

Pedrolino having dreamed that Orazio had come home,
 sees him; they make much of one another and
 talk together about Isabella and Franceschina;
 then, grieving, they exit.

Pantalone calling from indoors for Pedrolino.

The actors would follow these directions and improvise the dialogue themselves. This method seemed to suggest the performers had some agency since the actors had to impose their own speech as well as assert some form of mastery over the thematic cues as provided by the playwright.

In his *A Treatise on Acting, from Memory and by Improvisation* written in 1699, Perrucci referred to improvisation as a risky and difficult undertaking in which "saying *quidquid in buccam venit* [whatever first comes to your lips] will certainly result in blunders. When an improvised comedy is performed by good actors, however, it generally succeeds just as well as a scripted one" (2008: 101). Perrucci had recommended tightening up the stock characters and scripts in order to avoid these blunders. Perrucci writes:

one must know that it is not by stripping oneself entirely of scripted materials that one should take up the challenge; rather, one should be armed with general compositions that can be adapted to every kind of comedy. (2008: 103)

Perrucci's advice for toning down the riskiness of improvisation by adding formulaic structures marked difficulties that improvisation in theatre was undergoing during his time and which continue to this day – the tension between structure and freedom has thus been apparent throughout the history of improvisational theatre. By attempting to create a less risky and more stable space for performance, *commedia*

dell'arte was starting to look similar to staged works. Yet *commedia dell'arte*'s innovations were an inspiration to many 20th century theatre makers including Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Nikolai Erdman, Max Reinhardt, and Bertold Brecht, as well as the founders of improv (Chaffee and Crick 2015: 9).

The practice of Konstantin Stanislavsky is often cited as an influence for contemporary improvisational theatre. Stanislavsky's work offers a shifting point in drama and acting, whereby directors started to show an interest in the creative journey of the actor and the actors were encouraged to empathise with the characters they are playing. In the rehearsal space, the actors improvise a scene from memory without a script in order to achieve the same emotional outcome as they would with a script (Frost and Yarrow 2007: 20). Stanislavski's collaborator, Vsevolod Meyerhold, was fascinated by the history of *commedia dell'arte* and resurrected it in the history of 20th century theatre, influencing the French theatre directors Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing. Copeau used improvisation as a rehearsal and training technique. According to Rudlin, Copeau's practice influenced a variety of theatre techniques including drama games, improvisation, animal mimicry, ensemble playing, writers in residence, the revival of *commedia dell'arte*, mime and mask-work (Rudlin 1986: 26). Copeau and Bing introduced physical theatre training exercises to challenge the complacency of actors at the time and encouraged the actors to rediscover acting using improvisation as the point of departure and by rejecting the text. Copeau wanted to create something that was different to the scene at the time, a reaction against overacting. Copeau, in his 1916 prospectus, wrote:

Improvisation is an art that has to be learned... The art of improvising is not just a gift. It is acquired and perfected by study... we will push the experiment further and try to give re-birth to a genre: the New Improvised Comedy, with modern characters and modern subjects. (quoted in Rudin 1986: 44)

This notion of improvisation as something to be learned became very influential as improvisation developed into a form for education in theatre when Viola Spolin developed a form of improvisation influenced by *commedia dell'arte*. Spolin's book *Improvisation for the Theatre* was first published in 1963 and it contained a set of guidelines on improvising. The Spolin system encouraged turning complex techniques into a series of theatre games in order to help the actors get to grips with

their roles. In 1955, Spolin collaborated with her son, Paul Sills, and David Shepherd to set up The Compass Players in Chicago. The Compass Players were a group of actors that began performing improvised games and dialogues as part of their performances. This revolutionised improvisation as, in moving from the rehearsal space and taking it back to the performance space, it allowed for suggestions from the audience. This is regarded as the birth of improvisational comedy (Sweet 1987; Seham 2001; Fotis 2014).

The Compass Players went on to inspire another group called Second City, another Chicago initiative set up by Paul Sills, Bernard Sahlins and Howard Alk. Comedians such as Alan Alda, Bill Murray, Joan Rivers were famous alumni, as well as various writers of the live sketch-show *Saturday Night Live*. The distinct audience suggestion feature was also adopted by Second City. Since its establishment in 1959, Second City continues to be an important space for improv, and it has helped further the careers of very high-profile comedians and actors (Frost and Yarrow 2007: 53). According to Seham, Chicago style improv comedy is the most prevalent form performed in America today:

a form of unscripted performance that uses audience suggestions to initiate or shape scenes or plays created spontaneously and cooperatively according to agreed-upon rules or game structures, in the presence of an audience — frequently resulting in comedy. (Seham 2001: xvii)

Keith Johnstone, a British theatre director, developed his own approach to improv independently of Spolin (Johnstone 1989, 1999). His Theatresports format was also based around short games but also adopted the features of a sporting event. He launched the format in Canada in 1977 and it has become highly influential in the improv world. The Compass Players, Second City and Theatresports paved the way for the formation of other new companies such as Second City, The Groundlings, ImprovOlympic, Upright Citizens Brigade, The People's Improv Theater and ComedySportz. Indeed, improv today has developed into an industry, spawning television shows, guidebooks, and educational and corporate spinoffs.

Improvisational comedy

Literature on improv falls into three broad categories: educational texts, historical or biographical accounts, and applicatory suggestions. Educational texts

range from the pioneering specialist pedagogical works of Spolin and Johnstone through to later “handbooks” and “how to” guides that seem designed to appeal to a commercial audience. The historical or biographical accounts comprise both popular and journalistic introductions to the history of improv and academic work that focuses on the history from an analytical perspective. The applicatory works are those that argue for the effectiveness of applying particular techniques developed in improv to other fields.

Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1963) reads like a polemic educational manifesto, which blends her philosophy of bringing theatre to the masses with creative devises she refers to as Theatre Games. The aim of these games is to teach people how to improvise; she insists that “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise” (1963: 3). In reference to her theatre games, improvisation, she says, is “playing the game; setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem” (1963: 382). While her work began with developing exercises to relax non-professional actors in rehearsal spaces in community theatre, it developed into a programme for tapping into freedom:

[I]f permitted to do so, theatre workshop will allow personal freedom and equality to flower. For when individuals of any age know what they are doing is contribution and service to a project and not imposed authoritarianism pushing them about, they are free to release their humanness and make contact with those about them. (1963: 257)

Another key pedagogical text is Johnstone’s *Impro*, originally published in 1979, contains his own personal story of moving from traditional theatre to a more experimental style. The book offers a vision of how to improvise and demonstrates how theatre games and techniques can nurture creativity. He argues that through these exercises improvisors can achieve a trance-like and spontaneous state. Johnstone wrote a follow up book in 1999 *Impro for Storytellers*, which builds on and develops the devises and games from the previous book, primarily for Theatresports performers, teaching students how to play and to “fail gracefully” (Johnstone 1999:23).

Another instructional tool for practitioners wanting to develop their performance practice was *Truth in Comedy* (1994) by Charna Halpern, Del Close and

Kim “Howard” Johnson of the ImprovOlympic theatre. *Truth in Comedy* sets itself apart from previous works that contained guidance for short improvisational games, by espousing a long form version of improv that focuses on developing multi-scene, non-narrative but thematically related performances. In particular, they advocate for a form of improv known as “the Harold”. The Harold has become the main version of long form improv performed in the US and is a particular focus of this thesis, and I will discuss the structure and performance of the Harold in detail in Chapter 3. It was developed in the 1960s by Close while working as part of an improv group known as The Committee. They were looking for a way to combine the various games they played into one unifying structure. After Close presented the structure to the group and asked what to name it, Bill Mathieu replied “Harold”, as riff on the scene in *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) when George responds to a question about the name of his haircut with “Arthur” (Halpern, Close Johnson 1994: 4). Halpern, Close and Johnson put great emphasis on the collective and community aspect of improv. In the foreword to the book, comedian Mike Myers describes the Harold as not just a game but:

a way of looking at life. The basic principle of the Harold is adaptation, and being adaptive is the most crucial lesson I’ve learned. It provides you with a glossary of terms for the creative process and identifies recurring patterns in your imagination. It’s the Zen approach to comedy (quotes in Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994: 1)

Jeffrey Sweet’s *Something Wonderful Right Away* (1978) documents a historical overview of Second City and The Compass Players, with a collection of interviews and oral histories of the early improvisers. Donna McCrohan’s *The Second City* (1987) is a popular text focusing on the eponymous theatre company while Janet Coleman’s *The Compass* is an in-depth history of the Compass Players. While these books present a rich history of improv, it was not until Amy Seham’s *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* (2001) that the first critical engagement with improv from an academic perspective emerged. Engaging with Sweet’s oral histories while also conducting her own interviews, Seham provides a critical history of improv in the context of race, gender and power. Seham questions the cardinal rules of improv, of ‘Yes! and...’ – that is, the rule that all players should accept and add to the reality established in the scene – and how this rule affects the group dynamics. Seham’s quest was to understand why improv seemed to fail some improvisors – in particular, women and people of colour.

Through her retelling, she aims to understand the appeal of improv and why over the years and through successive waves of improvisation, new groups have tried to reinvent improv from the debris of the previous years. Her argument is that an idealism underpins improv, of “community, spontaneity, spiritual connectedness, self-expression, freedom, resistance, and laughter [which] is, at the same time, entertaining, accessible to all audiences, and open to every performer” (2001: 224). This communal sense is what improvisors over the years have tried to recreate, because, as Seham argues, they believe in it despite the various failures and collapses that have punctuated its history and which I will analyse in depth in Chapter 5.

Matt Fotis’s *Long Form Improv and American Comedy* (2014) focuses on the history of the Harold, its development and how it has changed “an entire system of thinking” about both improv and comedy: “The Harold transformed improvisational theatre, ushering in the concept of long-form scenic-style improvisation based not on games, but on relationships, connections, and support.” (2014: 176). Other books straddle the educational and biographical divide. Jeanne Leep’s work *Theatrical Improvisation: Short Form, Long Form, and Sketch-Based Improv* (2008) provides a comprehensive overview of different forms of improv, researched primarily through interviews. Her work emphasises the growth of improv since its inception and she offers techniques on teaching improvisation through games and assessments. Written as if delivering a workshop, Deborah Frances-White and Tom Salinsky in *The Improv Handbook* (2008) give an overview of the history of improv for the uninitiated and then delve into more technical, “how-to” aspects of improv. The book contains interviews with the greats of improv such as Keith Johnstone, Charna Halpern, Mick Napier and many others. In a similar vein to Frances-White and Salinsky, Matt Fotis and Siobhan O’Hara wrote a complete guide entitled *The Comedy Improv Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to University Improvisational Comedy in Theatre and Performance* (2015). The handbook is also designed to be used as a teaching manual for improv.

David Charles’s unpublished dissertation “The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity” (2003) employs Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque to argue that the spontaneity of improvisation is akin to Bakhtin’s vision of the modern novel. While only one chapter relates directly to improvisational comedy, and then only by engaging with the early works of Spolin and Johnstone, Charles’s thesis is one of the few to make a significant attempt to lay a theoretical basis for understanding improv through his application of the Bakhtin’s notion of the

carnavalesque, which I will discuss in Chapter 4. Charles suggests that “The temporary site of improvisational performance can readily spill into the realms of life and politics and its unique way of seeing can enable prosaic wisdom and collaborative creativity to (re)shape the world it encounters” (2003: 320). In Chapter 5, I consider some examples of the way improvisational strategies have played out in the realm of politics. James McLaughlin also brings a Bakhtinian framing to the study of improv in his 2013 piece examining why Johnstone’s Theatresports approach to improv is funny. McLaughlin suggests that the centrifugal forces of improvisors gradually wrenching the scenarios away from their starting point, or base reality, is the key factor. This insight is interesting in terms of Johnstone’s short-form approach, though, as I argue in Chapter 4, there is a tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces in long form improv like the Harold which keeps the incongruity of the comedy in constant relation to its base reality.

Beyond these works, research into improv has tended to focus on its applicability to other spheres. There exists a wide literature applying improv techniques to business practices. A 2008 *New York Times* article quoted Mike Kwatinetz, a venture capitalist and co-founder at Azure Capital Partners, as saying that improv will help new companies succeed: “You want to be reacting to what you’re seeing and what you’re doing right and where it’s not working and react to that to try something different.” (quoted in Rae-Dupree 2008). A 2010 PhD thesis by Kudrowitz entitled “Haha and aha!: creativity, idea generation, improvisational humor, and product design” found that improv games were a useful warm up for idea generation in the corporate industry and that it was possible to teach creativity. Moshavi (2001) applies the same principles and finds the same results in relation to management, Lubet and Hankinson (2006) to legal practice and Balachandra *et al* (2005) to negotiation. Education is held up as a space that can be improved by using improv techniques in Young (2013), while Steitzer (2011) suggests improv techniques can assist practitioners of social care. All focus on the relevance of forms of group interaction and active listening that improv depends upon. While it is easy to be cynical about the over application of improv techniques, there seems to be something about the kinds of communication it encourages that can improve group interaction. I will explore this aspect of improv in Chapter 3. Finally, there are a number of journal articles that suggest the use of improv techniques in therapy. Phillips Sheesley, Pfeffer and Barish (2016: 157) worked with the Second City theatre in Chicago to develop a Comedic Improv Therapy approach and found that “play, exposure, group

cohesiveness and humour as part of an effective treatment” for social anxiety. Stevens (2012) found that using improv techniques in the treatment of patients with dementia was beneficial to memory and sociability.

In this section, I have surveyed the literature and history of improv. It is clear that there is a remarkable paucity of engagement with improv as practice, and distinct from the much more general matter of improvisation, from a critical and theoretical perspective. As I will establish in the next chapter, improvisors speak of experiencing freedom, yet there is no work that engages with *why* improvisors feel free. Since the appeal of freedom is a key aspect of what draws people to improv, and what improv classes sell to consumers, it seems as though this is a major gap in the literature that should be filled.

1.3 Research questions and methods

In light of my own observations of improv and my literature review, my overarching research question is: **Why does improvisational comedy make people feel free?** In order to explore this question, I developed the following sub-questions:

1. How are freedom and constraints articulated in the structure of improv?
2. What makes people laugh in improv and what role does laughter play in the relationship between the audience and players?
3. What limits exist to freedom in improv, and could it be possible to overcome them?

These questions comprise a research agenda that has allowed me to investigate specific areas of improv that are central to an understanding of the sense of freedom that improvisors report experiencing. The method I employed in this research involved secondary research into a wide range of areas, including the history of improv, psychoanalytic theory, comedy studies and Marxist political economy. I opted to utilise psychoanalysis for a range of reasons. First, I have a long running interest in the field, and completed my Master’s degree in psychoanalysis prior to embarking on the PhD. Second, psychoanalysis is an approach which itself has a peculiar relationship with the question of freedom, which I will discuss in depth in the next chapter. Third, Lacanian approaches to language are well placed to

investigate a mode of performance that relies upon language and of speaking in the moment, as well as in exploring the role of unconscious linguistic processes in the generation of material in improv. Theories of comedy and laughter, while sparingly applied to improv until now, are an ideal entry point into the question of what makes improv funny. My decision to include Marxist political economy, which was introduced to the thesis during a major rewrite in the final year of production, stemmed from two sources: first, my increasing personal and political engagement with Marxism in recent years, and second, my realisation that it was well placed to contribute to a theorisation of capital as a limit to freedom in improv.

I have applied insights gleaned from psychoanalytic theory – in particular, from Lacanian approaches to language – to the structure and practice of improv in order to illuminate the ways in which improvisors experience freedom. In doing so, I have also problematised this notion of freedom – not only in questioning how far one can go in describing it as truly “free”, but also in investigating the limits of this freedom. I have explored various approaches to comedy studies and theories of comedy and laughter and brought them into dialogue with both psychoanalytic approaches to comedy and to my own analysis of the structure of improv. In addition, I have utilised Marxist political economy to analyse the interrelations between the improvising space and the outside world. While this has largely involved researching conceptual texts (by Freud, Lacan, Marx, and their interpreters, for example) and texts related to improvisation and comedy, I have also engaged with a range of journalistic sources and websites and blogposts operated by improv companies and practitioners. As I explained earlier, viewing improv on screen does not adequately capture the performance, but I have viewed a range of recordings as part of my research, and have drawn upon a film based on improv, Mike Birbiglia’s *Don’t Think Twice* (2016) in Chapters 4 and 5. The ‘coda’ in my concluding chapter is based upon original research in the Joan Littlewood Archive at the British Library.

1.4 Key arguments and chapter overview

I make three key arguments in this thesis. The first relates to the sense of freedom that a wide range of improvisors have reported they have experienced during improvisation. I suggest that rather than being an element of some kind of essential and total freedom, it rather emerges from three key sources: First, the inherent ambiguity of language, the valences of meaning that are concomitant with

signifying practices, creates the potential for improvisational interaction and the shifting and layering of meaning within improvised scenes; second, the structure of improvisation allows for, and indeed relies upon, the ongoing transformation and re-incorporation of earlier meanings into new, and yet already always existing significations – that is to say that when improvisors take part in an improv scene, they don't simply change the topic to keep things interesting, but rather, they intervene to transform the meaning of previously established significations such that the new meaning was always such; third, this radically open signifying practice takes place in the context of the “sandbox of the impossible” – the improvising space as one in which improvisors can make the impossible choice, repeatedly, without the constraints of one's everyday life. It is the combination of these factors that is central to the potentiality, the incorporative, transformational nature of improv and its scope for doing “anything”. I suggest that psychoanalysis, especially Lacanian interpretations, are well equipped to make sense of this kind of freedom due to the centrality of notions of retroaction, language and determination to its discourse. My second key argument relates to the relationship between improvisors and their audiences. In particular, I maintain that the sense of freedom that improvisors experience exists in a close relationship to their reception by the audience; a positive response in the form of laughter can ratify the impossible realities created in the improvised space, while the necessity of recognition from the Other brings with it the danger of failure, though a failure that can potentially be overcome in the next scene or game. My third key argument is that in as far as these processes can give rise to a sense of freedom in the improvising space, such spaces exist in the context of a *capitalist* social formation, the heart of which, capital as a motive force for ongoing accumulation, constitutes a limit to freedom in improvisation.

I expound my argument across chapters as follows. In Chapter 2, I survey psychoanalytic approaches to freedom. I begin by outlining four ways that improvisors report experiencing freedom – those being total freedom, focused freedom (or freedom within constraints), freedom as discipline, and freedom in the moment. Next, I go on to consider Freudian and Lacanian approaches to freedom. In doing so, I rule out the idea that there could be in any sense a “total freedom”, except as a fantasy. I go on to explore Lacan's rejection of the discourse of freedom and his more hopeful articulation of clinical work that underpins the potential for a psychoanalytic cure, a form of freedom within constraints, through which an analysand might be able to exact a measure of freedom to choose their own

determination. Central to this paradoxical notion is the way in which retroactivity emerges as a central preoccupation, in that the subject can create new significations and meanings, transforming their subjectivity in the process. I suggest that Lacanian psychoanalysis, because of its engagement with this potentiality, is a significant tool for understanding the workings of improv.

In Chapter 3, I begin an examination of the structure of improv by establishing the “rules of the game” and the specific forms that improv takes. I begin by briefly considering theorists of play and what they can contribute to the overall picture of improvised play and the historical development of different forms of improv. I then move on to discuss a Lacanian approach to language and how it relates to the practice of improv. I argue that the peculiar temporality of language established by Lacan helps us to make sense of the openness and playfulness of language in improv, as meanings are fixed and refixed, in an ongoing process of signification. I go on to explore the role of the unconscious in improv and the way in which an effort to go beyond the censoring functions of the ego-ideal contributes to the freedom improvisors feel. The possibility of speaking beyond oneself – the possibility of full speech, speech filled with meaning, is explored and I establish a peculiar “event-like” quality to the structure of improv, as improvisors transform not only the meanings of given statements, but of the “reality” they construct within the improvising space. I then consider the constitution of the improvising group, arguing that the ability of improvisors to experience a measure of freedom is heavily reliant on the imaginary unity they forge with others in the group and that the maelstrom of signification they create opens up greater levels of unpredictability in improv. Finally, through a consideration of the “fort/da” game, I consider the role of the radical diversity of repetition in improv, giving rise to the possibility of playing with the rules and making the “impossible choice”.

In Chapter 4, I explore the relationship between the improvising group and the audience by asking what makes improv funny. I examine the different ways that improvisors understand improv to make people laugh, before exploring traditional theories of laughter – superiority, incongruity and relief. While I establish that incongruity is the central aspect of comedy in improv, I suggest that all three offer a partial understanding of what makes improv funny. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian analyses of jokes and comedy, I argue against a commonplace notion that there is no room for “jokes” in longform improv, and that in fact, the very structure of

the improv scene has many commonalities with a Lacanian reading of jokes, and in particular with Zupančič's (2008: 57) exposition of the comic sequence and its production of surplus meaning and a short circuit between "excluding realities". I argue that while improv necessarily seeks recognition from the Other in the form of the audience, it best achieves its aim of making the audience laugh by focusing on the practice of creating new meanings and new significations in sketches, maintaining the imaginary unity of the group rather than breaking that unity in order to chase laughs and running away from the "reality" of the scenes. I conclude by exploring the role of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque in improv and consider the event-like structure of the improvised performance and the way it heightens the sense of freedom improvisors experience, up to providing a sense of immortality, in that they can be resurrected after "dying" on stage.

In Chapter 5, I turn to explore the world beyond the improvising space and consider the way in which it impacts upon improv. Through an engagement with the arguments of Žižek (2000) and Marxist political economy, I explore the notion of capital as the "Real" of improv through an examination of improv's history as practice, as institutions and as an industry. I suggest that capital imposes an external limit on the way in which freedom can be experienced in the improv space by playing a role in creating and exacerbating tensions within groups, imposing financial requirements and restrictions on them, and commodifying their practices to the point of "industrialising" improv. Further, I move beyond improv to explore the ways in which improvisation as comedic and political practice have played out in the cultural and socio-political spheres, and especially how it has been utilised by right-wing forces and actors in a wide variety of ways. I end the chapter by considering the possibility of an improvisational practice that might overcome the limits of capital.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude the thesis and end with a 'coda', a vignette based upon archival research that highlights the possibility of a subversive improvised theatre practice.

Chapter 2: Freedom, psychoanalysis, and improv

2.1 Introduction: *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free*

What does it mean to be free? Think of Freud's assertion:

Many people, as is well known, contest the assumption of complete psychical determinism by appealing to a special feeling of conviction that there is a free will. This feeling of conviction exists; and it does not give way before a belief in determinism. (Freud 1960a: 253)

In this sense, freedom consists of the belief that one could have acted otherwise in any given situation - that decision A could equally have been replaced by decision B, C, etc. Freud's claim is that, in fact, a strict psychical determination is in play and that the freedom to choose what to do that we seem to enjoy is a conviction and not a fact. One of the key issues faced by anyone wishing to assert that this "special feeling of conviction" is in fact some "true" freedom to choose confronts an obstacle perhaps best presented in the opening lines of the jazz classic written by Billy Taylor and Dick Dallas and popularised by Nina Simone, "*I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free*":

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free,
I wish I could break all the chains holding me,
I wish I could say all the things that I should say,
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear,
For the whole round world to hear

What is at stake in the verse are a number of conundrums. If one isn't free, then how can one know how it feels to be free? Here, the singer knows that they are chained, and that these chains prevent her from doing what she should do, saying what she should say. This knowledge of unfreedom is understood from the perspective of a Black person in the US during the 1960s, and the freedom in question is political freedom. The singer can see her unfreedom in contradistinction to the freedom of others; those who enjoy particular civil rights that are denied to her. A more radical reading might suggest, further, that such freedom goes beyond simply the struggle for equal rights under the law but a more thoroughgoing freedom - from want, from exploitation, from domination. What is crucial in this context is that the realisation of unfreedom is recognised because someone else is free.

There is a clear echo here of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic that was so important to Lacan, via the philosopher Alexandre Kojève, and that I will discuss later in this chapter. The freedom of the master is predicated on the unfreedom of the slave and the master's exploitation of the slave. Kojève describes this as a "real freedom" (1980: 43), one that is concrete and yet is an illusion. Should the slave withdraw his recognition of the master, the illusion would be dispelled. On the other hand, the slave, while lacking a concrete freedom, has an ideal of freedom that he or she sees in the freedom of the master. As merely an ideal, such freedom remains abstract; to realise it—to actually unrecognize the master *qua* master—would require a mutual recognition between the two subjects. I will return to Hegel later in the chapter, but for now it suffices to illustrate the dialectical movement of Hegel's philosophy, as well as its abstract sketch of actual processes of movements for political freedom - the demand to enjoy rights denied to some and afforded to others, articulated concretely in social, political, and economic struggles, leading to new rights being claimed by the oppressed and instituted in law.

Imagine now, though, anyone who wanted to claim that they were possessed of free will, were free from determination. Who is the "master" that one can see who enjoys that freedom? How can we know that they do? In our psychical lives, how can it be possible to know how it feels to be free? Even if we were able to extract ourselves from all the compulsions and restrictions inscribed upon us by capitalist society, free will or otherwise, I am not free to buy a £10 million pound manor house except in the most empty, legalistic sense. How would we know that our actions are not caused, determined, in some way? As much as we might wish we knew how it would feel to

be free, that actual knowing seems like a step too far. However, as Freud insists, that sense of free will does not give way before belief in determinism, and he continues:

Like every normal feeling it must have something to warrant it. But so far as I can observe, it does not manifest itself in the great and important decisions of the will: on these occasions the feeling that we have is rather one of psychological compulsion, and we are glad to invoke it on our behalf... On the other hand, it is precisely with regard to the unimportant, indifferent decisions that we would like to claim that we could just as well have acted otherwise: that we have acted of our free — and unmotivated — will. (Freud 1960a: 253)

This raises the question: what is it that warrants the feeling? Why is it that we feel as though we have a sense of freedom? On the one hand, capitalism, and the ideological apparatus of liberalism, rests upon the insistence of freedom. I will return to and question these notions in Section 2.4 and in Chapter 5. For now, it suffices to say that a sense of freedom is inherent in the ruling ideology. To be specific, neoliberal capitalism and its proliferation of 'stuff' is predicated on the notion that we are free to choose - that we can choose, of our own free will, from a vast accumulation of commodities that circulate on the free market. As McGowan puts it: "The capitalist subject does not have to confront the question of what project will define its existence. Instead, it must decide what brand of cough medicine to purchase." (2016: 266). Thus, social and political freedom merge here with notions of freedom to choose and free will. On the other hand, what allows us a sense of freedom is the fact that to the extent that we are determined, that determination is unconscious.

What, then, does this indicate to us about the question of freedom as experienced in improv? As Freud suggests, it is in the little things that we feel as though we could act this way or that way, and certainly, during improv, the decisions being made seem quite little. The connections and links and associations are, by definition, a series of small decisions. A line here, a word there - perhaps this is one of the roots of the sense of freedom, that one is engaged in a constant series of decisions about what to say (and what not to say) that are not "great and important decisions of the will". The choices made here will not go elsewhere, they are fleeting and passing, and therefore, feel more free. Of course, such provisos do not always hold. What if you say something that gravely offends someone? What if that offence is captured on

camera by an audience member? For now, however, it will suffice that at the most basic, everyday level, this sense of abandon with which one can speak may afford a sense of freedom to improvisers. However, the kinds of freedom practitioners of improv detail experiencing goes beyond such a trite definition. What other forms of freedom can we speak of in discussing improv? I suggest that there are four distinct though potentially overlapping conceptions or understandings of freedom that seem to be prevalent in both the literature on improv and among practitioners.

Total freedom

The website for Hoopla!, a London based improv company that caters to private and corporate clients, states that long form improv represents “Total freedom!” (Hoopla! n.d.). Interestingly, this total freedom is accessible only after finishing a Level Three Improv Course. Perhaps their reference to the totality of freedom is a little tongue in cheek, and yet other improvisers have spoken of an absolute sense of freedom that they link directly to the experience of early humans. Seham quotes from a personal interview with Dee Ryan, a member of the Second City troupe in the 1990s and now Adjunct Professor in comedy, improv and sketch at Northwestern University, describing the long form Harold improv game, which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter, as “primal” and “tribal”, likening it to “dancing by the fire” or a “whirling dervish” (Seham 2001: 50). Similarly, Patricia Ryan Madson writes in her *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare Just Show Up* that the improvisation that she learned from Keith Johnstone's classic work *Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre* “can give us a taste of the primal freedom that our early ancestors experienced before they turned their attention to planning; it is an exhilarating way to live” (Ryan Madson 2010: 22). Ryan Madson suggests that such a view of freedom in improv can inform everyday life and, as Seham (2001: 61) suggests: “Improvisers often talk about improv as a way of life, or philosophy, that guides their interactions with the world offstage as well as on”, and that improv teaches them to say “Yes! And...” to life, “to take chances, go with the flow, connect and collaborate with others.” Here, then, is a first freedom of improv; a total and transformative freedom, one that can be associated with prelapsarian humanity and that can extend into the daily life of improvisers.

Focused freedom

A second form of freedom described by improvisers is a more circumscribed one. As Fotis puts it: “While it is popular to celebrate the unlimited freedom of improv, in reality, like most modes of performance, it is usually most effective within set parameters.” (Fotis 2014: 5). Fotis refers to this freedom within structures that “freed” improvisers artistically as “focused freedom” (2014: 5). Mark Gagné, who worked with the ComedySportz franchise in the 1980s, argues: “If an improviser is willing to go in and find the freedom within the structure, you’re going to do your best work” (quoted in Seham 2001: 173). However, such a perspective also creates a tension within the improv community, since the degree of structure can vary wildly – it could refer to the rules of particular theatre games, or extend to the use of pre-prepared scenarios, which in turn led to the development of scriptprov, that is, the kind of written work derived from initial improvisations that form the basis of some comedy sketch shows. As Wasson has suggested: “This essential dispute between freedom and form would become the driving tension of improvisational comedy” (Wasson 2017: 46). Focused freedom, then, is a perspective that celebrates the productivity of working within constraints.

Freedom as discipline

Contrasted to the notion of focused freedom is the stress put by some in the field on the need to learn how to exercise freedom within improv, such that the form itself can be as free as possible. Such a perspective has a long pedigree. Jacques Copeau, a French theatre director in the early 20th century utilised improvisation as a way of training performers to avoid overacting. In his quest to invent a new form of improvisational comedy, *la comédie nouvelle*, which was inspired by the earlier *commedia dell’arte* movement, Copeau stressed that “Improvisation is an art that has to be learned... The art of improvising is not just a gift. It is acquired and perfected by study” (quoted in Rudlin 1986: 44). Later, Ted Flicker, a theatre director who started a branch of the Compass Players in St Louis in 1957, put a stress on the need for training and technique in improv, saying: “The freer the form, the greater must be the underpinnings of discipline” (quoted in Sweet 1987: 161). Del Close, a mainstay of improv throughout the second half of the last century was a proponent of an improv in which the risks “had to get higher and higher and the players had to learn to fly

without nets" (quoted in Coleman 1990: 61). This third freedom of improv, then, is a perspective that stresses one must learn how to be free in improv.

Freedom of the moment

Viola Spolin, one of the key figures in the emergence of contemporary improv, raises freedom to a level of centrality in the discipline. She suggests that the first step to improvisational play is "feeling personal freedom" (Spolin 1963: 6). For Spolin, this freedom comes about through the very act of spontaneity:

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression. (Spolin 1963: 6)

In this sense, freedom is not a state to be obtained and maintained, but something that exists in moments of spontaneous action, that free us from the shackles of the past and thrust us into an unknown present that is ours to discover. This stress on spontaneity and freedom is shared by Barbara Harris, who explains that her involvement in the workshops organised by Spolin was one in which improv "swept us into another realm, another consciousness...a new language which asked for spontaneity and freedom on stage that followed nothing I had ever heard of before" (quoted in Sweet 1987: 66). This fourth freedom of improv, then, is one which stresses the freedom of the moment that arises from spontaneity. These four freedoms of improvisation are not mutually exclusive, though some contrast with one another. For example, proponents of the need for discipline and training to allow greater freedom in form may favour less structure in their pursuit of freedom.

In this chapter, my focus will not be on the practice of improvisation, which will be examined in detail in subsequent chapters. Rather, I will consider the way in which psychoanalysis, particularly the theory as it was articulated by Freud and Lacan, deals with the notion of freedom and what the resonances of these "four freedoms" of improv might be. First, I will consider the notion of a total freedom, one

tied to a supposed “primal” freedom of our early ancestors. Subsequently, I will consider the way in which Lacanian psychoanalysis deals with the problem of freedom. In conclusion, these four freedoms will be brought into dialogue with psychoanalysis to tease out their tensions, contradictions, and possibilities.

2.2 The fantasy of total freedom

What is at play when improvisers describe a sense of “primal freedom”? Dee Ryan’s use of the signifiers “primal” and “tribal” in relation to freedom, in addition to the imaginary allusions to “dancing by the fire” and a “whirling dervish” posit this freedom as radically exterior to common experience, and this is underlined by Ryan Madson’s assertion that what improvisation offers a taste of is a kind of freedom that “early ancestors” enjoyed. This is not a kind of freedom one would typically experience in everyday life. Rather, a “primal” freedom is something prior to our contemporary world, something that has passed and yet can be rediscovered through the practice of improvisation. We should begin by asking: How can we access knowledge of what kinds of “freedom” our early ancestors experienced? It very quickly becomes clear, then, that we are dealing with a fantasy here. It could not be otherwise, for as we shall establish here, from a Lacanian perspective, the notion of a kind of freedom that existed before civilisation (as Ryan Madson puts it, before “planning”, which she situates in opposition to improvisation) can only be conceived of as a myth.

The myth-like status of the primal freedom account of improv can be illustrated by examining precisely what Ryan Madson views as the distinction between improvising and planning. She begins by asserting that “[l]ong before there was planning, there was improvising. For millennia humans functioned naturally only by thinking on their feet, problem-solving in the here and now,” but that human civilisation gradually acquired the capacity to think and plan ahead “for the lean times”. This development, she argues, “marked the end of improvising as our primary *modus vivendi*” (Madson 2010: 21). This account presents us with a just-so-story *par excellence*. There is no way to verify the claims it contains. Is it really true that human society ever existed without some kind of planning? Counterposing hunting to planning seems especially awkward given that anthropological research has uncovered evidence of complex planning of hunting with spears dating back two million years, long before the evolutionary emergence of modern humans (McKie,

2012). Any attempt at pinpointing an “improvising” past in which we enjoyed freedom, then, seems doomed to failure, or to anthropomorphically attributing human characteristics to pre-human hominoids. However, a more clearly and carefully articulated position can be found in the work of Freud, who in *Civilization and its Discontents* writes that:

“primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct. To counterbalance this, his prospects of enjoying this happiness for any length of time were very slender. Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities for happiness for a portion of security” (Freud 1961d: 115).

However, Freud perhaps overstates any immediate benefits of the trade that humanity made in adopting agriculture and civilization. Anthropological research, again, suggests that early settled societies were in fact more prone to breakdown and famine than their hunter-gatherer forebears (Berbesque *et al* 2014). Freud further argues that in the “primal family” only the head of the family enjoyed freedom, while the others were “suppressed”. This freedom, for Freud, “had for the most part no value, since the individual was scarcely in a position to defend it” (1961d: 95). Indeed, prior to the establishment of civilization, Freud thought life was brutal and that humanity required the development of forms of social organisation to tame humanity’s baser instincts. As he puts it in *Civilization and its Discontents*, it is civilisation that stands in to protect the individual from these painful realities. Freud writes:

We shall therefore content ourselves with saying once more the word ‘civilization’ describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and serve two purposes— namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations. (Freud 1961d: 89)

How, then, did humanity leave behind this earlier period of primal freedom? To reiterate, this is not a freedom that is romanticised and idealised as in the fantasies presented earlier. Let us examine the primal scene depicted in *Totem and Taboo*. Here, Freud writes that “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the

Oedipus complex” (Freud 1955a: 156). In his account, a violent father jealously guarded all the women for himself and drove away the sons as they grew older. The group of ‘brothers’, out of hatred and jealousy, killed the father. Afterwards, their earlier feelings of hatred clash with their love of the lost father and elicit a feeling of guilt. This guilt leads them to make a pact that would deny them sexual access to the liberated women – that is, their mothers, so that “[w]hat had up to then been prevented by [the father’s] actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves” (Freud 1955a: 143). By feasting on the flesh of the dead father, Freud hypothesised that they identified with him and appropriated part of his strength. Freud saw in the totem feast observed by some tribes, whereby a sacred totem animal not normally harmed by tribe members is slaughtered and consumed, as a memorial of this primal scene and regards it as “a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things— of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion” (Freud 1955a: 142). Thus, for Freud, this primal scene inaugurated the dawn of human society, including the incest taboo and, indeed, the very notion of moral restrictions, in other words, of the Law.

Lacan’s attitude toward this work of Freud’s shifted over the course of his career. Writing in 1938, the young Lacan rejected the account for two key reasons, one theoretical and one historical. Theoretically, Freud’s account ran counter to Lacan’s own early conception of subjective structuration, which saw nostalgia for the nourishing breast as more important than any nostalgia for the father, while historically, Lacan was influenced by the research of Bachofen who saw matriarchal order as the basis for the family structure, leading Lacan to comment that traces of matriarchies are “implicit everywhere in Antique culture” (quoted in Zafiropoulos 2016: 120). However, the later Lacan, under the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who had written favourably of aspects of *Totem and Taboo*, shifted his position on Freud’s work. He had not accepted its historic status – indeed, as late as 1970, in *Seminar XVII*, Lacan, while insisting that Freud held the view that the primal murder of the father “was real. He clings to it. He wrote the entire *Totem and Taboo* in order to say it – it necessarily happened, and it’s where everything began.” (2007: 113), himself described the primal scene as “Darwinian buffoonery” and a “cock-and-bull story” (2007: 112; 114). However, Lacan did not dismiss the account *in toto*, but rather attempted to reconstruct it not as history but as a myth. In *Seminar III*, Lacan argued that Freud’s intention in constructing the mythical scene, and indeed the “red thread”

that ran through all Freud's anthropological work, was woven with a singular purpose:

Freud only ever asked himself, personally, one question - how can this system of signifiers without which no incarnation of either truth or justice is possible, how can this literal logos take hold of an animal who doesn't need it and doesn't care about it - since it doesn't at all concern his needs? (Lacan 1997: 242).

Lacan thus repositioned Freud's inquiry. Why is it that humanity would allow itself to be subjected to alienation in language? Moreover, Lacan insisted that for Freud, constructing this primal scene that Lacan reads as a myth nevertheless is not simply a question of creating an origin story. Rather, he suggests that Freud's construction of:

a sociology of totems and taboos [is conducted] obviously because for him the Law is there ab origine. It is therefore out of the question to ask oneself the question of origins—the Law is there precisely from the beginning, it has always been there, and human sexuality must realize itself through it and by means of it. This fundamental law is simply a law of symbolization. This is what the Oedipus complex means. (1997: 83; emphasis added)

In Lacan's reading, the Oedipus complex becomes a quadripartite relationship between mother, child, father and *language*, the phallus, as the child passes into the symbolic order. In *Seminar III*, Lacan introduces another term that comes into contact with the subject and the Other, that of the paternal signifier, or Name-of-the-Father. Suppose a child and mother exist in some form of unity. The child is free to get anything from the mother, when the child cries, the mother gives it food, warmth, comfort and appears as fully accessible to the child. Here we insert the father as he appears in the mother's discourse, maybe someone or something else that grabs the attention of the mother. This triangulates the child's relationship and Lacan formalises this relationship as the Name-of-the-Father, or a social authority, or simply put the Law. Therefore, in shifting from an ancient, primal father as the precipitate of the law as such, Lacan stresses the role of a paternal *function* in guaranteeing that natural relations between mother and child may develop:

a third party has to intervene, one that is the image of something successful, the model of some harmony. This does not go far enough – there has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervention of the order of speech, that is, of the father. Not the natural father, but what is called the father. The order that prevents the collision and explosion of the situation as a whole is founded on the existence of this name of the father. (Lacan 1997: 96)

I shall return to the question of this passage into the “order of speech”, the symbolic, later in this chapter. Here, suffice it to say that Lacan’s reconstruction of the primal father myth is twofold. First, he follows Lévi-Strauss in conceiving of the “original symbolisation”, that is, the “primordial Law” as being that which:

in regulating marriage ties, superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature, the latter being subject to the law of mating. The prohibition of incest is merely the subjective pivot of that Law, laid bare by the modern tendency to reduce the objects the subject is forbidden to choose to the mother and sisters, full license, moreover, not yet being entirely granted beyond them. (Lacan 2006: 229)

Lacan sees this law as identical to a language order, since kinship relations require names, without which “no power can institute the order of preferences and taboos that knot and braid the thread of lineage through the generations” (Lacan 2006: 229-230). This primary symbolisation is the dawn of society as such. Lacan’s second move reconstructs Freud’s primal father, rather, as the Name-of-the-Father, the paternal *function*, in an account of a child’s passage into alienation in language. The connection between the two is not dissolved in the reconstruction, however, as Lacan also insists on the role of this Name-of-the-Father historically. Thus, in “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, Lacan writes: “It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law.” (2006: 230).

The preceding discussion of Freud’s and Lacan’s conceptions of the dawn of society have taken us some distance from the question of improvisation and freedom,

so let us now return to the question of the primal freedom improvisers have spoken of. We have seen that for Freud, this primal freedom was worthless in the face of the brutal relations that existed before the birth of social organisation. Lacan insisted that behind Freud's myth is the truth that human history as such begins with the installation of the primordial Law and the birth of language. How does the Law operate in our conceptualisation of freedom? Is the Law an obstacle to freedom, something which, in Freud's account, our distant ancestors traded a portion of freedom for in order to gain some security? Rather, I would suggest that it is impossible to consider any experiences of our ancient ancestors, lost into the mist of prehistory, as in any meaningful sense "freedom", any more than we can consider a wild anteater or zebra to be "free". What would they be free from if there was no social order standing over them? What would they be free to do other than to exist as part of the tightly bonded social groups? Indeed, the only freedom they might have enjoyed in these prehistoric times may have been based on a forced choice similar to that which Lacan (1998: 246) speaks of in terms of the subject's alienation in language: You give up "your freedom" (you acquiesce to living as part of the social group) "or your life" (you leave the group but most likely die of hunger).

There is an even more fundamental objection to this notion of freedom, which, after all, is the same as that faced by any animal that lives in kinship groups; if it leaves one group, it must surely search for another or perish. Rather, the very notion of freedom relies upon constraint to give it meaning. Think of the film *Born Free*, a 1966 British film which is an account of two people's attempt to raise an orphaned lion cub after its mother is killed by a wildlife warden. The couple raise the lion and eventually set it free as an adult, and it duly takes its place in a pride of lions. What does it mean to say that this lion was "born free"? The very idea of an animal being free makes sense only in the context of the possibility of captivity – the intervention of humans into the life of the animal. In a similar way, the freedom or otherwise of human beings makes sense only in the context of the possibility of some degree of unfreedom. As McGowan puts it: "Law creates the subject's freedom in the act of constraining it. There is no freedom without law's founding constraint" (2019: 47). Thus, it is the law as such, the symbolic order that both restrains freedom and makes it possible.

So far, however, we have established that primal freedom can only truly exist as a fantasy. As Žižek has argued: "when a certain historical moment is (mis)perceived as the moment of a loss of some quality, upon close inspection it becomes clear that

the lost quality only emerged at this very moment of its alleged loss" (1998: 199). This narrativization of history serves to occlude chronological processes, instituting a kind of temporal loop; a retroactive recasting of the past which "involves an impossible gaze, by means of which the subject is already present at the act of his or her own conception" (1998: 200). Žižek's commentary is significant here, not only because it so neatly encapsulates the paradox at the heart of the fantasy of primal freedom, but also because it brings to the fore the notion of *retroactivity* which, as I will show in subsequent chapters, is a significant factor in the functioning of improvisational comedy. The fantasy of primal freedom is thus doubly impossible – it places the subject not only prior to their conception, but prior to the conception of human society, at a point where freedom has no meaning or status. We can, of course, account for this impossibility by observing Lacan's argument that fantasy is not merely an image – primal, tribal, dancing by the fire, whirling dervishes – but rather "as an image *set to work in the signifying structure*" (Lacan 2006: 532). In this sense, the imaginary identifications with a primal scene are articulated with what Lacan describes as the "discourse of freedom", which I will turn to in Section 2.3. Freedom as a signifier – indeed, as a master signifier – is central to accounts of practitioners of improv and equally to the improv *industry* that I will discuss in the next chapter.

When freedom is bound up with the primal image, perhaps what we encounter is something that is more closely related to Lacan's reconstruction of the myth of the primal father. If the imposition of the Name-of-the-Father, the paternal function, heralds the subject's alienation in language, symbolic castration, and the loss of the unbounded *jouissance* of the mother – a *jouissance* that is itself a fantasy retroactively constructed by the desiring subject after the fact – then this loss is represented in the subject as a lack, a negativity that we are compelled to try to satisfy, to fill, through the big Other. This, then, is the object cause of desire, not the specific thing(s) that we desire, but rather that which compels us to desire them in the first place. While we can never fill this lack, we try and try again. In the context of improv, then, improvisers who speak of primal freedom are compelled again and again to try and achieve an unbounded freedom that, while impossible to attain, they nevertheless pursue, returning week after week to try and capture it. While, as we will see, it may be possible for them to attain some sense of freedom within constraints, behind the fantasy of an unbridled primal freedom lies the object *a*. Perhaps Lacan in *Seminar XI*, in describing "the whole business of this term freedom" as a "phantom" (Lacan 1998:

219), understood the way in which the pursuit of freedom had a spectral quality, that it would haunt those who pursued it but were doomed to never truly encounter it.

2.3 Freud and freedom

In the previous section, I established that the notion of primal freedom is fundamentally a fantasy. However, is it possible to conceive of a sense of freedom that was not a fantasy, one that can be understood from the perspective of psychoanalysis? In Freudian psychoanalysis, the discussion of freedom is often juxtaposed with the discussion of determinism. While this may appear to be a paradoxical relationship, it demonstrates Freud's curious way of thinking about the necessity of both freedom and determinism in his works. As Peter Gay puts it: "Freud was a determinist, yet his psychology is a psychology of freedom" (1990: 74). How precisely do these two seemingly opposed perspectives interact? One way to consider this is by dividing freedom into two aspects: on the one hand free will, and on the other a socio-political freedom, a liberty based upon one's place within "civilization", that is, the state and civil society. In the previous sections, I established that Freud saw determination as a strict aspect of psychical life. Moreover, it one that he grounds in physical determination. Thus, in 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', Freud stated that:

The hypothesis we have adopted of a psychical apparatus extended in space, expediently put together, developed by the exigencies of life, which gives rise to the phenomena of consciousness only at one particular point and under certain conditions—this hypothesis has put us in a position to establish psychology on foundations similar to those of another science, such as for instance, as physics. (Freud 1964b: 196).

Freud expressed great hope that, while neurosis was at the time untreatable by medicine, in the future, "[i]n view of the intimate connection between things that we distinguish between physical and mental...paths of knowledge...and influence will be opened up, leading from organic biology and chemistry to the field of neurotic phenomena." (Freud: 1959b: 231).

As established in the previous section, Freud saw in the rise of social organisation a progressive social form that protected humanity from the vicissitudes of nature and regulated relations between people. However, he also saw society as

being neither wealthy nor well organised enough “to be able to compensate the individual for the amount of his instinctual renunciation” (Freud 1961c: 219). Thus, humanity’s place in society was to be one in which “unsatisfied claims of his instincts make him feel the demands of civilization as a constant pressure upon him (Freud 1961c: 219). Already, then, we can see that from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, a strict delineation between political and psychic freedom is not maintainable since the field of society always weighs upon the psychic. The “psychology of freedom” that Gay refers to, however, is one that is grounded in both a social and a psychic sense. At the social level, Freud was keen that psychoanalysis be available to all and supported the establishment of low-cost poly clinics. Danto (2005) has documented the history of these clinics, which were opened across Europe and in New York, providing free access to psychoanalysis. Gherovici notes that “Freud’s social activism and his commitment to the treatment of the poor and the working classes have been erased not just from the collective memory but, most importantly, also from psychoanalytic history” and that analysts in Freud’s day had seen themselves as “brokers of change – individual and social” (2019: 5).

Freud and many early psychoanalysts, then, saw freedom to pursue the aims of analysis as an important aspect of the overall project of psychoanalysis. Psychically, Freud’s notion of freedom centres on the need to “restore the ego, to *free it from its restrictions*, and to give it back the command over the id which it has lost owing to its early repressions” (Freud 1926: 205; emphasis added). Freud, then, saw the work of psychoanalysis as being intimately related to mastering baser instincts - that the ego needed to be freed from restrictions such that *it* could restrict the id. Freud uses an analogy of a horse and rider to indicate how the ego is compelled by the unconscious to act and to see that act as the ego’s own: “if he is not to be parted from his horse, [he] is obliged to guide it where it wants to go; so in the same way the ego is in the habit of transforming the id’s will into action as if it were its own.” (Freud 1961a: 25). This carried over into Freud’s conception of society, since a society comprised of those who had mastered their ego would presumably be a more harmonious one. Thus, it can be seen that Freud operated with a certain view of freedom - freedom from repression of the ego, freedom to pursue this aim in society. However, Freud’s notion of the need to strengthen the ego relative to the id, which provided the fertile ground from which the discipline of ego psychology sprung up, was not shared by Lacan, who saw in the attempt to strengthen the ego an ill-fated project based on a profound misrecognition. Lacan took Freud’s statement that “*the ego is not master in its own house*” (Freud

1955b:143) not as a state of affairs to be remedied through psychoanalysis, but rather as an inherent aspect of human subjectivity.

2.4 Lacan and the discourse of freedom

In the 1972 documentary film *Jacques Lacan Parle*, Françoise Wolff asks Lacan “Doesn’t psychoanalysis contain a repression of freedom?” Lacan looks around quizzically, and then laughs into the camera before responding: “Those words make me laugh. I never talk about freedom” (Wolff 1972: 52m). Of course, it is not enough to take Lacan at his word here. Indeed, as we shall see, Lacan in fact discussed freedom on many occasions and yet, as Pluth (2007: 5) suggests, “it is never really a lively concept for him,” and was usually referenced in a derogatory sense, particularly in relation to existentialism. Indeed, Lacan’s many criticisms of existentialism were rooted in a reaction against what he saw as Sartre’s profound mistake with regards to the ego. Lacan argued in his 1949 text “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” that existentialism has as one of its premises “a self-sufficiency of consciousness,” which “ties the illusion of autonomy in which it puts its faith to the ego’s constitutive misrecognitions” (Lacan 2006: 80). I established in the previous section that Freud had argued for the need to strengthen the ego relative to the id, yet this is not a perspective that Lacan shared. As we shall see, Lacan instead argued that the ego should be understood not as an autonomous agency but as an object, an idealised construction resulting from the earliest stages of the individual’s life based on an identification that is also a misrecognition (or *méconnaissance*). This was part of what led Lacan to privilege determinism over freedom in much of his work.

Lacan’s criticism of “freedom” arises as a critique of philosophical doctrines that argue that human beings are somehow *essentially* free, in a metaphysical fashion (Pluth 2007: 5). This underlines the findings of section 2.2, in which a sense of “primal freedom” was argued to be a fantasy. Indeed, Lacan’s critique of the “discourse of freedom” was precisely oriented against this fantasy, what Chiesa describes as “the falsely transgressive ideal of a total emancipation that would know no constraints” as opposed to recognising “the productivity of *constraints*” (2016: vii). Chiesa’s words here have another significance – the notion of productivity emerging from within constraints has a clear resonance with the second freedom of improv, focused freedom, and as I will argue in Chapter 3, is a fundamental aspect the sense of freedom

that emerges from the structures of improvisational comedy. Just as Freud's "psychology of freedom" operated alongside a commitment to a kind of freedom, so Lacan's theory was grounded in the notion that it was possible to reshape the grounds upon which aspects of determination occur. Thus, in *Seminar II*, Lacan offers a guardedly positive suggestion that psychoanalysis might represent "an apprenticeship in freedom" (Lacan 1988: 85), and he later evocatively states, in the context of discussing the nature of reality in psychoanalytic treatment: "The game is already played, the die already cast. It is already cast, with the following proviso, that we can pick it up again, and throw it anew." (Lacan 1988: 219).

One of Lacan's most sustained engagements with the question of freedom comes in his discussion of what he dubs the "discourse of freedom" in *Seminar III* – perhaps not accidentally, a seminar on psychosis. In Section 2.2 I suggested that the notion of the "primal freedom" of improv represented an image at work within the symbolic structure, a fantasmatic image of freedom articulated with this discourse of freedom. Lacan observes a clear contradiction in the modern world: "We live in a society in which slavery isn't recognized. It's nevertheless clear to any sociologist or philosopher that it has in no way been abolished... It's also clear that while bondage hasn't been abolished, one might say it has been generalized" (Lacan 1997: 132). He goes on to claim that this bondage, and the "deep-seated bondage of consciousness" that accompanies "this unhappy state of affairs" is supported by "a secret discourse, a message of liberation, which in a way subsists in a state of repression" (Lacan 1997: 132). In a way, this discourse, which Lacan traces back before the Christians and to the Stoics, is one in which any notion of liberation can take a back seat. It can be deferred, it comes through brotherhood, as the reward for a life well lived, even in an afterlife. However, a profound shift has occurred in recent centuries, which meant that the concept of freedom has taken a far more central stage. With the onset of capitalism, "freedom" became a rallying cry of a new bourgeois class against the *Ancien Régime* of the old feudal order. This marked the emergence of the discourse of freedom, in which the message of liberation became patent rather than repressed.

Lacan saw this discourse as an essential feature of the modern world, and one "that is personal and yet common, and always, whether imperceptibly or not, delusional" (Lacan 1997: 135). If we look again at the contradiction that Lacan identifies - that our society claims that bondage has been abolished and yet it exists everywhere - then it becomes apparent that some form of ideological support is

required for this gap between reality and perception. Under feudalism, no such distinction was required; peasants and serfs lived under the boot of the lord. The idea of equality, of freedom, was never broached and could nevertheless be papered over by the discourse of brotherhood of faith, of reward in the afterlife. With the emergence of capitalism, and with it, the clearing of common lands and the creation of a modern proletariat, freedom became a live question: political freedom, freedom of trade, freedom of association, were all necessary aspects of the early bourgeois project. And yet, as Marx put it in *Capital*, capitalists required workers to “be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of his labour-power” (1976: 272). In this sense, the discourse of freedom served to obscure the reality that the freedom most people enjoyed at the level of the economy was hollow and yet promoted the notion that, regardless, human beings were nevertheless free, autonomous agents. Lacan saw this as “articulated deep within us all” (1993: 133). Indeed, it is the basis of capitalist ideology.

Žižek (2008) has suggested that one can interpret Lacan’s enigmatic suggestion that the origin of the notion of the symptom is to be found in Marx’s analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Lacan 1975: 106) in precisely this fashion. While under feudalism, relationships between people took on fetishistic qualities such that the recognition of the feudal lord was apprehended as an innate quality of the “lordliness” of the lord, rather than as the result of the fact that subjects related to him as a lord, under capitalist social relations, it is the at the level of commodities that such fetishism operates – relationships between people are apprehended as relationships between things. Žižek (2008) argues that this transition heralds a paradox, and that Marx’s dual freedom is what allows for the obfuscation of unequal relations between worker and capitalist behind formal bourgeois equality. In this “free” selling of the worker’s labour, the worker’s freedom is lost. This underpins the generalisation of bondage that Lacan identified as concomitant with the discourse of freedom, and thus lays bare the falsity of the ideological universal of bourgeois freedom.

Interestingly, Lacan saw the emergence of the “modern revolution” - speaking in 1956 and so less than 40 years after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia - as based on the one hand on the imbalance between “pure and simple fact of revolt and the capacity of social action to transform” and, on the other:

on the notion that the discourse of freedom was, by definition, not only ineffectual but also profoundly alienated from its aim and object, that everything probative that is linked to it is properly speaking the enemy of all progress towards freedom, to the extent that freedom can have a tendency to animate any continual movement in society. (Lacan 1997: 132-133).

It is a testimony to Lacan's perceptiveness that he identified this break with the discourse of freedom. Chiesa (2016) suggests, Lacan distinguishes the Russian Revolution from the demands for freedom in the 19th century which, as Lacan points out in *Seminar XI*, amounted to the freedom to die of hunger (Lacan 1998: 213). Indeed, the Bolsheviks' demands recognised the incapability of "freedom" to animate the movement of the revolution and were for the much more concrete "peace," meaning an end to World War I, "land" meaning the redivision of aristocratic estates among the peasantry, "and bread" so that workers could eat. In Chapter 5, I will examine the ways in which the functioning of the capitalist economy and the discourse of freedom with which it is articulated repeatedly undermines the freedom of improvisers to improvise. In addition, I will consider again the role of the Russian Revolution and its relationship to improvisation.

Lacan's dismissive attitude toward the discourse of freedom, then, reflected a profound scepticism towards empty abstractions of freedom that served to support an illusory and delusional belief in the autonomy of the individual - indeed, of the ego. This should not lead us to cast Lacan as a nascent revolutionary. Tomšič (2015) suggests that Lacan's own politics leant towards Charles de Gaulle's conservatism. On the other hand, Rabaté (2009) suggests that Lacan was enthusiastic about the student uprising of May 1968:

The seminar of May 8th did not take place because of a general strike called for by the teachers' union. Lacan came and just chatted with those who were present. On the 9th, Lacan signed a manifesto in support of protesting students, no doubt incited by his daughter and son in law, both involved in Maoist group activities. Lacan dealt with students in psychiatry who were on strike; even at the time, Lacan was never impressed by people arguing that they need more "dialogue" with the power, rejecting the very notion of dialogue. (2009: 31)

Rabaté's recollections indicate at the very least a more ambivalent relationship to radical political action than Tomšič's assertion suggests, and perhaps the sheer power and scale of the May 1968 events played a role in radicalising, maybe briefly, Lacan's own attitude towards social change. However, we should nevertheless heed Nobus's (1998) warning against using *ad hominem* arguments to colour our interpretation of Lacan's contributions. If, as Tomšič suggests, Lacan "saw the most subversive aspect of his teaching in the fact that he did not pretend to have a solution for social antagonisms" (2015: 2), then it is better to focus on what he *did* think psychoanalysis could achieve. "Psychoanalysis", he suggests, "never places itself at the level of the discourse of freedom... Psychoanalysis is otherwise directed at the effect of discourse within the subject" (Lacan 1997: 135). At this level, within the clinical practice of psychoanalysis, Lacan seemed to believe that there was space for a freedom, of sorts, to which I will now turn.

2.5 The 'afterwardsness' of freedom

Since we have established the fantasmatic nature of the notion of primal freedom, and subsequently Lacan's understanding of the discourse of freedom as a delusion, what place remains for any possibility of freedom in Lacan's thought? Let us think again of two quotes from *Seminar II* referenced in the previous section: if psychoanalysis is "an apprenticeship in freedom" (Lacan 1988: 85), then freedom is something that must be attained through a process, that must be worked for. How, then, to consider the notion that even though the "game is already played" (Lacan 1988: 219), we can pick up the die and roll it again? After all, we cannot relive our life. Perhaps, however, we can change our past. In this section, I will argue that a particularly psychoanalytical reading of temporality and causality lies at the heart of a notion of freedom in Lacan's thought. It is derived from what Freud termed *Nachträglichkeit*, rendered by Lacan in French as *après-coup*, and translated into English often as deferred action, retroaction, or "afterwardsness".

Freud introduced the term *Nachträglichkeit* to explain how trauma can be formed when an initial event is repressed and is later *retroactively* rendered traumatic to an individual only after a subsequent encounter. Freud (1950) gives the example of Emma, a patient who was unable to go to shops alone after the age of 12, when she walked into a shop and was frightened by the shopkeepers laughing at her clothes. Freud discovered that Emma had had two earlier encounters as an eight-year-old

when a shopkeeper grabbed her genitals. Freud's interpretation of these events is that various associations between the events led to the first incident, which while troubling had not been experienced as traumatic, subsequently being retroactively invested with trauma. As Bistoien, Vanheule, and Craps (2014: 674) suggest, this points to the limits of Strachey's rendering of *Nachträglichkeit* as "deferred action", which suggests the trauma was deposited at the first incident only to later explode like a timebomb during the second incident. Rather, it is an element of the past *as it exists for the subject* that is being retroactively reinterpreted as an effect of the second incident that revives it. Here, then, we can see the starting point for an understanding how past events can be resignified – that the subject can in a sense change their past. In order to explicate this process in relation to Lacan's thought, I will return to a number of points which have already been touched upon in this chapter, beginning with the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, before moving on to discuss Lacan's concepts of alienation and separation, before returning to a discussion of the role of the law in accounts of freedom presented by Lacan and his interpreters.

Lacan was initiated into Hegel's work through his attendance at Kojève's seminar on *The Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1933 till 1939. Kojève's influence on Lacan is evident from the latter's dedication of the first issue of the journal *La Psychanalyse* some twenty years later, in 1956: "for Kojève, who was my master (truly the only)" (quoted in Lucchelli 2016: 340). Kojève's approach to the *Phenomenology* concentrated on the master-slave dialectic and this, in turn, became a crucial influence in the formulation of its relation to Lacan's notions of alienation and separation. Like Lacan's recasting of Freud's primordial father story as myth, Hegel's dialectic takes the form of a myth that can be applied to the origins of human history, or to the birth of subjectivity in the infant. It is the latter reading that underpins Lacan's subsequent development of the dialectic.

Hegel contrasts objects, as things in themselves, with the negativity of subjectivity, of beings "fettered to no determinate existence" (Hegel 1977: 113). Hegel postulates that in order for the subject to achieve self-consciousness it must achieve recognition by another: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged." (Hegel 1977: 111). When these consciousnesses converge, bewildered by the resistance the other presents to it, they recognise in the other desirousness and realise they are, themselves, an object to this other and therefore also an object for itself. This is the

moment of *alienation*, the loss of one's "essential being" (Hegel 1977: 114), and it precipitates a battle of wills. The subject who chooses death rather than becoming an object in fact chooses freedom and sovereignty and becomes master over the mere "object" that chooses survival, who assumes the role of slave at the whims of the desire of its counterpart. As discussed earlier, the master is free only insofar as the slave recognises its freedom, while the slave, in his or her unfreedom, has an ideal of freedom that is seen in the master, but that is abstract and thus universal – realisable only through mutual recognition between subjects.¹ Significantly, here we see an instance of retroaction in process. The slave must realise that they are a slave, and the master that they are dependent upon the recognition of the slave, for the master-slave dialectic to be operative; the interpretation simultaneously changes what it describes (Parker 2011: 71). Subjectivity emerges retroactively through recognition, reconfiguring what had previously been; that which determines us as "free" has been retrospectively assigned.

Lacan draws on Hegel's account of alienation in his account of the advent of the subject, but also fundamentally transforms it. Alienation features prominently at two points in Lacan's work: in his account of a child's development and the mirror stage and, later, in *Seminar XI*, in his elaboration of alienation and separation as logical functions. In the first, delivered in 1936 and again in 1949 before being published in *Ecrits* (Lacan 2006) as "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", Lacan explains how an infant at first experiences no separation between itself and the objects that surround it, that give it succour and support. Slowly, the child begins to explore and eventually encounters its reflection and comes to identify its own body with that in the mirror. The child experiences this identification as a moment of autonomy, yet it also becomes a moment of misrecognition, since the image is *not* the child and yet becomes the basis for the child's burgeoning sense of self-consciousness. As Lacan suggests, this encounter symbolises the "mental permanence" of the ego, but at the same time "prefigures its *alienating* destination" (Lacan 2006: 76; emphasis added). This process "situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction" (Lacan 2006: 76). Thus, this imaginary alienation – of the child's being in its mirror image – creates the grounds for the ego and sets the child on a path towards its "social determination", that is, its alienation in the symbolic order discussed in Section

¹ Concretely, for Hegel, this would be represented in the state and civil society as *Geist*.

2.2. In this account of alienation, we again encounter retroaction as the child can now make sense of its prior existence as this body-image, and as it gains further mastery of its motor functions such mastery can be attributed to the wholeness it witnessed in the image. Indeed, Lacan insists against a chronological interpretation of child development, and rather that the infant's passage through the pregenital phase is "organized by the retroactive effect of the Oedipus complex" rather than playing out at determinate times of a child's development (2006: 462). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the intervention of the name-of-the father, the symbolic function that inaugurates the child's alienation in language, prompts the subject's attribution of pure *jouissance* to an earlier, undivided, pre-symbolic existence – a retroactive fantasy.

By 1964, when Lacan delivers his *Seminar XI* on "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis", the concept of alienation has been developed substantially. Alienation in language is not simply an event which occurs in childhood when the child accepts symbolic castration (as discussed in Section 2.2); rather, it is an ongoing process for any speaking being. Subjectivity involves choosing between being and meaning. The subject strives for being – indeed, Bruce Fink, in a translator's note in the English edition of *Ecrits*, states that Lacan selected "want-to-be" as the English translation of *manque-à-être*, often rendered as "lack of being" (Lacan 2006: 761). However, to choose being is to choose non-meaning, for how can a speaking subject represent itself other than through language? The choice of meaning requires the use of language, of signifiers, that is, the domain of the Other. In making such a choice, the subject is able to interact with others, but in doing so, "being" is out of the question; the subject is reduced to a signifier and petrified. Lacan draws the parallel with the highwayman who demands: "Your money or your life!" (Lacan 1998: 212). If one chooses money, one loses both. If one chooses life, one is subject to live a life without money. In the forced choice of alienation, if the subject chooses being, they have no means by which to express such being, thus there is no question of either being or meaning. On the other hand, if they choose meaning, they choose life alienated in the Other of language, they are determined by it and thus lose being. In every attempt of the subject to represent itself in signifiers – that is, through the domain of the Other – the subject slides beneath the signifiers, condemned to never fully being but rather determined by language, by the symbolic order of the Other.

Thus far, the discussion of alienation seems indelibly marked not by freedom but by its loss. Yet alienation is also a condition of possibility. Hegel's alienation offers

the possibility of its sublation [*Aufhebung*] in the mutual recognition of subjects. In Marx's (1988) recasting of Hegel, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, alienation became the way in which the product of labour came to dominate labourers as an alien force, and yet which allows the worker to recognise the need to annihilate the system of private property that gives rise to alienation and replace it with communism. Both processes proceed dialectically to overcome the previous state of being while retaining the advances made (in terms of self-consciousness for Hegel, or the development of productive forces for Marx). The situation with Lacan is quite different, though it is no less a condition of possibility. Tomšič (2015: 92) suggests a conceptual delineation between two kinds of alienation: *constitutive*, which is equivalent to structure of language which constitutes the subject, and *constituted*, such as that which Marx discussed that exists at the level of the social. Lacan's is clearly a constitutive alienation, and the kind of socio-economic and political freedom entailed in Marx's concept of communism would not mean an end to the alienation of language; this is unavoidable for speaking beings. Yet, as Lacan said in *Seminar XI*, he was "unable to deal with the relation of alienation without introducing the word freedom" (1998: 252). This freedom stems from a second operation which "completes the circularity of the relation of the subject to the Other" (Lacan 1998: 213).

This second operation is that of separation. While alienation details the operation through which the subject of the signifier emerges, separation involves the subject of desire. Through the process of separation, the subject attempts to come to terms with the desire of the Other. This can be seen, for example, in the ways that children constantly question their parents' choices, and the reasons for them. As Lacan puts it:

The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child's why's reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a *Why are you telling me this?* ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire. (1998: 214)

The child is not asking why things are this way and not that way, except in as much as they are asking: why does this matter? What do you want of me? The child discovers a lack in the other, a failure of words to adequately express desire and thus to fully determine the subject. This provokes anxiety in the child, who as a result of

this signifying impasse stages a fantasy: "Does the Other want to lose me?" or "Can the Other afford to lose me?" If not, then the subject has received something in return – knowledge of a lack in the other. Thus, the operation of separation gives something to the subject. To be clear, it does not give back something that was lost. Rather, through what Lacan describes as "the superimposition of two lacks" (Lacan 1998: 213) – the lack in the subject and the lack in the other – a new presence makes itself felt; the object *a* (introduced in Section 2.2 above). There is, however, a further result of this operation of separation, which, again, is not to be chronologically located at the first time that the subject becomes aware of the lack in the Other (as mother or parent), but rather is continually restaged in realisations of lack in the Other. If the Other lacks, then the subject may question it as the source from which recognition must emerge – perhaps the Other does not hold the truth of one's being after all. Separation creates the possibility of the subject realising that they cannot become the sole object of the Other's desire, are unable to be placed fully in symbolic terms, and are incapable of ever acquiring the elusive object *a*. Thus, the subject represents a break in the chain of signification that would otherwise petrify them (Smith 2020: 39).

The logical operation of alienation and separation, then, gives rise to the possibility of a further separation through psychoanalysis. In the clinic, through the practice of free association (to which we will return in the next chapter) the analysand speaks, repeats, rehashes and rehearses their past, their fantasy. The analyst's role is not to provide knowledge of the analysand's desires (that the analysand nevertheless supposes that they must know) but rather through interpretation to uncover them – the "irreducible signifier (Lacan 1998: 250) – and in so doing, not to reveal their hidden meanings but rather to reduce the "non-meaning of the signifiers, so that we may rediscover the determinants of the subject's entire behaviour" (1998: 212). In doing so, the analysand can overcome their identifications with the ego and recognise themselves in the subject of the unconscious and one's lack of being. They can retroactively both come to grips with the Other as their cause and intervene in order to redefine their position with regard the Other. As Fink (1995: 62) suggests, this would mean that where the Other's desire was, this subject would say not "It happened to me," or "They did this to me," or "Fate had it in store for me," but "I was," "I did," "I saw," "I cried out." This passage has echoes with Freud's famous dictum "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden", translated as "Where It was, shall I be" or "Where id was, there ego shall be" by those who strengthen the claim of ego psychology to Freud's legacy (Freud 1964a: 80). Lacan objected to this reading, though, and proposed

instead the translation: "Where (it) was itself...it is my duty that I come into being" (Lacan 2006: 348). It is through this process of coming to grips with one's earliest significations and the fantasies enmeshed with it that one has the possibility of assuming a new subject position in relation to them; not merely to act "freely" within preordained limits but to "freely" have some bearing on what those limits are. Not to be freed from the symbolic order – which is a constitutive alienation in Tomšič's (2015) terms – but to rework your position within it. This then, for the subject, is a form of freedom within constraints – a freedom to redefine one's constraints and one's behaviour within them.

We can see in this account a link to freedom as discipline, as learned, as worked for – which helps us understand why Lacan referred to psychoanalysis as "an apprenticeship in freedom" (Lacan 1988: 85). The work is such that, as Zupančič argues in her discussion of the Kant's categorical imperative and its relation to freedom that one "cannot found the freedom of the subject on the fact that her actions may be unpredictable" but instead "one has to discover the point where the subject itself plays an (active) part in lawful, causal necessity, the point where the subject itself is already inscribed in advance in what appear to be laws of causality independent of the subject" (2000: 33). This passage is of a double significance here. First, Zupančič underlines the role of retroactivity in the freedom of the subject. Through the end of analysis, the subject has retroactively determined itself as its own cause; it was not a random effect but a product of its own act; the past can be changed. Secondly, it is of great significance to the practice of improv, since it can be argued in common sense terms that freedom in improv is related to the "random" and arbitrary way in which players can use language. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, there are significant rules that constrain such arbitrariness, both at the level of language itself and the specific 'rules' of improv, and thus it is the case also for improv that freedom cannot be founded merely on unpredictability in the game.

To choose the grounds of one's determination at the end of analysis is to "act". Pluth (2007: 24) suggests that Lacan's notion of the act is central to understanding freedom since to act in such a way does not involve seeking recognition in the Other. He offers this three-point definition of the act derived from Lacan: "(1) it does something with words (it is signifying); (2) it changes the structure of the subject; and (3) it is transgressive" (2007: 102). He translates a quote from Lacan's Seminar XV thus: "If I can walk to and fro here while talking to you this does not constitute an act...but

if one day it amounts to crossing a certain threshold where I place myself outside of the law, my locomotion will have the value of an act" (quoted in Pluth 2007: 101). This notion of the act can also help us to tentatively conceive of a kind of freedom that might exist beyond the clinical account just discussed. This brings us back to McGowan's point, introduced in Section 2.2, that it is the law that creates the possibility of freedom through constraining it. Our desire relates dialectically with the symbolic law – on one hand, our alienation in language enables us to desire objects, since desire is always the desire of the Other, yet our desiring extends beyond the symbolic to that pre-symbolic fantasy of a full *jouissance* that was lost in castration – towards the object *a*, the lack that functions as a presence, motivating our desiring. So, while the law inaugurates a lack in the subject, it simultaneously denies the fulfilment of this lack. Thus, inherent in the law is the inferred possibility of its transgression, which without the law would not be possible. Lacan articulates this perspective in *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in his discussion the Ninth Commandment, where he suggests that "In 'Thou shalt not lie' as law is included the possibility of the lie as the most fundamental desire" (1992: 82). We see here the importance of the creation of something out of nothing – *creation ex nihilo* – that Lacan discussed in *Seminar VII*. The law creates the possibility of its transgression. The symbolic order retroactively creates the lack that we seek to fill, as a vase creates a void within it that opens the possibility of it being filled "because in the first place in its essence it is empty" (1992: 120).

McGowan (2019) develops Lacan's profound insights to argue that it is precisely this dialectical relationship between law and desire that gives rise to the possibility of free acts. McGowan suggests that "The metaphor of the law gives the subject the freedom to create something out of nothing, which is authentic freedom" (2019: 62). We can see here a parallel with the earlier discussion of the psychoanalytic cure – the subject, despite its radical negativity, nevertheless intervenes to determine its own determination, creating something from nothing. Since the act of prohibition gives rise to the sense that the prohibited thing would be accessible if only it were not for the law. This creates the possibility of the subject regarding what is impossible as possible, which McGowan suggests is freedom. Therefore, he goes on, since social structures define the possible in order to maintain themselves, acts that disturb the social relations underpinned by such structures appear as impossible in relation to them (McGowan 2019: 62). This claim echoes that of Žižek (2001: 121), who, drawing on Lenin's distinction between formal and actual freedom, argues that actual freedom

entails, in the context of a choice between alternatives within a pre-given set of coordinates, one changes the coordinates – in a forced choice between supposed alternatives that in practice amount to maintenance of the status quo, one acts as if the choice is not, in fact, forced, and rather “chooses the impossible.” Both these claims have immediate resonances with Lacan’s conception of the psychoanalytic act, and perhaps open up a space to see acts outside the analytic space as free in as much as they manage to defy a social demand, or the limitations of the symbolic agency of the ego-ideal – that is, the symbolic aspect of the ego as ego internalisation of the symbolic order and the law. Certainly, such acts would have resonance with the Spolin’s notions of freedom in the moment, freedom as fleeting and constructed in the act of improvisation.

The notion of a primal freedom discussed earlier misses the significance of constraints in creating productivity and of the law in provoking free acts. Indeed, it can exist only as that thing that our desire strives for despite its impossibility. In McGowan’s and Žižek’s sense, freedom entails acting independently of the social demand that compels capitulation and rewards it with a sense of belonging (McGowan 2019: 63). In McGowan’s discussion of *The Breakfast Club* (1985), he argues that the film’s hero is the hapless Principal Vernon, who through the “introduction of nonsensical laws frees the students to defy the social demand that had hitherto been *utterly determinative* of them. Though the film presents their freedom as defiance of him, his intervention is the *proximate cause* for this freedom.” (McGowan 2019: 69, emphasis added). This might at first glance appear to be a paradox – freedom from utter determinism as the result of a proximate cause. Yet this example seems an excellent metaphor for the kind of freedom that results at the end of analysis. Perhaps this “switching tracks’, intervening in one’s past to retroactively change the course of one’s determination, is the root of a meaningful sense of freedom, i.e., that we *choose* to be determined by something other than what had previously determined us. This, then, would constitute a moment of freedom, within constraints, that is worked on through a form of discipline.

2.6 Conclusion: ‘Yes! And...’ or ‘No! But...’

In this chapter, I have laid out some of the key aspects of Freudian and Lacanian approaches to freedom. In doing so, I have shown that there is indeed a concern for freedom inherent in both their works. I began the chapter by considering different

understandings of freedom expressed by improvisers. I argued that total, primal freedom represents a fantasy. However, in my discussion of Lacanian approaches to freedom, there were resonances with notions of freedom within constraints, freedom as learned and freedom in the moment. Significantly, I have argued that a central aspect of freedom as understood from a Lacanian perspective relates to the possibility of retroactively changing one's past. As will become clear in the subsequent chapters, a retroactive resignification of meaning is central to the practice of improv and, I argue, lies at the heart of what makes improvisors feel free. However, I do not wish to claim that this somehow proves that improv is free in that it escapes determination, or that improv performances bring about some fundamental transformation in the subject. Consider Badiou's reading of the act, or truth-process, which he sees as structured as "no...but", in which the no represents "the potential dissolution of closed particularities", that is, a refusal of the law, "whereas the 'but' indicates the task," that is, the articulation of an alternative (quoted in Pluth 2007: 136). Yet, as we shall see, the cardinal rule of improv is radically different from "no...but"; it is "Yes! And...". Rather than representing a radical rupture, the entire practice of improv lies in what could perhaps be termed a *radical continuity*: the signifying chain extends and yet does so in a way rather different from how it does in everyday life and conversation.

While, as Zupančič argues, "we cannot found the freedom of the subject on the fact that her actions may be unpredictable" (2000: 33), and while we should therefore not attempt to suggest that improv is in fact a radically free practice from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lacanian psychoanalysis can nonetheless help us understand the reasons why it can feel quite so free as it does. In the next chapter, I will explain many of the practices of improv and how the radical continuities that they generate might create a sense of freedom that goes beyond the trite definition of a "sense of abandon" with which I opened this chapter. At the heart of this sense of freedom is an activity that improv shares with psychoanalysis, i.e., the practice of free association. In such free associations, what role does the Other as unconscious play? As one of the original Compass Players, Andrew Duncan, explained: "To suddenly find something that was...an applied form in which to get up and start expressing the things we were thinking about and feeling at that time, with all those repressed political, social, psychological feelings... I mean the freedom!" (quoted in Sweet 1987: 47). Clearly, free association in improv does not have the same aims as in analysis, but maybe, in welcoming the unconscious into the game, in at least partly suspending the censoring function of the ego, a form of free

association takes place in an arena of non-judgemental comradeship. Perhaps some of these moments of improvisation really are ones where a spark of subjectivity makes the improviser free?

Chapter 3: Improv, play and the rules of the game

3.1 Introduction: "...all the men and women merely players"

In the monologue written by William Shakespeare in act 2, scene 7 of *As You Like It*, the melancholy Jaques famously declares:

All the world's a stage

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances

And one man in his time plays many parts... (Shakespeare 2000: 124)

Jaques is referring to the different roles people fulfil as they live, grow and age. However, this statement is relevant in introducing the standpoint of the improviser, or rather, the player. The two widely acknowledged originators of improv, Viola Spolin and Keith Johnston, both refer to participants as players, and play is seen as a crucial element of the practice of improvisation (Spolin 1963; Johnstone 1989). Much like Jaques' players, the improvising player plays many parts in their time – typically many in one session of improv. And during the period of improvisation, even if the whole world is not a stage, the player's stage is, or can be, the whole world, or many worlds. This playfulness hints at the potential for freedom that both Spolin and Johnstone identify with improv. For Spolin, emphasis on play was precisely what was required in order to enable the spontaneity that she thought was the prerequisite for experiencing freedom in the moment: "If you put someone onstage . . . and tell him to

‘act,’ he will feel inhibited and self-conscious, but if you transform the situation into a game, the actor, in concentrating his energies on playing the game, will lose his self-consciousness and perform naturally and spontaneously” (quoted in Sweet 1987: xvii). Johnstone, similarly, sees play as a critical aspect of improv, and one that needs to be learned, so that participants can play “with no effort or anxiety” (Johnstone 1989: 118).

In the previous chapter, I presented four related notions of freedom that practitioners and theorists of improv have discussed: a primal freedom, a freedom within constraints, a learned freedom, and a freedom in the moment. Subsequently, I surveyed Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic literature and established another four notions of freedom that could be associated with these schools: a Freudian “primitive” freedom; a notion of freedom derived from certain formulations of Freud’s that emphasises the freeing of the ego from the id; a Lacanian clinical freedom that results from the end of analysis that involves retroactively transforming one’s previous determination; and a freedom of the act that is extended by Žižek and McGowan beyond the clinical setting into the social, summarised as making the impossible choice, confronting a forced choice and acting as though it is not in fact forced. In this chapter, I will apply and extend these notions of freedom in considering the relationship between freedom and constraint in improvised play. In doing so, I will draw attention to “the productivity of constraints” (Chiesa 2016: vii), that is, the crucial role that limitations on freedom play in enabling us to exact a measure of freedom.

The chapter will begin by considering relevant contributions to an understanding of play by a range of social theorists. These theorists will establish a context within which I will then locate improvised play as something that is embedded within, but separated off from the everyday lives of the players, in which the relationship between structure and unlimited improvisation is a key concern. Next, I will move on to discuss the games, forms and rules that have developed in improv, which form a central aspect of the symbolic structure of the practice. In particular, I will consider the cardinal rule of improv – the rule of agreement, or “Yes, and...” – as well as the most influential structure of improv in its long form, known as “the Harold”. Next, I will discuss aspects of Lacan’s approach to language that can enrich our understanding of the operation of wordplay in improv, as well as the crucial way in which time in improv is, in another famous notion of Shakespeare’s, out of joint – the way in which meaning in improv is constructed in a non-linear

fashion, and how the inherent ambiguities and polyvalences of language are central to the players' ability to improvise with one another. I will suggest that the "event-like" structure of improv is a major influence on the sense of freedom and transformation that improvisors believe it engenders. I will then go on to consider the role of the unconscious – in particular, the Lacanian and transindividual unconscious – in improvised play. Here, I will argue that not only is this conception of the unconscious helpful in understanding the ways in which improv scenes play out, but also illuminates the way in which improvisors themselves understand the role of the unconscious choice (Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994) and how this is connected to the way in which improvisors understand their craft to be "transformative". I will connect these notions to the role of the group in improv, and suggest that the improvising group represents a kind of imaginary unity of players, but a unity that is constantly challenged by the pressure of the Other – in particular, of the audience. Finally, through a discussion of Freud's and Lacan's readings of the "fort/da" game, I will suggest that a crucial aspect of the sense of freedom that improvisors feel arises from the way in which it permits a radical diversity in repetition and allows for the improvisors to repeatedly make the "impossible choice".

3.2 Play: from *paidia* to *ludus*

The notion of play established by Spolin and Johnstone, as something liberatory from inhibition or self-consciousness, as *freeing*, has a long pedigree in a wide range of theoretical work relating to play and playfulness. Schiller, in his aesthetics, for example, understood play to be the essence of freedom: "[I]n every condition of humanity it is precisely play, and play alone, that makes man complete (Schiller 2004: 79). For Schiller, the "play drive" (*Spieltrieb*), balances between the formal and sensual drives of man and, when awakened, allows for the appreciation of beauty and freedom from determination. As such, it bestows the ability to freely choose between the moral law and our sensuous desires. Marcuse paraphrases Schiller to suggest that, in fact, the liberatory power of play is the way in which playfulness, and the loss of seriousness it entails, will only truly hold in a world in which "wants and needs can be satisfied without alienated labor. Then, man is free to 'play' with his faculties and potentialities and with those of nature, and only by 'playing' with them is he free" (1974: 188). Thus, Marcuse reinvents Schiller's play drive in order to link the liberatory potential of play to the possible end of capitalism. In binding freedom and play so closely, Schiller and Marcuse thus anticipate Spolin's

notion of freedom as something which emerges from play. However, for Spolin, freedom is not an ongoing balance or mediation of conflictual drives, nor a liberated future freed from the yoke of capital, but rather the momentary “explosion” that “frees us from handed down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings” (1963: 6). Yet all three share the notion of play as a freedom emerging creatively within constraints – the drives, alienated labour, or the rules of the games – but which also transforms or annuls those constraints through the unification of the self. For Schiller, play aims at the consummation of matter and mind, whereas for Marcuse it is the abolition of alienated labour as that which, once created, stands outside and dominates the worker, which is at stake. For Spolin, play is the moment in which “the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole” (1963: 6). This evidently raises the question of what the organic whole of the player really entails, which will be discussed in Section 3.5 below.

Huizinga, who studied the nature, historical development, and organisation of human play, saw a defining aspect of play as being the “temporary abolition of the ordinary world” (1949: 12). He defines play as follows:

...we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly . . . It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (1949: 13).

Huizinga’s definition of play sounds quite similar to that in Spolin and Johnstone’s works. Play, in this sense, is something that is outside the ordinary and which transforms a space and a group, while operating within certain boundaries. Huizinga’s preoccupation with groups emerges from his observation of the way in which ceremonies of play have a role in binding together social groups. In the context of improv, this has a particular salience since the improvising group, or troupe of players, is a fundamental aspect of the sociability of improv. As we saw in Chapter 1, and will discuss further in section 3.3 below, the development of improv saw the emergence of multiple groups in different geographical locations, all with their own

rules and tendencies. The group could thus be seen to represent an imaginary unity of players as a cohesive unit. Yet, as Huizinga continues, play involves two basic aspects: “a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game ‘represents’ a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something” (1949: 13). Thus, in practice, it should be understood that such unity can be put under constant pressure both from without and from within, due to the potential for competitive clashes.

Caillois, one of the pre-eminent sociologists of play, similarly finds that while games are fundamental to civilisation, the notions of play and everyday life tend to be antagonistic towards each other. Caillois develops various categories of games and places them on a continuum ranging from what he terms *paidia* to *ludus*. *Paidia* at one end of the spectrum, represents “turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety [...] uncontrolled fantasy” (Caillois 2001: 13). At the opposite side lies *ludus*, which is governed by rules, and which disciplines the properties of the *paidia* by creating conventions to adhere to. For Caillois, the antagonism between freedom and constraints is important for establishing the basis for play. This tension between *paidia* and *ludus*, freedom and constraint, is a central aspect of improvisation and lies at the heart of the productivity of the discipline; the structure of the game is what provides the condition of possibility for the forms of creative expression that players seek to engage in. As Corbett suggests in relation to jazz music, improvisation consists in a “compromise between order and disorder . . . a negotiation between codes and their pleasurable dismantling” (1995: 237). Similarly, I argue in section 3.7 below, in improv, this productive tension is nevertheless a real tension that tests players and pushes them to seek to overcome the rules of the game.

Unlike Huizinga and Caillois, Henricks sees play not merely as the abolition of the ordinary world, or as something that stands in fundamental tension with it. Rather, Henricks’ understanding of the contradictions between play and ordinary life are captured perfectly in the following quotation:

Play is the laboratory of the possible. To play fully and imaginatively is to step sideways into another reality, between the cracks of ordinary life. Although that ordinary world, so full of cumbersome routines and responsibilities is still visible to us, its images, strangely, are robbed of their powers. Selectively, players take the objects and ideas of routine life and hold them

aloft. Like willful children, they unscrew reality or rub it on their bodies and toss it across the room. Things are dismantled and built anew. (2006: 1).

Henricks is discussing play in general, yet his description here seems particularly apt to improv – the way in which aspects of the everyday world are examined, magnified, and ridiculed. Henricks incorporates the difficulties of ordinary life *with* play, rather than conceiving of play as something we simply escape to so that we can forget the realities of everyday life. While ordinary life is frustrated by arbitrary rules and structures, through play we can step into a different reality and twist and transform our everyday life in a way that would be considered impossible within it. The pressures of ordinary life are part and parcel of the player, and it is out of such conflicts that those new meanings and new possibilities are created. Thus, we can draw upon Henricks to suggest that improvising play is a reconfiguration of the space around us, and that we can be playful even within the ordinariness of life. However, the very material challenges and constraints imposed upon us by capitalism can have a way of influencing the improvising group – when competition as a game becomes competition for a slot in the troupe, for a spot on the TV show, for access to an affordable theatre space, for example. If play is seen as direct opposition to work, then we run into problems: in improvisational comedy, which some consider a form of livelihood, how do work and play interact? I will return explicitly to these considerations in Chapter 5 when I discuss the way in which the world beyond the improvising space creates further constraints and tensions for improvisors.

While play is often linked to children's play, an association not germane to this discussion, there is something to be explored in the nature of play as linked to learning and education. According to the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), play is a significant part of a child's cognitive and social development and pleasure should not always be linked to play as there are some games or activities that do not bring pleasure. This has an echo in the work of Keith Johnstone, who approaches improv as a teacher and who sees learning as being a central aspect of achieving a sense of freedom in improvisation. For Johnstone, a level of discomfort is a necessary step on the road to freedom within improvisation, after which they can be encouraged "into letting the imagination off its leash." (1989: 118). According to Vygotsky, play is linked to an illusion of freedom, because the child must surrender to the rules. As discussed earlier, a similar tension is at play within improv: during a show the improvisors are

working playfully within the game structure and with audience suggestions to generate laughter. Thus, there is certainly an element of improvised play that is intermingled with the ideology of work, production, and rules. This echoes the juxtaposition of play with ordinary life in Henricks' work; it suggests that play is not completely an escape from the ordinary but rather it is enmeshed *with* it.

In this section I have drawn upon a range of theorists of play in order to set the context for the discussion that follows. I have established that there is a clear thread of seeing play as representing some form of tension between freedom and constraint – in Callois' idiom, between *paidia* and *ludus*. In the next section, I will examine the specific ways in which improv has developed rules and structures that are intended to facilitate effective forms of improvised play.

3.3 Structuring Improv

As established in the previous chapter, practitioners of improv tend to see their work as in some sense articulating freedom. I demonstrated that there is a certain tension between, on the one hand, a tendency to see rules and structure as necessary for the exercise of freedom within constraints, and those who emphasize the need to *learn* how to improvise in order to minimise the constraints that might fetter one's free expression. However, no matter where on such a spectrum a given improviser is, they will always require a set of rules around which they improvise in order for them to interact with other players on a shared and mutually agreed playing field. However, such a set of rules, which make up an element of the symbolic structure inherent to improv as an art form and social practice, can take a wide range of forms, as we will see in this section. Thus, in improv, the freedom of play always exists in a productive tension with the structure of the games and exercises, as well as with the social realities of the players and the wider symbolic structure.

As discussed in Section 3.1, play was considered a central aspect of improv by two of its pioneers, Spolin and Johnstone, and both understood that playfulness necessarily required at the very least a minimal set of rules or structure within which to play out. For Spolin, improvisation can be learnt by anyone as long as they follow certain instructions. Spolin was inspired by the sociologist Neva Boyd, who used game structure as part of theatre training with working-class children and adults at a settlement-house theatre in Chicago. According to Spolin, Boyd saw games as “a means to *free the child and the so-called amateur* from mechanical, stilted behaviour”

(Spolin 1963: ix; emphasis added). In Boyd's training, the troupe asked the audience for suggestions, which the players – it was Boyd who coined the term in preference to actors – then turned into improvisations, laying the initial groundwork for improv comedy and the outlines of a format that is deployed to this day. Spolin's games went on to emphasise the prioritisation of play over acting, with one of her instructions being "Were they acting? Get them to play!" (Spolin 1963: xiii). Meanwhile, in Britain and quite separately from Spolin's work and the North American tradition, Johnstone developed his own approach to improvisation, eventually connecting it to characteristics of professional wrestling. Much as Barthes (1972) had identified wrestling as a theatrical spectacle rather than a competitive sport, Johnstone wrote that, as a child in London, "[w]restling was the only form of working-class theatre that I'd seen, and the exaltation among the spectators was something I longed for, but didn't get, from 'straight' theatre" (Johnstone 1999: 1). Thus, while Spolin saw play as a means of *relaxing* the player to free them from their inhibitions, Johnstone sought to integrate aspects of sport into improvisational theatre for *heightened* dramatic effect. Despite these seemingly dichotomous aims, both embraced the need for a definite structure to their games.

One of the games detailed in Spolin's book on improvisation is the basis of one of the central rules of improv – the "Yes, and..." rule. In the "Accept and offer" game (Spolin 1963: 382), one improviser presents a scenario the other should accept with a "yes" – the other improviser has to accept their partner's reality and then elaborate on the reality with an "and...". As the improviser and comedy actor Tina Fey explains:

So if we're improvising and I say, "Freeze, I have a gun," and you say, "That's not a gun. It's your finger. You're pointing your finger at me," our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, "Freeze, I have a gun!" and you say, "The gun I gave you for Christmas! You bastard!" then we have started a scene because we have AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun. (2011: 84)

This rule of agreement became The Compass Players' first rule in 1957. The so-called Westminster Place Kitchen Rules ran as follows:

1. Don't deny. If Severn says he has a bunny in his hands, he has a bunny in his hands.

2. Whenever possible, make a strong choice. The less obvious the better.

3. You are you. What you think of as your “character” is really just a magnified piece of you. Therefore, onstage, be you.
(Wasson 2017: 51)

These three rules, combined with the audience suggestions of who and where the players were and what they were doing, became the basis of improv. Variations on these rules can be found in other improvisational troupes and the “don’t deny” or “Yes, and...” rule became the central tenet of improv: as a player, you accept the other players’ realities. For example, if the improviser says they are a robot on their way to the dentist, then the other improviser must accept that reality. The improvisation simply would not work if the other improviser rejected the thesis and said it is impossible to be a robot walking to the dentist. To respond with “Yes, and...” is an affirmation that improvisation is an open and an interactive process, and therefore not a unidirectional one (Ringstrom 2012). Abiding by the rule means that one has to be open to the possibilities of the other improvisors’ inputs and their desire to transform the game. To be open to possibilities is not just a banal injunction, but rather cultivates a way to be open and prepared, and to encourage others to do the same. It is the condition of possibility for successful improv.

To argue that agreement is a better aide to the scene than conflict, Halpern, Close & Johnson (1994) draw upon Freud’s analysis of *Hamlet* in “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” (Freud 1953). In this text, Freud suggests that it is the conflict internal to the characters rather than an external conflict that makes the play so interesting and modern. Accordingly, Halpern, Close & Johnson argue that, even in the context of a scene based upon conflict, it is more interesting to have the characters agree or work together somehow. They give examples of a burglar stealing art from a housewife who, after saying that she had painted them herself, gets into a conversation about art while insisting that the burglar take her pieces. Another example involves a policeman and a robber who, when the policeman asks the robber if they can take a break because he’s out of shape, get into an exchange that allows their characters to interact and develop as they pause to catch their breath every so often. Even in a scene that starts with some kind of conflictual situation, Halpern, Close & Johnson suggest, should move away from that starting point because the

incongruity this movement generates, and the emergence of agreement out of that initial conflict, creates humour in a way that ongoing conflict would not.

Fey's example of the gun also shows us how objects can be deployed in a scene during improvisation; not prop objects, but rather imagined objects that are inserted into empty space through contextualisation. For example, when Fey says she has a gun, she would make a fist, then raise her thumb and extend her index finger to mimic the barrel. Now Fey has to communicate to other improvisors and the audience that it is a gun, since the gesture could represent something else. This relies upon not just a shared formal language but a wider set of symbolic identifications – that the outstretched finger represents a gun in children's play, for example. One of Spolin's improvisational games "consists purely of players tossing the [imagined] ball to each other, communicating the invisible, sharing and transforming empty space" (Coleman 1991: 27). The improvisor has to throw the ball to the other improvisor, but they need to relay the "message" of the ball to the other as well as their audience, since their movements could have different meanings. What kind of ball is it? Is it big or small? Heavy or light? A bowling ball or a ping pong ball? Each movement offered to connote the nature of the ball has to be decoded by the other players, because they do not have a particular meaning and can denote a variety of meanings. Therefore, the improvisors are agreeing with their fellow players, whilst constantly writing their own meanings into the performance.

In developing his Theatresports format, Johnstone rejected traditional and mainstream ideas of bringing originality and concentration into acting and deliberately decided to become "notorious" and taught his students to "be more obvious" or "be more boring" (Johnstone: 1999: xii). Theatresports took shape in the context of a profoundly censorious atmosphere for performance in Britain in the early 1960s, when the Lord Chamberlain's censorship act was in full effect, which meant that any performance or play had to be thoroughly vetted and approved by the Lord Chamberlain's office. This meant that the model was only used in order to "liven up" Johnstone's improv classes, and it was only after Johnstone's move to Canada that he was able to fully to develop the format (1999: 2). Theatresports took place within a dramatized competitive structure with a commentator, two improv teams and three judges. Each team takes it in turn to challenge their opponents to improvise a scene, and in the context of this structure, spontaneity was able to thrive. Johnstone gives an example of the range of events that could take place in a Theatresports show:

Sometimes there are 'one-on-one' challenges, in which players from the opposing teams perform together – perhaps in a 'one-on-one love scene to be judged on sincerity and truth' (one-on-one scenes may involve several players from each team). Challenges can be to anything (at the discretion of the Judges) – for example, Bruce McCulloch's challenge to 'the best scene completed in the length of time that I can submerge my head in a bucket of water'. (1999: 4)

There were clearly stark differences between the approach embodied in Spolin's theatre games (and their extension by the Compass Players) and Johnstone's Theatresports, but there were also many affinities. Like Spolin, Johnstone incorporated the "Yes, and..." technique and, while improvisors were competing against each other, the underlying nature of the improvisation remained a series of discrete scenes played within groups. Like Spolin, Johnstone saw himself as an educator and interspersed the "sports" with "Free-Impro" sessions in which Johnstone would give a class. Both the Compass Players and Theatresports approach saw minimising rules within scenes as a key to giving the players more freedom, but the Theatresports approach had a greater role for an arbitrary "law" in the suggestions of the opposing team and the mediating role of the judges. However, both approaches represented a form of improv known as "short form", an improv style in which players take part in short scenes that are developed out of audience suggestions and based upon given structures, such as those developed by Johnstone and Spolin. In contrast, "long form" improv involves improvisation sustained over time using pre-agreed scenarios and more complex game structures. Long form improv is primarily associated with a structure known as "the Harold", which was developed by Del Close through the 1950s and 60s. Close had felt constrained by short games and sketches, and so invented "a freewheeling mode of play that seemed to capture the ecstasy and sensation of liminality in the improv process" (Seham 2001: 48). According to Close, he and his collaborators "'developed a way to intertwine scenes, games, monologues, songs and all manner of performance techniques" and in doing so "came up with one of the most sophisticated, rewarding forms of pure improv ever developed" (quoted in Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 7). Note here that Close links "pure" improvisation with complex structure, aligning him closely with the "focused freedom" approach to improv discussed in Chapter 2.

The Harold became a staple of both Second City and ImprovOlympics. It has a three-by-three act structure:

- Opening
- 1A
- 1B
- 1C
- Group Game
- 2A
- 2B
- 2C
- Group Game
- 3A
- 3B
- 3C

In the opening, the troupe asks for suggestions or themes from the audience. But the suggestions do not serve as the basis of the Harold – for example, a call of “a robot going the dentist” would not result in that being the subject of the Harold. Rather, the players use these suggestions as a starting point in a process of free association whereby the initial signifier would give way to others in a warm-up game, and subsequently, “[i]deas, attitudes, phrases, characters, and anything else that strikes a performer from the opening are used to explore the various facets of the theme and provide ideas for the improvisers” (Fotis 2014: 11-12). These initial signifiers formed the basis for further significations and associations as the Harold progresses – as Jessica Rogers, a veteran of both Second City and ImprovOlympics explains:

It’s like when you go to a musical and the first thing you hear is the overture. The overture is filled with little pieces of all of the songs. Then when the show actually starts, we get to all of the little pieces as full songs with words and the actors and the scenery. You get all these little snippets that we call back throughout the piece with greater complexity. (quoted in Patton 2007: 35)

Note Rogers’ reference to calling back snippets with greater complexity; retroactive reincorporation of previous elements in a new, transformed manner. This retroactivity is central to the operation of improv, as I shall explain at length in this

thesis. By the final scene, 3C, the Harold reaches “a finale that incorporates the theme and as many elements from the scenes and games as possible” (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 19). For Salinsky and White, Del Close’s approach was to produce performances that were “fiercely intelligent, terribly funny and containing nothing whatsoever in terms of plot” (Salinsky and White 2008: 11), and this perhaps sums up the content of an ideal performance of the Harold. The Harold would become the basis for most long form improv in the US, with Kozlowski describing it as “the most important theatrical movement in Chicago in thirty years” and branding other forms of long form improv as “the Harold with a new coat of paint” (Kozlowski 2002: 24; 69). The Harold would become a launchpad for successful TV and film comedy actors and directors, and greatly influenced the production of many US ensemble sit-coms in the early 21st century (Fotis 2014: 16). Thus far, I have explored the way in which rules and structures have been employed in improv in order to facilitate improvisational play in a range of forms. In the next section, I will draw upon aspects of Lacan’s approach to language in order to illustrate the operations by which meaning is created through improvised play.

3.4 Language and the ludic

Aspects of a Lacanian approach to language

Before I consider the ways in which psychoanalytic theory and concepts can contribute to our understanding of improv, it is worth commenting on something that has hitherto remained somewhat in the background of my discussion, namely the remarkable affinities that exist between the two practices. Improv borrows from psychoanalysis the method of free association, i.e., the effort of refraining from conscious consideration in favour of following ideas that seem to appear involuntarily “to skim off the surface of [one’s] consciousness” (Freud 1961b: 195). Free association plays the role of a warmup game in improv, as well as being a popular opening for the Harold. Moreover, free association is seen by improvisors as a way of circumventing egoic censorship (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994; Fotis 2014; Learn Improv 2010). In the next sections I will suggest that, in as far as there is a connection, it is one that helps us to understand some aspects of the way in which improvisors feel as though they experience a measure of freedom in their play.

Before moving on to consider Lacan’s work on language, it would be remiss of me in a chapter that discusses play to not mention the *playful* way in which much of

his teaching was delivered. Nobus and Quinn emphasise the way in which Lacan's delivery embodied a "ludic dreamworld of language", which developed over the years into an increasingly idiosyncratic vocabulary, peppered with puns and "linguistic playfulness" (2005: 71). When delivering his lectures Lacan would often wear bohemian outfits in front of his professional audience, speak in tongues, and in different names and different voices. In 1972, for example, Lacan spoke at the Catholic University of Louvain, "sporting a huge fur coat, the trademark 'twisted cigar' directly imported from Cuba and a groovy, psychedelic shirt, whose attached 'cravate' proved to be an obstacle to the microphone" (Nobus and Quinn 2005: 72). These playful performances were in a very real sense improvised. Roudinesco observes the stark distinction between Lacan's fixed writings and the "uncontrolled improvisation" that animated his seminars (Roudinesco 1990: 565), which he would frequently deliver from only a few notes. Moreover, this sense of improvisation extended beyond Lacan's own performance to the audience with whom he worked. Nobus and Quinn suggest that Lacan's early seminars could be compared to a jazz workshop in which the band leader assembles a trusted group of gifted musicians to improvise new pieces out of old tunes: "In trying to rescue Freud's spirit of discovery from the clutches of his contemporaries, Lacan endeavoured to create surroundings in which people could also breathe this same spirit" (Nobus and Quinn 2005: 88). This improvised, subversive and collective effort to overcome the stifling effects of orthodoxy has some parallels with the efforts of early improvisors to fashion a space and practice within which to operate beyond the bounds of censorship and conformity. Moreover, the linguistic playfulness that Lacan employed in order to underline the instability of language has clear affinities with the way in which, as we shall see, improv relies upon such instability to create connections, associations and new layers of meaning, particularly in the Harold.

Thus far we have established the rules of improv that comprise an aspect of the symbolic structure of improvised play. This structure is integral to what could be considered a manifestation of the "big Other" in relation to improv. Chiesa (2007: 35) suggests three related notions can be equated with the Lacanian big Other: first, language as structure (as derived from the structural linguistics of Saussure); second, the "symbolic order" as the very fabric of law in human culture (as derived from the anthropology of Levi-Strauss); and finally as the Freudian unconscious as developed by Lacan himself. In the rest of this chapter, I will consider these three aspects of this Other insofar as they help illuminate practices of improvised play. First, in order to

explore the dimension of playing with language in improv, I will introduce two key aspects of Lacanian linguistics – the signifying chain and the related concepts of metaphor and metonymy. For this, we must begin with Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics, which Lacan reworked and to which he explicitly refers in *Seminar I* and develops as an aspect of psychoanalytic discourse.

According to Saussure (2011), the linguistic sign marries together a concept (signified) and a sound-image (signifier). For instance, ‘tree’ connotes the concept of a tree with the imprint of the sound, but the relation between the concept and the sound-image is arbitrary. There is no reason why the sound ‘tree’ should evoke the concept of ‘tree’. Saussure compares the relationship between the signified and the signifier to a sheet of paper, with thought (signified) on one side and sound (signifier) on the reverse. One could not cut one side of the paper away from what is on its reverse, to isolate the sound from thought and thought from sound. While thought and sound are separate entities on either side of the page, they are unified; as Saussure suggests, it would be impossible to cut the paper, just as “it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound” (Saussure 2011: 11). Lacan’s intervention is to make precisely this impossible cut, so that not only does the meaning of a signifier emerge only as part of a network of differentiations, i.e., of what they are not; but also that a signifier is not pre-combined with any signified, and rather is independent of any necessary relation to a signified. Any signifier can signify more than might be intended by whoever utters it, and thus cannot be said to strictly signify anything in and of itself.

In *Seminar V*, Lacan refers to Saussure’s model as follows: “The signifier’s relation to the signified, so palpable in this dramatic dialogue, led me to refer to Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous schema in which you see the double parallel flow of signifiers and signifieds, distinct and destined to perpetually slide over one another” (2017: 7). Lacan’s reworking flips Saussure’s network by assigning primacy to the signifier, placing them above the signifieds. Rather than meaning being constructed through a linear flow of signs, the meaning of signifiers is only retroactively fixed in place by the use of further signifiers that anchor them in meaning. These anchors Lacan refers to as “*points de capiton*”, translated variously as “quilting points” (Lacan 2017) or “button ties” (Lacan 2006), which halt the incessant sliding of signification. Consider this opening to a sentence: “Willy was carried away by...”. It is currently highly polyvalent since, until we continue it, it is impossible to be clear what is meant

by “carried away”. If Willy were carried away by his mother to bed, then perhaps we would see Willy as a little boy who has fallen asleep and carried away as an act of caring. If Willy were carried away by whalers to a theme park, then we would now associate Willy with the orca who is the centre of the 1993 film *Free Willy* and carried away would be an act of abduction. If Willy was carried away by one too many drinks after work, then not only does Willy appear now to be an adult man but also the notion of being “carried away” would be taken in a completely different way than in the other two examples – encouraged to act in excess. And, of course, Willy as a signifier is often used as a slang term denoting a penis. This polyvalence – indeed, polyphony as Lacan suggests in an allusion to musicality – indicates that discourse can be seen as “aligned along the several staves of a musical score...there is no signifying chain that does not sustain—as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units—all attested contexts that are, so to speak, ‘vertically’ linked to that point” (2006: 419). Thus, one could imagine a series of musical staves across which the various possible meanings of given words in a sentence are arranged. In this way, we can conceive of the signifying chain as not merely unidirectional.

Drawing upon the work of Roman Jakobson, Lacan describes the operation of the signifying chain by way of the rhetorical figures of metaphor and metonymy. Metonymy refers to the replacement of a given word in speech by a word that has some form of contiguous relationship to it. The example Lacan gives in *Seminar V* is the use of “sails” for “ships” in the phrase “thirty sails in the harbour” from *El Cid* (2017:64). Lacan points out that this is not a comparison – there may be less than thirty sails or more than thirty sails on the ships in the harbour. The point is rather that one word is used for another. Metaphor, meanwhile, involves not only a substitution but a comparison – the word that replaces another obliterates it, but takes over its meaning. Consider the example of Freud’s comment to Jung on arrival in New York, which Jung relayed to Lacan: “They don’t realize we’re bringing them the plague” (Lacan 2006: 336). This substitution creates a resonance above and beyond what either the replaced word (psychoanalysis) or the new one (plague) could convey alone. On the one hand, the comparison of psychoanalysis to the plague could refer to its infectious quality, or Freud’s anticipation of America’s response to it. As Pluth (2007: 34) suggests, it is more evocative than it is informative, and what it evokes is not simply reducible to the information we can gather from it. This draws attention to a central implication of Lacan’s view: the signifying chain, operating via horizontal relations of contiguous displacement (metonymy) and vertical relations of

substitution and condensation (metaphor), includes not only the intended but also the latent meanings, thus opening a space for misunderstanding. An inescapable aspect of this conception of language is that the subject, alienated in language, can never say precisely what they want. There is an inherent indeterminacy of meaning in communication, whereby one's interlocutor cannot fully grasp what one means to tell them; one's desire cannot be effectively communicated due to "desire's incompatibility with speech" (Lacan 2006: 535). Simultaneously, one's speech communicates more than one intends to communicate; there are unconsidered valences, unforeseen excesses in any statement. Thus "the function of language in speech is not to inform but to evoke" (Lacan 2006: 247), and what it evokes can be both more and less than what was intended. In this section I have summarised some of the key contributions made by Lacan regarding the structure of language. In the next section I will utilise these concepts to illuminate how improvised play makes use of such operations in the creation of meaning.

Playing with language in improv

If we return to improv now, it is possible to see how Lacan's conception of a signifying chain which sustains its various contexts is a crucial dimension of improvised play. In improv, it is precisely the uncertainties and excesses of meaning that create the possibility of playful interaction; it is on the basis of the valences and ambiguities of meanings in any signifiers that the chain can continue. Consider these examples of "The Pattern Game", a word association game often played as the opening game of the Harold to develop an audience suggestion into several possible themes, topics and situations. The players call out words and phrases in turn that link to the original suggestion and to previous links in the chain. In both examples, different teams respond to the audience suggestion "dog":

Team A
"Collar."
"Police."
"K-9."
"Rin Tin Tin."
"Barking up the wrong tree."
"Firemen."
"101 Dalmatians."
"Open 24 hours."
"I read it in the Sunday papers."
"Sentence."

"Death."
"Bergman."
"Bird dog."
"Bird Man of Alcatraz."
"Prison."
"Bondage."
"Collar."

Team B
"Loyalty."
"Man's best friend."
"Barking."
"Sit."
"You can have the kids. I'll take the dog."
"Stay."
"Caged."
"Divorce."
"Heel."
"Barking."
"Cat fight."
"His bark is worse than his bite."
"He's a stray." (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 30-31)

These games exemplify some ambiguities of language and how they can give rise to many meanings. The authors took these two examples from real games played by ImprovOlympics and reduced the richness of the associations in the following way: "Team A's use of the "dog" theme revealed ideas about crime and punishment; Team B discovered levels of failed human relationships, in addition to animal-human relationships." (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 31). However, even this summary attempts to create a stability where there is not one. In both chains, the word "dog" operates as a kind of quilting point; it pre-emptively prevents the sliding of meaning too far from where it started. Yet there is clear tension at various points in the chain as it slides away from the starting point. Sometimes this tension remains essentially metonymic – "Bergman" follows "Death", but this is not due to a comparison, but rather the fact that Ingmar Bergman was the director of *The Seventh Seal*, in which a knight plays chess with Death. So, some of the links in the chain rely upon contiguous connections, even if their contiguity is somewhat far afield. Others, however, rely upon metaphorical substitutions. In the second chain, for example, the "You can have the kids. I'll take the dog" comment is followed by a run of words: "Stay", "Caged", "Divorce", "Heel". The first comment appears in relation to dog and does not seem to emerge from any of the proceeding comments. However, the subsequent words rely

not only on metonymic connections to dog (and “You can have the kids” in the case of “Divorce”), but rather on allusions to divorce and what is present only by its absence – marriage. “Stay” is addressed to a dog but could also be said to a spouse who is leaving, and so is metonymic. But “Caged” and “Heel” are both metonymic to dog and metaphors for marriage – to be caged, to be brought to heel. These metaphoric meanings, however, are only evident through the relationship to divorce. Thus, the unfolding of the chain, while constrained by the signifier “dog”, develops layers of meaning through processes of metaphor and metonymy.

In building a scene, the polyvalent nature of language is crucial for the ongoing construction of meaning. Moreover, the meaning of a scene is not fixed until it reaches retroactive quilting points. Consider this example of a short, three-line scene:

PLAYER ONE: Sign here.

PLAYER TWO: This makes it official.

PLAYER ONE: Yes, we're now legally divorced. (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 42)

In this scene, an opening that evokes, perhaps, the collection or delivery of a parcel, is shifted to a different register by the statement “this makes it official”, indicating an event of some moment. The sliding of signification comes to an end with the comment about divorce, serving as the *point de capiton* of the scene as a whole. It is only through the generation of additional layers of meaning and signification, building on the direct and latent possibilities for links in the signifying chain, guided by the rule of “Yes, and...” and of agreement, that scenes can develop. Moreover, the meaning of the scene transforms the earlier context through the fixation of meaning. In the context of this scene and the humour it creates, the subsequent developments in the scene loop back on earlier signifiers and incorporate them into a new meaning. One could say that on one level, they can now be considered to have always already had that meaning. On another level though, the earlier polyvalences are still present – and, in the context of a Harold, for example, could become manifest if used by players later in the show.

Lacan’s linguistics thus help us to understand the way that the necessary ambiguity inherent in language is yet another condition of possibility for improv. There is, I believe, a striking parallel between the activity of the improvising player and the psychoanalyst. Hook (2013) draws upon Lacan’s comparison of the signifying

chain to a musical stave to suggest that analysts listen to their analysands as a trained musician might listen to a musical score. While a layman might hear primarily the dominant melody, the musician will attend to the harmonies, textures and complexities present; the different sounds produced by different instruments. Similarly, the analyst listens for the ambiguities, associations and gaps in speech that we ignore in our everyday conversations. An improvising player must do the same – attend to the polyvalences in meaning, the openings and gaps that will allow for successive layers of signification and development of meaning in the scenes they are enacting. Without it, scenes and games in improv would be humdrum and uninteresting. For both musicians and analysts, the training in such matters takes some time and interaction. The end result is such that an improv game, particularly in its long, Harold form, possesses peculiar affinities with psychoanalysis:

Close worked with the game's progression from the chaos of free-associated fragments to the order of their reincorporation into themes through the recognition of patterns. Meanings and connections often appeared to emerge unbidden through the game in a way that struck some players as magical . . . (Seham 2001: 49)

Perhaps, as I will suggest in the next section, rather than “magic” being at play, we should instead consider how it is the unconscious that helps give rise to emerging meanings and connections. Lacan's engagement with language was not conducted on the basis of furthering the study of performance, but on furthering the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. However, as I have demonstrated, the resonances between psychoanalysis and improv are particularly rich, even if they are not synonymous, and despite what those who would sell improv as therapy might maintain, as we shall see in Chapter 5. In fact, practitioners of improv have themselves drawn quite direct links between the practices of free association and the editing function of the ego vis-à-vis the unconscious. In the next sections I will consider how free association and the unconscious relate to improv in relation to the improvising group.

3.5 The unconscious, the ego and the event in improv

Lacan’s approach to language and the unconscious was opposed to crude interpretations of the Freudian unconscious as a “depth psychology”, a kind of intrapsychic space of that contained our deepest fears, desires and impulses like a storehouse contains grain. Rather, it is important to consider the implications of Lacan’s famous dicta, that “*the unconscious is structured like a language*” (Lacan 1978: 20) and “*the unconscious is the Other’s discourse*” (Lacan 2006: 10). As discussed in the last chapter and the previous section, the subject’s alienation in language implies an imposition as well as a loss; the imposition is not only language as such as an exteriority, but also language as the language of others – of the Other. Fink (1996: 9-11) suggests that this dual otherness of language can be summed up as a “mOther tongue”, a native language that we learn and through which the discourses and desires of others are internalised without ever truly becoming our own, remaining somehow foreign. The unconscious is made up of this “Other’s discourse”; what other people say, what other people want. This insistence on the simultaneous interiority and exteriority of language helps clarify that the unconscious ought to be understood as a “transindividual” phenomenon. As Hook (2013: 52) explains, a transindividual unconscious cannot be reduced to the “psychic interior” of a subject as it is also based upon speech and symbolisation, but nor can it be merely reduced to the social because it always involves the struggle of the subject to express an aspect of their desire in words that, as we have established, are not suited to do so; that evoke rather than inform.

To return to Lacan’s linguistics and his insistence that the unconscious is structured like a language, we can now conceive of the unconscious not as a space, a depth, or a storehouse, but rather as a multidimensional signifying chain – the musical stave of latent and manifest meanings. This image may give rise again to the notion of these signifying chains as existing internally, but these chains, and the aspects of repression enabled by metaphor and metonymy, condensation and displacement, exist always in relation to discourse beyond the individual. Commenting on Freud’s use of the term unconscious thought in *Seminar III*, Lacan suggests: “We could call this language internal, but this adjective already falsifies everything. This so-called internal monologue is entirely continuous with the external dialogue, and indeed this is why we can say that the unconscious is also the discourse of the Other” (1993: 112). Hook (2013) illuminates this necessarily interactive nature of the unconscious with an

example of the return of a repressed thought: a wife who receives a bunch of flowers from her husband and, due to that signifier – the act of giving flowers – begins to suspect that he has been cheating on her. It doesn't matter whether he has or has not, in this instance, but rather that the signifier's valences allow for a repressed possibility to emerge from the multi-dimensional, transindividual signifying chains.

The significance of the unconscious to improv is perhaps evident from the way in which many improvisors discuss the ways in which they seek to achieve the best choices in a scene or game. There is a section in *Truth in Comedy* by Halpern, Close, & Johnson entitled "Following the Unconscious Choice", which suggests that improvisors often feel as though ideas they have come up with in the course of improvisations are "mistakes", and seek to avoid them, to not revisit them. The authors argue that these "mistakes" are, in fact, unconscious choices, and that ignoring them is itself a mistake: "a scene is *never* about what the player thinks it is going to be; glossing over this 'mistake' actually ruins a great chance to make discoveries . . . The unusual choices result in the most interesting scenes" (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 55). Compare this advice to the directions given by Freud in "On the Beginning of Treatment": "You will be tempted to say to yourself that this or that is irrelevant here, or is quite unimportant, or nonsensical, so that there is no need to say it. You must never give in to these criticisms, but must say it in spite of them—indeed, you must say it precisely *because* you feel an aversion to doing so" (1958: 135). The encouragement to generate material from free association is common to both practices, as is the notion that what can stand in the way of successful use of free association is the ego.

Learn Improv, which describes itself as the internet's oldest improv comedy website, suggests: "Many players have editors in their head. Learn Improv calls it the headitor. The headitor keeps a player from using the first thought that an offer evokes. Free association should help a player break free form [*sic*] their headitor" (Learn Improv 2010). As Halpern, Close & Johnson go on: "The ego is the part of the mind that hangs on to preconceived notions about scenes, so the best improvisers always strive to overcome their own egos" (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 55). We established in the previous chapter that the ego is a fictional agency, an imaginary formation that humans acquire in early development. However, we must add to the notion of an imaginary formation a further qualifier, since we are discussing the ego in relation to speaking – or not speaking but censoring – and thus in relation to the

symbolic order. The ego insofar as it represents the imposition and internalisation of the symbolic order and the law is described by Lacan as “ego-ideal”, that is “the other as speaking, the other insofar as he has a symbolic relation to me” (Lacan 1991: 142). In this sense, the ego-ideal is a symbolic agency that can be contrasted to the ideal-ego: As Žižek (2006: 80) suggests, if the ideal ego represents one’s idealized self-image, the ego-ideal is the Other that one seeks to impress with that image. In improv, then, we can conceive of the editing function that stands between the “unconscious choice” and its utterance as the symbolic agency of the ego-ideal, seeking to limit the extent to which one draws upon different latent aspects of the signifying chain because they would represent one inadequately, inappropriately, shamefully, to the Other.

To what extent can we truly say that “unusual decisions” are products of the unconscious? Is there a comparison to be made between slips of the tongue and choices made in the heat of the moment, especially those considered a “mistake”? If the unconscious is responsible for generating signification at the conscious level, then it is surely germane to think of the way in which the ego may censor possible significations. Perhaps when improvisors ignore – or resist – a particular possibility in a scene, there is a similar process happening as when, in analysis, the analysand realises they are unable to say what they think it is they want to say, and such hesitations and blockages are localised around symptomatic points (Parker 2011: 232). Is there, then, a moment in improv when resistance is evident, or overcome? One possible example comes from this account of another ImprovOlympics performance of the Harold. The opening monologue was based on the signifier “pet”, and yet the player was stuck and asked to stop the game – he said he had nothing to say about pets. He said that he had never had one and would never want one. He then said that having a pet is as big a responsibility as having a child, and who would want that responsibility? At this point, he began to engage with the question of pets and children. When at the end a fellow player said she had just had her 16-year-old dog put down, he responded “Try doing that to a kid!” (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 82). Through a metaphorical shift from pets to children, the player was able to voice his anxieties about having children by talking about pets, overcoming the blockage and creating a humorous juxtaposition. Sometimes the attempt to break down resistance is taken to extremes – the improviser Ken Campbell initiated the Improvathon, a 36-hour improvisation session in which the aim is to tire out players to the point where they achieve what is known as “lizard brain”, a sense of complete detachment and abandon in which players seem more open to improvising freely. As

Campbell explains: "After hour 30, people I hadn't thought were anything in particular became brilliant. Hours 26 to 30 were the most uniformly abysmal, but they were followed by six hours of sensations" (Campbell 2005).

Another form which improvisors use in order to enable freer expression is the use of masks. This practice is particularly linked to Keith Johnstone, who saw mask games as a way of circumventing what he described as the censor that blocks free expression. He took inspiration from the *commedia dell'arte* movement discussed in Chapter 1, but goes further and suggests that, unlike in day-to-day life, when one is expected to maintain a "consistent personality", mask work encourages the player to "let go", with many players reporting "'split' states of consciousness, or amnesias; they speak of their body acting automatically, or as being inhabited by the character they are playing" (1989: 151). Yet, for all this, Johnstone is clear that he sees this split state of consciousness to be a divide in the player themselves. Indeed, games such as the mask game are for him ways of making the player feel safe in free associating and improvising by overloading their internal censor:

If I want people to free-associate, then I have to create an environment in which they aren't going to be punished, or in any way held responsible for the things their imagination gives them. I devise techniques for taking the responsibility away from the personality. Some of these games are very enjoyable and others, at first encounter, are rather frightening; people who play them alter their view of themselves. (1989: 118)

There are some interesting aspects of Johnstone's perspective here. Again, we come across the notion of improv as something that changes its players, of games that are frightening. Yet, what is the mask that covers the face of the improviser? As Lacan himself points out, psychoanalysis has sought to problematise the very notion of the person, insisting that "the persona is a mask" behind which there is only an ambiguous unity (2006: 562). As Žižek suggests, sometimes there may be more truth in the mask, giving the example of an online gamer who adopts the personality of a murderer and seducer in the game, in contrast to their shy "real" persona, but knowing it is "just a game" can show their "true" self; "in the guise of a fiction, the truth about himself is articulated" (2012: 516). Perhaps, then, the act of roleplaying, whether in a physical mask or masked by the role or scenario of the improv game, creates a potential space for the expression of something unmediated by the

censorship of the egoistic “headitor”, where something of the unconscious subject can emerge into the improvising space.

Freedom, full speech and the “afterwardsness” of improv

The examples discussed above suggest that one of the possible forms of freedom identified in the first chapter, namely the strengthening of the ego vis-à-vis the id, is not only ruled out by psychoanalysis, but also the practice of improv itself. Instead, there appears to be a belief among improvisors that allowing the unconscious to speak is a crucial aspect of successful scenes. Can this be thought of as free behaviour? On the one hand, Lacan was scornful of the idea that free association was free of determination, referring to it often as “so-called free association” (see, for example, Lacan 2006: 61, 275, 390). Yet, is there something in Lacan’s concept of full speech that might offer a ray of light to freedom in improv?

As Lacan suggests in *Seminar I*: “Full speech is speech which aims at, which forms, the truth such as it becomes established in the recognition of one person by another. Full speech is speech which performs” (1991: 107). Much later, in *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan depicts a contrast as follows: “Full speech is a speech full of meaning [*sens*]. Empty speech is a speech which has only signification” (quoted in Evans 1996: 191). In this sense, it could be said that full speech is that which occurs at the Symbolic level, revealing something of the subject’s desire, as opposed to the Imaginary signification of empty speech. What would it mean, then, to achieve full speech in improv? Perhaps the notion is fanciful, since full speech is particularly associated with analytic treatment and the assumption of one’s unconscious desire and would thus correspond more closely to the Lacanian psychoanalytic model of freedom identified in the previous chapter. However, here we must think again about the centrality of retroactivity to both psychoanalysis and improv. For Lacan, full speech is that which creates meaning retroactively: “the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present” (2006: 213). This “scant freedom” is thus linked to a realisation, an assumption of responsibility, rather than a remembering of something we have forgotten.

Hook (2011: 201-202) usefully develops Lacan’s account to offer a fivefold definition of full speech: 1) Much like a Freudian slip, it represents a moment in which the subject “speaks *beyond himself or herself* (beyond their ego), and ends up saying

more than they had meant to”; 2) It disrupts the ego-to-ego nature of speech such that “it becomes apparent that it is the [big] *Other* rather than the ‘little other’ that one is speaking to”; 3) It has a performative aspect that is “able to bring about change in the speaker and the situation”; 4) It establishes a new relation to truth, such that something about the speaker and their relation to their past is changed; and 5) It establishes a new relationship between the speaker and the Other. Hook (2018) goes on to explore the way in which this schema can be used to interpret social phenomena, in the case of Richard Nixon’s famous interview with David Frost. This perhaps offers a way to think of some practices in improv as forms of full speech, retroactively realised as such. Consider this example from the actor Alan Arkin:

I had no interest in being myself onstage. In fact, there was no possibility of my playing myself on the stage because I didn’t know who I was. I didn’t have a clue . . . as I became more comfortable and secure, I started to let go a little and I began to explore other characters. I found a proud and untrusting young Puerto Rican, a devil-may-care Italian worker, a stalwart and stoic old Jew—all of them immigrants or misfits. I felt at home as a foreigner. As a stranger. As anyone who was an ocean away from his own environment and a million miles away from his own identity, whatever that was. Interestingly, at that time I was aware only of the great variety of characters I was playing. The fact that they were all foreigners and misfits didn’t occur to me until years later when I had started down a path of self-examination, and realized that this was the way I saw myself. (2011: 41-42)

I have quoted Arkin at length as his words indicate to me some of the potential for seeing an aspect of full speech in improv. It is important to note that by “self-examination”, Arkin is referring to the psychoanalysis he underwent later in life. Could it be that his improvised performances spoke a truth beyond what he recognised in them at the time, but one that only truly became recognised after analysis? Given that improv relies upon the speaking beyond oneself as a precondition for others to interact in a novel way, and the emphasis put on improvisors to follow their unconscious choice, I think it is possible to imagine ways in which improvisation can draw out unsettling, unstable formulations that could be

retroactively assumed as instances of full speech, which also raises questions about the potential psychoanalytic value of improv.

There is something inherent to the structure of improv – of becoming, of the retroactive fixation of meanings and assumption of previous aspects of the scene into an “always already” extant meaning – that creates a sense of constant possibility in the space of the stage. Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar draw upon Badiou and Deleuze to develop a notion of “the event” which they describe as something

that takes form for us within the symbolic ‘after the event’ according to the logic of ‘deferred action’, ‘après coup’, what Freud originally spoke about as ‘Nachträglich’. This is a peculiarly psychoanalytic conception of time, a looping back and activation of what has already occurred, and the investment of that first event with a significance that turns it into what it will later always already be. (2014: 338)

As discussed at length in the previous chapter, *après coup* and *Nachträglich*, “afterwardsness”, a central aspect of Lacanian theory as regards freedom, and yet they also relate to precisely the retroactive incorporation and assumption of meaning that I have argued is central to the construction of meaning within both improvised play and Lacan’s full speech. If an event is a point at which a transformation occurs in the relationship between past and present, in which something new emerges from the old in a contingent and unpredictable way, then there is something oddly event-like about the structure of improv. Within each performance, latent possibilities become manifest; the world – or at least, the stage – is transformed by the actions of players seeking to act against the social demand as represented by the ego-ideal and instead following their unconscious choice. I will return to the event-like nature of improv in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to say that perhaps the processes I have illustrated help us to understand how it is that Spolin can see improvisation as an act that “creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people’s findings.” (1963: 6). Instead, improv creates a new relationship with history – recent and earlier – and a space for the players to realise something about themselves.

In the last chapter, I mentioned Badiou's suggestion that the act, or truth-process, comprises the structure "No, but". Rather than articulating a demand of the other, it creates a new signification; it creates something out of nothing. Clearly, in the normal practice of improv, we cannot see this as being the typical structure of discourse because the "Yes, and" rule would militate against any possibility stating "No, but". The extent to which agency in improv lies with the unfolding of language is clear; indeed, it is the signifying chain in its multidimensional, trans-individual form that proffers the "No, but" in response to "Yes, and...". The "Yes, and..." injunction has as its necessary counterpart at the level of language a "No, but..." – i.e., these routes are now closed off by the rule of agreement but, nevertheless, there remain all these other possible routes through the scene. However, as the Arkin example at least suggests, perhaps it is possible to conceive of a form of expression that somehow defies this logic and that, in a way, allows improvisors to speak beyond themselves not only in such a way as to unconsciously elicit a laugh, but to unconsciously say something of themselves that surprises them. In this section I have argued that the unconscious plays a significant role in improvised play, and that players themselves are sometimes aware of this. The transindividual nature of the unconscious I have established has important implications for the nature of the group in improvisation, to which I shall now turn.

3.6 The improvising group: an imaginary unity

As has been clear throughout this chapter, the group is a fundamental aspect of improvisation. Improv groups develop close associations and friendships, yet improvisors suggest that the group dynamic goes even further than this. For Spolin, improv "requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing that material evolves for scenes and plays." (1963: 9-10) Fotis further illustrates what this group work entails: first of all, a harmonious group in which the members are "intellectually, physically, and emotionally in sync with one another" (2014: 9). Seham talks of how "players form deep, unspoken connections with teammates, and they often speak of finding the zone—a state of unselfconscious awareness in which every individual action seems to be the right one and the group works with apparently perfect synchronicity" (2001: 64). This is a state described in improv as "group mind". The Second City Training Centre manual contains a poem written by the artistic director Martin de Maat which illustrates what is meant by group mind:

The birds seem to have a common mind, a common goal. They each surrender to the power of the group. No bird questions the flow. They simply flap and fly to support it whichever way it turns.

This is the way of natural order and the emergence of creativity. It is the flow that we seek when improvising.

.

No bird is questioning the flock's movement

.

No bird thinks he has a better idea.

No bird doubts his ability to fly

.

Nothing is important but the flight itself. (quoted in Seham 2001: xxv)

This encapsulates a strong sense of belonging and egalitarianism: “no bird thinks he has a better idea”. In Chapter 5, I will argue that such a picture is perhaps somewhat idealistic. However, it suffices here to show that there is a notion not only of equality in improv, but also of deep connection. Halpern, Close & Johnson say of the group mind:

When a team of improvisers pays close attention to each other, hearing and remembering everything, and respecting all that they hear, a group mind forms. The goal of this phenomenon is to connect the information created out of group ideas — and it's easily capable of brilliance . . . This is not to say that each person can read the others' minds or project specific thoughts; but when a group mind is achieved, its members have a very strong sense of the group as an entity of its own, and connects with its feelings and requirements. (1994: 56)

The trans-individuality of the group is reflected in the fact that the members' close and regular interaction leads not only to egoic identifications between one another on the imaginary level, but also to relationships of language through the signifying chain, and thus mediated through the big Other. One example of this is of

an ImprovOlympics performance which was attended by executives of the Budweiser beer company. At the suggestion “beer”, the players, with no prompting or coordination, began to favourably mention different brands of beer. At the end of the scene, they burst into a room, proclaiming it to be filled with “the finest beers in the world”, and listed them – but without ever mentioning Budweiser, the absent anchor to the entire scene (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 52). The improvisors figured out the game from the suggestion of beer onstage – there was no agreement in advance to play this game, yet it nevertheless came about through playing together. This form of communication requires not only that the players were aware of each other, but also that they were aware of an Other: Budweiser as a brand, the presence of Budweiser executives, of the existence of a whole range of other beers that were available to wax lyrical about, and an awareness of the irreverence that constructing a scene around the absence of the signifier would entail.

Fundamentally, each of the players had to have the knowledge – or at least, the hope – that the other players would be able to read the game from the actions of those first players to get the ball rolling. This leads me to another aspect of the sense of freedom that players experience in improv. While the extension of the signifying chain may take place under determined rules and mechanisms, the involvement of more players – each a subject with their own history, repressions, characteristics – means that the nature of the game becomes increasingly chaotic, as different signifying chains coalesce, intertwine, break apart, and so on. We have already established that the signifying chains that represent each of the players is in itself split into a multitude of “musical staves”, latent and manifest meanings and extensions beyond the given moment that operate through the laws of metaphor and metonymy. Through the interaction of these chains with other players, latent meanings are subjectivised, bringing into play that which had previously remained at an unconscious level. Thus, the transindividual nature of communication in improv is one that gives rise to a radical diversity of outcome – we shall see in the next section how this is indeed one of the key aspects of improv’s appeal. One could draw a comparison here to the three-body problem of physics – that while it is possible to chart the paths of two gravitationally-bound objects, the addition of a third (or fourth, or *n*th) leads to a situation of too high complexity to possibly predict what will happen, leading to highly diverse and divergent outcomes. While Zupančič warns that one “cannot found the freedom of the subject on the fact that her actions may be unpredictable” (2001: 33), one can nevertheless understand how such an interaction can contribute to

a feeling of unbound freedom – even if, in practice, it is rather a freedom within which the source of determination is obscured by a multiplicity of interactions. This effect contributes to the sense of improv not being a radical break in discourse but rather an incongruous and radical continuity.

The improvising group also represents an instance of a crossover between the symbolic and imaginary registers. The imaginary register enters the picture because, at its core, the improvisational group is an imaginary constitution of the ideal-ego as discussed in the last section: it provides the comfort of being complete, a whole, a group united in practice, in group mind. In the improv group, the body is very much the body of the group and therefore, the misrecognition of unity and mastery can be attributed to the group as a whole. It is an identification with an image that is outside the players, and which presents an image of unity that allows them to achieve mastery over the body in play. In this way, the game structure helps the improv group achieve the coordination it requires to succeed in the performance. However, within the group itself, tensions can and do emerge, as will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In particular, despite the injunction not to chase laughs that I will discuss in the next section, this is often a point of tension between players within the group – that is, the laughter of the audience. The image of unity is thus a misrecognition and comes at the price of alienation in the images of others. As Lacan writes, the ego is “a function of mastery, a game of bearing, and constituted rivalry” in the subject (2006: 695), just as it can be in the case of the group as a whole. These constituted rivalries at the group level can take many forms, sometimes disruptive. At the core of the Imaginary register of the improvising and playing group lies a frustrated attempt to address and understand the discordant nature of mastery and insufficiency.

In this section I have presented a view of the improvising group that stresses the way in which transindividual communication structures the interaction between group members and allows for an effect, which I liken to the three-body problem in physics, resulting in a radical diversity in outcomes in improvised play. In the next section I will examine the way in which radical diversity forms a central aspect of what Lacan identifies as the “true secret” of playfulness and contributes to the sense of freedom that improvising players enjoy.

3.7 Joy in repetition? The radical diversity of the ludic

An improvised game: 'fort/da'

It would be apt in a discussion of psychoanalysis and improvisational play, and in particular the role of repetition in improvised play, to consider one of Freud's and Lacan's own engagements with a game – indeed, an improvised game – namely the so-called Fort/Da game. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud examines the manifestation of the compulsion to repeat by using an illustration drawn from the game. He noted that a little boy, who could only express a few words but could make sounds that were “intelligible to those around him” (1955c: 14) had a habit of throwing his toys into a corner, before making a drawn out “o-o-o-o” sound, accompanied by a satisfied expression. Freud and the boy's mother agreed that the sound represented the German word fort, or gone. Soon afterwards, Freud realised that this was a game that the boy had organised with his toys. He observed that the boy would use a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it in a way that struck him as intriguing. The boy would throw the reel by its string over the edge of his cot so that it completely disappeared, and while doing so would utter the same drawn-out sound that suggested fort, or gone; when the boy pulled the reel back and made it reappear, he “hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da’ [‘there’]” (Freud 1955c: 15). The game that the boy created for his enjoyment was to stage a disappearance, which led to an even more pleasurable re-appearance of the object.

Freud's interpretation of this game related to the child's attachment to his mother. While the child did not protest when she left the room, he did stage a game where the object disappeared but then reappeared to his elation. Freud then goes on to ask the question, “How then does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle?” (1955c: 15). Freud's pleasure principle holds that a human would strive to release excess tension in order to have the lowest possible level of tension whilst remaining alive – a form of homeostasis. In this situation, Freud thought that the child was himself generating an unbearable tension – first experiencing the trauma of his mother leaving, and then reliving the trauma in the form of a game that the child himself created. This behaviour, extending beyond the pleasure principle, was a factor in Freud's development of the death drive. His interpretation was that while the child was unable to articulate his feelings towards

his mother's disappearance the child created a game where he could stage this experience differently. The experience itself may not be pleasurable, but the restaging of it, with this newfound mastery, can be pleasurable. In order to deal with the absence of the mother, the boy stages himself as the agent of appearance and disappearance. The repetition of an initial unpleasant experience is thus carried out through the medium of active play, yielding some form of pleasure for the child.

According to Lacan, the game is a response to experiencing absence. Lacan follows the French psychologist Henri Wallon in observing that the child is not distressed by his mother's departure from the room, but rather from her move away from his side in the first place. Lacan interprets it as follows: "the game of the cotton-reel is the subject's answer to what the mother's absence has created on the frontier of his domain—the edge of his cradle—namely, a ditch, around which one can only play at jumping" (1998: 62). The mother's absence causes a split (*Spaltung*) in the subject and this split is overcome in the game through the alternation of *fort* and *da*. The reel in Lacan's account is therefore not a representation of the mother: "it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained . . . To this object we will later give the name it bears in the Lacanian algebra—the *petit a*" (62). Much later in *Seminar XI*, Lacan explains:

The function of the exercise with this object refers to an alienation, and not to some supposed mastery, which is difficult to imagine being increased in an endless repetition, whereas the endless repetition that is in question reveals the radical vacillation of the subject. (1998: 239)

Lacan is elucidating what he sees to be the way in which the emergence of the split subject, as discussed in the previous chapter, also heralds the emergence of a tendency towards repetition in the subject. This repetition manifests itself here as primitive symbolisation – the ascribing of signifiers to absence and presence. Lacan does not see repetition as an anomaly to be explained but as something that lies at the very heart of psychic life. The true impact of the *fort/da* game is perhaps that, as Frosh suggests, it is "an infantile game that can sum up a whole lifetime" (2019: 36).

What is it about playful repetition, though, that is salient to improv and the improvisors' affinity for the repetition of games within given structures? Freud, again in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, writes that while for adults "[n]ovelty is always the

condition of enjoyment" (1955c: 35), a child will never tire of playing the same game or hearing the same story again and again. In Lacan's reading of this observation, he states:

The adult, and even the more advanced child, demands something new in his activities, in his games. But this sliding away (*glissement*) conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself. (1998: 61)

The ludic – playfulness – can itself be premised on repetition and the myriad ways in which repetition yields different results. As Zupančič puts it: "we *can* tell something in a hundred different ways [but] we *cannot*, absolutely not (not even by literally repeating it) tell something in only one way" (2008: 171). Each repetition yields a difference: in tone, in timing, in timbre, in texture. This is true not only for stories and textual repetitions, but also for the games we play, even though the rules we play them by – their lawlike symbolic structure – remain the same. The act of playful repetition will always end up with different results. Consider again the example of the fort/da game. How much of the pleasure the child gains from its playing comes from the fact that the reel never ends up the same way – no matter how many times the throw is repeated, the reel will land in a different place, will hang over the cot in a different way, surprise the child by landing somewhere unexpected. Consider how, when you play peekaboo with a child – covering your face only to reveal it – the child becomes more excited when the tempo of the reveal is modulated. Thus, we can take from Lacan's reading of the fort/da game not only the instantiation of repetition as a fundamental aspect of human psychic life, but also the realisation that there is always a new way of repeating, of doing the exact same thing differently, and that this can give rise, in the words of the musician Prince, to "Joy in Repetition". Such repetition within given structures has, of course, particular significance for the practice of improv.

Playing with and by the rules

Through playing at improv, repetition is transformed into a seemingly limitless variety by virtue of the interaction and interplay of multiple, multidimensional signifying chains. Think again of the "Yes, and..." rule, which requires that each player accepts what their fellow player has said and then builds upon it. The initial

suggestion determines the next stage of the scene, but there still exists a myriad of ways forward, even while accepting the initial suggestion. Leep gives an example of a scene that begins with a player saying “Mom, making cookies with you is my favorite thing to do!” and suggests that, while the response “Me too, son! Let’s put red sprinkles on this tray before we put them in the oven! That’s your father’s favorite” could be a way of both accepting and developing the scene. So too would pretending to be in zero gravity and responding “Yes, and this batch should turn out better now that we learned that cookies in space don’t need baking soda to rise in the oven!” (Leep 2008: 17). The golden rule of improv is at the same time a constraint and a vehicle that facilitates the shared construction of a “reality” within which the same structure leads to a “radical diversity” of outcomes for the players. In more complex improvisational scenarios, such as the Harold, the structure gives rise to an unpredictable, chaotic set of outcomes each time it is played. As the former Saturday Night Live performer Tim Kazurinski put it: “When it works, it’s an amazing thing. And when it doesn’t, the audience thinks you’re insane . . . But something good always comes from it” (quoted in Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 20). This radical diversity in repetition, then, is a central aspect of the allure of improv, and the pursuit of ever better performances embodies a sense of joy in repetition – itself potentially an unending pursuit of the perfect performance, which can only be object *a*.

Thus far, this joy in repetition could be identified with any game, any sport, and any exercise in which the same set of structures gives rise to a potential multiplicity of outcomes. Indeed, Lacan’s insight into the link between playfulness and a radical diversity in repetition is of general interest in comprehending why people form such strong attachments to structured games, hobbies and interests. Yet there is something about the specificity of repetition in improv that gives it a qualitatively different character. The structure of improv is intended to facilitate the exercise of one’s own and one’s collaborators’ imaginations. Via the “Yes, and...” rule, each further link in these games of signification simultaneously constrains and enables the players’ expressions. However, the rules of improv possess a plasticity that is not present in many other structured games. For one, the format is malleable in the sense that one can adapt and change the rules, invent new games within the overall rubrics of improv which leads to a sense of ownership over the forms that play can take. As Charna Halpern, who co-created the ImprovOlympic group with Del Close and developed the Harold in the 1980s and 90s, explained:

I blasted the players to go beyond the form. The Harold is just training wheels for long form. Long form is all about reincorporating new things. You don't have to follow the form of a Harold to do that. Once they got that message, there was no turning back. People started upping me, and then I would up them, and new forms were happening all the time. (quoted in Leap 2008: 68).

This plasticity of rules is based upon the recognition of the nonsense of the law. Rules in improv are more or less arbitrary and any number of different forms and combinations of rules can give rise to expressive improvisation. Improvisors are thus free to create and adapt, invent and discard rules in the exercise of their craft. Indeed, Halpern and Close, with their co-writer and fellow improviser Kim Johnson, write that "one of the first rules is 'There are no rules'" (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 20). They argue that under the right circumstances any rule can be broken for the good of the scene, with one exception, which is, of course, the "Yes, and..." rule. In a way, this structure flips the nonsensicality of the law touched upon in the previous chapter. McGowan argues that "[t]he primordial signifier of law is nonsensical, but its nonsense is the basis for all sense" and that the non-relationality of this signifier of the law as such – the name of God, for example – is "undefinable by definition" (McGowan 2019: 54-55). Within the practice of improv, however, the "Yes, and..." law is the only one that makes sense and which has an unwavering relevance and insistence which is the condition of possibility for effective improv, while all the other games and rules can be chopped and changed as seen fit.

Yet, despite this, the foundation of improv on the basis of the "Yes, and..." rule is precisely a creative act of metaphor and substitution. As McGowan suggests that the law "founds the symbolic structure through a metaphorical act", replacing an absence with the signifier (McGowan 2019: 61-62). Without the "yes, and..." rule, improv does not exist – it is a prohibition that creates the possibility of improv. How, then, does this relate to Žižek's (2001) notion that freedom consists in choosing the impossible, in regarding the impossible as somehow achievable? Perhaps its relevance is twofold. First, the freedom to break the rules when it benefits the scene opens a world of possibility within improv that is quite alien to our day-to-day lives, where there are often negative consequences to the breaking of rules. Instead, improv opens the door to an interruption of norms that is celebrated. Second, the structures of

improv open the possibility of making a different kind of impossible choice; that is, choices that it would be impossible to make outside of improv. Consider the examples earlier of baking cookies in space, or the robot going to the dentist. Through processes of signification in interaction with other players, one can improvise impossibilities that those around you accept as entirely plausible.

In this sense, I think it is possible to conceive of improv as a sandbox of the impossible. A sandbox is, of course, a child's play area filled with sand where structures can be built and crushed with no consequence. In the world of software design, a sandbox is an area where codes can be tested without consequence for the platform as a whole, while sandbox computer games are those where the player has a high level of freedom to determine their own goals and actions within the game world (Breslin 2009). Improv creates an arena within which players can to a significant degree determine what they will do, what they will say, who they will be, where they will go. They can, moreover, do so in a way in which their decisions will not have repercussions in the way they might outside the improv space. It is unsurprising that such a space can be seen as freeing, as a form of freedom. In this sandbox, repetition within structures can play out, with structures shifting according to the needs of the players, in an atmosphere of radical diversity. Yet of course, there is one prohibition which must be obeyed – agreement. Do not breach the cardinal rule. Unlike the primordial signifier as such – for example, the word of God, do not eat the apple from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden – this law has a clear logic. Without it, the very structure of improv is undermined. Is there not, however, an argument then that, despite this the truly free act in improv is to break this rule? To deny your fellow players' reality in order to establish your own?

In order to consider this question, I will return to the fort/da game. Pluth (2007: 103) argues that the fort/da game is particularly striking because it is a signifying activity that does not articulate a demand, does not represent a "cry to the Other", or an attempt to develop some meaning for the trauma of the mother's departure, but is rather activity that is addressed "to the event itself". What does it mean to think of an address to the event itself in terms of improv? One key aspect of Pluth's reading of the Lacanian act is that it does not articulate a demand of the Other: "The subject of an act is a subject who does not receive recognition of its being, or identity, from the Other" (Pluth 2007: 6). In the structure of improv that I am outlining, recognition from the Other—from outside the imaginary unity of the improvising group—is recognition

from an observer who is not a player in the group or troupe; in most cases, this is the improv audience. If one was to break the rule of agreement, who could such an act be directed at other than the audience? Del Close gives the example of an interaction he had with Joan Rivers in which it had been established that they were a married couple having an argument. 'What about our children?' asked Close. Rivers' response was 'We don't have any.' This brought a huge laugh from the audience, but Close was upset that this was done at the expense of building the scene; it denied the reality that was being created by the group (Sweet 1987; Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994). Thus, the freedom that is entailed by breaking the "Yes, and..." rule is merely to subordinate oneself to the laughter of the audience – to seek recognition in the Other. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the laughter (or non-laughter) of the audience in practice plays a significant role in the improvising process. It is, however, a social demand, and one that demands of the improvisors that they desire what the audience desires. By resisting this incorporation, improvisors like Close are able to realise some freedom from the social demand and the desire of the Other-as-audience.

This conceptualisation of improv as a sandbox of the impossible has, I would suggest, a clear echo with Freud's work on the relationship between creative writing and daydreams. Freud writes that for the child, play is not unserious; indeed, that the child takes play very seriously. Rather, he suggests: "The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real" (Freud 1959a:144). One does not need to associate this use of the signifier "real" with the concept of the Lacanian *Real*, as Freud is suggesting that what differentiates play from fantasy is the way the child links "imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world" (1959a:144). For Freud, then, play might be said to represent an interface between the imagined and the tangible, but one that is distinguished from it. Freud links this attitude to the creative writer, who also takes seriously their creative work while separating it from reality. However, for most adults, play is something grown out of. Freud goes on to suggest that there are moments in an adult's life in which they find themselves "in a mental situation which once more undoes the contrast between play and reality" (1959a:144), giving rise to pleasure gained through humour. Freud continues:

As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he

has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called daydreams. (1959a:145)

I would argue that this passage illuminates the liberatory nature of improvised play and its connection to a joy in repetition. The replacement of play by means of fantasy and daydreams in the adult disarticulates the imagined from the tangible; the impossible choice is torn from a context in which it can be generative of new associations and significations at a social level and loses its sensuous, embodied dimension. If growing up involves the replacement of play with daydreaming, improv offers the potential to return to play, to the repetition of games, without giving up the radical diversity that Lacan identified as the secret of the ludic, of playfulness. The lack of a social dimension to daydreams is something Freud also identifies. The daydreamer, he suggests:

is ashamed of his phantasies and hides them from other people. He cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions, and as a rule he would rather confess his misdeeds than tell anyone his phantasies. It may come about that for that reason he believes he is the only person who invents such phantasies and has no idea that creations of this kind are widespread among other people. (1959a:145)

Such shame can be cast aside when one has learned how to enjoy improvised play. In improv, the castles you build in the sky are seen by those you play with, and they walk in them with you. Players gain a sense of freedom from being able to experience radical diversity in the outcomes of the repetition, of being able to make “impossible choices” in the sandbox-like environment of the improv space and to determine their environments as they see fit.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the tension between freedom and constraint – *paidia* and *ludus* – is fundamentally a creative and productive one. I have underlined the ways in which freedom in improv is experienced – as one that emerges from within constraints, that players must learn how to exercise, and which exists in explosive moments of spontaneity. I have drawn on Lacanian approaches to language to show how the instability and ambiguity inherent to language is what gives rise to the possibility of improvisation. I have drawn attention to the way in which the signifying chain, through the operation of metaphor and metonymy, allows players to take up the words of others and develop them in new directions, fixating new meanings and destabilising previous assumptions in a non-linear, retroactive fashion. I have further argued that the role of the unconscious choice in improv is understood by players to involve overcoming the censorship of the ego in order to develop stronger material. This process, which entails speaking more than one might have intended, indicates the way in which improvisors might reveal more of themselves, and thereby surprise themselves, in the games they play and the scenes they create, which in itself offers the opportunity for seeing improv as somehow transformational, as many improvisors insist it is. This structure, inherent to improv, bears comparison to the structure of the event as elaborated by Parker and Pavón-Cuellar (2014) and drawing upon Lacan, Badiou and Deleuze. I have argued that this structure and the sense of becoming it engenders can give rise to a sense of freedom among improvisers.

In discussing the improvising group, I have subsequently drawn out the role of transindividual communication in facilitating interactions within the group and the way in which such interaction gives rise to a phenomenon I liken to the three-body problem of physics: a seemingly chaotic interrelation between latent and manifest elements of conscious and unconscious signifying chains that, within improvised play gives rise to a radical diversity of outcomes. I have also problematised the unity of the improving group, characterised as an imaginary unity at the level of egos, and suggested the tensions that this unity can experience. Finally, after a discussion of the fort/da game and Freud's and Lacan's engagements with it, I have argued that Lacan's observation that radical diversity within repetition is the true secret of the ludic lies at the heart of the appeal of improv. Repetition within given structures gives

rise to not only a seemingly endless diversity of outcomes, as suggested by the interplay of the rule of agreement and the “three-body problem”, but also to a space within which changing the coordinates of what is possible allows players to make the impossible choice, to attempt to transcend the law and the social demand, and to enable a measure of freedom in their actions.

In this sense, the “unbounded freedom” that improvisors talk of – and which in Chapter 2 I argued could not emerge from some “primal”, prelapsarian state inherently “available” within us – is in fact a product of language. It is predicated on 1) the ambiguities of language that create the potential for improvisational interaction and the layering of meaning within scenes; 2) the event-like structure of improvisation and its re-incorporation of earlier meanings into new, and yet already always existing significations; and 3) this happening in the context of the of the “sandbox” of the impossible – a space within which one can make the impossible choice, repeatedly, without the constraints of one’s everyday life. It is the combination of the three that is central to the potentiality, the incorporative, transformational nature of improv and its scope for doing “anything” in the context of the enmeshment of signifying chains, of latent and manifest meaning.

In the next chapter, I will consider a major constraint upon the improvising group’s unity – the audience. In particular, I will consider the ways in which laughter operates as a symbolic agency within improv. The audience’s laughter – or the lack thereof – will be shown to be a powerful influence on the direction of the performance, regardless of the injunction within improv to not chase laughs.

Chapter 4: Laughter and the audience in improv

4.1 Introduction: (do) you have to laugh(?)

The success of a comedy routine or a joke is measured through the validation of laughter. Double (2014) argues that a comedy performance is based on the model of a conversation, a direct interaction, in which the comedian carries out the performance and the audience responds with laughter and applause. Double suggests that stand-up comedy without an audience is only half the experience, citing comedian Mark Thomas, who argues: “[Y]ou can’t do the gig in a vacuum, because it is specifically about the performer and the audience, and it’s specifically about generating the prerequisite number of responses. And they’re very audible responses. And if you’re not getting that, really you should stop.” (quoted in Double 2014: 188). This suggests that questions pertaining to laughter must consider the objects of laughter, the subjects who laugh, and the relationship between them. All kinds of laughter, and sometimes, as Thomas indicates, the absence of laughter, possess the potential to articulate meaning. However, in discussing improvisational comedy, it is important not to entangle it too closely with its stand-up cousin. Improv is a different beast, one that has its own, related but rather different, relationship to the audience and its laughter.

Studies of laughter have been conducted in a wide range of academic disciplines, from philosophy to neuroscience, and this work has engaged with numerous questions relating to the sociability and sociology of laughter; why, when and for whom do we laugh? This chapter will explore the subject of laughter from the perspective of improvisational comedy and through the lens of Freudian and

Lacanian psychoanalysis and related theorists. The chapter will begin by exploring the ways in which improvisors understand laughter and comedy to be generated in improv, which will help to contextualise the subsequent discussion. It will then look at the three classical theories of laughter – superiority, relief and incongruity – and bring them into dialogue with improv and psychoanalytic perspectives on laughter. Finally, I will unite these strands in a discussion of the function of laughter in improv, the productive tension engendered by the player-audience relationship, and the way in which these contribute to a sense of freedom in improvised play. I will stress again that the structure of improv and the rules one plays by can and should generate a productive tension that gives rise to laughter. In particular, I will argue that the law of agreement requires also the law of extension – not just “yes”, but also “and” – in order that scenes can not only continue but that they can generate layers of meaning that may seem incongruous but also that create a sense of relief, or recognition, through the re-incorporation of earlier material as call-backs. I will relate this to the “event-like” structure of improv and Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque and offer an argument for how aspects of improvisation I have discussed thus far come together to account for the feeling of primal or total freedom that many improvisors profess to experiencing.

4.2 What’s so funny about improv?

Improv is comedy, but it has quite stark differences from more familiar kinds of performance comedy such as stand-up, sketch and scripted comedy. Keith Johnstone explains that there are two reasons why comedy is the dominant form of improvisational theatre: firstly, because audiences love spontaneity and respond to it with the enthusiasm of a sporting event; and secondly because “an evening of serious scenes would be like seeing a series of car crashes in which we empathized with the victims” (Johnstone 1999: 22). However, even under the banner of improv, there are divergent approaches to the art and indeed, towards the question of laughter. On one level, this can be broken down by the two key varieties of improv introduced in the last chapter: short form and long form. While this thesis is primarily concerned with long form improv, it is instructive to consider the way in which short form improv is perceived and how its practitioners understand its comic appeal. As Leep (200: 51) suggests, the aim of short form improv is “to entertain comically”, which sets it apart from long form which does not ultimately merely play for laughs. Unlike the slow-developing long form typified by Del Close’s the Harold, short form improv is instead

performed “ at a breakneck pace” while encouraging “as many jokes, bits, and gags as possible: a laugh is a laugh, and the more, the merrier” (Fotis 2014: 65).

Perhaps the most notorious example of this approach is the ComedySportz organisation based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This format was developed by Dick Chudnow in 1984 after witnessing a performance of Theatresports but failing to convince Keith Johnstone to franchise the show (Salinsky and Frances-White 2008). Chudnow agrees with Johnstone that spontaneity is at the root of what makes the audience laugh in improv. Interviewed by Seham, he explained “When you’re spontaneous, people laugh... It’s a vehicle. It’s just a vehicle” (quoted in Seham 2001: 62). In short form improv the direct interaction between players and audience is more frequent, as the audience must be consulted between each scene in order to garner further suggestions. This constant cycling between scenes and interactions with the audience had a further attraction for Chudnow, as he explained again to Seham:

We were sold out almost right away from the very start—because even if the show didn’t work, the format worked. And that’s the problem with improv. If the improv doesn’t work, you’re dead... People want to come out and laugh—they don’t want to see death. So even if the improv didn’t work, it only didn’t work for three minutes—and you were on to another game. (quoted in Seham 2001: 90)

Two striking elements emerge from Chudnow’s interview. First, he is explicit about the fact that laughter is the goal and that the form is merely a vehicle for eliciting laughter. Secondly, his reference to death; people want laughter, not death. This rather precludes the possibility that they would quite like both. As I will discuss later in this chapter, watching someone “dying on stage” can be seen as part of the appeal of improv, including in its long form, and that death on stage opens the possibility of rebirth. In ComedySportz, however, dying gets in the way of laughing. Laughter is seen as something to be solicited and generated consciously and actively by improvisors. Indeed, as Seham observes, laughter operates as a currency in ComedySportz – the bigger the laugh, the more likely the team is to be voted winner of the game. In this sense, then, there is a big difference between the dynamics of ComedySportz and Theatresports. As Johnstone explains, in Theatresports, the competitive element is a conceit employed to heighten dramatic tension and yet it is able to “take jealous and self-obsessed beginners and teach them to play games with

good nature, and to fail gracefully” (Johnstone 1999: 23), while in ComedySportz the dynamic tends towards an active rivalry not only between teams but within teams. It also stands in stark contrast also with the approach of long form groups such as ImprovOlympics in which, despite the sporting name, group unity is stressed, and competitive elements are played down (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994).

The approach to laughter in long form improv proceeds on a very different basis to that in short form. The pressure of the improvising scene can lead players to chase quick laughs by denying the reality of the other players, as evidenced in the example of Del Close and Joan Rivers in the previous chapter. Long form improv goes further than arguing one should not break the law of agreement to argue that players should not chase laughs at all. The founder of improv troupe The Groundlings, Gary Austin, insists that being true to one’s character is the critical component of improv and that while good improv will be funny, “funny isn’t the task” (Austin 2011). As I argued in the last chapter, chasing the laugh amounts to seeking recognition from the Other as instantiated in the audience. This acts against the ensemble nature of the improvising group and undermines the imaginary unity of the group as an improvising whole. As Second City director Nancy Hayden puts it:

It’s why you are there to do it. If you are there to create interesting scenes, or if you are there to be ‘hey look at me I’m jumping up and down telling jokes!’ I think that is a hell of a lot more work. The jumping up and down telling jokes thing. You might as well just go and do stand-up (quoted in Leep 2008: 16).

Hayden directly contrasts the “telling jokes” approach of stand-up comedy to improv’s emphasis on interesting scenes which of necessity involve the collaboration of the players. Of course, a stand-up can create scenes and eschew traditional joke formats, but the stand-up is alone on stage and not interacting with other comedians. Close takes this contrast further and insisted that because improv should not be directed at making the audience laugh but rather at creating a supportive environment for the players within which they can establish the truth of their characters and scenarios, it shouldn’t even be considered comedy:

It is easy to become deluded by the audience because they laugh. Don’t let them make you buy the lie that what you’re doing is for the laughter. Is what we’re doing comedy? Probably not. Is it

funny? Probably yes. Where do the really best laughs come from? Terrific connections made intellectually, or terrific revelations made emotionally. (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 25).

The clear implication of Close's comment here is that striving for laughter in improv will get in the way of achieving it. The effort of eliciting laughs as an individual works against the ability of the group to generate "the really best laughs" as a collective endeavour. Spolin describes the potential distorting effect of laughter succinctly:

Freedom and creativity must never go beyond the limitations imposed by the play itself. Laughter from the audience often causes an actor to lose his head (and his focus). This distorts his relation to the whole, as he works each performance for himself to achieve the laughter again. He is the actor working only for applause, for personal gratification... (1963: 361)

In Spolin's account, it feels almost as if the laughter that goes to the head of the individual creates a compulsion to repeat; to catch lightning in the bottle twice, so to speak. However, as established in the previous chapter, repetition is never "the same" next time around; Lacan's (1998: 61) insistence on the secret of playfulness being "the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself" should be warning enough that what makes one crowd laugh might not have the same effect with the next, especially if what has gone before in that performance is different; the essential links and connections of language that made a line funny in one performance simply may not have been established in another.

So, an individual, self-aggrandising pursuit of laughter is seen as damaging to long form improv performances. One example of this arises in the film *Don't Think Twice* (2016), when the character Jack, aware of the fact there are scouts for a TV show in the audience, completely deviates from any connection with the base reality of the scene by launching into an impression of Barack Obama. The audience falls about laughing, while his fellow players make their displeasure visible. The Obama impression is a crowd-pleaser, there to attract attention and laughs for Jack at the expense of fidelity to the scene being created and making meaningful connections. An emphasis on connections underlines the crucial way in which long form improvisors

see the production of laughter in their practice. While long form shares the emphasis on spontaneity evinced by Johnstone and Chudnow, Halpern, Close & Johnson suggest that the best humour in spontaneity comes about through connections with what has been established earlier in the improvising process:

The connecting line must be truly inspired by the situation on the stage at the moment, and usually can't be planned or recreated later. It is seldom the least bit funny out of context. A laugh resulting from a connection is a classic example of a moment when "you had to be there," and describing what happened later can't do it justice. (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 26)

Halpern, Close & Johnson insist that making connections is more important than making jokes; indeed, they suggest that most jokes are forced, and a forced joke "is usually a comment about the scene. Unfortunately, if you are able to comment on the scene, then you are not really involved in the scene" (1994: 27). They argue that even when these forced jokes get a laugh, it is at the expense of the commitment that is being built to the scene. Instead, Close argued that improv ought to pioneer a "Slow Comedy", which he contrasted to the "one...two...joke...repeat" of typical comedy performances and that elicited a knee-jerk laughter from the audience. As was discussed in the previous chapter, he instead pioneered the "unconscious choice", the unusual rather than the obvious, regardless of how funny one might think it was in the first instance. This would lead to bizarre, surreal scenes that would often seek to confuse rather than amuse audiences, and yet this would be celebrated by the crowd at the ImprovOlympics:

Audience laughter was rarely based on the jokes themselves. Rather, spectators applauded the players' virtuosic ability to recombine new stimuli with well-worn punch lines on the spur of the moment. Patrons also took pleasure in displaying their own, mostly shared, cultural competence and their ability to "get" the allusions in their new configurations. Their enjoyment was enhanced by their level of insider knowledge about the individual players and teams and their understanding of ImprovOlympic's style. (Seham 2001: 43)

This account underlines the crucial fact that that the collaboration in long form improv is not only between the players, but between the players and the audience. The connections built up and established on stage must connect also to the experience, knowledge and understanding of the audience. Such connections can be more subtle, more multi-layered than the punchline of a joke. So, while improv must find recognition in the Other, in the sense that it must be understood, proponents of the Harold method suggest that it must not be directed at the Other, it should not be aimed at eliciting a laugh from the crowd but rather directed at the internal coherence of the group.

The most comprehensive account of how long form improvisors see their art creating laughter is that given in the *Upright Citizen's Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* (2013) by Matt Besser, Ian Roberts and Matt Walsh. The UCB is a New York-based spinoff from ImprovOlympics that also specialises in the Harold as its preferred improvising form. Besser, Roberts & Walsh argue that the key to making improv funny is to first establish the "base reality" of a scene. This lays out the context for the scene based upon following the "yes, and..." rule and building the who, what and where of the scene. After this, the scene is made funny by establishing "the Game of the scene", that is, "a consistent pattern of behavior that breaks from the expected patterns of our everyday lives" by identifying the first unusual associations and developing them while remaining true to the base reality (2013: 64). After finding the Game, the next step is to heighten the Game, that is, "the act of making a Game move in a scene that is more absurd than anything that has preceded it" (2013: 113) and subsequently to explore the Game, that is, to explain the absurd choices direction the scene has taken in ways that seem plausible in relation to the base reality. They give the example of having an elephant in your apartment:

Saying that the zoo you work at has closed down because of low funding justifies the unusual in a smart, plausible way while still being funny. Saying the elephant was a given to you by a magical genie is an exploration move that adds an unnecessary, new absurd element to the scene... This logical answer, juxtaposed with the absurd behavior, will make this scene funnier. (Besser, Roberts & Walsh 2013: 130)

When integrated into the long form structure of the Harold, this approach creates a wide range of possibilities for connections between scenes and games, calling

back to previous themes and concepts and to the ambiguities, the latent as well as manifest meanings, that had previously been presented.

In this section I have pointed out some of the key differences between short form improv, which knowingly orients itself to the audience and seeks to generate laughter by any means necessary – the laugh is the key – with long form improv, which rather suggests that laughter will arise through fidelity to the scene, to constructing a reality and then subverting the reality without deviating from it – that is, creating a tension between congruity and incongruity. At a fundamental level, long form improvisors suggest that making jokes – or, more precisely, forcing jokes – is a route out of the reality of the scene and thus a trap for players who might be chasing laughs. This raises the question of what really is meant by a joke? How do they differ from the techniques used to generate laughter in long form improv? In the next sections, I will address this question and consider the ways in which the above understandings of what makes for funny improv performances relate to a range of theories of humour and laughter.

4.3 Theorising laughter: a fool's errand?

The three “classical” theories of laughter are typically understood to be superiority theory, incongruity theory and relief theory (Morreall 1983, 1987; Bown 2018). Morreall (1983, 1987) suggests that surprisingly little was written by philosophers about laughter prior to Henri Bergson's 1900 work and what had been written about it in passing had tended to cast laughter in an overwhelmingly negative character. Much of the most engaged writing on laughter prior to Bergson concerned its physical characteristics. This is perhaps unsurprising; laughter unfolds in various ways, and we experience it first or second hand as an embodied phenomenon that has clear physical and sonorous characteristics. Many writers have highlighted this visceral, physical nature of laughter. The 16th century physician Laurent Joubert describes that during laughter:

The face is moving, the mouth widens, the eyes sparkle and tear, the cheeks redden, the breast heaves, the voice becomes interrupted; and when it goes on for a long time the veins in the throat become enlarged, the arms shake, and the legs dance about, the belly pulls in and feels considerable pain; we cough, perspire, piss and besmirch ourselves by dint of laughing, and

sometimes we even faint away because of it. (1980: 28)

This shows that the body is very much implicated in the act of laughter in quite dramatic ways. Joubert's interest in the sheer physicality of laughter was related to his belief in its ability to cure patients, even revive people from their deathbeds. The 19th century literary critic William Hazlitt defined laughter as a "convulsive and involuntary moment, occasioned by mere surprise or contrast" (Hazlitt 1819: 3), while from an anthropological perspective, Darwin in *The Expression of Emotion* gives laughter the following physical characteristics:

The sound of laughter is produced by a deep inspiration followed by a short, interrupted, spasmodic contraction of the chest, and especially of the diaphragm. Hence, we hear of "laughter holding both sides." From the shaking of the body, the head nods to and fro. The lower jaw often quivers up and down, as is likewise the case with some species of baboons when they are much pleased. (Darwin 1872: 202)

For Darwin, laughter constitutes a very visceral effect, in which the whole body takes part and reacts to a stimulus. Darwin, however, has little to say about the "deep inspiration" which gives rise to this effect. Indeed, these physicalist perspectives tell us little about laughter as a social phenomenon. Researchers such as Provine have investigated how physical responses to laughter can be linked to specific social relationships. For Provine, "laughter is a social act" (2001: 37). Provine moves away from the idea that laughter requires a "comic spirit" and suggests that there are complex neuromuscular reasons that occur for laughter to take place. After investigations on chimpanzees and studying the evolutionary aspect of laughter, Provine concluded that laughter does not have to be comedic, linguistic or verbal but that it is rather a form of tactile bonding. Provine links laughter with tickling and says: "I forge recklessly into the paleohumorology fray, proposing my candidate for the most ancient joke—the feigned tickle" (2012: 55). While Provine understands laughter to be conducive to human bonding, he does not seek to account for precisely what it is that makes us laugh, or how we make others laugh.

Discussions of the physical characteristics of laughter are perhaps the only accounts of laughter that remain consistent, but the physical reactions they describe are not the reasons why people laugh. There is significant debate across disciplines as

to what causes laughter and there is certainly no agreement on a comprehensive theory of laughter. In Bergler's *Laughter and the Sense of Humor* (1956), there is a chapter entitled "Ephemeral Theories – Eternal Laughter", which, as the title suggests, contains a copious catalogue of theories of laughter – at least eighty theories of why people laugh. The title indicates that at least some laughter theorists have a sense of humour in their quest to find meaning in laughter. Similarly, Gruner in *Understanding Laughter* (1978) lists categories of humour that generate laughter, including responsive reactions such as exaggeration, incongruity, surprise, slapstick, absurd, human predicaments, ridicule, defiance, violence and verbal humour. Gruner's categories suggest an understanding of techniques that can produce laughter. However, whilst most of the literature around laughter provides particular analyses and viewpoints, authors fail to agree or develop a universal understanding of laughter; the literature cannot agree whether laughter is exclusively a human trait, an emotion, a form of pleasure, whether it is moralistic or aggressive. Morreall in *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983) examines the three theories of laughter he identified but is highly critical of them, arguing they only account for specific instances of laughter and are not comprehensive explanations of laughter. He argues rather that they must be combined, such that superiority entails an affective reaction, relief a physiological one, and incongruity an intellectual one, and in doing so offers his definitive theory of laughter which entails "a pleasant psychological shift" (Morreall 1983: 38-39). However, as Le Gof has suggested, this attempt amounts to a tautology built on scant evidence, and in which the "shift" is ill defined (Le Gof 1997: 47).

Perhaps it is something of a fool's – or joker's – errand to attempt to arrive at a unified theory of laughter and the techniques – the comic, jokes, and comedy as genre – that generate it. As McGowan (2017: 49) suggests, perhaps "the failure to be adequate to its object is the destiny of every theory of comedy", and yet, as he continues, what is striking about theories of comedy is their lack of theorization and the paucity of development they evidence. In the following sections, I will draw upon the three classical theories of laughter, as well as psychoanalytic theorising around comedy, to suggest a theory of what is funny about improv, and, more particularly, how the generation of laughter in improv generates a feeling of freedom within constraints in players and audience alike. I structure this discussion around the classical theories as they treat laughter as a social process that arises from interaction between people. The theories can be used to analyse comic situations in which the comic subject negotiates the rules imposed by society, by language and by the

improvising space. The three theories have a relationship with the laughing subject in that players can create situations of superiority/inferiority, congruity/incongruity and nervous energy/relief that elicit laughter. The comic situation is created through a mediation between these opposing forces for the audience.

4.4 Superiority and the split subject of laughter

Superiority theory is one of the oldest theories of laughter, and it suggests that we laugh at jokes because they make us feel superior to the object of the joke. This can imply a range of positions in the relationship between the object and the subject of laughter, including social correction, derision and pointing out the deficiencies in others. According to Hobbes, “the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (1812:65). For Hobbes, laughter is based on gaining a sense of superiority with others through competition, which only stops in death, a perspective that married well with his understanding of the state of nature as a war of all against all (Hobbes 1996). In this reading, if improvisors embodied an inferior position to the audience, or if there is a playful interaction between positions of superiority and inferiority between improvisors, then by embodying the superior position the audience can feel better about themselves. While the Hobbesian theory of laughter presupposes certain beings to be superior, Hutcheson interrogates the superior feeling’s function. He argued that there was no necessary relationship between superiority and laughter, and nor was a sense of superiority sufficient explanation. He observed that it was possible to feel superior to a beggar and feel pity rather than to laugh. Despite this, Hutcheson thought laughter allowed people to exert a level of social control and helped to correct “undesirable qualities” among those who, one must assume, he felt were in some way inferior (1750: 11).

Baudelaire, in his essay ‘On the Essence of Laughter’, views laughter as a fault occurring in the one who laughs, and suggests that laughter is linked with mankind’s fall from grace. When we see someone fall on the street, he suggests we feel an irrepressible urge to laugh:

To take one of the most commonplace examples in life, what is there so delightful in the sight of a man falling on the ice or in the street, or stumbling at the end of a pavement, that the

countenance of his brother in Christ should contract in such an intemperate manner, and the muscles of his face should suddenly leap into life like a timepiece at midday or a clockwork toy? The poor devil has disfigured himself, at the very least; he may even have broken an essential member. Nevertheless the laugh has gone forth, sudden and irrepressible. It is certain that if you care to explore this situation, you will find a certain unconscious pride at the core of the laughter's thought. That is the point of departure. "Look at me! *I* am not falling! *I* am walking upright. *I* would never be so silly as to fail to see a gap in the pavement, or a cobblestone blocking the way" (1964: 152).

This passage playfully evokes the physicality of the object of laughter – this disfigured fellow on the ground – while also drawing attention to the absurdity of any sense of superiority that might emerge from it. Bown suggests that Baudelaire has italicised the 'I's that appear at the end of this passage in order to emphasise the subject's superior position in relation to the object of laughter, and that the italicised 'I' suggests that it is through the laughter that subject is coming into being, "boasting in its new and celebrated position" (Bown 2018). It is this emphatic assumption of a new subject position that makes the laughter so ludicrous; to assume some superiority when it could have so easily been themselves who fell over, being laughed at. Baudelaire writes that laughter is contradictory: "it is at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery [arising] from the perpetual collision of these two infinities" (Baudelaire 1964: 154). In this sense, it is not superiority per se but the collision of superiority and inferiority that produces laughter. This contradiction, for Baudelaire, is at the heart of the human experience, a dualism that manifests itself as "being oneself and someone else at one and the same time" (1964: 165). In that moment that we see someone fall to the ground we recognise ourselves on the ground and we laugh to separate ourselves off from that recognition – all at once, not only has it not happened but it could not happen! Thus, as Bown (2018) suggests, when we read Baudelaire's account of the laughter we laugh at both the fallen man and the person silly enough to think that they could never fall over. This perhaps hints at the infectious nature of laughter – for surely, as we laugh at the laugher, invoking a sense of superiority vis-à-vis them, do we not recognise in ourselves someone who in that situation would also have laughed at the falling person? Baudelaire's theory brings to the fore a certain

duality involved in the process: the relationship between the two positions, subject and object of laughter, is not straightforward. When we laugh from a position of superiority it is an *idea* of superiority, a presumption. In that case, laughter based on superiority in fact underlines the precarity of any such notion, or the line between it and supposed inferiority.

According to Bergson, the comic arises as “something mechanical encrusted upon the living”, and laughter is an inherently social act that serves to embarrass deviants into correcting their faults (1913: 37, 170). Bergson sees humans as governed by opposing forces of automatism and rigidity on the one hand and vitality and elasticity on the other. If our body, mind and character lack the forces of elasticity and tension, then we subsequently face sickness, mental deficiency and the inability to adapt to social life. The mechanical human becomes the object of laughter, yet we are not laughing at the human but at the mechanical behaviour, the transformation of the person to a thing. By contrasting automatism with vitality, Bergson highlights the fact that laughter emerges between two polarities that give rise to something incongruous – there is incongruity in the human being that takes on the characteristics of the mechanical object. Therefore, Bergson’s view on laughter relates to both superiority and incongruity. He suggests that laughing at the “inferior” human as a mechanical object serves a utilitarian aim of social correction. If society is keen on getting rid of a particular rigidity so that its members keep pursuing the greatest elasticity and sociability, then laughter acts as a social corrective to achieve this. Zupančič (2008) questions Bergson’s view of laughter by complicating his notion of the mechanical – rather than the comic arising from rigidity vis-à-vis an essential vitality and elasticity, can it not be said that there is a necessarily relational aspect to any perceived mechanistic character, two seemingly vital and lively attributes, when put in relation seem forced and mechanical? Zupančič (2008: 115) offers the example of a garment that strikes us as “being stuck, imposed on the body” so that while it is not in itself mechanical, the relationship between the item and the wearer is forced, inorganic and thus mechanical.

This relational dimension to that which seems mechanical is important in the context of improv as an artform in which laughter ought to arise from interaction – what is and isn’t vital or mechanical cannot be gleaned from any internal, inherent property of a player but only from the dynamic interaction between players. An interaction that fails to find the game of the scene may well proceed mechanically,

automatically, “Yes, and...” following “Yes, and...” but not reaching a moment at which the players switch tracks to a game move that allows them to further heighten and explore the Game. A sense of vitality must surely be a vitality that relates to an alertness to the opportunities that language presents us to pursue the Game of the scene collectively, and to connect with the audience in doing so. More broadly, Bergson’s disciplinarian view of laughter fails to consider the psychological impact of laughter or the emotional sensation that laughter produces; it rather dispels laughter as an absence of feeling. The social demands society places on the individual are suspended during an outburst of laughter. The crux of Bergson’s essay is the search for the social function of laughter with the emphasis that laughter is inherently social. However, Bergson’s understanding of the function of laughter as a disciplinary method to correct disagreeable attributes of society follows a moralistic and utilitarian thinking, which fails to analyse the multifaceted experience of laughter. Laughter functions merely as an oppressive and corrective force. In the context of improv, such a viewpoint can only be partial, and depends upon the audience behaving in an uncharitable way to the improvisors – laughing at their failures.

A key issue with all forms of superiority theory – and indeed, all three classical theories – is that they clearly do not provide an explanation for all kinds of humour and are thus epistemologically limited. Not every type of laughter is intended to humiliate or constitutes a form of aggression towards an individual or a group. The object in Bergson’s perspective is something that lies beyond the subject that requires correction and yet, as Bown’s reading of Baudelaire suggests, this laughing subject occupies a very precarious relationship of “superiority” vis-à-vis the object of laughter. In improv, we see laughter emerging from a sense of superiority in two significant ways. Firstly, when the improviser steps outside the reality of the scene to get a quick laugh. As Close puts it: “Don’t deny the verbal reality. It’s said, it’s real. ‘What about our children?’ ‘We don’t have any.’ That’s wrong” (quoted in Sweet 1987: 144). This kind of one-upmanship closes down the player being denied and establishes the other player as a superior figure who is able to “block” their reality. As Johnstone argues, “A problem for the improviser is that the audience are likely to reward blocking at the moment it first appears. ‘Your name Smith?’ ‘No!’ (*Laughter.*) They laugh because they enjoy seeing the actors frustrated” (Johnstone 1989: 108). There is more than a hint here of Baudelaire’s precarious relationship between superior and inferior positions; the frustration of the blocked player or the joke of the player who has blocked them – which position might one want to identify with? A similar

dynamic can be at play in a second form that a sense of superiority takes in improv is laughter at failures, at “death” on stage – laughing at the “wrong” parts, at the failures and the gaps in the reality being constructed. Often, this takes the form of performances that fail to convince; that fail to achieve a believable scene. In such cases, one could see the result emerging from a “mechanical” performance, and yet it can just as easily emerge from very vital performances that nevertheless fail to connect; in such cases, the mechanical nature of the performance may emerge from the inability of the players to relate to the potential connections made available; that is, failing to find the Game of the scene discussed earlier.

I would argue that a superiority approach to laughter only fully works in improv if it is subverted in some way. Halpern, Close & Johnson give an example of successfully finding the Game of the scene that relates to superiority, though to joking about superiority: the scene involves six people waiting for a job interview and opens:

PETE: My son is on a kidney dialysis machine. (*An obvious sympathy ploy*)

JENNA: And you're not with him?

PETE: No, I had to be here today.

JENNA: Oh, you should be with him every second. At times like these, a child needs a father. (*The others all agree, increasing Pete's guilt.*)

PETE: You're right. I'm going to him now. Thanks, guys. (*He hugs the others and exits.*) (Halpern, Close & Johnson 1994: 37)

The scene plays out along a similar vein – what is important is that the Game of the scene is discovered by the whole team in the very first exchange, a collective recognition at a transindividual level in which the players rapidly connect to the material offered. The first line offers a wide range of directions for the scene to go in, and the immediate response establishes the direction – guilt, moral superiority. Yet this fixing of the game can only be sustained by the recognition of the other players in the scene. The game then plays with these notions of moral superiority and inferiority as the motor for the rest of the scene. In a sense, the scene as a whole could be seen as a quite mechanical exchange once the nature of the game is established, and yet the vitality of it emerges from the group interaction, the fluidity with which the game is

improvised and generalised among the players and the way in which it plays with an idea of superiority to gradually clear out the waiting room.

Johnstone developed a status game in which the players are persuaded into playing people of different social statuses. In this game, one player will be given a high status and the other a low status. Once the players figure out how to play the characters using the given status, they are then asked to play different scenes following these suggestions: “(1) both lower status; (2) both raise status; (3) one raises while the other lowers; (4) the status is reversed during the scene” (Johnstone 1999: 44). This demonstrates how elements of superiority and inferiority can be incorporated into improv games and how the subversion of these positions helps to suspend the everyday and generate laughter. The improvisors are perhaps aware that the audience members enjoy this play with superiority and inferiority and can deliver a performance in which the audience can laugh at the arbitrary way in which power is negotiated. In doing so, the audience is implicated; their own position as a laughing subject is destabilised as the statuses change; if the players’ status is so precarious then so are theirs.

4.5 Incongruity in improvisation

Incongruity theory suggests that we laugh at things that we perceive quite suddenly to be incongruous, such as a mismatch of words or a contrast between rationalities. It is based on mechanisms of expectation and surprise, and on the assumption that we laugh when things do not fit into our perception of reality or what we were expecting to experience. An early conception of the theory can be found in Aristotle, who suggests that the way to make an audience laugh is to set up and work towards an expectation and then defy it. As an example, he cites the following line: “He came on, having under his feet—blisters” (Aristotle 2007: 223). Here, the listeners were set up with the expectation that he was going to say sandals, but the punchline violated the expectation. Incongruity theory has been alluded to in the works of Hobbes, Hutcheson, Schopenhauer and Kant. Kant writes: “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Kant 1987: 203). An example given by Kant is of the merchant who is forced to throw overboard his wealth during a storm and grieves so much that ... his wig turns grey. Laughter

happens when our expectations are diverted for a moment and we are not able to understand the situation; the 'nothing' referred to is the thwarting of our expectations during a moment of incongruity.

Schopenhauer's notion is somewhat different from that of Kant's, in that incongruity arises between our experience of things and the abstract knowledge we have procured of those same objects. Our laughter is an expression of this incongruity. He gives this example:

When someone had declared that he was fond of walking alone, an Austrian said to him: "You like walking alone; so do I: therefore we can go together." He starts from the conception, "A pleasure which two love they can enjoy in common," and subsumes under it the very case which excludes community. (1948: 277).

This is particularly useful in understanding jokes based upon valences in the meaning of signifiers and the incongruity that can be produced through them. The theory can also be linked to the concept of surprise. In this sense, incongruity in humour can be related to the way in which the unconscious expresses hidden motives in slips and bungled actions – and our tendency to laugh, whether laughing *at* a slip by another (that, following Baudelaire, *I* would never make) or laughing *away* what has slipped out from one's mouth – it is, after all, merely nothing!

Psychologists such as Suls (1972) and Schultz (1976) suggest that it is not the incongruity itself that makes us laugh but the fact that we enjoy resolving the incongruity – that we "get" the joke by working it out. Morreall (2009) suggests that these theorists of incongruity have in mind jokes such as Mae West's quip "Marriage is a great institution – but I'm not ready for an institution" which, he suggests, relies on switching script from one set of assumptions to another, from institutions as time honoured traditions to institutions as psychiatric hospitals. This is of course true, and the homophonic play on "institution" creates a humorous incongruity, and yet the further layer to the joke is a metaphorical one, comparing marriage to a being in a psychiatric hospital. The joke is retroactive – one has to return to the original instance of institution in order to "get" the joke, but there is no manifest *point de capiton* as such. The two instances of institution sustain themselves in a mutual tension, and in as far as meaning is fixed, it fixed outside the phrase in the latent chain; the *point de capiton*

exists as latent meaning that is spectrally manifested through the sliding of “institution” as a signifier. There is clearly a great deal that can be gleaned from a 12-word joke, but it seems too much to try and rest a whole theory of laughter on working it out.

There is an inescapably imaginary dimension to improvised incongruous humour. This links to a point made by Lacan, that is, that in comic situations, “the imaginary is somehow implicated in the relationship to the symbolic” giving rise to laughter “at a higher level” (Lacan 2017: 119). In incongruous jokes, we visualise the scene, that can only be half captured by words and gestures, in order to fill in the gaps. Take the example of an improvised scene performed by Jonathan Winters from the very direct audience suggestion “Could you do a sergeant in the Marine Corps who is interviewing a gorilla that has been drafted by mistake?” The scenario already sounds like an incongruous situation, and Winters takes it further. With the rough and gravelly voice of a sergeant in the Marine Corps, he takes a roll call before coming to the name “Gorilla”: “Here’s a guy – I guess he’s tryin’a be some kinda clown [laughter]’ Sensing something is wrong, he goes on: “You don’t have to go to the rifle range today. [laughter] But I would shave. [laughter and applause]” (quoted in Double 2014: 355). The comedy that emerges from language, and from the shared reference points (such as the drill sergeant, the workings of the roll call, the danger of the rifle range), nevertheless serves at every stage to impress upon us the *image* of the Gorilla – in uniform, perhaps, though not stipulated, and subsequently attempting to shave. Whether or not improvisors are chasing laughs, they nevertheless require recognition from the Other in the form of the audience’s recognition of said reference points.

While it fails to be a comprehensive account of comedy, incongruity is clearly a central aspect of the way in which improvisors seek to generate laughter. It can be a way of understanding what happens in improv, propelled by failures and misunderstandings, and incongruity demonstrates how slippery the sliding in the signifying chain can get. As was demonstrated earlier, improvisors seek to develop incongruity relative to the base reality established at the start of the scene. Incongruity emerges from the law of extension, from adding to reality established by fellow players. In long form improv such as the Harold, incongruity develops within and between stages of the game. Thus, Besser, Roberts and Walsh give an example of a Harold performed at the UCB theatre in New York in which the opening suggestion

“iceberg lettuce” gave rise to an opening monologue in which the improviser, Andy Richter, reminisces about working in a grocery store where staff would “be talking about, you know, competing grocery stores, how that one has a shitty meat department”, and this inspires a scene that opens “Yo, man, you’re one of the new guys. We’re going over to Whole Foods right now. You have a chain or a bat or something?” (quoted in Besser, Roberts & Walsh 2013: 258). Here, the polyvalence of “competing grocery stores” is taken up to suggest grocery stores as rival gangs meeting to fight. The very first line establishes both an amusing incongruity and the Game of the scene. This example also underlines the imbrication of laughter in improv with the symbolic structure and with a shared set of reference points in language and culture for improv to work not only between players but between players and the audience. As we shall see in the next chapter, tensions can arise in improv when reference points are not shared due to cultural and gendered differences.

4.6 Relief Theory and Freud’s economic model

Relief theory arose alongside incongruity theory during the eighteenth century. The gist of the theory is that the physical responses of laughter are linked with the nervous system. One of the earliest works on relief theory surfaced in Shaftesbury’s 1711 essay, ‘The Freedom of Wit and Humour’, in which he writes: “And thus the natural free Spirits of ingenious Men, if imprison’d and controul’d, will find out other ways of Motion to relieve themselves in their Constraint...” (1971: 71). Spencer and Freud are the most prominent thinkers who have revised and updated the relief theory of laughter. In ‘The Physiology of Laughter’, Spencer (1911) develops his theory that emotions such as laughter are linked to physical forms of nervous energy. For instance, emotions build up, intensify muscular energy and then in a moment of laughter everything pent up gets released. Spencer specifies that the muscular movements in laughter have no object, and only serve to release nervous energy. Again, this theory does not provide a comprehensive explanation for all types of laughter, since there are situations where the individual does not invest a lot of emotion for a form of relief to occur. Relief theory is present as an underlying element in the physical phenomenology of laughter, as well as in Hobbes’ thought discussed above, where laughter is described as a “sudden glory”.

The more notable contributor to relief theory is Freud. In his book on *Jokes*, Freud is primarily concerned with analysing jokes, but he also introduces us to the

tripartite system of *jokes*, the *comic*, and *humour*. Freud tends to use these subcategories of 'jokes', 'humour' and 'the comic', and the responses to all these categories is termed as 'laughter'. Freud writes:

In laughter, therefore, on our hypothesis, the conditions are present under which a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis is allowed free discharge. And since laughter—not all laughter, it is true, but certainly laughter at a joke—is an indication of pleasure, we shall be inclined to relate this pleasure to the lifting of the cathexis which has previously been present. (1960b: 148)

So, the cathexis, the allocation of psychic energy, being lifted, allows this energy discharge; thus we have laughter. The specific forms of relief in Freud's theories differ depending on the kind of laughter being elicited. Freud makes the following distinction between the three categories: "The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humour from an economy in expenditure upon feeling. In all three modes of working of our mental apparatus the pleasure is derived from an economy" (1960b: 235-6). To briefly summarise, the pleasure in the joke frees up a repression, as we laugh as energy we would have used to repress is released; the pleasure in the comic frees up mental energy; energy we mobilise to understand something is deemed superfluous and is released as laughter; and the pleasure in humour frees up an emotional investment, as we laugh as energy summoned in expectation of distress is instead discharged as humour).

Like Spencer, Freud links laughter to the notion of psychic energy. In chapters 3 and 4 of *Jokes*. Freud's economic theory of laughter suggests that psychic inhibitions pertaining to sexual desire or aggression require an expenditure of energy. Therefore, when telling or hearing a joke that is aggressive or overtly sexual, the energy used in repression of these subjects is released in laughter as the mechanisms put in place sustain these inhibitions gives ground to the libido. Freud writes: "the hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychical energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off" (1960b: 149). Freud argues that in civilised societies, cultural norms have influenced and developed the mechanism of repression, and in a joke these repressions are shattered.

If it problematic to express or laugh at certain obscene forms of comedy – of smut – then it is for this reason that jokes play a role: “Only when we rise to a society of a more refined education do the formal conditions for jokes play a part. The smut becomes a joke and is only tolerated when it has the character of a joke” (1960b: 100). Nevertheless, he maintains, “when we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut” (1960b: 101).

In the joke form, there is the teller, the listener and a third person (*dritte person*), who is the object of the sexual or hostile aggressiveness. From this Freudian angle, to laugh at jokes that originate in smut or hostility is to enjoy jokes in which women and/or an oppressed group of people are often the butt of the joke. While this may be a simplistic way of looking at Freud’s analysis, Freud’s illustrations of jokes often put women as the object of the joke. Freud retells this joke: “A wife is like an umbrella. Sooner or later one takes a cab” (1960b: 78). Freud condenses three movements in this joke. The first one suggests that an umbrella is not always reliable protection against the rain and therefore will lead the person to take a cab. The second movement of the joke is to suggest that the wife is not reliable either, an act of metaphor, and this pushes the person to find something satisfactory outside of marriage. Third, the exchange of money in taking a cab alludes to the exchange for satisfaction outside of marriage. This joke is clearly derogatory towards women, particularly in its comparison to objects—the umbrella and the cab. Yet, without explicitly saying anything about forbidden thoughts or pleasures, through the joke-work the teller plays a trick which redirects the circuits of censorship and allows a discharge of pleasure in the listener.

While Morreall (1987) suggests that Freud’s theory is outdated due to its reliance on a hydraulic notion of the nervous system and energy, in fact Freud moves beyond Spencer’s crudely biological explanations of laughter as a sudden physical release of emotion by offering a more nuanced study that combines the physical expenditure with a psychological expenditure and economy. Unlike biological and evolutionary theories of laughter, Freud’s real contribution is to focus on the psychological processes that the joke-teller and the listener go through. Freud recognised that the production of enjoyment is closely linked to a psychical conflict and that such tensions are crucial for the production of laughter. When considered from that perspective to what extent can relief theory help us to understand the laughter generated in improv? One way to conceive of this is to consider the relief as

something produced on the re-incorporation of previous elements into the performance. Indeed, this would be a particularly Lacanian way of conceiving of the relief – a relief that one was not even aware of until the retroactive re-incorporation of material that, on its call-back, seems to have always been waiting to be used in just that way. In this sense, the relief is not a question of energy but of language, the reincorporation of earlier material triggers recognition. Yet, as was shown in the example of the supermarket gangs, this recognition need not be merely related to the manifest meaning of the earlier material – grocery stores competing as capitalist firms – but of an incongruent latency within the signifying chain based upon the valence of the signifier competing grocery stores. The “relief” is coupled with a delight at the wordplay that transforms the previous meaning into the new one.

Another insight from relief theory relates to the tensions produced by the precarious nature of the reception of improvised performance. In any comedy performance there is a danger that the set will not work out, that jokes will fail to land. In stand-up comedy, for example, comics will work on their sets and run through dry runs and try outs in order to test material before an audience, to hone the performance in smaller venues in front of dedicated comedy fans before taking finished sets to a wider audience. For amateur or new and upcoming comedians, this smaller scale performance may be as big as it gets, but even so the rehearsal of material allows for refining it. In such performances, it is not uncommon for comics to fail; to “die on stage”, to fail to elicit laughter. Billig coined the term “unlaughter” (2005: 177) to describe a particular form such failure can take, in which the audience members do not laugh at something because they do not appreciate the political, moral or aesthetic context of the comedy. The audience can actively withhold laughter, but both laughter and unlaughter involve a process of reacting to tensions created in the performance. In an improvised show, there is no refining of material, except in as much as the players find, heighten and explore the game of the scene as the performance plays out. All that can be rehearsed is technique and connections with one’s fellow players. Therefore, any performance is freighted with expectation. that it be funny because it is a comedy show, but that it might collapse because it is being improvised. Expectation and anticipation thus play an unusually big role in improv.

The three classical theories of laughter are important as they tell us something about the social dynamics present in laughter – that laughter is based on a relationship between certain oppositions. These tensions bring forward some of the problems with

the identity of the laugher and of the improvisor. Will the laugher release their inner tensions through laughter? Will the laugher preserve or subvert their identity of superiority or inferiority? Will the laugher negotiate the difference between congruity and absurdity? There is certainly something that is splitting in the subject that laughter evokes— whether it is splitting of theories, of temporalities (a split in the gap between set-ups and the punchlines, suggestions and reincorporation), splitting of the *I* as we see in Baudelaire or simply side-splitting at the carnivalesque redemption of an onstage fiasco. The theories discussed above, while unable to provide a full account of laughter, nevertheless offer clear insights into the way in which laughter operates in improvisation. While incongruity theory provides a means of accounting for the way in which players seek to construct funny scenes, one also requires aspects of superiority and relief theory to understand the ambivalent and creative aspects of laughter in the improv space. Indeed, contra Morreall's (1983) assertion that Freud's account of laughter is outdated, it is the interrelation between tension and relief that plays a central role in generating the unexpected and unpredictable outcomes that emerge between these polarities between audience and players.

4.7 Jokes, sequences and the incongruity of language

Freud's work on jokes is a major contribution to our understanding of comedy – this is despite the fact that, as has been suggested above, making “jokes” is not the aim of improv. However, Freud's insights are more generally applicable than the kind of forced jokes Del Close warns against. Consider this striking passage:

A joke has quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us ‘involuntarily’. What happens is not that we know a moment beforehand what joke we are going to make, and that all it then needs is to be clothed in words. We have an indefinable feeling, rather, which I can best compare with an ‘absence,’ a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there – as a rule already clothed in words. (Freud 1960b: 167)

Freud here suggests jokes, or witticisms, as an effect of language – they do not precede language but arrive “already clothed” in words, and not forced, as Close objects to, but emerging in the moment through a release of intellectual tension. This

is particularly relevant to improv, in which the clothing of language is present at every comic moment, emerging “in the moment” of improvisation.

In order to consider the role of incongruity in language and its relationship to laughter, it would be useful consider one of Freud’s more famous interpretations of a joke, that of the “famillionaire”, and the reading that Lacan provides of it in *Seminar V*. I do so not only to illustrate more clearly Freud’s model but also to underline the significance of incongruity in language in creating a comic effect and laughter. Lacan demonstrates that witticisms are a way to think about the formations of the unconscious because they convey a message about how language works and how it is organised as linguistic code. As discussed in the previous chapter, in order to understand the meaning of a sentence, one has to get to the end of the sentence and similarly, the process of constructing a joke in the psyche is always incomplete until it is articulated to someone else; we are left with a remainder, which is in the process of being brought to its conclusion once the code has been sent to the other.

Lacan recollects from Freud’s work the following witticism, as told by Heinrich Heine, as a leading example of what is referred to as a slip. The remark comes from the character, a poor Jewish man who tells of having a relationship with a well-to-do gentleman, Salomon Rothschild, and says: “And, as true as God shall grant me all good things, Doctor, I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal – quite famillionaire” (1960b: 16). Freud interprets in this joke the mechanism of condensation at work between two positions. The first position is a play on “familiar” and the second position is “millionaire” generating the condensed witticism that appears in the end result, an incongruous pun; famillionaire. The witticism invests in a homophony between “familiar” and “millionaire” where the sounds “aire” and “milli” appear in both words. Sounds get condensed in the merging of the two words, which creates a new meaning through the slip, famillionaire (*familionär*). Lacan suggests that the “message is completely incongruous...it’s not in the code” and that this is “the crux of the matter” (2017: 18). The merging of one signifier to another in the signifying chain produces a new signification and the incongruence of these engender a short-circuit allowing an illogical comical condensation to emerge.

The replacement of one signifier for another in the signifying chain indicates how the everyday offers the potential for a whole range of misunderstandings and substitutions. Figures of speech, poetry, or the “follies” of the *Witz* demonstrate on a secondary level what is happening in the primary process of the unconscious. As

discussed above, Freud's main distinction between what is comic and what is a wit is that while the comic is a dual relationship, witticism involves a third. Lacan emphasises that this third is the Other, who confirms the message as witty, as a joke. Upon hearing *famillionaire* for the first time, there is some form of pleasure that is gained and one finds some meaning – and a surplus of meaning at that; the teller seems to boast of his relationship to the rich Rothschild, and yet contained in the melding of “familiar” with “millionaire” is, as Freud observes, an evident bitterness at the condescension of the rich man, which serves also to embarrass the poor man – “the millionaire owns him” as Lacan explains it. This “doubling” is key to understanding the working of jokes and their relationship to the Other – you get something you did not demand of the joke, *and* something surplus on top of it:

What I was saying to you last time was about the Other, this damned Other, who, when one communicates a *Witz*, completes and, in a way, fulfils the gap formed by the insolubility of desire. It can be said that a *Witz* restores an essentially unsatisfied demand its jouissance, under the double and moreover identical aspects of surprise and pleasure - the pleasure of surprise and the surprise in pleasure. (2017: 109)

As Zupančič (2008: 132) argues, one can apply a similar logic to comic sequences as well as to jokes; that such sequences involve a “surplus-realization” produced, in the manner that the unconscious communicates, “by failure, by a mistake, an error, through misunderstanding”. This surplus or excess is an impossibility, of surprise and incongruity, that propels the sequence. Using the example of a moebius strip, Zupančič suggests that the comic is a short circuit which allows us to see an impossible connection between two sides of the strip and gives an example of an advertisement for mobile phone:

The general situation is a (stereo)typical situation of adultery. A man comes home from work earlier than usual, and finds his wife in bed. She is visibly upset by his arrival, and claims to be in bed because she has a terrible headache. While he is expressing his concern for her, a phone starts to ring. The man reaches for his phone and answers, but the ringing continues. He is perplexed, and keeps looking at the phone in his hand; then the

door of the bedroom closet opens and another man, wearing only his socks, comes out. He apologizes for the inconvenience and heads for the heap of clothes lying in the corner of the room, in search of the phone, which continues to ring. He finds it, answers it, and gets very seriously engaged in conversation. Meanwhile he is gesticulating to the (staring) husband and wife, to express his regret at intruding on them with his phone conversation. As if to minimize this impolite intrusion, he moves back towards the closet, climbs in, closes the door behind him, and calmly continues his conversation inside. . . (2008: 56-57)

The scene, Zupančič suggests, is funny for a number of reasons but she focuses on the “the impossible sustained encounter between two excluding realities” (2008: 57). This form of heightened unreality formed by the juxtaposition of two contradictory situations is also the core of what makes successful improv funny. Zupančič argues that the linkage between the two realities – articulated by the polite apology of the lover and his considerate retreat back into the cupboard – is not merely absurd but somehow works, is a form of “nonsense that nevertheless makes sense” (2008: 58). This echoes some of the suggestion put forward by Besser, Roberts and Walsh (2013), that the absurdity of the scene should be true to its base reality. Indeed, the scene could be read through the prism of their notion of the Game of the scene. The base reality is established by the encounter between the man and woman in a stereotypical adulterous situation. The Game of the scene is established by the phone ringing. The Game is heightened by the emergence of the lover and his retreat to the cupboard. While there is no “exploration” as such, the absurdity is clearly rooted in a very believable premise; the scene’s humour is generated by incongruity rather than a complete absurdity, an incongruity which, one could read into the scene: the lover was motivated by the fact that the call was very important, a matter of life or death, he had to take it; the onlookers were so astonished and in disbelief that they could not act. Isolated, neither “reality” – a man taking a call or two lovers nearly caught in the act – would necessarily be funny. Yet the juxtaposition and the incongruity that it reveals is *central* to the comic effect. As Zupančič goes on:

the Real “exposed” by comedy is usually not the Real of what happened, but the structural Real (or *impasse*) the suppression of which constitutes the very coherence of our reality. By

ignoring the Real of what happened, comedy succeeds in displaying the crack in the midst of our most familiar realities. And *this* is the real core of comedy. (2008: 58)

This is of course, a central aspect of effective improvisational comedy. We can observe a similar process to that discussed by Lacan in relation to Freud's *famillionaire* joke and in Zupančič's notion of the comic sequence at work, or perhaps at play, in an improv sketch. Think back to the example of the rival grocery stores discussed earlier. We begin with a discussion of rival grocery stores (grocery stores that compete in the capitalist marketplace) and the way in which staff would talk about other stores. The sketch begins – "Yo man, you're one of the new guys." At this stage, there is very little meaning that one can glean from the opening. The next line, "We're going over to Whole Foods right now", fixes the meaning to something understood – the sketch is going to be about grocery stores, as established in the opening dialogue. Then the next line completely shifts the context of the scene: "You have a chain or a bat or something?" This line establishes not only that the relevant context of the grocery stores set-up is rivalry (as opposed to, say, the quality of produce, which was also discussed in the set-up) but also radically resignifies the rivalry from market competition to gang warfare. This resignification requires the recognition of the Other – it can only be received as funny due to a second, unconscious chain of signification of what constitutes rivalry, of understanding that gangs might use bats and chains to fight over territory. Yet on top of this, you get a *surplus* meaning – that the crux of gang rivalry is perhaps not so far removed from the capitalist competition between grocery stores; that the losers of capitalist competition are themselves subject to forms of structural violence. So, what can at first seem like an illogical and incongruent resignification carries a surplus meaning that is both a "nonsense that makes sense" and precisely displays "the crack in the midst of our most familiar realities". We should, therefore, see the generation of comedy within improv as not so far removed from that in a typical joke. While the likes of Del Close might stress the necessity of not chasing laughs with forced jokes, the structure of comedy in improv plays out in similar way to the joke as analysed by Lacan yet extended in time.

In improv, there is a seemingly endless potential for the generation of new discrepancies due to the operation of "Yes, and...", bringing about new and reconfigured meanings, for surprises and incongruities. McLaughlin (2013), in a discussion of Johnstone's Theatresports format, suggests that a central factor that

makes the performances funny is the centrifugal force of each player's decision making relative to the background of the scene, reinforcing a "flight from the foundational centre" (2013: 51). However, in a Harold, just as important as the flight from the centre – from the suggestions, or from the base reality of a given scene – are the centripetal forces anchoring them to a "truth" of the scene. While McLaughlin follows Bakhtin in linking centripetal forces to control, in long form improv they rather sustain the incongruity, generating new moments of surprise and laughter as scenes proceed while anchored to one or a number of quilting points. The extension of improv, the "and..." in "Yes, and..." generates a surplus of meaning, an excess which provide new potential for ambiguous and surprising connections to the base reality, audience suggestions, or the earlier material generated in the show. Thus, the tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces and the incongruity they generate are at the heart of laughter in improv.

In this sense, at a formal level, there is a correlation with McGowan's (2017: 13) theory of comedy as that which lies at the intersection between lack and excess which constitutes speaking subjects: that we laugh when we are surprised by a coincidence of lack and excess. McGowan suggests the pun as "the primordial form of comedy", since a pun's humour is based upon the fact that its lack of a single decisive signification gives rise to an excess in potential significations (2017: 29). By situating this elementary form of comedy on the level of language rather than of manifest content, there emerge parallels with improv: the comedy can be seen to emerge from the lack of any given reality, summed up in the meagreness of the one-phrase suggestion that initiates the whole process, and the excess of reality generated by free association and the rule of "Yes, and...". Between the two, a series of incongruous sequences play out which can delight the audience by extracting a surplus of realisation and meaning from such meagre beginnings. The games and structures that allow this extraction to proceed are precisely the intersection of lack and excess that gives rise to an "event-like" moment of improv, that is confirmed by the Other as audience and ratified through laughter.

Zupančič suggests that the structure of a comic sequence differs from a joke in that the punchline of a joke affects the entire structure, fixing its meaning with the intervention of a master-signifier, whereas in a comic sequence, the master-signifier itself can be transformed into a comic object and produce further comic material:

It is very important for the construction of a comic sequence that

the signifying objects produced in it, including the comic pleasure that sticks to them, are used as the material and the means of its further construction, not simply released as such... most have to be kept within the comic field and used as possible passages to further events with which to construct the comic sequence. (2008: 147).

This, of course, is precisely the shape of an improv performance, in which the signifying objects are precisely the motor for further comedy, and the connections between them, their repetition in new and reconfigured forms, doubles the “comic pleasure that sticks to them”. Consider the example of a Harold given by Halpern, Close, & Johnson (1994) in which a suggestion “camera” gives rise to a pattern game that generates references to high school, smoking dope, writing on the wall and Vietnam. The Harold that followed had the following structure:

1A: Two teenagers smoking dope in a school restroom, reading the graffiti and boasting of sexual exploits with a girl named Sue.

1B: A married couple are packing to move. The man finds his yearbook, in which he is pronounced an all-American, voted most likely to succeed, and is guilty about moving.

1C: A news report on casualties from Vietnam

Game 1

2A: The same two boys are now older, in a foxhole in Vietnam, taking cocaine to distract from the pain of a wound.

2B: The couple decide to return to the US after hearing of an amnesty for draft dodgers.

2C: The news report continues, making connections to other scenes and the Game 1.

Game 2

3A: One of the boys, now an adult, is in a wheelchair looking for his friend’s name on the Vietnam memorial wall.

3B: The couple are photographing their baby when the woman sees the TV and recognises the man looking for the name on the wall.

3C: The newscast is showing the Vietnam memorial wall, the man in the wheelchair is looking for his friend's name; the couple are watching at home and the man comments on how his wife, Sue, seemed to know all the guys at school. (adapted from, Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994: 86-88)

This sequence demonstrates the way in which a Harold plays with ambiguities in meaning and constantly develops them. For example, "writing on the wall" which emerged from the pattern game shifts its status as the gamer progresses – it begins as graffiti, then alludes to the inevitability of trauma, death or disfigurement for those who were sent to Vietnam, and then becomes the Vietnam memorial wall. The retroactive connection of the two strands of characters via the third, the news reports, reconfigures the meaning of the previous scenes. The final three scenes mirror the first, but this time, rather than boasting of a woman they have had sex with, the surviving boy reflects on the fact that the people named on the wall have been "screwed". The authors suggest that the reappearance of the character of Sue, as well as being a funny call back, precisely stands in as "the symbol for America when it becomes apparent that the vet is still reading on a wall the names of men who have been 'screwed.'" (Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994: 88). Thus, the comic effects of the connections represent the reconfiguration of signifying objects, and this reconfiguration enhances their potential comic impact, bringing with them a surprise in their repetition and a surplus of meaning.

Bringing into focus different incongruous realities side by side is a key aspect of what makes people laugh at improv. By activating latent meanings in language through associations, it can develop highly incongruous situations that express something that might otherwise have been missed, a surplus of meaning. The rival supermarket gangs, for example, brings to the fore the brute reality of capitalist competition, of the fact that workers are pitted against each other in the search for profits. Indeed, the same is on display in the waiting room sketch – people waiting for an interview whittle each other down because that is what an interview is there to do; to whittle down the qualified contenders to the lucky one who will get the job. These meanings are, of course, at a second order to the comic effect generated by the players, but they nevertheless add something to the comedy, something that resonates with the audience when successfully performed.

4.8 The event and the carnivalesque in improv

As established above, laughter in improv often comes from the position of understanding the group's precarious position. If sections of the performance are not funny, the audience may laugh from a benevolent and encouraging position because they are aware the improviser is taking a risk with their fellow improvisors. However, laughter in improvisational comedy also manifests in the expectation that the comedy, since it is improvised, can fail, and the awkwardness of such an encounter can be funny. The audience may take pity on the improvisers and pepper the show with generous laughter or really put the improvisors to the test and hold back laughter or laugh at the awkward gaps. Both laughter and non-laughter towards a comedic performance can bring forward something pleasurable. Thus, laughter in improv can emerge from the relief experienced when tension over whether or not it will work is released. However, enjoyment, whether vocalised laughter or experienced quietly, or as a whispered exchange in the audience, can also arise from the heightening of the tension at a performance going badly. One way to account for this ambivalent nature of laughter and enjoyment in improv is through the prism of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin's carnival experience was "opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression. It demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms" (1984: 10-11). The resonances with improv are here evident, even if on Bakhtin's account, the carnival is an even more closely aligned with the unrestrained improvisational notion of Callois' *paidia* than improv, with its unbreakable rule of agreement and various malleable but commonly understood structures and games. Bakhtin argues that the nature of laughter in the context of a carnival has three aspects: first, it is a "festive laughter" rather than an individual response to an isolated event. Second, Bakhtin suggests carnivalesque laughter is a universal laughter, directed "at all and everyone", including participants. Finally, it is "it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (1984: 11-12). The first aspect is an understanding that resonates with improvisors. For example, Fotis and O'Hara argue, improv is necessarily communal in nature, and "[p]eople tend to laugh if other people are laughing. And people tend to laugh when they feel like part of a group" (2016: 176). The second and third aspects point to the necessary ambivalence of laughter in improv; the potential for triumph as well as mockery, for death and rebirth. Bown (2018) emphasises that the ambivalence of carnivalesque laughter can be destructive, but in that act of destruction it also creates, forges a new subjectivity *in the act of*

collective laughter, in its essentially relational nature. This, it seems, is an aspect of improv – the way in which laughter creates and sustains performances, even in their failures, is key to understanding why it is so alluring to both players and audiences. In improv, there is the possibility through laughter for failure to be experienced as a positive and creative force. Bakhtin's carnival is a radically democratic form of performance where the spectator is not told what is funny or enjoyable. Rather, enjoyment is dispersed, and the spectator is emancipated from the hold of the performer.

There is an element of this at play in improv. While traditional performances centre the performers and the audience can take or leave what they're offered, the precarious nature of improv, the implication of the audience in the show through both suggestion and participation and the ambivalent nature of laughter means that the audience has a greater power in the relationship between audience and performers, even in situations where the players are not consciously "chasing" laughs. Despite the injunction not to *chase* laughs, laughter nevertheless becomes a yardstick by which performances proceed – being true to the scene while nevertheless observing what aspects of the scene resonate most is a key method of communication in the improvising space. As suggested earlier, the audience often laughs when the improvisors pay attention to each other and work out how to build a scene together in unexpected ways. Fotis and O'Hara (2016) suggest that the skilled improviser then pays attention to the varying types of laughs – since there are small laughs and bigger laughs that can occur in a scene. Therefore, we ought to emphasise that the tenet to not chase laughs be understood as precisely that – do not *chase*, do not run away from the scene in pursuit of laughter but remain true to the scenes and trust in the capacity of the relationship being built between the audience and the players to generate laughter in the democratic, quasi-carnavalesque environment of the improvised space. Again, we have a strong sense of the creative potential developed in the context of constraints – the dialectical tension between players and audience generating a sense of shared freedom, a relational freedom that echoes Bakhtin's understanding of the carnival as embodying "becoming, change and renewal" (1984: 10).

I am not arguing here that there is a necessarily liberatory nature to laughter; indeed, this would be a dangerous misconception. As Dolar has argued, laughter provides the ironic distance required for us to become truly subject to ideology: "It is only when we laugh and breathe freely that ideology truly has a hold on us", assuring

“our free consent and the appearance of spontaneity, eliminating the need for the non-ideological means of outside constraint” (1986: 307). In laughing off the absurdities of our times, do we not offer some degree of acquiescence to them? Zupancic (2008: 7) suggests that this distance from any given ideology, bolstered by associated notions of freedom, humour and positive attitudes, has precisely come to occupy the position of *the* dominant ideology. When we laugh, we can feel rather autonomous while precisely assuming a given ideological position in what we laugh at. Thus, as Bown (2018) suggests, the apparent spontaneity of laughter can be a binding force, controlling the subject of laughter even as it feels free. Yet it is a contradictory process; in as far as our laughter relates to the impossible, whether this is conceived of as Zupančič’s structural Real as impasse exposed by true comedy, or the impossible choice of the improv space, it can potentially undermine such control, however momentarily.

As I argued in the previous chapter, there is an event-like nature to the structure of the improv performance. This extends to the carnivalesque interplay between the players and audience. Indeed, in a successful improv performance one of the crucial elements is laughter as that which sustains the event. By drawing the audience into the creative process, and exposing the mechanics of the generation of laughter, Fotis argues, improv involves the audience in a co-creative relationship with the piece, such that “humor doesn’t simply arise out of witty dialogue or situations, but out of the ways that the players connect the various threads of the piece together, the way they make the machine work” (2014: 61). It is through this sense of cocreation, the implication of the audience in what is produced, that laughter assumes such a critical place in improv. As Hallward suggests, for Badiou, “A truth persists...solely through the militant proclamation of those people who maintain a fidelity to the uncertain event whose occurrence and consequences they affirm – those people, in other words, who become subjects in the name of that event” (Hallward 2003: xxv). One can immediately see the relevance of this to, say, the persistence of the “truth” of the Russian Revolution to Trotskyists, or of the Chinese Revolution to Maoists. I would suggest a structural homology with the event-like nature of the improv performance. It is in this sense that the audience of the improv show take on the role of militants; the reality of the show is attested only in their reaction, in their laughter, which is fidelity to the “event-like” moment of improv.

Laughter ratifies the transitory reality of the improvised world. In the context of improv, just as ideology can cement groups, so can the laughter that indicates the concreteness of the scene and the relationship between the audience and players. Thus, the “event-like” retroactivity of the improv performance discussed in last chapter is consummated by laughter. Not by seeking out laughter, but nevertheless, reliant upon it to inaugurate the creation, of the generation, however fleetingly, of a new reality in improvised scenes. The sense of freedom that I anatomised in the previous chapter is heightened by the ratification of this impossible reality by the audience through laughter. However, this necessary dependence on *an* other in the performance also gives rise to the potential for failure in the scene. The improv space is not a dictatorship where ratification is always delivered resoundingly but one in which laughter might be delivered unevenly – more to one player than another, more in one scene than another, more on one night than another. This indeterminacy in the laughter of the audience can thus be a constraint that shapes and guides the performance. Even though ‘not playing to the audience’ is a key tenet of much of improv, there is nevertheless an expectation that improv should generate laughter.

As I showed through the example of Joan Rivers and Del Close in the previous chapter, this tension is one that can lead to the suspension of the law of agreement in pursuit of a quick laugh. I argue therefore that agreement and the laughter that arises from fidelity to the scene, that is, which proclaims its truth and its reality on its own terms, is more radical than the laughter that arises from the cheap joke, which punctures the reality of the scene and detracts from the work that has been put into establishing its transitory reality. Moreover, while the stakes of the performance seem very high – and indeed, sometimes the stakes can be very high in terms of work and success – the other underlying miracle of improv is that of rebirth; even if one dies on stage in a scene, one can be reborn and reincarnated in another. Thus, in improv, one has an almost messianic potentiality. The freedom it engenders then is perhaps one that Benjamin suggests: it can transform the empty, homogenous time of everyday life into one in which “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (1968: 264). Benjamin was remarking on the Jewish Messianic tradition, and likening it to the “tiger’s leap into the past” through which proletarian revolution must emerge. Improv, then, structured as an event, breaking through the everyday and into a contingent state of possibility where the past is recontextualised as a radical new moment.

One striking example that can relate these notions of the carnivalesque, of the precarity and ambiguity of improv, of rebirth, and that can also partially unite the three classical theories of laughter emerged from an incidence of ‘corpsing’, that is, a mechanism where the performers actively attempt to suppress unintended laughter during performance. Ridout refers to corpsing as infectious and something that disrupts rehearsals and creates a space for “collective giggling” (2006: 131). This can be directed towards something funny or produced when a performer is nervous or embarrassed by something; they can evoke laughter that will be “caught” by others in an infectious way. Ridout recalls being part of an improvised performance in which the group had formulated a plan for what to do if the audience didn’t laugh; they would perform “the Angel of Death”, in which they gaze into the heavens as a way to resuscitate themselves from their failed attempts. After performing several of these Angel of Death moments the performance would be rescued by another performer who entered the stage with a plan to save the scene. Ridout recalls that the performer who was supposed to rescue the performance runs in to the failed show, where the audience were not responding, but instead of bringing a plan to save the scene they were laughing hysterically, saying they had nothing to offer. The laughter infected the audience and performers, with laughter escalating in “giddy escalation” (2006: 148). In this moment, one can see potentially an intersection of the three theories of comedy. The audience’s failure to laugh – the death on stage of the players – indicates an element of superiority; of the sense that *I* (or, rather, *we*) are not dying on stage; and yet the incongruity of the saviour of the show falling about laughing with nothing to offer leads to relief – to laughter throughout the audience. Mockery and triumph dissolve into one another in the creation of laughter throughout the auditorium. After dying on stage, the performance is brought back to life by a messianic figure who had nothing to offer but...nothing. In their infectious laughter, they showed, contra *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), that one can be the messiah *and* a naughty boy (or, indeed, girl).

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that incongruity is the key motor of laughter in improv. However, that incongruity does not rest on absurdity, but rather on the constant relation of incongruity to the “base” reality of the scene. By drawing on my analysis of the role of language in improv in the previous chapter, I have shown the ways in which incongruity can arise by exploiting the valences in meaning provided

in improvisation, giving rise to a surplus meaning, as well as how this emerges in tension with the “base reality” of the scene or game. I have explored the ways in which psychoanalytic theories of comedy and laughter contribute to our understanding of improv, in particular, Zupančič’s observations about how the coexistence of two impossibilities alongside each other leads to heightened comedy, and McGowan’s observation that a juxtaposition of lack and excess in the form of comedy generates laughter. Laughter plays an ambiguous role in improv – it can signify approval but also mockery; its absence can be as ominous as its presence. It can guide skilled players to better performances, but its lure can pull players out of the moment and into appeals for laughter through forced jokes. Performances can fail, players can “die on stage”, and laughter can play a role in bringing them back to life. Finally, I have argued that laughter plays a role in ratifying the reality that players create, of keeping fidelity, however briefly, with the event-like nature of the improvised performance. This, I argue, is key to creating a feeling of freedom among improvising players and the audience alike.

In this and the previous chapter, I have argued that the structure of improv can be thought of as “event-like”, and that the sense of freedom that it engenders is related to this structure. I was careful to distinguish “event-like” from a more definitive term such as “evental”, since my argument is not that improv truly is an event in the sense that Badiou understands the term, nor do I seek to suggest that improv represents a “mini-event”, a smaller version of the same process. Rather, it is the structure of improv which, in creating, however temporarily, a world in which language can be played with, meanings can be reincorporated and impossible choices can be made, that engenders an analogous effect in the improvising space. Yet this is a key point – the event of improv is not generalised; its “situation” is the theatre, the workshop. While its participants may themselves feel changed by the experience, and its aftereffects may cheer both participants and observers for some time afterwards, the substantive sense of freedom that it generates is localised both spatially and temporally. Thus, in the next chapter, I move on to look at the processes and relationships which lie outside the improvising space proper.

Chapter 5: Improvising the impossible: freedom and capital

5.1 Introduction: "... you must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on."

In the previous chapter, I argued that the feeling of freedom that emerged in improv was one that could be snatched from what seemed to be the jaws of failure; from the fiasco of dying on stage to the carnivalesque event of laughter in improv, saving the day. Pushing ahead in the face of failure is, of course, a common theme. Consider Samuel Beckett – himself no stranger to the stage as a grave, as in the case of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Beckett's novel *The Unnameable* ends with the coda, "...you must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on" (2012: 135). Uttered by the nameless narrators, the statement seems to capture a sense of perseverance in the face of the impossible, of the duty of the artist to push through failure; indeed, it echoes his later, more famous writing in *Worstward Ho*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (1983: 7). Is there, however, a failure that cannot be overcome, a structural limit to the sense of freedom engendered by the improvising space? Indeed, is there one that closes down that space in both metaphorical and literal senses? In this chapter, I will consider the way in which the imbrication of improv with capitalism represents a fundamental limit the impossibility that emerges in the improvised space. That is, that no matter the structural resonance between improv and the event, or with the carnivalesque, improv has become an industry, and increasingly finds itself implicated in wide areas of capitalism even beyond its immediate requirements to pay the rent to cover a room in which players and audience can collaborate in creating the sandbox of the impossible. Indeed, the impossible surrounds and permeates the improvisational space, emerging in the cracks that swell to shatter the unity of groups, turn audience against players,

and whip away the roof from over their heads. Yet, in the face of the challenges and limitations imposed upon them, improvisors offer a range of responses, from adaptation and incorporation to resistance

The dilemma of improv is neatly dramatized in Mike Birbiglia's 2016 film *Don't Think Twice*, which follows the lives of six people from an improv group and school called The Commune. The film situates itself faithfully within the history of improv – the character Sam explains to a class at the start of the film their rules: first, “Say Yes”, second, “It’s all about the group”, third, “Don’t Think”. The early scenes with the group are very warm and intimate. It seems that their private lives are blended into their improv, they seem very close and on the surface work very well together. They begin their show with the group’s standardised question: “Has anybody here had a particularly hard day?” An audience member responds with: “I am looking for an apartment and it sucks”. After probing further, the audience member expands on their response by saying that the only apartment they can find has a bathroom in the kitchen. The group improvises a sketch on the challenges of finding a flat; there is a bathroom in the kitchen; and then the flat comes with orphans included. The grind of finding an affordable apartment in New York moves through the cramped living space to a Dickensian riff on *Oliver Twist*, or maybe the little orphan Annie. The sketch is met with laughter from the audience, as the incongruous symbolisation of the stress and challenges of everyday life generates some relief.

This happy and intimate group existence is interrupted when they find out that scouts from the late-night sketch comedy show *Weekend Live*, which stands in for *Saturday Night Live*, will be in the audience for their show. Getting work on *Weekend Live* is the Holy Grail for improv groups like theirs, and many of them have dreamed of getting this job together, but the competition that getting the gig engenders creates problems within the group. At their next show, the group perform their set by asking the standard question, following the basic rules, and making sure the audience laughs. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, during the performance, Jack, who seems nervous and clearly wants to be noticed, performs his best impression of Barack Obama, totally out of context from what the group was performing. This generates laughter from the audience and consternation from the rest of the group, which only heightens after Jack gets the job. The group is pulled apart as the imaginary unity of the group is exposed to the impossibility of them all “getting the gig”. Instead, some of them work in cafes and supermarkets, others rely on rich parents, while others try

to eke out a living from the theatre itself, a prospect which collapses when the landlords announce the closure of the theatre due to gentrification - they joke that Trump buildings keep popping up all over the place. The film brings forward the disparities of being part of an improv group and the pressure to strive towards the success and presumed stability that accompany the bigger television show, and highlights some of the contradictions that emerge when economics clashes with art. The film also touches on a creative conflict between the improv group and the big-time TV show, as players watching Jack on *Weekend Live* on TV realise that Jack's comic moment in the TV show is not even funny. While Jack becomes successful, he is not able to be as creative in the TV show as he was in the improv group.

I detail the film's plot here to draw attention to the overall structure it depicts – a group unity built upon a commitment to improv as practice and success at the level of the improvising space, yet a unity that masks very different backgrounds and relations to capital, different levels of aspiration for success, and yet a unity that is pulled apart by the impinging of the sphere of capitalism on the group. Some players compromise, some try to carry on in the face failure. Birbiglia himself drew on his own experiences of improv in writing the film. As he explains in one interview:

My wife once said, 'Improv is all about saying 'yes' and agreeing, but ironically, some of the people in your improv group are literally millionaires, while others are barely paying their rent,'... The principals of art are like socialism, but life is capitalism, and I started writing a screenplay based on that. (quoted in Bloomenthal 2016).

This tension identified by Birbiglia is, I argue, an inescapable aspect of improv as it is increasingly commodified and subjected to the laws of capital accumulation. Despite the attempts made to symbolise the tensions of capitalism in the improvising space – in the words of Henricks, playing in the “cracks of ordinary life” such that while “that ordinary world, so full of cumbersome routines and responsibilities is still visible to us, its images, strangely, are robbed of their powers” (2006: 1) – the force of capital nevertheless make itself felt. The commodity form does not merely resist symbolisation, it shrugs off our attempts to do so and instead incorporates ever more aspects of social life into its logic. In this sense, I echo Žižek's suggestion that

in socioeconomic terms...Capital itself is the Real of our age. That

is to say, when Marx describes the mad self-enhancing circulation of Capital...it is far too simplistic to claim that the spectre of this self-engendering monster which pursues its path regardless of any human or environmental concern is an ideological abstraction, and one should never forget that behind this abstraction there are real people and natural objects on whose productive capacities and resources Capital's circulation is based, and on which it feeds like a gigantic parasite. (2000: 276).

Here Žižek makes a claim for the self-expanding logic of capital as being something beyond the sphere of ideology, and something not captured solely through reference to the symbolic structures of capitalism. If capital is an abstraction, a social relation, it nonetheless has some consistency, a logic that exacts a toll on people. In this, he echoes one of Marx's (1976) central arguments regarding the capitalist mode of production. The exploitation of labour, the specific commodity labour-power, produces surplus value, and thus allows capital to expand. This expansion through exploitation of labour begets a further process of commodification; of bringing ever more spheres of human life into the commodity form. The expenditure of human labour thus is fixed, crystalised, as capital; yet of this labour, no trace remains. In its place we see the commodity, which is fetishized as having intrinsic value. Yet this human labour nevertheless leaves its trace as an abstract objectivity, a logic of accumulation which both compels capital to expand, lest it be overcome and swallowed up by other capitals, and eventually to fall into crises. As I will illustrate in this chapter, such tendencies are at play within improv, and thus in a sense, capital forms the limit of freedom in improv; a singularity which is at once a barrier preventing its motion and a hole compelling it and swallowing it up.

In the first section of this chapter, will explore this proposition in relation to improv by examining the tensions and contradictions that have emerged as the improv scene has developed into the improv industry. I will draw upon psychoanalytic theorists of capitalism influenced by Marxism in order to explore the ways in which improv, its players and its audiences are differentially incorporated into the commodity form. I will argue that while the form of improv as a collective and creative activity may mask the commodity fetishism inherent to commodification, this form and the imaginary unity it generates nevertheless does mask the reality of

this fetishism – the misrecognition of relations between people as relations between things. In improv, however, it is a double misrecognition – the imaginary misrecognition of the group as the primary mode of articulation conceals the broader symbolic articulation of the group with the capitalist market and the real processes engendered by the logic of capital accumulation which animates it. In the second section of the chapter, I will consider the underside of improvisation and comedy – that is, what becomes of improvisation and comedy outside the improvising space when it is utilised to offend or incorporated and adopted by the political right? When we are told by such forces that “You can’t say anything anymore”, what precisely is the nature of this censorship and what is motivating them to say these unsayable things? I will conclude the chapter by considering how it might be possible to conceive of a political practice that can begin to conceive of a world beyond the Real of capital in which some meaningful sense of freedom might be enjoyed.

5.2 From radical intentions to real tensions

Long form improv began against the backdrop of a burgeoning counterculture, in which free jazz, beat poetry and new, risk-taking forms of comedy, in which stand-ups would risk improvising on stage in order to test out material, were flourishing (Seham 2001: 6). In 1955, Viola Spolin’s son, Paul Sills, then a young theatre student at the University of Chicago met David Shepherd, a Marxist with a keen interest in the traditions of *commedia dell’arte* and the radical theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Shepherd had a vision was of a populist theatre in which activist performers would improvise left-wing comic scenes in a cabaret style environment. As he explained to Jeffrey Sweet many years later, he realised that “as we develop a new kind of play and audience, we may have to develop an entirely new style of acting” (quoted in Sweet 1987: xxii). Sills realised that the theatre games his mother had developed, initially as techniques for theatre and rehearsal, could provide an ideal framework for such improvisation – not only to train new performers but to practice on stage. There emerged from this marriage of ambitions and techniques a highly productive and successful collaboration in which the basis for contemporary American improv was laid. Yet, as with previous examples of productivity discussed in this book, they emerged from tensions that had been generated by constraints that took the form of somewhat different approaches that each contributor sought to impose upon the form. Seham (2001: 7) summarises the differences between them as Spolin, “devoted to improvisation’s spiritual and psychological release of human potential”; Shepherd, in

search of “a political community theatre” that would bring actors and workers into communication and contribute to a fight against class oppression; and Sills, somewhat between the two, drawn to the political and spiritual aspects of improv but in particular committed to the authenticity of the art produced. What bound the three together was the conviction that improv had the capacity to help its participants overcome the disciplinarian limits of law and ideology to achieve a kind of freedom from the norms of bourgeois society and to express some kind of truth.

Historians of improv such as Sweet (1987) and Coleman (1990) have suggested that each of the contributors were crucial to the development of the perspective that improv was oriented towards overcoming barriers and hierarchies and in pursuit of freedom. However, there were obvious differences between their conceptions of freedom and how it might manifest. As discussed in previous chapters, for Spolin, freedom was something that emerged in the moment of spontaneous improvisation and emerged from the interplay between individual freedom and group agreement that was facilitated by her games. For Shepherd, the freedom he envisioned was of a rather different kind: “I saw that the goal of our theatre should be a riot in the audience” (Sweet 1987: xxi). Shepherd explained that his vision of an improv influenced by *commedia dell’arte* and Brecht and Molière would be a “didactic theatre” (Coleman 1990: 56) that would inform and incite its audiences, not fully improvised but rather built upon narratives agreed in advance and drawing upon a repertoire of comic bits that could be combining with spontaneous improvisation. Sills sat between the two; he shared the interventionist approach of Shepherd, but he envisioned yet another form of freedom: “I’m not talking about tearing down buildings and things like that. I’m talking about personal liberation” (Sweet 1987: 17). Influenced by his mother, Sills was interested in the spiritual, but unlike Spolin his focus was on the shamanic aspects of the spiritual, with “primitivist ideas of myth, magic, and ritual” that would contribute to “channeling the subconscious, or tapping an even deeper collective unconscious, to find a cosmic truth that would link his artistic expression to both the personal and political uses of improvisation” (Seham 2001: 7-8).

Spolin’s was a freedom of the moment that emerged within constraints and was learned. Sills’ was a primal freedom, that could encourage the development of personal freedom that would emerge from community groups as part of a “do it yourself’ movement” (quoted in Sweet 1987: xxvi). Shepherd’s notion of freedom sat was of a movement that would effect political change in world by effecting a

transformation in the audience itself. Despite their resonances, there were clear tensions in these visions. At the formal level, pre-planned narratives to allow for political didacticism sat uneasily with Spolin's spontaneous improvisational games. Between the two emerged a hybrid, scenes that took a political angle but rather than emerging from pre-planned narratives developed from audience suggestions and using Spolin's games as a base structure. These became the highlight of the Compass Players forming another step in the evolution from early improv to the Harold. Shepherd grew frustrated as the political elements of the show became less pronounced. Rather than attracting a working-class audience, the crowds at shows were primarily made up of middle-class professionals and bohemians. Amateurs were unable to keep up with the schedule for the shows and so professional actors were brought on board. The Shepherd's pre-written scenarios were abandoned, and the players began to repeat jokes in different performances. Not only had the form changed but so had the content, as politically charged material was replaced with social and cultural themes. The changes were enormous crowd pleasers, but for Shepherd, their newfound success was unsatisfying (Coleman 1990; Seham 2001).

The tensions that had initially been so productive ended up pulling the collaboration apart. The Compass Players folded in 1957 after just two years. In 1959, Sills created the hugely popular Second City troupe, which would employ improvisational techniques to generate scripted material that would then be performed in revue – what Fotis (2014) describes as *scriptprov*. According to Seham, Sills wanted to escape the restrictions imposed by “Shepherd's Marxist notions” in order to create “marketable social and political satire” (2001: 17). Andy Duncan, an original Compass Player, said of The Second City revue: “Rather than the anarchy which reigned at the Compass, Sills planned every second from the minute the lights dimmed to the applause and bows” (Sweet 1987: 55). As Wasson (2017: 46) suggests, Freedom versus form was to become the “driving tension” of improvisational comedy. Yet this dispute occludes the further dispute between Shepherd and Sills – *who* is improv for and *what* is its purpose? For Shepherd, it was aimed at a working-class audience and aimed to educate and agitate politically from the left. For Sills. It was aimed at the liberation of more nebulous abstraction, “the people”, in order that they “get a little heart and spirit back” (Sweet 1987: 17).

Sills had broken with Shepherd because he believed the success of his vision meant getting out to a wider audience. Thus, Second City was more commercial, more

polished, and attracted bigger audiences. Yet it drew improv further and further from the ethos of freedom, however interpreted, that had guided its early days. McCrohan (1987) recounts that Sills' partner, Bernie Sahlins, had experience as a commercial director and operated the troupe like a tightly-run business, keeping a lid on pay. Sills spoke of his frustration at what he saw as the excessively commercial nature of the theatre. It was "softening its satiric edge, presenting less and less challenge to the 'establishment' that had become a large part of its audience" (Seham 2001: 23). Soon afterwards, both Spolin and Sills abandoned the company, with Spolin establishing the Games Theatre in California in 1964 and Sills selling his stake in the theatre the following year. Sahlins was quite open about why the theatre had to change – it needed to make more money to stay afloat, to cover costs: "The place had to become more commercial or die" (McCrohan 1987: 128). Sills' commitment to "personal change" rather than political change lent itself to the commodification of improv in a way that Shepherd's more radical imperatives did not. As we will see in the next section, improv's overlaps with therapy and self-improvement have become a significant motor of its continued visibility. However, Sills was not seeking the wholesale commodification of the form. For him, commercial expansion was a way of opening up improv's transformative, freeing potential to a wider audience. And yet, despite their best intentions, there was a logic at work which appeared to be beyond their control; something that made its influence felt through disruptions to their plans and intentions. Attempts to push improv in the direction they intended met with resistance, and instead was forced into another trajectory. In order to try to understand this logic, in the next sections I will discuss the notion of capital as the Real of improv.

5.3 Capital as impossible Real

To what extent can we consider capitalism to be the Real of improv? To begin, I will consider some of the objections to Žižek's notion of capital as the Real. As Žižek (2000: 276) has argued, in socio economic terms, the abstract logic of capitalism "is 'real' in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes themselves", and that the fates of masses of people can be decided by "the 'solipsistic' speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in a benign indifference to how its movement will affect social reality". This reading of capital is commensurate with Žižek's radical anti-capitalism, and echoes many of the popular anti-capitalist critiques of capitalism emerged alongside the *alter-globalist* movement

after 1999 (e.g., Klein 1999; Monbiot 2004). Žižek goes further, however, with his integration of Lacanian theory with Marxist political economy. He goes on:

Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real: 'reality' is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable 'abstract' spectral logic of Capital which determines what goes on in social reality. (2000: 276)

In this provocative argument, Žižek draws upon Althusser (1996) and Sohn-Rethel (1978) to develop the Marxist conception of real abstraction.² Marx delineates in *Capital* between the “concrete”, or physical and sensuous characteristics of human labour, and the “value form” of such concrete activity, “abstract labour”; the products of labour are left with nothing but a “phantom-like objectivity” (1976: 128). A better translation of the original German *gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*, is offered by Arthur: “spectral objectivity” (2001: 41). For Marx, then, to be ruled by capital is to be “ruled by *abstractions*” (1973: 164). In Žižek’s combination of Lacan and Marx, capital represents something beyond the “reality” of the symbolic and the imaginary, and rather represents an abstract logic at work that nevertheless makes itself felt in the social world. Žižek (2002: xii) suggests that the imbrication of the Real, symbolic and imaginary are so complex that all three are reflected in each other, such that one can speak of “modalities” of the Real: the “real Real” as the horrifying, primordial object, the imaginary real as the mysterious and unfathomable factor that shines through an object, and the “symbolic real”, which is “the real as consistency: the signifier reduced to a senseless formula”. Capital as Real, then, can be interpreted as a symbolic Real, a modality of the Real which has consistency, which subsists as a senseless but self-reproducing logic.

Žižek’s interpretation is open to criticism from both a Lacanian and classically Marxist perspective. Laclau, for example, takes Žižek to task, insisting that as a Lacanian he should know that capitalism cannot be the Lacanian Real which is “that which resists symbolization, and shows itself only through its disruptive effects”, whereas capitalism is a “set of institutions, practices, and so on” which means it can only operate “in so far as it is part of the symbolic order” (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000:

² See Toscano 2015 and Toscano 2019 for more on the relationship between Althusser’s and Sohn-Rethel’s work on abstraction and Žižek’s. Here, I focus rather on the way in which Žižek’s formulations complement Marx’s.

291). From the vantage point of classical Marxism, Callinicos (2001: 389) suggests that Žižek's argument founders on a contradiction: capitalism is only directly accessible through conceptualisation because it is only possible to apprehend it through its effects. So, for Laclau, it makes no sense to see capitalism as Real since it operates through the symbolic, while for Callinicos, it is because capitalism is necessarily conceptualised – hence necessarily symbolised – in order to be apprehended in the first place. Do such objections really amount to a refutation of Žižek's perspective? In a discussion of Freud's Wolfman case in *Seminar I* Lacan suggests that "the real, or what is perceived as such, is what resists symbolisation absolutely" (1988: 66). Yet, there is an ambiguity in the notion of symbolisation as far as capital is concerned. To say that something "resists" symbolisation, even absolutely, does not mean that it cannot be at least partially symbolised. In Fink (1995) suggests that one aspect of the Real is that which has yet to be spoken, yet to be put into words, or "signifierized". This is the Real that must be spoken, through analysis, and symbolised; as Jacques-Alain Miller has put it, analysis involves the progressive "draining away" of this Real into the symbolic (quoted in Fink 1995: 120). Yet, as Fink suggests, even as this Real is progressively symbolised, there is a remainder that persists, "a real after the letter" (1995: 27) of impasses and impossibilities. This second, post-symbolic Real, then, indicates a lack in the Other, within the symbolic order, an absence which nevertheless makes itself felt.

What is the significance of such a perspective to the notion of capital as Real? After all, these conceptions of the Real relate to the context of the clinic. I believe that there are some interesting parallels with Žižek's argument. For one, in as much as, in Laclau's words, the Real "resists symbolization, and shows itself only through its disruptive effects," capital's symbolisation can only be seen as partial; a remainder of it escapes symbolisation. At the level of conceptualisation, our understanding of capital is both partial and contested. Moreover, at the level of Laclau's argument that capitalism is "a set of institutions, practices, and so on can operate only in so far as it is part of the symbolic order", this too overlooks both Žižek's and Marx's critical point: beyond these embodied systems of capitalism, there is the abstract logic of the value form – the "spectral objectivity of capital" – that cannot be captured at the level of practices and institutions. This spectral objectivity of capital lies above and beyond the institutions and practices that make up the symbolic order of capital. Indeed, the notion of such a logic is a joke or a heresy to both the agents of capital and its dominant theorists; as Tomšič (2015: 20) argues, they instead develop and deploy

“pseudoscientific hypotheses of political economy” fetishistic and vitalistic, such as Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ of the market.

When Laclau discusses the disruptive effects of the Real we should have in mind the way in which capital disrupts “reality” – not merely the “normal” disruptive effects that affect the lives of billions of workers and oppressed people every day, but those which disrupt capitalism’s supposedly typical functioning, i.e., it’s secular crisis tendencies – it is not enough to talk of these emerging from institutions and practices. Rather, they represent the accumulation of abstract labour – this spectral objectivity – transmogrified and crystalised as dead labour, *as capital*, weighing down the very system itself. As Marx (1981) argues in volume 3 of *Capital*, this accumulation of dead labour, in ever higher quantities relative to the living labour that sets it in motion, is the catalyst for falling profit rates and crises of overproduction, and yet still dead labour begets more dead labour until it crashes down, unleashing a wave of privation. Marx explains that “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (1976: 342). Yet while this metaphor speaks of impossibilities, so too does Lacan’s conception of the Real in *Seminar XI* as distinguished “by the fact that its economy...admits something new, which is precisely the impossible” (1998: 167).

Perhaps this is the crux of things – it is not the practices and institutions, or indeed conceptualisations of *capitalism* that are Real but rather precisely as Žižek put it, “the inexorable ‘abstract’ spectral logic of *Capital*” (emphasis added); dead labour felt only in its disturbances, disruptions and dead weight; a remainder of what was. Lacan in *Seminar II* suggested “[t]here is no absence in the real” 1988b: 313), and there seems no more horrifying a notion of a Real than capital, marked by absolute presence – the presence of all that has gone before, dead generations frozen into an insubstantial mass which, as Marx puts it, “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” (2008: 15). The language of a nightmare resonates with Freud’s “navel of the dream”; as Lacan puts it, “this abyssal relation to that which is most unknown... in which the real is apprehended beyond all mediation, be it imaginary or symbolic” (Lacan 1988: 176-177). Yet this terrifying presence is a presence of precisely nothing – it is lacking, “phantom-like” and spectral, because “there is nothing left” of the products of labour (Marx 1976: 128). There is a clear echo here of the object *a* – as a lack and as remnant. I draw this comparison not to suggest a direct homology between object *a* and capital as Real, but rather to suggest, contra Laclau, that there is precedent for understanding

the Real not merely as something that impinges upon the symbolic but as something that is both generated by and missing from it. Lacan's neologism *extimité* in *Seminar VII*, rendered as "extimacy", that is, "intimate exteriority" (1992: 139), usefully captures the peculiar relationship between symbolic and Real (as it does the relationship between the unconscious and the Other as discussed in Chapter 3).

For all this talk of symbolising or imagining capital, it evades any such effort – our images and signifiers can only dance around its horrifying presence. It is in this sense that I argue that Žižek's reading of capital as Real can be sustained – an impossible trauma of untold generations of exploitation dominating our lives, disturbing the operations of the symbolic realm that gives rise to it and which is structured around it; such a reading allows for capitalism as a system of institutions and practices to be situated at the level of the symbolic order. Indeed, capitalism as a system and social structure is precisely that which marks our penetration by and imbrication with the symbolic. As Tomšič (2015: 36) argues, the autonomy of commodity exchange as a system of differences, i.e., as structured like a language, gives rise to commodity fetishism, in which the source of value – human labour – is obscured so that value instead appears as a quality of things. In such a symbolic realm, the Real of capital as dead labour is obscured by a fetishism which provides a screen of fantasy.

There is more to capitalism is more than just the institutions and practices of the symbolic realm that Laclau mentions. As Žižek has argued in response to criticism of his notion of capital as real, "Capitalism is *not* just the outcome of multiple discursive strategies and struggles for hegemony - the 'logic of the capital' is a singular matrix which designates its real" – that is, there is a consistency that evades discourse at the centre of capitalism. Rather than attempting to identify and isolate the commonalities between these discursive strategies, capitalism in its particular forms, we should instead grasp

this matrix as a positive force in itself, as something which all actual particular forms try to counteract, to contain its destructive effects. In this sense, truly, 'there is no capitalism': the universal matrix of capitalism is virtual-real, with all actual forms reactions to it. (2007: 211-212)

Thus, the logic of capital is that which gives rise to the various and shifting forms, institutions, and practices that seek to react to the traumatic, abyssal nature of capital itself. Capitalism as we know it – as we conceptualise, theorise, symbolise it – is a virtual assemblage of these forms, which are themselves attempts to channel the abstract logic of capital into a manageable system that, nonetheless, is fundamentally determined by it. Capital compels accumulation for accumulation's sake – as Marx puts it: “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!” (1976: 742). The symbolic structure of capitalism can be considered the instantiation of the different approaches of capitalist firms and states to obey this *drive*; in a remarkable passage in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx observes that the “there develops in the breast of the capitalist a Faustian conflict between the passion for accumulation and the desire for enjoyment” (1976: 741). Marx in the original German expresses “passion for accumulation as *Akkumulationstrieb* and “desire for enjoyment” as *Genusstrieb*: *trieb*, drive, which, Tomšič suggests, represents “a split within one and the same drive” (2019: 20, 21).

Thus, capital presents a limit that, like Lacan's Real, “faced with which all words cease and all categories fail” (Lacan 1988: 164). Even in the face of capitalist production itself, capital presents itself as an impossible limit, as Marx argued in *Capital* volume 3: “[t]he *true barrier* to capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-valorization appear as the starting and the finishing point, as the motive and purpose of the production. (Marx 1981: 358). The clearest sense in which capital forms a barrier to capitalist production consists in its tendency towards crisis – it is, like the clinic in Lacan's observation, “the real insofar as it is impossible to sustain” (quoted in Tomšič 2019: 199). The symbolic structure of capitalism as such, the specific forms it takes, is a means of facilitating capital's self-expansion and containing its self-destructive capacities. Crises represent moments of *tuché*, of encounters with the Real, precipitated by the internal logic of capital. Yet the final crisis of capital never comes; in every crisis, a floor is put beneath the collapse; the encounter is missed; and, as Foster suggests, as something missed, “the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated” (1996: 132). Thus, the notion of capital as real brings with it the threat of a never-ending cycle of crises that changes in the symbolic order can only temporarily ward off or ameliorate. The spectral logic of capital will haunt us until a way is found to finally exorcise it.

5.4 The commodification of improv

To return to topic of improv, in what sense is capital a Real? As suggested in the previous section, the logic of capital was a profound limit on the intentions of the founders of improv – capital thus made itself felt in a way which must have seemed to them impossible – that their efforts produced something other than what they intended. There is a parallel here with the way in which Lacan, discussing Freud's account of a hallucination experienced by his Wolfman patient, talks of the Real that is "excised from the primordial symbolisation" – excised, here, is Lacan's early translation of Freud's *Verwerfung*, which Lacan will later translate as "foreclosure". Lacan goes on to say of this Real that the subject nevertheless encounters it as "*already there*", which "talks all by itself. The subject can see something of it emerge in the form of a thing which is far from being an object that satisfies him and which involves his present intentionality only in the most incongruous way" (2006: 324-325). The foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father leaves an unfilled gap in the symbolic structure and is crucial to Lacan's work on psychosis. Here, I want rather to suggest an analogy with the exclusion of capital that the founders of improv attempted in their own ways, to deny it in any fashion, in order to exact from improv a sense of freedom; despite these attempts, limits were constantly imposed upon their efforts, distorting their actions and delivering outcomes that merely served to further push their creation into the realms of commodification – an incongruous intentionality.

As Marx argued, commodification involves process through which:

the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought – virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc. – when everything, in short, passed into commerce... to speak in terms of political economy, the time when everything, moral or physical, having become a marketable value, is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value. (Marx 2009: 12)

This brute description, taken from Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy*, emphasises the totalising nature of the process of commodification, as in the famous words of the *Communist Manifesto*, as the logic of capital expands, "all that is holy is profaned" (Marx and Engels 1967: 83). This totalising expansion expands the market, in which commodities can only exist as part of a system of difference, as values are compared,

which, as Tomšič (2015: 33) suggests, represents the structural overlapping of value and signifier. At this level, then, the particularities of improv and the intentions of its creators matter only as much as they can be differentiated in value terms from anything else on the market. Of the sensuous labour that went into its production, nothing remains; in as much as a consumer may “value” the commodity, the initial intention – of the creators or players – is secondary to whatever may be found in the valences of meaning in the signifier/value that an audience be willing to pay for. Through an appreciation of the way in which, in Žižek’s words, the Real of capital is the spectral logic “which determines what goes on in social reality” (2000: 276), we see more clearly how the Real of capital and the symbolic realm of the market are articulated.

It is not simply that the commodity form incorporated improv but that capital itself resisted symbolisation. Consider the aim of Shepherd’s; a radical critique of the present state of affairs, an incitement to revolt. And yet, instead, the logic of the commercial development of the Compass Players meant that:

the target of their barbs was not the capitalist system, as Shepherd would have liked, but their own families and upbringing, social mores and pretensions. Societal ills were presented in terms of individual dis-ease [*sic*] and anxiety. With psychoanalysis a newly fashionable pastime, scenes were often set in a psychiatrist’s office and characters defined through their neuroses. (Seham 2001: 14-15).

Needless to say, unlike in the works of theorists influenced by both Lacan and Marx, the relation between such neuroses and the domination of humanity by the abstract spectral logic of went unremarked on. Even as symptoms could be laughed at, the traumatic hole around which the symbolic structure of capitalism is structured evaded criticism or even detection. Consider again the examples in the last chapter of the rival supermarket gangs and the job interview; both hinted at a meaning beyond the manifest content of the scenes – in both cases, capitalist competition causing rivalries between workers – and yet neither named or diagnosed capitalism as the issue. The screen of fantasy, of fetishization, erected around capital means that it must be inferred from the latency within sketches. Now, one could well argue that this is a blessing, that a didactic improv would simply not be funny. This is likely true in most cases. Yet it is another example of the way capital’s presence in the symbolic disrupts

and yet is not detected; symptoms are named and yet nothing is apprehended. Even if it were detected – if it were partly, crudely symbolised, if it were explained to audiences and players alike that capital is an unimaginable monster irrupting into the fabric of our lives – what would it matter? Capital would shrug off our laughter and continue to haunt us, as Shepherd discovered. I suggest this not to say that the logic of capital cannot be challenged, but rather that such a challenge would necessarily go beyond its naming, beyond mocking it or drawing attention to its symptoms.

One way to observe the impact of capital upon improv outside the narrow sphere of commodification and marketisation is to consider the impact that these processes had upon the players and the imaginary unity of the group. Even in the very early days of the Compass Players, greater success and popularity meant that

tensions, rivalries, exhaustion, and disillusionment increased. Players were forced to acknowledge that, despite Spolin's original insistence on mutual support and shared focus, improvisation could be manipulated to give some performers star status at the expense of others, male and female. (Seham 2001: 15)

Commodification of the industry led to the intensification of competition between players; the symbolic order stressed by Spolin gave way as the logic of capital determined new social forms – instead of cooperating, players could show off in order to boost their status. This process intensified as The Second City became increasingly successful in the 1960s. David Steinberg, who would go on to become a major comic in both the US and Canada, got his first break at The Second City in Chicago. Yet his early days with the company were challenging – he found it impossible to gel with the group and believed that Spolin's emphasis on group agreement had come to mask the reality of a hierarchically divided company in which the more experienced players were protective of their profile and status. In order to impress the audience, one night he broke the reality of the scene and provoked laughter. He later said that "For me, the lesson of that night persisted. Break any rule you can get away with" (McCrohan 1987: 130).

It was not simply a case of status, of course – with status came the possibility of greater success. It would be too easy to write off players as merely fame hungry – fame would bring with it the kinds of financial security that the theatre was not

providing at the time. In 1960, when a television company struck a deal with the theatre to develop a special broadcast, the company players were excited at the potential for exposure. Alan Arkin, who had been at the company for around six months, had developed a scriptprov scene that had been very successful at the theatre and which was to be a centrepiece of the show. Arkin explains

As the weeks went on and the TV special loomed closer, I began to feel that the actress I was working with was no longer relating to me. I felt she'd stopped listening to anything I said, and working with her started becoming unpleasant and difficult. The TV show was upon us, and once again I felt my career—my whole future—was at stake. As we continued to perform the scene in the club, I became more and more frustrated. During the scene every other word out of my mouth was "Listen!" and each night it became more emphatic. "*Listen!*" I'd say to her. "*Listen to me!*" I couldn't seem to make any impact; I couldn't get her to play ball or to bounce off me. Looking back at it now, I know that her behavior came out of fear. At the time it felt like selfishness, something that she was doing to upstage me and take all the attention for herself, and it drove me crazy. I became so annoyed with her and the way the scene was going that I started to miss laughs, my timing was thrown, and I even began to feel that the audience was starting to dislike me. They didn't seem to be concerned with my partner's selfishness; they didn't notice that she wasn't *listening* to me, one of the first lessons every actor is supposed to learn. In fact, the worse it got, the more I struggled, the more positive the audience's reaction to her seemed to be. I began to intensely dislike the audience, feeling betrayed by what I'd felt until then had been a very intelligent crowd, a *university* crowd. We had a *following*, for God's sake, people who came back, show after show, and up to now had demonstrated taste and intelligence. I started to hate them, and the actress too, and I began to dread doing the scene. Once again I felt my career slipping away. (Arkin 2011: 46-47).

I have quoted this excerpt at length in order to give a full sense of the drama of the process as Arkin experienced it. The pressure of the TV special led Arkin to misinterpret fear as selfishness, to hate his partner, to resent his audience, to doubt their intelligence and commitment to the group. The show had not changed, but the stakes had as the logic of capital encroached ever further into the improvising space and into Arkin's and his partner's psyches, as their imaginary identity and transindividual connection were frayed by something from without; an encounter with the real of capital, making itself felt as an extimate force that warped their performances. There is a striking sense of anxiety in the passage – feeling his career “slipping away” and leaving him hating his partner, his audience, filled with a sense of dread. As Lacan suggested in his 1953 paper “The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real”:

anxiety is always linked to a loss - in other words, to a transformation of the ego, to a two-term relationship that is on the verge of vanishing, and which must give way to something that the subject cannot approach without a certain vertigo. (2013: 28)

If the prospect of a “big break” emerges from the symbolic realm of capitalism, from the television company's calculations of how to make a profitable show, then it is the ineffable logic of capital, making itself felt in this traumatic, extimate fashion, which generates the anxiety and fear which both Arkin and his partner experience. After weeks of things going wrong, Arkin took a decision to do something different: “I'm going to love her. Whatever she does, I'm going to accept her just the way she is—I'm going to love her” (2011: 47). The scene transformed: “The character came back, my laughs came back, the audience regained their intelligence, and I found some peace for the first time in weeks. It was probably the most important realization I had ever come to” (2011: 47). I detailed another example in Chapter 3 of Arkin discovering something beyond himself through improv. I would not want to speculate too far here, but these examples, and those of other improvisors, lends some credence to the notion that improv, and the need to improvise, opens more possibilities for an unconscious choice which can spill over into an impossible one.

As the TV specials became more regular, players began to chafe at the failure of management to increase their relatively low earnings. Sahlins thought that the players should be happy to do the TV performances without any extra pay for the

good of the company. The players responded to Sahlins by forming a trade union and refusing to perform on television if it was not a union job at unions rates. The imaginary unity of the group as players was being eroded by the pressures of fame and success. Indeed, Sahlins sought to exploit this unity for in the interests of the company – when the players threatened to strike, Sahlins protested “But we’re a family” (McCrohan 1987: 162). Sahlins went as far as shuttering the theatre for a short time in order to obstruct their organising efforts. It is important to be clear here that this was not a resistance to commodification, but rather a demand for a greater share of its proceeds. Yet what is interesting is that the erosion of the imaginary unity of the group in the improvising space was arrested, and then reconstituted on the symbolic level – i.e., at the level of the market, even if aiming to disrupt its normal functioning in their favour – through collective organisation to advance their terms and conditions in the face of the continuing encroachment of commodification.

5.5 Improv as industry

In 1975, *Saturday Night Live* premiered with a cast of improv alumni. It was a major success and, indeed, remains on the air to this day. From this moment onwards, improv had entered the mainstream of US culture. Wasson (2017) demonstrates that improvisational comedy has surpassed jazz as the most popular form of improvised entertainment and argues it should be considered the most influential contemporary American art form. While a little hyperbolic, it is clear that improv has, in successive waves had a tremendous impact on the fabric of cultural – and corporate – America. The second wave of improvisation that emerged in the 1980s had some similar traits to the first wave – not least the was in which the intentions of its founders were pulled off course. Yet, for all the successes of this second wave, a range of crises in the industry has led to a divergent path in which some companies have struggled while others have thrived; the limitations of certain models making clear that capital remains the limit with which freedom in improv repeatedly finds itself unable to contend.

In 1981, David Shepherd made another attempt at his dream of a proletarian improv theatre. Influenced by the Theatresports approach of Keith Johnstone, he devised the idea of an Improvisation Olympiad. Working with producer Charna Halpern, Shepherd devised a format in which players would perform in teams based upon their jobs, thus making it easier to reach groups of workers who would form

teams at work. However, most of the teams that formed were of professionals and managers (including a group of psychologists called the Freudian Slippers), and soon the relationship soured. As Halpern recalls

I made it more theatrical and David and I had a splitting of the ways—because he did not want it to be theatrical. David was looking for the common man in Berwyn, Illinois, and I was trying to get art. (quoted in Seham 2001: 46)

Halpern instead began to collaborate with Del Close, who had recently departed the Second City after becoming frustrated with its format. The two collaborated to create a space in which the Harold could be practiced. Unlike at Second City, where tickets were sold to spectators, ImprovOlympics would sell memberships and thereby maintain itself through subscriptions. This offered a level of stability that would allow for the Harold to develop into a major draw to dedicated audiences of aficionados. The company opened a training school and expanded rapidly. As Fotis explains (2014: 58), “ImprovOlympic put more teams and players on stage in a month than Second City did in a year.” ImprovOlympic became an academy for improvisors to both learn and perform. They were able to take classes with Close in the week and perform on the weekend. The lesson of ImprovOlympic was that it is possible, at least for a time, to find a niche; a position within capitalism where it was possible to sustain and develop an alternative approach to improv without succumbing too quickly to the immediate demands of the market and instead to shift the parameters of what was marketable. As far as this represented a success it was, at least at one level, success as a capitalist firm. Nevertheless, the artistic success that the stability of the theatre allowed for led to a great flowering of the Harold as a form and the expansion of an approach to improv in which the kinds of freedom discussed in the previous two chapters were able to be experienced – by those who could afford the costs of membership, of course.

A very different approach was pursued by comedian Dick Chudnow. He was also inspired by Theatresports, and after trying and failing to convince the Theatresports group in Toronto to marketise and franchise their format, Chudnow launched Comedysportz to great success. Seham (2001: 90) suggests that the amateur and educational nature of Theatresports is a conscious choice that allows them a claim to “pure and authentic” improv. By contrast, ComedySportz rapidly grew into nationwide success and then a multinational franchise. The franchise manual written

by Chudnow (1988) explicitly states that the two basic facts of ComedySportz are that it is a sport and a business – explicitly not an art form, and a sign in their company headquarters in Milwaukee reads “This is ComedySportz—If you want art, go to a museum” (Seham 2001: 82). A polar opposite to the Harold, ComedySportz relies on gimmicky games and gags to generate laughs. It is family friendly and eschews any “taboo” topics, indeed, there is a “brown bag” foul for the use of terms deemed offensive by the referee. Of course, the bagging in itself generates a laugh, and thus referees are instructed if possible to completely ignore any “sensitive suggestions” from the audience that might actually cause offence (Chudnow 1988: 112). The overtly commercial nature of the show not only generates competitive tension between teams but also within teams. Status and power is achieved by being “laugh-getters” who can become audience favourites and guarantee bigger audiences and higher incomes (Seham 2001: 100).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the tension between short and long form improv is reflected in the differences between ComedySportz and ImprovOlympics. In that chapter, I discussed the difference in terms of different approaches to generating laughter, but the difference is a broader one. Fotis (2014: 65) suggests that both the aesthetic and technique of ComedySportz reinforces dominant social values, in stark contrast to ImprovOlympics’ style that builds from “fractured realities, multiple truths, and a collage approach to creation.” While the Harold relies upon valences in meaning, ComedySportz’s approach is rather blunter and more direct. While ImprovOlympics carved out a niche for itself, ComedySportz became a global franchised phenomenon. Rather than franchising, the Harold format spread when players who enjoyed the show took it with them to other cities – such as the Upright Citizens Brigade in New York. Players from ImprovOlympics would become some of the most successful comedy actors in the world in the early 20th century, while comedy directors such as Judd Apatow, Tina Fey and Adam McKay would use its techniques on television and the big screen.

ComedySportz, on the other hand, operates a global league for competition, as well as corporate and educational services that can be purchased. ImprovOlympics offshoot Upright Citizens Brigade followed in ComedySportz’s footsteps by establishing a corporate training programme with its UCB@work division which teaches improv to corporate and financial institutions. In 2016 the *New Yorker* reported that when Lehman Brothers went bankrupt, Mark Thompson, an investment banker,

did a course at the UCB to study improvisation. Thompson said that improv changed his life:

“I learned to not worry about the outcome, to just trust the process.” He left the V.C. industry and became a photographer. “Telling my boss was sort of like coming out of the closet,” Thompson said. “He was, like, ‘You just invested five million dollars in Citi Bike! What are you doing?’ And I was, like, ‘I’m “yes, and” -ing my beliefs!’” (Allen 2016)

Similarly, an article in *Forbes* magazine detailed four reasons to do an improv class which included high energy person-to-person interaction, to focus and heighten awareness, to listen and respond patiently, and permission to “fail” (Ashgar 2015). Goddard’s 2015 book, *Improv-Ing Agile Teams: Using Constraints to Unlock Creativity*, explains how the principles of improv can help corporate teams improve their agility with the use of 50 games adapted from improv. In Britain as well, there are various organisations that promote improv classes such as Hoopla! and The Free Association, and both also provide corporate services, working with clients including Facebook, YouTube, Network Rail, NBA and Amazon (Hoopla 2018; The Free Association 2018). The City Academy website claims: “[I]mprovisation helps you develop listening skills, allows you to be more impulsive and free, as well as think on your feet” (City Academy 2018). Improv is also marketed as an aide to anxiety much like yoga and mindfulness. Brainne Edge of ComedySportz’s UK franchise suggests that around 75 percent of the attendees of their classes are attracted by the claim that improv can help deal with social anxiety (Healy 2017).

The commodification of improv and its development into a full-blown industry has brought with it the transformation of the scene from a radically subversive attempt to generate spaces of freedom into one that will sell you that freedom for a weekly cost. Perhaps improv has become more like psychoanalysis as it has developed. Fink (1995: 137) has argued that while psychoanalysis has seen “individuals and schools compete for theoretical and /or clinical dominance, vying for political influence, university support, hospital positions, patients, and simple popularity”, this was not some original sin inherent to psychoanalysis as practice. Similarly, there is nothing in improv that compelled it to industrialise; rather, it is its existence within a capitalist system that operates according to the inexorable logic of commodification, the looming weight of capital as the Real around which the market

translates the sensuous freedoms and constraints of improv into values to be bought and sold, competing for attention in the economy. If the story was to end there then it would be appropriate to suggest that ImprovOlympics proves that there is a space for something different to develop and flourish, to allow that taste of freedom that the Harold engenders in player and audience alike. However, in 2020, the theatre closed down. Two years after the LA branch of the theatre closed, Coronavirus and the collapse in revenues and attendance it brought with it led to the original Chicago theatre being closed down. A year later, it was announced that the theatre and brand had been bought up by two Chicago real estate agents; around the same time, Second City was acquired by a private equity firm (Jacobs 2021). This was an encounter with the Real that the company could not survive, a form of *tuché*, which emerged beyond the realm of the symbolic but nevertheless made itself felt very much within it. In this sense, Coronavirus on the one hand and capital on the other presented an unsurpassable barrier to ImprovOlympics, and, when it was broken upon them, capital swallowed up its remnants whole, as can and must do.

Capital is also experienced as an extimate force within improv in the realm of racialised and gendered oppression. As scholars working in the field of social reproduction theory have argued, women's oppression in capitalist society stems not only from earlier oppression in pre-capitalist society but is constantly reproduced by the functions of a system which relies upon women in the propertied classes to maintain line of inheritance of private property, and in the working and subaltern classes to reproduce labour power, both as caregivers and mothers (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2017). Moreover, as Marxist economists such as Botwinick (2018) and Post (2020) have argued, capital reproduces racial difference as a central aspect of accumulation and competition. Just as competition in the workplace can engender rivalry, so it can erode the imaginary identifications between players in the improv group. While improv has potential for an inclusive and liberating performance tradition, it has long been dominated by middle-class white men. Seham (2001) juxtaposes the ideals of the improv community, such as community, spontaneity and liberation, with the actual practices of improv and how these practices shape race, gender and power. She acknowledges that improv players must negotiate difficult problems on stage, unlike actors who work off a script; they need to problem solve difficult scenarios that come up, such as scenes in which there exist manifestations of sexism or racism. While the experienced improv group can perform the scene in such a way as to avoid making offence to women or minorities – in a more sophisticated

way than the brown bag foul of ComedySportz, perhaps – an unskilled performer may find it difficult to resolve such issues. Improv groups tend to be close knit, and often performances are followed by time in the bar, which Seham suggests can alienate some women and minority groups from being part of the cultural backstage.

The structure of improv often relies on the other performers understanding exactly what their group is thinking or feeling. Sometimes, difficulties can arise when a performer cannot understand cultural references made by another performer. Monica Gaga, a black queer performer explained that when starting a scene with a mostly white team, when she brings up race or topics that are culturally specific, “the dynamic changes quickly. It feels heavy in the air – this room’s not ready for me to bring all of myself.” Similarly, Athena Kugblena explains that “They don’t know what Supermalt is, they don’t know what ashy skin means, or about the plastic on the sofas – it’s just not their life” (quoted in Khadar 2020). Another Black improviser, Francis Callier, speaks of having to “whitewash [their] humor” to feel part of the group, leading her to

just play generalities. And very rarely is it a specific woman, an African American single mother in the projects; very rarely is it an African American lawyer dealing with employment problems at her firm; very rarely does it become anything specific. (quoted in Seham 2001: 189)

Instead of being an inclusive and liberating group, these difficulties can lead to the groups reproducing the exclusionary tendencies make participation by minority groups more difficult. Gaga gives the example of how, too often, she has witnessed white players free associate from “Nigerian” to “online scammers”, illustrating the way that sometimes the unconscious choice made in the moment of improvisation can lead to lazy and crass stereotyping. Therefore, for some, the group work can be an alienating experience. This can also be seen in terms of the audience; Gaga again suggests that sometimes she puts on an accent to play a character and the crowd is laughing before she even says anything funny: “It’s literally just the accent that my mum’s got” (quoted in Khadar 2000). For Seham (2001), the imperative to follow the law of agreement within the group means that often any form of difference is suspended by the group’s majority; the play doesn’t venture outside the narrowest of parameters as defined by the usually middle-class white male majority. This is a significant insight, since it problematises the often-romanticised notion of group unity

– which is, after all, an imaginary, illusory unity – and how it relates to individual and social subjectivities.

Prior to the closure of the ImprovOlympics theatre in Chicago, a petition circulated accusing Charna Halpern of racism, with over 2,000 people signing a pledge not to perform at the theatre until Halpern took a series of steps to address the problem (Jones 2020b). A similar row emerged at the Second City, and both campaigns emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Black Lives Matter rebellion that erupted in May 2020. When the Second City Twitter account tweeted in support of Black Lives Matter, comedian Dewayne Perkins detailed a long list of racist actions perpetrated by the theatre company (Jones 2020a). Second City's co-owner, Andrew Alexander, resigned stating "The Second City cannot begin to call itself anti-racist... That is one of the great failures of my life" (quoted in Jones 2020a). Halpern, meanwhile, apologised and promised to work towards meeting all the demands put by the petitioners.

In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter rebellion, it seemed that the coordinates of the possible had shifted, that the rebellion could perhaps even suggest an Event in the true sense of Badiou's meaning – that is not to say that corporate responses and pledges to do better were evidence of a truly changed situation in which they themselves would act, but rather that there were millions of people who would keep fidelity with the event and enforce such changes. While the outcomes of the rebellion in the improv industry remain to be seen, the potential for minority groups to have not only a louder voice but a voice that is heard and understood seemed more alive than it had before. While David Shepherd had long hoped that improv could become a force for radicalisation, when it did come about it happened in a rather different way to what he imagined. While he had hoped that radicalisation would emerge from the improv space and into society, here the rebellion fed back not into the improv space itself but disturbed the coordinates of the symbolic order on which improv rested. It demonstrated that it is possible to conceive of challenges to the status quo emerging unpredictably, spreading rapidly, and even having an impact upon the highly commodified industry that improv has become. However, we have also seen a backlash against Black Lives Matter, some of which have drawn upon improvisational techniques. Indeed, in the years following the financial crisis of 2008, a wide range of improvised responses to a destabilised political and economic system have been attempted across the political spectrum. In what follows, I will examine

how methods of improv and comedy have contributed to the development of the contemporary “culture wars” and conclude by considering how they might be overcome.

5.6 Can’t say anything?

In order to explore the peculiar temporality of these developments, I want to begin with a series of improvised outbursts by stand-up comedians that went on to have significant impacts in popular culture. This will necessarily touch upon a central question – freedom of speech. Improv both generates a feeling of freedom among its participants and sells an idea of freedom to those who might become participants. The quest for freedom in improvisational comedy and more broadly seems to be symptomatic of a society that lionises the discourse of freedom while not taking seriously the constraints that such an abstract notion of freedom can come into conflict with. Language and speech are central to the ways in which comedians create comedy and seek to generate laughter. Yet as we have seen, speech can be deemed offensive. As the previous section demonstrated, often a key difficulty with freedom of expression is being heard and understood from the position of a racialised other. Yet, frequently, questions of free speech often today circle around questions of “cancel culture”. Some comedians have spoken out about defending the freedom of speech due to feeling that they are not being able to say what they want, because what they say might be deemed offensive. Comedians Michael Richards and Daniel Tosh are two of the most notable figures to have faced consequences after improvising on stage, only to generate offensive material. In 2006, *Seinfeld* star Michael Richards performed a stand-up show at the Laugh Factory in which he hurled racist abuse at his audience members. One of those who was involved recounted the incident on CNN:

As we walked in, we sat down and started ordering drinks. And, as we ordered drinks, I guess we're being a little loud, because there was 20 of us ordering drinks. And he said, look at the stupid Mexicans and blacks being loud up there.

That's the first thing he said. And then he kept on with his bit.

And, then, after a while, I told him, my friend doesn't think you're funny.

And then when I told him that, that's when he flipped me off and said, F-you N-word. And that's how it all started. (CNN 2006)

Despite Richards fulsome apologies on television, the incident largely ended his comedy career – he retired from stand-up and has made only a few television appearances since the incident. In yet another Laugh Factory incident in 2012, comedian Daniel Tosh was setting up a premise to show that rape jokes can be funny when one woman from the audience shouted out: “Rape jokes are never funny!” Tosh improvised a quick response: “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by, like five guys right now?” (Martin 2012). After much criticism, Tosh was forced to issue an apology for the joke.

A few years later, veteran comedian and multi-millionaire Jerry Seinfeld came out to speak against the political correctness culture and in defence of freedom of speech. In 2015, on the *Late Night with Seth Meyers* show, Seinfeld went on to speak about freedom of speech and how everything is considered offensive in these times:

They just want to use these words... ‘That’s racist. That’s sexist. That’s prejudiced.’ They don’t even know what they’re talking about... I don’t play colleges, but I hear a lot people tell me: ‘Don’t go near colleges.’ They’re so PC. (quoted in West 2015)

It appears that the freedom to say what you want is crucial, and this is especially important for the comedy industry. The debate around this issue is of particular significance to improvisational comedy, since, as I have established, improv has a strong relationship with freedom. The comedian Sofie Hagen offered this perspective some years after Seinfeld’s intervention: “When comedians say: ‘Oh you can’t say ANYTHING these days!’, what they are actually saying is, ‘I don’t know how to be funny without stomping on people.’ Which is fair enough: not everyone has those skills... But a lot of comedians do and they’re doing well based on that” (quoted in Jeffries 2019). Hagen’s point that one needs to use better and more creative ways to make comedy without harming people is a classic counterargument in the debate on free speech and comedy. Distinctions between punching up and punching down are also part of this debate. When punching up, comedians make fun of those in the higher echelons of the power structures, of privileged people, whereas when punching down they poke fun at marginalised or oppressed groups of people. Comedian Josie Long, who uses political comedy to attack the Conservative government in Britain, says: “I want to make sure I’m punching up, not punching down. Politics can leave you beleaguered, plagued, miserable. It’s that maxim where they say: ‘Satire is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted’” (quoted in O’Hara 2016). Long brings

forward an important point about who should be the butt of the joke. Comedy as an industry has no rules on who is allowed to speak and has no process for holding people accountable. Certain comedians, particularly the ones at the top of their game, are happy to reap the rewards and complain about their free speech being impinged upon, while comedians who are women, people of colour or people with impairments are the ones often denied access to performing, whether based on social, cultural or physical barriers. Therefore, it is not simply a question of what kind of speech is too much, or who is allowed speak, but rather of understanding that in the abstraction “free speech” can often mask unequal access to power and platforms from which to be heard.

Comedic moments can re-enact power dynamics and comedians need to bear in mind how these dynamics play out in their performances. In an interview on the new realities of comedy, Aparna Nancherla asks: “Does the freedom of all speech mean one never needs to reflect on or even stop to reconsider anything one says?” (quoted in Peterson 2015). Here, Nancherla flips the discourse from focusing on freedom of speech to accountability for it. Speech is always available but needs to pass through our critical faculties in order to relate to the social and cultural sphere; and, indeed, even then the ambiguities of language and valences in meaning arising from the signifying chain leave speech open to multiple interpretations. Improvisation is not a completely free space where anything is possible. In the improvising space, freedom is limited by the boundaries of the performance space and the rules that are applied to performance – this freedom within constraints is often productive and generative of laughter. Yet outside such constraints, with the collective and mutually enabling and disciplining aspect of improvisation absent, improvised moments are far more likely to be determined by the individual, their current mood and disposition. At its worst, the “groupmind” of improv can be an experience which alienates those who fall outside the group’s social or cultural “majority”, but the group can also foster a collectivity within which taboo topics are negotiated in a way that can challenge while protecting both players and audience from crass and unnecessary offence. In the next section, I will discuss a somewhat different form of improvisation, that of Donald Trump. While some found his run for office and subsequent term in power funny, others found it frightening, while others still saw it as an opportunity; the same form of speech considered in very different ways from very different positionalities within the symbolic order.

5.7 Improvisation on the right

Debates surrounding freedom of speech have spread to all aspects of media and the arts, articulated by both the right and liberals.³ The debate on the threat to freedom of speech in contemporary cultural life is frequently raised by the far right – so called “alt-right” figures such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Martin Sellner, white nationalist groups such as Generation Identity, as well as neo-Nazi groups, who seek to claim freedom of expression and other Enlightenment values as foundational and specific to “western civilisation” (Hanlon 2019). The alt-right have frequently used comedy memes on fringe social networks such as 4Chan and Reddit to incite hate and influence their followers on major political issues (De Cristofaro 2019). They have also used the debate around free speech to galvanise and mobilise their followers. For instance, the far-right group Generation Identity organised a free speech event in London in 2018 (Hope Not Hate 2018). In the writing guide for The neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer* website’s writing guide states that “the unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not”. The guide lists various acceptable racist and sexist slurs with the following advice for how to deliver it to their followers: “When using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking – like a racist joke that everyone laughs at” (quoted in Feinberg 2017). Alt-right comedians have found platforms such as The Gavin McInnes Show and the Legion of Skanks which have been used to develop wider audiences for live, right-wing comedy (Simons 2021).

From the ballot-box to comedy clubs, the rise of the alt-right indicates an upsurge of reactionary forces against those that belong to minority groups both in electoral politics and in spaces of entertainment. Freedom of speech is exercised over and against oppressed groups, but this speech must come across as a joke for it to function without consequences. Freedom must be constrained by the formula of the joke so the hearer will find what these groups say palatable and not take them too seriously. “Half-joking” is also a way for the group to avoid the consequences of what they are saying. This is the obverse of a relief theory of laughter – there is no relief, but only greater tension from the half-joke which is enough to engender an intense incongruity while masking their full ideology from the uninitiated, while far-right acolytes are fully aware of what is intended. Recall Dolar’s observation that “Laughter is a condition of ideology. It provides us with the distance, the very space in which

³ For example, David Shariatmadari in the *Guardian* argues that the crisis of free-speech is a myth, while Matthew d’Ancona in the same paper argues that free speech is an issue (Shariatmadari 2019; d’Ancona 2019).

ideology can take its full swing” (1986: 307). In the half joke, there is not enough space – unless you know what you are looking for. The half-joke brings forward their ideology precisely at the point where it can be collapsed into a joke. As Griffiths once put it, “A joke that feeds on ignorance starves its audience.” (1976: 23). The ironic distance of the far-right allows them to feed their audience half a joke and an ideology, so that those who have a taste for it keep coming back for more.

This kind of half-joking ideology has bled into the mainstream of US political life. Prior to his presidential run, Donald Trump was famed as a businessman and *bon vivant* and was known for his co-authored book *The Art of the Deal* (Trump and Schwartz 1987), which established a mystique around Trump as a dealmaker. His co-writer, Tony Schwartz, would later disown the book and claim that Trump had no role in its writing (Mayer 2016), and multiple newspaper articles would claim that his ability to make a deal was exaggerated (Baker 2018; Gearan and Lynch 2019; Rozsa 2020). His dealmaking mystique, then, was part of the theatricality of his presidential run – the “dealmaker in chief” as he described himself (Bonin 2017). Theatricality was certainly a key aspect of Trump’s presidential campaign in 2016. Yet, as Peetz has argued, such theatricality is central to all US presidencies:

The publicly performed presidential persona is a theatrical creation designed to appeal to a specifically imagined, cohesive national community, and both these theatrical constructions are far from ‘merely’ imaginary; they are social constructs that legitimate American democracy and thus seek to define people’s shared political reality to a significant extent. (2021: 248)

While these cohesive communities were, in fact, always non-cohesive, and would discursively exclude large sections of the population, the theatricality and appeals to US unity would attempt to paper over this. Yet what set Trump apart most strikingly was the nature of his theatricality – it was a very much *improvised* one. Indeed, numerous commentators have remarked that Trump’s campaign and subsequent presidency had an air of improvisational comedy about them (Podhoretz 2016; Graham 2017; Fertel 2020). An article from *USA Today* from the middle of his term of office draws a parallel between his White House and “a Night at the Improv”, suggesting that Trump uses his unpreparedness, and brings in elements of surprise and chaos to his “improv act” (Jackson 2018).

As early as 1990, Trump would say in an interview that his masterplan of dealmaking was “*much more* improvisational than people might think” (Plaskin 1990). Indeed, some have suggested that his entire campaign began as a stunt that was subsequently improvised into a genuine presidential run. Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018) recounts the story of how Trump, then the presenter of NBC television show *The Apprentice* discovered that pop singer Gwen Stefani was earning more for her coaching work on musical show *The Voice* than he was. On 16 June 2015, Trump announced his presidential campaign at Trump Towers, contracting a casting company to send extras to build his rally and paying each of them \$50 an hour to pretend to be his supporters. Moore described Trump’s speech as a way of showing NBC “how good he was at improv with his fake presidential announcement” (Moore 2018 00:10:50). Trump’s speech at that announcement was free-flowing, derogatory and came across improvised or spontaneous.

By 2016, characteristics of improvisational comedy could be seen in his rallies, where his audience was often treated to a series of gags and observations that felt like improvised and spontaneous babbling. Lawrence Rosenthal of the University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Right Wing Studies wrote in a blog during the 2016 election campaign:

As a politician, Trump’s improvisation has translated into his unique speaking style. Trump free-associates. When he is unbound by the likes of teleprompters (and even then in irresistible asides), Trump moves from topic A to topic B improvisationally. He often seems to have a list in front of him – topics he wants to talk about. Or better, he wants to riff about. And, via what looks like free association, one riff can lead to another. And another. And another. (Rosenthal 2016)

While in the improv space, players riff off each other, Trump’s approach was akin to a stream of consciousness. Yet, like the skilled improvisors, he would be able to take note of what hit, what missed – he was playing not just for laughs, or for adulation, but to identify what it was that he said that made an impact. This improvised approach to what hits and what sticks is evidenced by his opportunistic approach to pinpointing a racialised other to make the target of his criticisms. As Rosenthal (2018) has written elsewhere, his attacks focused first on Mexicans as criminals then on Muslims as terrorists. Both of which could be treated as enemies

within who can and should be kept out – with walls, and travel bans – while a focus on China as an external threat and enemy was a constant throughout his presidency. However, while the focus on China could be explained as logical extension of US policy – indeed, his policy towards China was largely duplicated under his successor, President Biden (Leary and Davis 2021; Karabell 2021), the focus on excluding Mexicans and the indiscriminate travel bans imposed on Muslim countries were of no instrumental use to US policy – they should be understood primarily as opportunistic efforts at naming and crystalising a racialised other, building on histories of racism that preceded him, in the interests of galvanising a constituency within the US (Saul 2017; Pulido, Bruno and Faiver Serna 2019). Trump's success in doing so was perhaps matched only by his success in galvanising its mirror opposite, a constituency who opposed him absolutely – yet with an intensity beyond politics. In a sense, Trump became a master signifier par excellence in his five years on the public stage, instilling in supporters and enemies alike an excessive enjoyment of either supporting or opposing him. As Zeiher suggests, commenting on his “failed” attempts at speech, described as “ridiculous and illogical word salad”: “[t]he jouissance of speech (the ‘blah blah’ as Lacan calls it) has in Trump acquired a new horizon, that of being totally divorced even from any intention of meaningful speech.” Yet meaning was always arrived at by the hearer, a meaning that would often be interpreted quite differently by supporters and opposition – it's stupid, it's brilliant, it's just a joke. Saul (2017) argues that many of his pronouncements, despite their freewheeling nature, have a rather clear intentionality. This comment on Mexicans for example:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems... They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (quoted in Saul 2017: 104).

Saul describes such pronouncements as a “synchronic figleaf”, a racist statement that simultaneously covers up its racism, in this case by differentiating the “good” Mexican from “bad”, while making clear that the problem is the bad ones – all of whom seem to be in the US. This allows Trump's supporters to take the position that they are not against Mexicans, just the bad ones. However, Trump is perhaps better known rather more diachronic corrections. His White House press secretaries would often have to clarify his statements after being made due to their ambiguity. In

2017, they had to clarify his remark that North Korea would be met with “fire and fury” should they pursue nuclear weapons was official policy, despite it having been improvised while Trump pretended to read notes from a briefing paper on the opioid crisis (Thrush and Baker 2017). In 2020, when Trump suggested using bleach to treat Covid, to slow down testing so less cases would be reported and to vote twice in an election, every time the White House press secretary would have to clarify – it’s just a joke (Baker 2020). Yet often, they were not “just a joke”. Perhaps they were half a joke, but this half a joke was allowing the drip-feed of not only ideology but political decisions which caused havoc for many people. Trump joked about Mexicans while simultaneously creating a hostile environment for Mexicans – its only funny for some.

Trump was, for his time in office, able to achieve a perverse sense of improvised freedom that fundamentally shifted the parameters of what was thought possible. He improvised freely both in form and content, much to the detriment of others who became the butt of his jokes. For Trump, the secret to finding freedom in improvisation was simple; to become the most powerful man in the world. From this position, however, Trump was able to take advantage of his “only joking” pronouncements to push the coordinates of what seemed possible in the eyes of both his opponents and supporters. Then and now we witness a peculiar situation in which the right decry the intolerance of the left, who say there is no possibility of free speech while pushing their agenda further into the mainstream, while politicians who seem to be able to transgress social expectations and demands to wield their power to say anything.⁴ It is almost as if the discourse around free and unbounded speech on the right serves the demands of two punitive masters, one that requires complete and impossible speech and the other who is anxious about an external force that would tightly restrict their speech and both masters within this discourse clash without a regulating body. Into the gap has stepped capital, in this case, the tech giants who monopolise and freedoms of speech we might enjoy. In the aftermath of Trumps election defeat and his incitement of a riot at the Capitol building, Twitter and Facebook stepped in to remove his platform. Trump was defanged, with some celebrating and others warning of the risks of the power of big tech (Noor 2021). What is fascinating is that, once again,

⁴ Trump is not alone in the merging of comedy and politics. Ukraine elected Volodymyr Zelensky, a professional comedian and television star, as president in 2019. Comedian Jimmy Morales was elected as the president of Guatemala in 2016, and Jón Gnarr as the mayor of Reykjavik in 2010 (Economist 2019). In Britain there is the practiced buffoonery of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the ex-MEP Nigel Farage, both of whom give the impression that they say whatever comes to their mind. All of these politicians tend to use the same tactics of comedy, such as subverting the status quo, playing with language, the freedom to say anything, and generating laughter from the public to aid their political careers. However, these politicians are responsible for generating policies that can devastate people’s lives and livelihoods.

capital in some form or another has imposed itself as a limit on freedom – this time on the improviser *par excellence*, who is himself a capitalist, who was the President of the US!

5.8 Speech: free or fearless

In the wake of the 1968 uprising, Lacan commented that “We live in an area of civilization where, as they say, there is free speech, namely, that nothing of what you say is of any consequence” (quoted in Rabate 2009: 33). Yet today the question of freedom of speech has been elevated to the highest level of political contestation. We find ourselves in a situation in which some of the most powerful people in the world look upon the marginalised and the young as a threat to their freedom of speech, and yet in which the arbiters of free speech are themselves different immensely powerful units of capital. How can we make sense of this paradoxical situation? One suggestion made by Bejan (2017) is that what is at stake and in dispute are, in fact, two rival notions of freedom of speech: *isegoria*, or equal right to participate in public speech and debate, and *parrhesia*, that is licence to say whatever one pleases and to whoever one would like to. In this context, those who complain of being silenced are demanding their right to practice *parrhesia*, to speak as they so wish, while those who draw attention to the fact that the most marginalised people in society have no platform from which they can be heard, and are indeed drowned out by those who do, are advocating for *isegoria*. While these terms have their origins in the ancient Greek republic, they are today more closely associated with Foucault, who delivered a series of lectures on *parrhesia*. As Foucault (2001: 169) explained of his work: “My intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity... or as a role.” What is clear here is that Foucault’s engagement with the concept was not based on free speech as it is commonly understood today. According to Foucault, the one who practices *parrhesia* is direct, frank and speaks the truth even if it is dangerous and risky to themselves – it is *fearless* speech. For instance, in a political argument the speaker practising *parrhesia* could lose their popularity because their opinions are different to the opinions of the majority in the room. Foucault insists that there is always a risk when it comes to practising *parrhesia*, so those in power, a king or a tyrant, cannot use *parrhesia*, precisely because they risk nothing. In the case of Donald Trump, speaking his truth (in this case the false claim of a stolen election) did indeed carry a risk – the risk that his platform would be taken away from him. This is certainly something to lose,

though it can hardly be compared to the risk that someone in a less privileged position might take in speaking truth to power.

However, the claim that *parrhesia* can be linked to a right to free speech rests on an anachronism since the world of *parrhesia* was not one of universal rights and freedoms. As Saxonhouse (2005: 88) has argued, two crucial aspects of *parrhesia* were 1) its fearlessness lay in the fact that those practising it were at risk of legal action for speaking out against the established laws and systems of government, and 2) speaking out meant revealing one's truth and left the speaker open to the judgement of others based on your views. Thus, while Foucault's adaptation of the term to relate to "fearless speech" in which the speaker takes a risk in order to express a truth captures the useful kernel of its original meaning, Bejan's interpretation of it as merely the "license to say what one pleased, how and when one pleased, and to whom" is clearly inadequate. Indeed, those accused of stifling *parrhesia* are often putting themselves at risk – of expulsion from their place of learning, of public attack by opponents with a greater platform and profile.

In fact, I argue that there are two distinct but sometimes overlapping trends at work in constructing a discourse that suggest free speech is under threat from the politically correct, giving rise to a cancel culture. On the one hand, there is a more-or-less cynical attempt by right-wing political actors and their outriders in the media to suggest that anything from calls for no-platforming the far right to demands for more space in the media for the marginalised represents an existential threat to free expression. This trend is conducted around a political logic that see political and demographic shifts, particularly but not exclusively among younger people and people of colour, as a long-term threat to the political right. Polling in Britain and the US point to such shifts, in which positive attitudes about "socialism" and negative attitudes to "capitalism" are growing (Wronski 2021; Jones 2021). On the other hand, the second trend is related to a layer of people within society, often, but again, not exclusively, older people, who feel as though their *mode of enjoyment* is under threat; that demands for more inclusion and, for example, racially sensitive language, are part of a challenge to forms of entertainment and conversation that they have been accustomed to and enjoyed. Indeed, it could be said that this sense has, for some, taken the form of a truly libidinal investment – a *jouissance* of the other in which, for example, younger people and marginalised people seem to assume the role of "the 'other' [who] wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our 'way of life') and/or he has

access to some secret, perverse enjoyment” (Žižek 1992: 165). It is this aspect that right-wing political actors seek to appeal to and mobilise in order to build a political constituency that crosses boundaries of class. The crossover of these two strands comprises one side of what has, in recent years, come to be described as the “culture wars”.

Yet there remains a problem, since in the culture war, the “left” broadly speaking, as well as marginalised people, are interpellated as “globalists” who can be mentioned in the same breath as the CEOs of Facebook or Google. Often, the master signifier in such an arrangement is “George Soros”, who via conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic sleight of hand becomes the bridge between the left and the marginalised on the one hand and “globalist” corporations and billionaires on the other. One key challenge of the culture wars is precisely the fact that in the neoliberal age, a radical left demanding a substantive form of social, economic and political freedom was eclipsed by a liberal left with a very different view of what freedom might entail. As Žižek (2008: 660) asks: “Why are today so many problems perceived as problems of intolerance, not as problems of inequality, exploitation, injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, not emancipation, political struggle, even armed struggle?” For Žižek, the answer is the very ideology of liberal multiculturalism, the “culturalization of politics”, in which political and economic differences that may be conditioned by inequality and exploitation are “naturalized/neutralized” into different “ways of life” which are essentialised and thus cannot be changed, only tolerated. A politics of tolerance has a double edge – on the one hand, a notion of “respect” for different ways of life, of affirming the dignities of people of colour and immigrants, for example. On the other hand, this politics was inextricably linked to tolerance of extreme economic inequality. The challenge for those who seek to establish a true freedom – to make the impossible choice, a freedom beyond capital – is in part to establish new paradigms beyond the deathly embrace of right-wing populism and neoliberalism that embrace a true universality.

The achievement of such political praxis will, of course, depend very much on language – and, I would suggest, comedy. Zupančič argues that there is a distinction to be made between true and false comedy. The content – the butt of the joke – is less important than the form of the comic. In a false comedy, she suggests, the abstract universal and the concrete do not change position and produce a short circuit; instead,

[t]he paradigm of these comedies is simply the following: the

aristocrat (or king, or judge, or priest, or any other character of symbolic stature) is *also* a man (who snores, farts, slips, and is subject to the same physical laws as other mortals). (2008: 30)

From this perspective, much of the proliferation of jokes and comedy which made Donald Trump the object of laughter was false, conservative comedy. Even as it ridiculed Trump, it did so without questioning the very foolishness of “presidentialness” itself – indeed, much of it was premised on his unsuitability for such high office. By contrast, a true, subversive comedy would be one in which the true comic object is this “presidentialness”. Zupančič gives the example of laughing at a baron who falls on the banana peel – in a truly subversive laughter, the object of our laughter would not just be the fact that even a baron can fall over, but his “barronness” itself (2008: 32). There is, I suspect, a rather particular play on words being made here – barrenness, yielding nothing of value. Yet it is not the particular attributes of the baron that yield nothing but his role, his position, the very structure that would support the notion of there being a baron. Anything less than this may seem acerbic and wry, yet what will it achieve? As satirist Chris Morris pointed out in an interview on Channel 4 News:

I think we’ve got used to a kind of satire which essentially placates the court. You do a nice dissection of the way things are in the orthodox elite, and lo and behold, you get slapped on the back by the orthodox elite who say ‘jolly good, can you do us another one?’ (transcribed from Channel 4 News 2019)

A truly radical politics, like radical comedy, would need precisely to call into question the very constitution of the symbolic order, not merely to mock or deride this or that aspect of it. Moreover, the trauma of capital should be seen for what it is – the silliest, most barren singularity our social order could be structured around. The process of developing such a politics will, of course, depend on a great deal of improvisation – of seeing what works and what doesn’t. Yet the lesson of improv for such practice emerges not from the content of this or that performance but from the structure of the performance as I have discussed it thus far. I have been careful to avoid suggesting that the “event-like” structure of improv *is really an event*. The sandbox of the impossible is, nevertheless, an impossible sandbox. Castles created in the sky cannot be fortified in battle. What improv helps us to understand though, is

the potential for making the unconscious, the impossible choice. In the previous chapter, I spoke of laughter as fidelity to the “event-like” moment of improv. In the likes of Badiou and Žižek, one sees two of the last hold outs in paying some form of fidelity to the event of the Russian Revolution – Žižek in his many reinventions of Lenin (see, for example, Budgen, Kouvelakis and Žižek 2007), and Badiou, as he wrote the revolution’s centenary in 2017:

The communist revolution of October 1917 remains that from which we know that, at the temporal scale of the becoming of humanity, and in spite of its temporary appearances, imperious capitalism is already and forever a thing of the past.

It is perhaps unsurprising to look back at Trotsky’s writing on the revolution and find multiple references to improvisation:

On the decisions made and the orders given in those days depended the fate of the nation for an entire historical era. And yet those decisions were made with very little discussion. I can hardly say that they were even properly weighed and considered; they were almost improvised on the moment. But they were none the worse for that. The pressure of events was so terrific, and the work to be done so clear before us, that the most important decisions came naturally, as a matter of course, and were received in the same spirit. (1975: 348)

The vision of revolutionaries using “Yes! And...” to attempt to create a new reality is certainly an incongruous one. Yet, while the fate of the revolution is no laughing matter, the fidelity of the likes of Žižek and Badiou to the event is a poignant one. As Žižek has argued while discussing the power of Badiou’s notion of the Event:

The fundamental lesson of postmodernist politics is that *there is no Event*, that 'nothing really happens', that the Truth-Event is a passing, illusory short circuit, a false identification to be dispelled sooner or later by the reassertion of difference or, at best, the fleeting promise of the Redemption-to-come, towards which we have to maintain a proper distance in order to avoid catastrophic 'totalitarian' consequences; against this structural

scepticism, Badiou is fully justified in insisting that - to use the term with its full theological weight - *miracles do happen*. . . (2000: 135)

5.9 Conclusion

In the final scene of *Don't Think Twice* (2016), a member of the group hears that they have inherited a new performance space. The scattered members of the group reunite at the funeral of a player's father and plan to turn the space into a new improv venue. After Jack, the star of *Weekend Live*, rushes off to catch the last train to New York to film that week's show, the rest of the group stay behind and start to improvise together. They laugh, they hug – all of them seem to be happy with their new positions in life and ready to make a new start with the theatre. The Commune are once again a commune. After the film so starkly showed the challenges faced by improvisors – the struggle to make a living, the inequality, the tyranny of property developers – this feels like a let-down. Indeed, it is tempting to read the scene as a fantasy – a screen draped over the Real of capital upon which a happy ending can play out. This final scene does not help the group transcend the social realities they are faced with. Rather, it skips to a nostalgic view of the group, in which they can just go back to how things were. It ultimately fails to follow the earlier logic of the film, in which bitter-sweet experiences are drawn in as fodder for improvisational comedy. Instead, they simply find their unity once again in the fortuitously acquired improvising space. In contrast to this fairy tale ending, I have argued that the challenges facing freedom in improvised comedy emanate from outside the improvising space, and must be confronted there. In doing so, I have made two main arguments.

First, I have argued that capital functions as a hard limit on what might be considered possible with regards to exercising freedom in improv. Following Žižek, I have argued that it is a Real whose spectral logic determines the social. I have pointed to several ways in which capital has made itself felt in the improvising space throughout the history of improv, such as in subverting and frustrating the intentions of its creators, commodifying ever larger areas of the scene and transforming it into an industry that spans the globe and sells “freedom” as a self-help mechanism or a way of making corporate teams work more efficiently. What is at issue here is the question of what potential is there for a freedom that might exist beyond the improv stage? This is a question posed ever more starkly as strands of improv that practice

more expansive forms such as the Harold find themselves facing bankruptcy and acquisition by private equity firms. If freedom is something that can only be simulated in the theatre, what happens when the theatres are converted into a more profitable enterprise, or just shut down altogether? Second, I have argued that the potential for a more liberated form of improv cannot be detached from a political project that seeks to achieve a lasting freedom. The challenge posed by the improvised alliance between the politics of the far right and a jouissance of the other is one that demands a response founded upon the exposing the barrenness of both and elevating the impossible choice of the improv stage to a politics of the Real.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Findings of the research

Overarching research question: Why does improvisational comedy make people feel free?

As I established in the introduction, while it is common to talk of a sense of freedom emerging in improv, there appeared to be no research into precisely *why* that should be the case. Indeed, one of the key findings of my literature review as it pertained to improv was just how little has been written on improv outside of either broadly historical accounts, “how to” guides, or attempts to transpose the lessons of improv into other sectors; of industry, education, and therapy, for example. Therefore, I opted to investigate improv from a somewhat different angle to the dominant historical/biographical perspective, and instead examined the *structures* of improv in order to gain a clearer grasp on how it operated and what precisely about it made people feel free. I identified three key areas of the structure of improv that I wanted to investigate. First, the structure of play – of the interaction between players in the group, the way in which games and scenes are built and the way in which meaning is generated within improvisational play. Secondly, the structure of the performance, that is, of the co-creative interaction between players and audience that comprises the improvisational space. In particular, I investigated the way in which laughter is generated and the role it plays in the performance relationship. Finally, I examined the interrelations between the improv space and the outside world, the world of capitalism. These three areas could be presented as a nested hierarchy of three concentric circles.

Missing from this hierarchy is the individual who participates in the group. This omission was made on the basis of my grounding the overall thesis in large part in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Rather than attempt to “psychoanalyse” the individual, I instead investigated the way in which psychoanalysis has treated the question of freedom in Chapter 2. I began by anatomising four different forms of freedom – the four freedoms of improv – that improvisors themselves reported as being key to their own understanding of freedom in improv: a total or primal freedom; a freedom within and emerging from constraints, what Fotis calls “focused freedom” (2014: 5); freedom as learned, as discipline; and freedom of the moment, freedom that is generated in the act of spontaneity. Through my reading of psychoanalytic approaches to freedom, I was able to rule out “primal freedom” as a genuine form of freedom, and rather situated it as a kind of fantasy. However, by the end of Chapter 5 I was able to reconfigure this assessment – while the association of this freedom might have the imaginary characteristics of being primal and total, it nevertheless emerges from specific qualities of the practice of improv. This goes beyond merely emerging as an amalgam of the three other forms of freedom players reported; rather, there is also something particular about the structure of the improv performance which gives rise to it. I will explain my findings by answering my three research sub-questions.

Research question 1: How are freedom and constraints articulated in the structure of improv?

In the context of improvised play, I defined freedom and constraint in reference to the work of Callois (2001), who differentiated between, on the one hand, *paidia*, as unrestrained fantasy and free improvisation, and, on the other, *ludus*, as the rules of the game. The tension between these poles is a creative and productive one. I examined the ways in which freedom in improv is experienced and found that they clearly mapped on to the descriptions of three of the freedoms discussed previously. Constraints were found to be a condition of possibility for improvised play to take place, to narrow and focus the field of play such that players could interact. Players could learn to improvise more freely, with more abandon – such was the genesis of improvisation in Viola Spolin’s and Keith Johnstone’s theatre games, they were intended to teach aspiring actors to relax in their performances. Yet there existed in improvisation particular moments of serendipity, of expression that feels spontaneous and free. However, it is important to be clear in how we define “free” in such moments – while we may speak of being free from inhibitions, or free to speak as one pleases,

or in ways that surprise us, we should not confuse this with freedom from determination *in toto*. Rather, I argue that this sense of freedom is in fact a product of the operation of language. It emerges from feeling able to speak without impositions, to make an unpredictable choice or from speaking beyond oneself, surprising oneself and others through the operation of metaphor in the signifying chain. Thus, the freedom that players might experience is related not only to the existence of rules of the games or the structure of the Harold, but also to the constraints of language.

Through improvisation, the limitations of language become possibilities for further expression, for further extemporisation. The failure of the signifier to fully signify – thus to signify nothing – allows it to potentially signify more than might have been intended when it was originally used. This not only allows for a polyvalent humour arising from, for example, a double entendre, but also for other players to take up the signifier and fix it with a new meaning – however temporarily – retroactively transforming its earlier significance. It provides the player with a seeming omnipotence in language. This retroactivity contributes to an “event-like” structure to improv. I established that improvisors themselves have a conception of an “ego” which they see as a constraint, and consciously – ironically – seek to bypass it, to make an “unconscious choice” that will lead to greater incongruity in performance. While improvisors like everyone are driven to repetition, the structure of improv gives rise to radical diversity in repetition – as Lacan puts it, the true secret to the ludic – and this diversity takes place in what I have termed the “sandbox of the impossible”, where an improvisor can do “impossible” things or make the “impossible” choice without an encounter with the Real. Rather, the interaction of multiple a wide range of improvisors gives rise to something akin to the three-body problem in physics – complexity leading to unpredictability, meaning any traces of determination are harder to discern. As I will discuss regarding question 3, capital forms limit to freedom in improv. However, even this limit can provide a productive tension at times; generating material that explicitly or latently engages with the impact capital has on everyday life or on improv in particular. One limit that can affect performances is death of sorts, death on the stage. While fear over a bad performance can influence a player, the knowledge that such death is only temporary, and that the improvising space has a messianic potential for resurrection, allows for the experienced improvisor to overcome this fear; another productive tension.

Research question 2: What makes people laugh in improv and what role does laughter play in the relationship between the audience and players?

I explored various theories of laughter and established that, in improv, the key to laughter is quite different to other forms of comedy. Making connections to previous material is key, but by linking this to my previous arguments regarding retroactivity, I established that these connections are not merely linkages but reconfigurations of meaning, a peculiarly psychoanalytic insight into the temporary fixing and refixing of meaning through quilting points that creates a relief that you never knew you were expecting. I argued that incongruity is a key aspect of what makes improv funny, in particular in long form improv, and that this incongruity is generated by a connection to as well as a deviation from the “base reality” of a scene or game. I followed Zupančič (2008) in arguing that the existence of two sustained impossibilities is a major source of laughter, and the possibility for discrepancies generated by the operation of “Yes, and...” is key to generating surplus meaning and further comedy. This echoes McGowan’s (2017) argument that the comic emerges from the juxtaposition of lack and excess, in this case the lack of specific meanings, the lack of anything but the bare bones structure of an improv game, the meagre one-word suggestion from the audience giving rise to an excess of meanings and incongruities.

I established that laughter sometimes operates as a constraint in improv, but also sometimes contributes towards a sense of freedom experienced by players and the audience. Laughter, in fact occupies a precarious place in improv, which reflects the precarious position of improvisors who are taking a risk in their performance, which can always go badly. This precarity, shared by player and audience, creates a shared space of possibility, and when performances succeed, it can lead to tremendous relief as well as appreciation. However, I also argue that the laughter of the improvising space cannot be reduced merely to “success”. Even performances that “fail” can, in fact, generate laughter, whether a cruel one or a joyous one – or indeed, an ambiguous one. However, the way in which different factors come together is important. I believe that the key to understanding the supposed “primal freedom” that improvisors report feeling emerges from several sources, not reducible merely to a combination of the other three freedoms discussed in Chapter 2. Rather, the imbrication of the ambiguities of language and the potentialities that accompany them, the event-like structure of improv and its retroactive incorporation of previous

meaning into an always already existing yet new meaning, and the possibilities opened up by playing in the sandbox of the impossible and making impossible choices, generates a powerful sense of freedom. This can then be ratified by laughter – in an analogy to the event, the laughter of the audience bears fidelity to the reality of the performance and the measure of freedom the players have exercised in creating it.

Research question 3: What limits exist to freedom in improv and could it be possible to overcome them?

First, it should be apparent that freedom in as far as it exists in improv should not be conceived of as some unlimited freedom from determinism; rather, the factors discussed create a sense of freedom. However, there is no inherent break with determination implied in improv; while the research raises interesting questions about the potential of improv to lead to analytic insights; “full speech” in the improvising space, for example, though this is beyond the scope of this thesis. This is why the discussion of freedom in Chapter 2 is of continuing relevance; from a Lacanian perspective, freedom is the freedom to choose one’s determination, which is a process relevant to the clinic more than the stage. However, in as far as a measure of freedom is experienced in improv, I argue that capital forms a limit to how far it can go. I discussed a number of ways in which we can understand capital to have impacted upon improv, through its incorporation and commodification of the improv scene; turning it into an industry that churns out freedom to subscribers, ticket buyers, and attendees of corporate away days. However, I also explored the ways it subverts the intentions of people engaged in improv – whether the noble ideas of its creators or the improvisations of the players.

What is at stake in the notion of capital as Real? That it is positivity itself, that the shift of this or that element of the symbolic structure can only rework relationships but cannot overcome the abstract logic of capital. This is the lesson of political projects of reform that sought to bring “socialism” through reform; in most cases, there is no pretence of that any longer. Management of capital and the ways to “try to counteract, to contain its destructive effects” (Žižek 2007: 212) is all that remains in the sphere of formal politics. Attempts by comedians and right-wing political actors to improvise have brought with them negative impacts for the oppressed and marginalised. One of the key obstacles I identified in overcoming the limits that capital imposes on improv

– indeed, on all aspects of our lives barring the overwhelming superegoic imperative to enjoy – is the contemporary constellation of forces, the alliance between right wing politics and a *jouissance* of the other, that comprises one side of the culture war, while the marginalised find themselves interpellated as part of a neoliberal-but-tolerant force that incorporates a phony “progressivism” alongside a firm commitment to the rule of capital. Proponents of a genuine freedom must find ways of extricating themselves from such an interpellation and improvising new modes of organisation and contestation. This revelation, of capital as the limit to the freedom of improv performs precisely the kind of retroactive refixing of meaning that I discussed in relation to improv – “a looping back and activation of what has already occurred” (Parker and Pavón-Cuellar 2014: 338). The “afterwardsness” of the discussion of the history of improv and its relation to capital has, I hope, shown that the precarity that runs through the improvising space and performance has also been a central aspect of improv since its inception. Perhaps there is something we can learn from improv about how to improvise a different future.

This thesis has made a contribution to the literature on improv by theorising why it is that people feel free when they engage in improv. It is, to my knowledge, the first major engagement between improv and psychoanalysis. It should be of relevance both to scholars of improv and comedy seeking to learn more about the freedom that is too often taken for granted in popular accounts, and to those interested in psychoanalysis and its application to cultural forms. By integrating comedy studies and Marxist political economy, the thesis has made an interdisciplinary contribution that will I hope can spark further dialogue. This thesis has had a broad area of analysis (in improv and its history), and I hope that future research into improv can find new focuses – research into particular groups, theatres, projects, for example. Research utilising original interviews and viewings of live improv shows could generate more insights. Moreover, I have utilised a relatively narrow section of psychoanalytic concepts, particularly relating to Lacanian approaches to language and freedom. Future research in the area could doubtless employ other concepts to provide new angles on improv, its limits and the challenge of overcoming them.

6.2 Coda: An Impossible Improvisation

While David Shepherd’s dream of a proletarian improv that confronted authority was repeatedly dashed, it is not an impossible dream. In this coda to the

thesis, I will explore an example of precisely that; a radical left wing theatre group, Joan Littlewood's radical left-wing theatre group called the Theatre Workshop, which operated in East London from 1953 till 1979 (Holdsworth 2006: 13). On September 26, 1968, Britain abandoned theatre censorship. Prior to that, the Theatrical Licensing Act of 1737 demanded that all new scripts be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for approval before it could be staged. The censorship imposed by the Lord Chamberlain favoured scripted text and vetting everything before being performed. This was a significant issue for improvisation and for actors who performed spontaneously. The Act created many obstacles for Littlewood, particularly because her work focused on improvisation and creative collaboration, combining the outlook of Konstantin Stanislavsky, with his focus on naturalism, with the epic and dynamic theatre of Bertolt Brecht and the aesthetics of *commedia dell'arte*. Her work was also linked to avant-garde experimental theatre and with left-wing activism, particularly her partnership with Ewan MacColl, who was a key member of the Workers' Theatre Movement, a part of the Communist Party. Furthermore, Theatre Workshop aimed to return theatre to the people and bring people back into the theatre, with great emphasis on representing working-class life in theatre (Milne and Goodwin 1967: 114). These were considered radical intentions since the theatre scene at the time was saturated with middle-class representations.

Littlewood encouraged her actors to play all the characters and none of the actors knew which part they were playing until they were halfway through the rehearsals (Milne and Goodwin 1967: 116). According to Littlewood, live theatre cannot thrive unless everyone involved works towards creating "fresh material to their creations each day working in association with their audience, making each day's performance a fresh imaginative experience" (Littlewood 1958). During the rehearsals, Littlewood encouraged the actors to transpose classical plays to their corresponding modern situation and to improvise their lines. Once the actors had played around with improvisations, Littlewood is known to have spent a lot of time on the verses and rhythms. The rhythms, for Littlewood, emphasised a loss of meaning, which was sometimes the only meaning that was required; "sometimes an actor is made physically to punch his way through a speech, beating out the metre with his fists like a shadow-boxer" (Milne and Goodwin 1967: 116, 119).

Theatre Workshop rejected the traditional models of theatre and transgressed the imposed laws of the times by implementing improvisations and rawness in their

work. I will explore the public production of Henry Chapman's *You Won't Always be on Top* by Theatre Workshop, performed from 9 October to 2 November 1957 at the Theatre Royal Stratford East because it shows how improvisation can occur in constrained environments. The play is an interesting and comical representation of male communal workspaces with banal workplace conversations and workplace organising.⁵ Littlewood produced the play and transformed the original script through "rehearsals, improvisations and exploring the physical possibilities of play" (Holdsworth 2011: 150). Littlewood stated that "every night we tried to bring the play alive afresh by adding new imaginary circumstances or actions and this is the Stanislavsky methods of acting. Each night the play must grow as a new organism and not be a bare repetition" (Littlewood 1958b). One very subversive and discernible event occurred when actor Richard Harris, who played the character of an Irish labourer called Nick, improvised a scene where he pretended to be Sir Winston Churchill using a public toilet. At one of the rehearsals, Nick who pushed a wheelbarrow around, stopped by a big hole in the centre of the stage. When the character Ganger says, "[F]ill that in", Nick says "sure" (Littlewood 1994: 493). However, at the performance the next day, Harris decides to pour water from a watering can and imitate the act of urination. Littlewood recalls Harris declaring "I name this hole..." and names a London landmark such as Piccadilly Circus or St Paul's Cathedral (1994: 494). While rehearsing for their next play two detectives walked into their auditorium and handed Littlewood a summons for "unlawfully presenting parts of a new stage play not allowed by the Lord Chamberlain".⁶ The theatre manager Gerry Raffles, theatre licensee John Bury, actor Richard Harris and producer Joan Littlewood were served the summons for staging new parts that breached Section 15 of the Theatres Act 1843. Not only did Harris perform an unauthorised scene, he went on to imitate a living public figure, as well as mimic a vulgar and abject bodily act of urination.⁷

⁵ In his Lord Chamberlain report, Heriot wrote the following about this play: "It is difficult to see the point of this play. It is about a gang of workmen on a building site who grumble and squabble and complain and loaf through three acts, there is no plot and no development and has about as much entertainment value as a tape-recording of real workmen on a real job. (Heriot 1957)

⁶ Report dated 11 March 1958, Unbound Material, Joan Littlewood Archives, British Library, London, 1958.

⁷ The original script is as follows:

"NICK: The Union Jack—who do you think? Chaps—it is my pleasure—nay, my honour – nay, my duty to come here today and declare these public – er – public – open and I say, may God Bless –

(raises his hat and picks up a watering-can):

-- may God bless all those who participate and function in them.

(He pours water from the watering-can down ALBERT's hole.)"

(Chapman 1965: 101.)

Playfulness is depicted in various ways. Firstly, it takes place in a building site, a communal space where the actors can play with tools and within the physical dimensions of the stage. Secondly, the actors play around with colloquial language and through inventing ways to articulate what cannot be expressed due to the censorship, through the witty use of thinly disguised expletives like “mouthy mucker” (Holdsworth 2011: 151). They also generated visual jokes, such as one where someone places two planks of wood on top of each other to resemble a cross with the letters ‘RIP’ on it. Both the physical nature of play and the playing with language tested the extent to which it is possible for the law to be violated. The theatre company has come together with a goal of creating theatre in spite of the censorship placed on them. To work around it the group uses props and language to show how much they can push the threshold. The words ‘mouthy mucker’ could mean a talkative (mouthy) and a rough person (mucker), but it could also suggest a play on words. It could suggest a variety of words such as “mouthy fucker”, “mock”, “mother”, “fucker” or “mucker” could be a word in which both “mother” and “fucker” are condensed to form one word. What the group is doing is still working within the rules of the censorship, that it sees itself as a group that will playfully make light of the situation by suggestive words and without saying anything too outrageous. It was only Harris that really steps outside of this line.

Nick’s portrayal of urination is also a suggestive act. The stock characters within a group or an idea pushed by a group usually revolves around what is considered funny in the mainstream, by each other and the audience, and these can be based on stereotypes. For example, in Harris’s portrayal of Churchill, the character Nick was literally “taking the piss” out of Churchill, a pejorative term which mocks Churchill. The metaphor of “taking the piss” is transposed onto an imaginary function of pouring water out of the watering can. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar V*, “inasmuch as the imaginary is somehow implicated in the relationship to the symbolic, laughter...reappears at a higher level” (Lacan 2017: 119). This was certainly the case when the audience responded with laughter. Moreover, through this act Harris was able to create something different from what the group had been doing with their plays on words. Here Nick was able to use his body as an image to show what he thought of the constraints in place on his body and on the group. Harris asserts that there is no such thing as unity in the group because it is not able to fully enjoy and be free to say or do what they want. The censorship in place is a barrier to freedom and

enjoyment. In order for Harris to express himself, he needed to degrade Churchill for the purpose of performance.

The play is tragi-comic and explores the notion that the workers are stuck in a continuous loop of labour and drudgery, of reproducing themselves and in reproducing capital. Through comic improvisation, it is not just Harris who protests but somehow also his character, Nick, seemingly breaks through the stage and into the theatre to question the theatre's subjugation to the censorship laws and the worker's subjugation to the logic of capital. He asserts agency through Harris by producing a situation that exposes and disrupts the working day, the play, and the political situation of the day. Harris attempts to navigate this dichotomy between free speech and censorship by bringing Nick to life in a more radical and creative way. At the start of the play, Henry Chapman writes that while it reads as a tragedy, it has its comical moments. I would argue that Harris's decision to improvise a comic act in this moment is a refusal to follow the trajectory of a tragedy, as Nick attempts to "punch his way through a speech". This punch disrupts meaning, going beyond the deadlock of indignation among these working-class labourers. The indeterminacy of the spontaneous act in the moment serves to expose and subvert power structures and introduce a political dimension. In this instance, comedy for the speaking subject is a way to reveal a truth of repression that is prohibited by the law. This rebellion against the nonsensical law reminds us, as discussed in Chapter 2, that it is through such confrontations that "we can free ourselves from the dictates of all forms of social authority" (McGowan 2019: 68).

In this coda to the thesis, I have tried to show that transgressive, proletarian, improvisation in theatre is indeed a possibility. In the court case that followed Littlewood's arrest, the defendants pleaded guilty and paid a token fine. The impact was much wider, however, as Holdsworth (2006: 30) explains, the incident gained enormous publicity as part of the debates around censorship and secured for Littlewood "her reputation as a maverick unafraid to confront head-on British theatre practice and received modes of working."

The improvisation transgressed the bounds of theatre, the law, so-called "decency" – and had a reverberation much wider. It is a salutary lesson from the history of improvised comedy that one act in the name of freedom can indeed push out from the improvising space into the world around it, impossible as that might seem.

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