

Twice Two: Hegel's Comic Redoubling of Being and Nothing

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Marx somewhere remarks that history repeats itself: first as tragedy, then as farce. But what he failed to mention—what Hegel already knew—was that the historical doubling of tragedy and farce repeats itself: first as tragedy, then as farce.

In the opening act of the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx stages tragedy and farce as a historical duo, farce tripping directly into tragedy's historical footprint (Marx 1960, p. 115). Marx states that although Hegel recognized that history repeats itself, he failed to see this historical doubling through the structures of tragedy and farce. Although Marx claims to make this addition to Hegel, we also might hear a bit of irony in his famous catchphrase, which is followed by an analysis dripping with sarcasm, one-liners, and paradox. "First as tragedy, then as farce" has the ring of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first? *Who's* on first!" (Yarbrough et al. 1945) In the events of 1848, the Young Hegelians learned firsthand that what announces itself as comic revolution is often exposed as farce: tragedy wearing a comic mask. On a formal level, "first as tragedy, then as farce" appears on the historical stage as an odd couple like Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy: a pair of opposites, one of which is always at the heels of the other. On the level of content, "first as tragedy, then as farce" is not the odd couple but identical twins, a mirroring of the same: *Who's* on first? *Who's* on first! Prior to the failures of 1848, the Young Hegelians anticipated that a revolution would erupt in the form of a comedy, demolishing

the tragic structures of their own historical stage. Marx was the first to introduce the concept in his 1842 essay on Prussian censorship (Marx 1956). In his first Young Hegelian “coming out” piece, Marx argues that the attitude of Prussian seriousness, which reinforces the status quo, must be countered with the humorous spirit of critique, which laughs in the face of that which was once revered. His older comrades eagerly responded with their own visions of comic revolution.¹ Arnold Ruge, the most nuanced reader of Hegel amongst the group (once having been imprisoned for his controversial Hegelianism, allegedly served his five-year sentence happily reading Hegel and Greek poetry), was quick to identify the theme of comedy as a Hegelian concept. Ruge’s contribution challenged Marx’s initial oppositional framing of dogmatic seriousness and critical laughter. We cannot laugh down the object of critique from a critical distance. Comedy, as simply opposed to tragedy, reveals itself to be a farce: a formal break that preserves the content of that which comes before it. Historical comedy can only erupt when tragedy, grasping itself by its own contradiction, can no longer take itself seriously.²

Not only did Hegel himself already frame historical repetition as a theatrical production, but he took Marx’s formulation of the historical double (tragedy and farce) one step further, multiplying “first as tragedy, then as farce” times two: first as tragedy, then as farce, now once more *only this time comically*. We see (2 x 2) in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1970) in Hegel’s analysis of “Art-Religion” and “Revealed Religion.” Greek tragedy and comedy are repeated in the divine drama of Christianity: first, in the tragedy of the incarnation in which contradiction is attributed to one tragic hero, then in the comedy of the crucifixion in which

¹ See, for example, Stirner 1983, pp. 327-53, and Ruge 1983, pp. 211-36.

² Ruge thus does not identify religion as the object of laughter/critique but rather as potential site for tragic contradiction—the corrupt relationship between Church and State—to grasp the absurdity of its own farcical nature and erupt in a subversive comedy (Ruge 1983, pp. 229-236).

the very same contradiction is revealed as belonging to all.³ In Marx's second formulation of critique and comedy, which he again positions against Hegel, he claims that the ancient gods had to die twice: once tragically and then once again comically.⁴ But in Hegel's own analysis, the double death of the ancient gods had to occur twice more so that God the Absolute could grasp his own tragic contradiction and erupt in comedy.⁵ What is played out on the dramatic stages of art and religion enacts an ontological drama in the opening of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. (2 x 2) also occurs as the redoubling of the original comic duo: Being and Nothing (Hegel 1986a, p. 82). As Hegel frames it, Being and Nothing are already from the beginning redoubled: "Being, pure Being...Nothing, pure Nothingness."⁶ This passage, as I will explore, holds itself open allowing the ontological double to be redoubled in several ways.

Sigmund Freud identifies the figure of the double as producing an uncanny effect. As he argues, *das Unheimliche* traditionally describes an encounter with something quite strange, some form of sinister opposition that threatens to snuff out one's existence (Freud 1999). But the chill that runs over my skin at the uncanny encounter is not due to the strangeness of this other but instead comes from a repressed familiarity. My opposite turns out to be my mirror image, although I may not recognize myself in its reflection. Freud positions the double not as between tragedy and comedy, but as between comedy and horror. (Marx's philosophy of the historical double of tragedy and farce similarly slips into horror with revolutions fought by ghosts and zombies.) Freud puzzles over the double, recognizing that although in one context the double chills

³ For another account of Hegel's analysis of the life and death of Christ as the double of Ancient theater, see Hegel 1986b.

⁴ On the double death of the gods, see Marx 1956, p. 382.

⁵ For a similar reading of Hegel's staging of Christ as an elevation of Greek comedy, see Zupančič 2008, pp. 44-60.

⁶ In this context, I made the decision to capitalize Being and Nothing to treat them like stage characters, comparing them to comic duos known by their proper names, Laurel and Hardy.

us, in another context the double strikes us as funny. He concludes that the experience of standing face-to-face with our own double creeps us out, because we cannot recognize that this other is a repetition of something that has already occurred or something that is already present within myself or someone who is no different than myself.⁷ But when the double is reproduced (in art for example), we are able to recognize something about the double that was formerly too close for comfort. The “ghastly multiplication” (ibid., p. 252) of the double allows for a certain recognition to come to the surface. What was once uncanny produces a burst of laughter.

Following Freud’s analysis of the fragile line between the uncanny double and its comic redoubling, I identify the doubling of the double found in critical moments of Hegelian dialectic as producing a kind of comic effect. It almost goes without saying that two provides greater pleasure than one, the loneliest number. Many also find two to be preferable to three, the tired trope of dialectic as a teleological waltz. Two seems to offer lightness, relieving one from her loneliness and lacking the complications of a third who comes in between. And yet, we learn through Marx and Freud that the double (even the double of tragedy and farce) borders on something closer to horror than comedy. In the following, I would like to explore why four is funnier than two in my staging of dialectic as the doubling of the double or, to borrow a movie title from Laurel and Hardy, “Twice Two” (Roach et al. 1933a). I will begin by exploring the formulations of the double in the form of a pair of opposites and in the form of a pair of twins. The literary tropes of the double as the odd couple, on one side, and the twins, on the other, appear to serve very different narrative functions, which incite different kinds of affective responses from the audience. However, the form of the opposed double sometimes conceals the realization that the empty or fragmented content of the first is only reduplicated in the second. The “straight man” of

⁷ On the comic effect and the double see Freud 1999, pp. 236, 245, and 252.

the odd couple cannot see himself in his counterpart “the comic.” The redoubling of the double, however, forces not only the audience, but the original double on stage to confront what was already present, but unrealized, from the beginning. To illustrate this redoubling of the double within the opening of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, I consider two short films by Laurel and Hardy in which the comic duo redoubles itself. The formula (2 x 2) produces a comic excess through the dialectical redoubling of there uncanny double.

Double It

Chewing Gum and The Mirror Phase—Autoeroticism Times Two

A dramatic duo comes in two varieties: in the form of twins—two of the same—and in the form of the odd couple—a pair of opposites who are two in one. In both cases, the second figure of the set of two seems to relieve the first from her tragic nature. The spirit of gravity—represented by the first of the pair—appears to be elevated by the spirit of frivolity—introduced by the second. However, although two (at first) may seem to be more fun than just one, two can also be slightly creepy. We experience this feeling while in the presence of obsessive lovers who threaten to annihilate each other in their passion. And yet although two may have the tendency to lose their initial appeal, twice two produces a hilarious effect.

Let’s consider the old Doublemint gum commercials with the unforgettable imperative: “Double your pleasure! Double your fun!” The first commercial for Doublemint chewing gum aired in 1959. A woman sits in front of her vanity intently gazing into her reflection as she combs her hair. She stands and turns away from her vanity. Her reflection follows her! To her delight her reflection is revealed to belong to another figure with her exact appearance and form. Wrigley’s Doublemint gum twins are born in this moment when the lonely girl finds a perfect companion in her reflection that comes to life. The moment when one is revealed as two appears to be delightful. One will never be alone again now that she is two. When the 1980s rolled around, Wrigley decided that the twins

weren't really all that fun anymore. The fantasy of the twins at first had sex appeal, but at the end of the day there was something unsettling about the ultimately autoerotic nature of the girl who had only her reflection for companionship. Rather than imagining oneself erotically positioned between the two playful sisters, the viewer instead sees herself in the girl blowing bubbles alone in front of the mirror. Although one is revealed to be two, two are also still one. The original incompleteness of the one was merely doubled in two, although this repeated inadequacy was masked by the appearance of completeness offered by the missing half.



Fig. 1 and Fig. 2⁸

⁸ Joan and Jayne Knoerzer in Wrigley's Doublemint Gum (1959) commercial. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Mars, Inc.

Just as minty-fresh was losing its flavor, Wrigley found its marketing solution within the tagline of its own slogan: “Come on and double it!” In the early commercials, silhouettes of two identical men appear in the background or foreground in the position that the audience occupies. The new campaign brought the boys to the same playing field as the girls, making all four figures objects of pleasure. The girls were redoubled in their male counterparts, finding lovers at last in the redoubling of the first autoerotic double. In doubling the twins, the original one’s loneliness or fragmented nature is not overcome. But the audience can take pleasure in the absurdity of what was initially pitiful if not creepy: the girl’s mistaken sense of completeness found in her reflection. In shifting her object of desire from her own reflection to one found in the world, the first girl seems to overcome her isolation. And yet it seems all too obvious that the twin girls fall immediately in love with the twin boys simply because they see themselves in their male doubles. The same may be said of the boys’ attraction to the girls.

We might consider the development of the Doublemint girl who discovers a perfectly symmetrical companion in her reflection through what Jacques Lacan identifies as “The Mirror Stage.”⁹ Lacan defines the mirror phase as an early pre-linguistic stage in which the infant gains a sense of “self” through its identification with its reflection. Prior to recognizing itself in the mirror, the infant could only observe itself through fragmented moving parts of its body (its hands or its toes). When the infant shifts from a fragmented body-image to an image of itself as a totality, it gains a permanent sense of self. This sense of self, however, is rooted in this “double” that is inverted and distorted in size. As the infant matures, it shifts from the spectral ego based in the mirror-image to a social ego based in its dialectical grasp of itself through the other. These two phases of the ego—in which we grasp our

⁹ For one formulation of the mirror phase see Lacan 2007.

self through the mirror-image and in which we grasp ourselves through the other in the world—may appear to be opposed. Yet, Lacan claims that the individual will continue to relate to herself and her environment imperfectly throughout her life, since there will always be a certain disjunction between her physical reality and the inverted double through which she grasps both herself and the world.

In the case of the Doublemint girl, the discovery of her double initially offers her a sense of completeness, but her security quickly gives way to a sense of uneasiness. To overcome this uneasiness, she seeks security not in her mirror image but in a form quite different from her own. And so the twin girls are partnered with the twin boys. The disjunction between the two sisters, whose relationship ultimately leaves something to be desired, is also the disjunction between the first girl and herself. We might speculate that the uncanny nature of the second girl lies in the fact that she is not perfectly identical; her actions are inverted. The uncanny nature would thus lie in this slight difference, this sense of something being slightly off. But we may also speculate that the uncanny nature of the second does not lie in difference but sameness, as the first twin recognizes a disjunction in herself that is not filled but only magnified by the presence of her twin.

Wrigley's campaign found success in the familiar comic trope of the double-double, a trope that Shakespeare employed frequently in his comedies. The two sets of twins in *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, allow for "double the pleasure" by doubling the trouble with more possibilities for confusion, misidentifications, inversions, and the old "switch-a-roo" (Shakespeare 1988). But why does the first double become funnier in its redoubling? What does the doubling of the double do to the first double? My suggestion is that the dialectical process of doubling the double reveals something that was already true about the relationship of the first duo. Something or, more precisely, *nothing* new emerges in the relationship between the split in the first double and the

doubling of the split itself in the second double. The addition of the boys of course does not fill the gap between one and two (which is to say, between one and one) but rather represents a shift from the first girl's imperfect relationship with herself to her imperfect relationship to the world. In a sense, nothing changes in the doubling of the double. But in another sense, the first undergoes transformation. In the redoubling, the first one is able to recognize the disjunction in herself as something she cannot overcome. Instead, in grasping the disjunction outside of herself as something that exists between the two brothers, she has the opportunity to recognize the disjunction as constitutive of her subjectivity. The uncanny thus may be experienced in a moment of comic relief.

*Two Peas in a Pot*¹⁰

The Tragedy of One—One becomes Two—Twins vs. the Odd Couple—The Game of “Not”

One is the subject of tragedy. As Antonin Artaud argues in *Theater and its Double*, the content of tragedy is that which is absolutely singular, that which cannot be repeated or represented by another (Artaud 1994). Hegel also defines tragedy by oneness, but for him the oneness of tragedy is the joke of comedy: comedy is the process of exposing the oneness of tragedy as farce. The tragic figure sees herself from the start as an absolute singularity. Her conviction to her ethical ideals pits her against the world. She is tragic, however, not because she must die at the hands of the world

¹⁰ This heading comes from a famous Stan Laurel malapropism in *Sons of the Desert* (Roach et al. 1933b). Stan is searching for the expression “two peas on a pod” to describe himself and Ollie, but accidentally stumbles upon the charming malapropism “two peas in a pot.” Stan’s malapropisms always seem to hit the nail on the head. The suggestion here is that two who are too close for comfort are likely to get each other in deeper trouble, like two peas in a boiling pot of water.

that refuses to see the rightness of her conviction. Her tragedy is instead in her one-sidedness: her inability to see that the ethical action that is demanded by her deeply personal conviction is also an impersonal product of the system that she believes she opposes. On the other side of the tragic hero is the one who protects the unity of the whole and demands the challenger's death. This one opposed to the first one fails to see that the transgression of the outsider is also demanded by the ethical system he protects. What appears to be the loneliest number is a logical absurdity, because there are always two tragic heroes who mirror each other even in (especially in) their opposition. Tragedy can only see itself from the eyes of the hero on one of the sides of its conflict. It tries to maintain the absurdity of its ultimate Oneness by killing the one who is identified as introducing conflict. The conflict however does not belong to the outsider—who is not an outsider at all—but belongs instead to the stage itself. Tragedy cannot see that the crack that divides one and one is that which constitutes the stage. Tragic blindness is blindness to the perspective of the blind spot itself: the nonperspective of the crack.¹¹

The tragic perspective does not see that the figure of the double is always already lurking within one. Farce, to use Marx's terms, presents itself as comic relief but is as blind as tragedy to the crack within one. It sees tragedy as the loneliest one and attempts to relieve tragic alienation by providing one with a companion. And so, one becomes two either through a sister who is the same (as in the Doublemint gum commercial) or through a companion who is her missing half, her opposite who is not opposed but who makes her whole (girl meets boy). As we see in Aristophanes's myth of the circle people from Plato's *Symposium*, two of the same as well as two opposites hopelessly struggle to overcome their incompleteness by attempting to mend the crack between them

¹¹ Hegel on the two tragic sides that mirror each other: Hegel 1970, pp. 539-40.

(Symp. 189c-193e). The twin, as I have already claimed, has the appearance of providing great fun for the loneliest one. The twin enters the private world of the one and shares the one's personal convictions and senses of pleasure that appear to be only one's own. There are many comedies that revolve around the playfulness of twins. However, although twins have been taken up as the subject of comedy, they are also the subject of horror: we think immediately of the twin sisters who haunt the halls of Overlook Hotel. In movies, such as *The Parent Trap* (1961), one finds great pleasure in the discovery of a lost other who is as familiar as her self. But this same plot also produces a chilling effect when one discovers the other who is no different from one's self. The horror of *The Shining* (Kubrick et al. 1980) does not lie in Jack's encounter with ghosts from the past, but rather in his encounter with himself as his own split identity comes to the surface.

The comic-horror of the figure of the double is illustrated nicely by the film *Single White Female* (Schroeder et al. 1992). The story opens with Allie Jones who kicks her fiancé out of their apartment after she discovers he has cheated on her with his ex-wife. Allie's appearance of fierce individuality, represented by her distinctive spunky red haircut, sets her up as the tragic hero. She maintains her independence although she is alone in the Big City, surrounded by predatory older male figures. Allie posts an ad for a roommate and finds relief from her isolation in Hedy Carson. When Hedy moves in the girls quickly become as close as sisters (Hedy mentions that her own twin died at birth). The girls complement each other in their differences. Each becomes the other's missing half. Sisterly giggles are exchanged as they fix their broken plumbing, raise a puppy, and swap clothing. There is, at first, an air of lightness when one becomes two and two are fused into one. However, the problem with the one-two-one formula is that in the process of joining two, one side tends to absorb the other into itself. The sister eats her twin. The tone of the film changes when the girls go to a salon to get their hair

cut. As Allie admires herself in the mirror she catches a glimpse of Hedy descending the staircase of the salon, sporting Allie's signature red bob haircut.



*Fig. 3*¹²

¹² *Single White Female* © 1992 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

The scene is a dark double of the Doublemint gum commercial, in which the reflection comes to life. The lightness of sister play descends into horror as Hedy quickly takes over Allie's identity and eventually attempts to snuff out her existence altogether. We learn that Hedy in fact killed her real twin and now seeks redemption by repeating the murder. Allie begins to experience her relationship with Hedy as uncanny not simply because Hedy is revealed to be something other than what she initially seemed (not a shy, sweet girl, but a serial killer). Allie experiences the relationship as uncanny, because this other takes the form of something that is all too familiar, a figure who becomes indistinguishable from Allie herself. It becomes clear to both girls that there is not room for two. Despite the appearance of fusion, there is still the first or the original who is threatened to be displaced by the secondary copy. But which one is which? In the final scene, Hedy and Allie fight to the death. Which one is original and which one is copy is of no matter. The victor emerges when one side of the double is destroyed.¹³

The trope of the odd couple produces a different dramatic tone than the trope of the twins. As we have seen, two of the same can be funny or horrifying depending on how the two-fused-in-one are staged. However, there is something inescapably comic about the difference between two opposites fused into one, as proven by great double acts such as George Burns and Gracie Allen. Even when the odd couple plays the role of the villain,

¹³ This fight to the death illustrates what makes dialectical repetition distinct from postmodern repetition. In postmodern repetition, there is no longer any claim to originality. Dialectical repetition is characterized by a tension produced between two, each of which seem to have equal claim to the position of the first. And yet, it is impossible to decide which side is referent and which side is signifier. In my view, the repetition of the first double in the second double (the movement from 2 to 4) does not overcome this tension, but rather allows for a new affective response to the tension between two. The fight to the death of one of the two sides also does not overcome the tension, since in the greatest irony one is shown to be already two.

the comic chemistry of the duo shines through. The first figure of the odd couple, as in the case of the first of the twins, fits the mold of the tragic hero. The first is typically narrow-minded and stubborn, hotheaded and quick to anger. He shakes his fist at the world which he must conquer with his small-minded plans lest the world destroy him. He is blinded by his one-sidedness. Unto himself this frustrated isolated figure is not very funny at all, but instead rather pathetic. And yet, when the spirit of gravity is paired with its opposite—the spirit of frivolity—the tragic nature of the first seems to be defused. Figure one represents order, necessity, fate, and essence: both what is and what ought to be. Figure two, in contrast, represents play, possibility, contingency, and accident: both what may be and what is not. One is absolute and one is not. At each step the second figure trips up the fatalism of the first. At each turn the seriousness and severity of the first is mocked by the silliness of the second. The tragedy of the first is constantly overturned by his comic double who is the immediate repetition of his every movement. Like the broom-faced sweeper dog from *Alice in Wonderland* (Walt Disney Productions et al. 1951), the comic double immediately sweeps away the tracks of tragedy.

But is the tragic nature of the first one really overcome by the comic cleanup man? Hegel saw Greek comedy on the ancient stage not as comic relief from tragedy but as a mirror of the tragic stage. As he puts it, the reconciliation on the comic stage of Greek history is superficial or partial freedom (Hegel 1970, pp. 541-45). On the ancient tragic stage, the grave hero steps before the chorus to defend the absolute rightness of her actions. She soberly utters, “It is. It must be. It cannot be undone.” The tragic hero solemnly sacrifices herself in the name of her gods, which she represents. On the comic stage, we drag the gods out onto the stage and make them represent themselves. We laugh as they are tortured and mocked and cry: “The gods are dead! All that was no longer is. It is not.” The double in the form of the odd couple

represents these two stages on one stage. The tragic utterance “It is.” is immediately met with the comic proclamation “It is not!”

We children of the 1990s played an incredibly obnoxious game in which we would interrupt someone’s speech yelling “NOT!”¹⁴ In fact, it was much more than a game. It was both our ethical duty and sick compulsion to scream “NOT” in someone’s face the moment they opened their mouth. The comic double operates on this game of “NOT!” One says, “It is.” Two responds, “Not.” “It is.” — “Not.”

(It is | Not) | (It is | Not)
(Being | Nothing) | (Being | Nothing)

The immediate movement from the tragic one to the comic double reflects the first movement of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Following Hegel, we begin with what would appear to be the most fundamental category of thought: pure Being without further determination. We begin with Being but the moment we try to point to Being—to determine what it is that Being might be—we arrive at its negative double, Nothing. This is so since the content of pure Being—indeterminate immediacy—cannot be distinguished from the emptiness of pure nothingness. A radical change appears in the immediate movement from Being to Nothing—from the spirit of gravity to the spirit of frivolity—from “It is” to “It is not”—from tragic seriousness to comic laughter. However, insofar as these two stages appear as simply opposed (even as they appear on the same stage) the relationship between one and (not) one fails to show us anything new. The radical change in appearance is a mere repetition of the empty contents of the pure forms. Insofar as the two appear to be simply opposed,

¹⁴ The game of “Not!” became popular in North America through the Saturday Night Live sketch “Wayne’s World,” later produce as a movie in 1992. That same year, The American Dialect Society selected “Not!” as the word of the year.

we miss the biggest joke of philosophy: according to logic itself, Being and Nothing cannot be the same, and yet we cannot logically distinguish one from the other.

One can understand this crisis as belonging to the logician who cannot distinguish the pure form of Being from the pure form of Nothing. But one can also imagine this identity crisis as belonging from the beginning to Being itself. From this perspective, the *Logic* begins with a depiction of “the mirror phase” of Being’s development. In other words, “the beginning” is in Being’s repeated failed attempt to grasp its own identity as something that is whole and complete. Being tries to grasp itself both in its mirror image and in the image of its negative counterpart. In one reading of this passage, Being appears in the form of the odd couple: Being and Nothing. Hegel redoubles the odd couple when he replays the movement from Being to Nothing backwards, this time starting from Becoming and moving from Nothing (or non-Being) to Being (Hegel 1986a, p. 84). It is as if Being passes by a mirror and is chilled by its missing reflection. Nothing likewise attempts to reflect on itself as pure nothingness and is startled by the image of its uncanny double, Being. Thus, Being and Nothing try again to grasp themselves, but this time as an ontological compound of Being and Nothing. And yet even as a compound, Being and Nothing can only grasp themselves imperfectly through a reflection that is inverted. In this way, I read Being and Nothing as the odd couple that is redoubled and inverted in Nothing and Being.

The originary redoubling of the odd couple may also be read as the redoubling of twins. As Mladen Dolar points out in his provocative reading of *The Science of Logic*, titled “Being and MacGuffin,” “Being, pure Being” is already split by a comma and repeated:

One could say: in the beginning there is *being* posited twice, or in the beginning there is a gap in *being*, a gap between the first and second *being*, splitting the *being* from itself, by the sheer cunning-

ness of its grammatical structure. [...] The minimal rhetorical device is precisely repetition, introducing redundancy, the surplus of rhetoric over “information.” Saying something twice is redundant, it doesn’t bring new information [...]. But the rhetorical at this point has immediate ontological value, it is the rhetoric of being itself, which makes that being insist before ever properly “existing,” it insists as a repetition and a cut. The minimal, for being pure, is a redoubled minimal. (Dolar 2017, pp. 92-93)

Being is already from the beginning its own double, even “before” Being loses itself in the image of its negative double. As I see it, this splice and repetition within pure Being allows Being to fold onto itself in an originary, although imperfect, self-relation. Being tries to reflect upon itself but can only grasp itself by the disjunction between itself and its double.¹⁵ The first set of ontological twins is mirrored in the second set of twins: “Nothing, pure Nothingness.” Nothing appears as a radical negation of Being, but it is instead nothing more and nothing less than the repeated content of Being. The content of pure Being from this perspective is not nothing in the form of emptiness, but rather negativity in the form of the comma, the splice, the disjunction, or the split.

(Being | Nothing) | (Nothing | Being)
(Being | Being) | (Nothing | Nothing)

In my interpretation, this originary crack or stutter in pure Being is heightened when repeated in pure Nothing. In fact, the only content of pure Being and pure Nothing is the stutter itself. The disturbance that causes Being to interrupt and repeat itself is echoed in Nothing. The comma represents a stirring in Being that is mirrored in the stirring in Nothing: a negative glitch within indeterminate negativity. The difference between one and one in

¹⁵ A comic double of Aristotle’s absolute as thought thinking itself (see *Met.* 12.1072b.20). Here thought attempts to think itself but its mind goes blank.

the case of the twins (Being and Being or Nothing and Nothing) and one and one in the odd couple (Being and Nothing or Nothing and Being) is only formal. In both cases, the redoubling of the double magnifies an active negativity—a repeated stutter or glitch—in the stillness of pure emptiness. The second ontological double magnifies something—or rather nothing—that was there from the beginning. In the beginning was the stutter. In the beginning was the glitch.¹⁶

Nothing Changes

The Doubling of the Comic Double—The Crack in the Crack

Comedy teaches us how to count to four: One—Charlie Chaplin, Two—Abbott and Costello, Three—The Three Stooges, Four—The Marx Brothers.¹⁷ But the comic dialectician begins with the double to count to four.¹⁸ To illustrate this dialectical doubling of the double through comedy, I conclude by turning to the classic comic duo, Laurel and Hardy. Oliver Hardy was a large 280-pound man who wore a bowler hat and suit that were slightly too small, while Stan Laurel was a slim man who wore a bowler hat and suit that were slightly too large. Ollie played the role of the serious man who was easily frustrated. He saw himself as the more intelligent of the two, although he constantly led the two into pitfalls. Stan, Hardy's easygoing sidekick, played the role of

¹⁶ A sort of origin story that constantly interrupts itself and restarts: it is a beginning that cannot quite be expressed in a full sentence (Gen. 1:3), but also requires more than a single word, since the word is already repeated (John 1:1); it is at the same time less than a single word since it is no more than the gap between the repetition.

¹⁷ Thanks to Aaron Schuster for counting to four with me through classic comic cinema.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek also recognizes the quadruplicity in the *Logic* but offers a different suggestion of how a dialectician may count to four with Hegel (see Žižek 1991).

the simpleton. As Nabokov describes him, “[Stan was] wonderfully inept, yet so very kind” (Appel 1971, p. 213). While Ollie easily loses his temper, Stan easily bursts into tears. And yet Stan, who appears so fragile and naïve always seems to come out on top without even trying. His mere presence causes Ollie—the spirit of gravity—to self-sabotage. In every episode, Ollie, thinking he knows best, forcefully pushes Stan out of the way and takes the lead. Ollie of course walks directly into disaster, while Stan remains unscathed.

The chemistry between Laurel and Hardy reflects the dynamics between the spirit of gravity and the spirit of frivolity. However, there are two Laurel and Hardy shorts that intensify the formula of the odd couple times two. Through an early experiment with overlaying film, the two play themselves and their doubles. *First as tragedy, then as farce* is fully played out as *first as tragedy, then as farce: redoubled*. In the 1933 short, “Twice Two,” Laurel and Hardy marry each other’s sisters, also played by the duo, in a double wedding. In the opening scene, the men call their wives from work. The usual slapstick that takes place between Laurel and Hardy is mirrored in the antics between their female counterparts who are at home preparing an anniversary dinner. Hardy is squirted in the face with black ink while the female Hardy gets a cake in the face. Initially the dynamic between Laurel and Hardy is only paralleled by the dynamic between the sisters. But the dynamic is complicated when all four sit down to the table together. Laurel sits across from the female version of himself (an exact replica in drag) and next to the female version of Hardy (his opposite in drag). Hardy likewise sits across from his female twin and next to his female opposite. The anniversary dinner begins with two sets of twins sitting at the table, each twin looking into his or her near reflection. But over the course of the dinner, four different combinations of the odd couple emerge: Laurel and Hardy, the female Laurel and female Hardy, Laurel and female Hardy, and Hardy and female Laurel. The traditional dynamic

between Laurel and Hardy operates on a movement that oscillates to and fro from one to two to two to one, like an endless game of *fort-da* between Being and Nothing, a game in which nothing changes. The dinner table, which stages the double-double, also features a ping-ponging of bickering and slapstick between one and one's opposite. The exchange is always between some version of Laurel and Hardy, but never the exact same combination of Laurel and Hardy. Even when nothing changes, the movement from one back to the other is not exactly the same. As Dolar puts it, "One cannot step into the same being twice" (Dolar 2017, 92).



Fig. 4¹⁹

The 1930 short "Brats" is a rare instance in which Laurel and Hardy carry out the entire plot without the aid of any other actors.

¹⁹ *Twice Two* (1933). James Parrott. MGM. Pictured: Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (Image Credit: Snap).

And yet double is not alone on stage. Laurel and Hardy redouble themselves, this time playing both the roles of Stan Sr. and Ollie Sr. and the roles of their sons Stan Jr. and Ollie Jr. (Roach et al. 1930). While their wives are out hunting ducks, the men are given the womanly task of watching the children. The scene opens with a game of checkers. Ollie is determined to win although Stan has already captured a large stack of Ollie's red checker pieces. Like a game of "NOT" in which children negate each other's words almost before they leave the other's mouth, Stan jumps to make a move the moment Ollie's hand hovers over a checker piece. When Stan is distracted, Ollie quickly makes his play. Stan immediately captures two more pieces. *It is. It is Not. It is Not.* After pausing to look sternly into the camera, Ollie begrudgingly advances one of his pieces. *It is.* The spirit of gravity plays the spirit of frivolity at a game of checkers. This scene has a dark double in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (Bergman et al. 1957) in which Antonius faces Death in a game of chess. But Stan and Ollie do not play chess but rather a round of children's checkers, which Ollie nevertheless treats very seriously. The game of checkers is redoubled in the children games in which the boys too go back and forth. In a game of building blocks, the boys take turns placing one block upon the other. The boys gain speed until Stan Jr.'s block lands on Ollie Jr.'s finger, resulting in a violent crash of the block tower (the crash is of course the *telos* of a game of building blocks). The formula seen in checkers and building blocks is repeated twice more: the boys take turns grasping the long neck of a glass vase placing one hand over the other's hand. This game predictably ends with the crashed vase. Finally, a game of tag is proposed, otherwise known as "It," which ends before it can begin. For a game of "You're it." immediately becomes a war of "Not it!" "Not it!"

Between one and two there is a change in form but not in content, since *It* and *Not* are initially indistinguishable, but create what would appear to be a changeless movement to and fro. In the mirroring of this movement in the second double there is

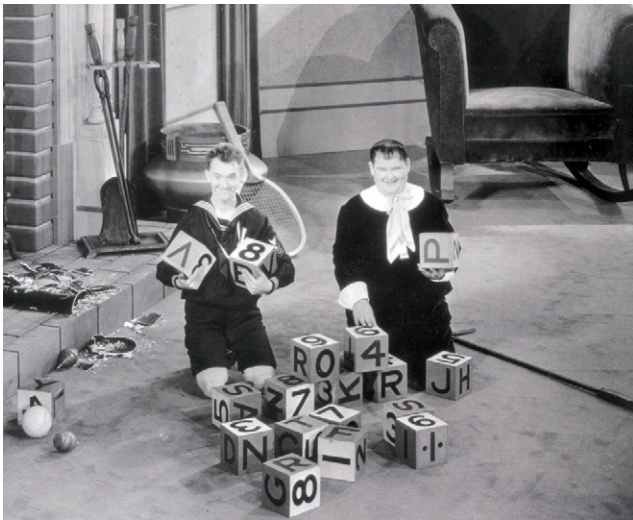


Fig. 5 and Fig. 6²⁰

²⁰ Fig. 5. Image title: Jan. 1, 1930 - Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy on set of the film *Brats* (1930) (Image Credit: © Glasshouse/Entertainment Pictures). Credit line: Entertainment Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo.

Fig. 6. Image title: *Brats* (1930). Hal Roach film with Stan Laurel (left) and Oliver Hardy. Credit line: Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

no formal change between one and two (the original Stan and Ollie) and one and two (the mechanical reproduction of the first in Stan Jr. and Ollie Jr.). What changes in the repetition between the first double and its exact duplication that produces a comic effect? My answer is nothing. Nothing changes in the dialectical redoubling of the comic double. *Nothing changes* in three ways:

1) Nothing changes. In the movement from the first double to the second double there can be a change in form without a change in content (Being, Being → Nothing, Nothing). Between Being and Nothing there is no change in content. There is also no change in content in the alternative formulation (Being, Nothing → Nothing, Being). Both the dialectical redoubling of the twins with the negative companions and the redoubling of the odd couple fail to bring about new content.

2) Nothing changes. This is to say, nothing itself undergoes transformation. When the first duo is duplicated or mirrored in the second duo, the split (Hegel's comma) between the first duo is itself repeated in the second split between the second duo. Negativity at first appears to be represented by the second figure who defuses the severity of the first one. However, when the double is repeated, negativity reveals itself to be between the first two. This becomes clear when the splice is repeated in the second two. What appears to be between two is already true of one.

3) Nothing changes. This is to say, the negativity that binds and separates Being and Nothing (and Being and Being) is the agent of change. The comma sets everything in motion. Nothing itself, represented by the comma, is in the position of the subject who in counting (to three) forgets to count herself (to be more exact, forgets to count herself as nothing).

The oscillation between Stan Jr. and Ollie Jr. highlights what should already be obvious in the relationship between Laurel and Hardy: the second does not make the first whole nor does the second overcome the first as the work of the negative, which only takes off in the redoubling. Instead, the two opposites are

somehow always already wrapped up in the other, because both are constituted by the crack that binds and separates them. There is no Laurel without Hardy, nor Hardy without Laurel. The tension between the two sustains both sides. It is precisely because each is bound to his distinct role that the severity and seriousness of the one has already crossed over into the lightness of the other. In turn, the frivolity of the second has already been sucked into the gravity of the first in the exact place where the second finds his lightness. What may be already obvious to us must become obvious to the double itself. As Stan says in one of his famous nonsensical proverbs, “You can lead a horse to water, but a pencil must be lead.” Ollie—the spirit of gravity—must get hit on the head with a block by the second set of doubles to realize Stan’s second accidental insight when he confuses himself and Ollie with their mini-mes. Stan scolds the boys, “If *you* don’t quiet down, we’ll have to send *us* to bed.” To which Ollie replies, “Not *we!* *Them!*” But Stan’s misspoken words are always closer to the truth.

Between the double and the redouble *nothing* changes, and for this very reason both the tension and the possibility of a comic eruption is heightened twice-two. The repetition of the deficiency in the first results in an excess. Comedy is not in the second repetition but in the crack that makes Being and Nothing a game of “It” (“Not It!”). The comedy of spirit emerges when nothing itself changes, when the crack is split open by yet another crack in the doubling of the double: the transformation of negativity itself.

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