

Humour in Surrealist Theatre

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Surrealist playwrights of the twentieth century use black humour in order to express their discontent towards the society in which they live. Parody of everyday life is a way of reaction against the extensive lifestyle. The actions, the choices and the situations, in which the characters of the surrealist dramas are involved, are comic and grotesque. Surrealist dramas reject the rules of the Western theatre; the lack of plot, the absurd, the misunderstanding, the use of poetic symbols, the parody of bourgeois life, the unexpected reactions and the unreasonable behaviour of the characters are some of the factors that cause laughter and surprise the audience. In this paper we will try to reveal the humour that emerges through the surrealist plays of André Breton, Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon and Roger Vitrac. We will also attempt to highlight the key points through which surrealism in theatre uses black humour in an effort to cover the deep melancholy and pessimistic mood of surrealist dramatists. The questions arising are; in which ways is humour a way of revolution? How can humour include dreams, ingenuity and fantasy?¹

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1. Humour as a “Revolver” in Surrealism

Surrealist playwrights use humour in their writings and in their life as well, in order to turn against the dynastic compulsions that reality requires from people. André Breton in *L'Anthologie de l'humour noir* (*The Anthology of Black Humour*, 1939) notes that Alfred Jarry, who is considered to be one of the precursors of surrealism in theatre,² is “he who pistols” and gives us an example from Jarry’s life: “One time, in a backyard, Jarry was amusing himself by uncorking champagne with gunshots. A few bullets strayed over the fence, prompting the irruption of the neighbour whose children were playing next door”. “Just imagine if they were hit!”- “Ah!” said Jarry, “not to worry, Madam, we’ll simply make you some more” (Breton, 1997). Surrealistic humour can get the character of defence, according to the Freudian theory about humour as a method of protecting Ego from suffering (Freud, 1989, p. 177; Freud, 1990, p. 14), but it can also get the option of a revolver, which surrealists jibe against the conventional society and the logical rules that control their lives (Breton, 1969, p. 125).

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¹ The phrase comes from Roger Vitrac’s statement that Alfred Jarry’s humour includes “dreams, ingenuity and fantasy”. Durozoi, 1997: 389.

² Esslin, 1961; Pronko, 1962; Wellwarth, 1964. Moreover, surrealists appreciate him deeply and in September 1926, Antonin Artaud, Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron establish the theatre called “Alfred Jarry”, paying tribute to him. See: Béhar, 1990: 284.

Louis Aragon, in his essay *Traité du style (Treatise on Style, 1928)*, rejects the idea that humour is connected with a literary style and relates it with the unfamiliar and the incidental (Aragon, 1991, p. 67). The incidental is, however, the essential element of surrealist theory, because it gives to automatic writing the paradox which is connected with the unconscious and dissolves logic. Aragon concludes that surrealist humour is a molestation (Aragon, 1991, p. 67) and looks like a revolver that marks against logic (p. 68). Breton writes that ‘the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd (Breton, 1969, p. 125).

The period after the First World War of the deep depression and the horror and futility of the war reinforces the need for subversion and contestation. Octavio Paz states that “no weapon is more powerful than humour” (Paz, 2002, p. 15). Black humour in surrealist dramas emerges from the absurd, which ruins every sense of the real and logical world. Surrealist dramas provoke the audience and adopt new ways of writing and presenting theatre.

2. Ridiculing the “Bourgeoisie”

Surrealist dramatists reject the mainstream theatre and are fond of ridiculing some of its popular themes, such as the crisis of marital relations. In the first act of their four-act play *S'il vous plait (If you Please, 1920)*,³ André Breton and Philippe Soupault present the story of a love triangle consisted of two men and a woman, but reverse the rules of the classic French boulevard, since Paul, the lover, is older than the husband and at the end of the story the lover is the one who kills Valentine, the woman, and not Francois, the husband.⁴ The dramatists use their surrealist “automatic writing”,⁵ but simultaneously they do not miss the chance to mock the boulevard’s style of writing, by using sentimentality: “PAUL. How hard do you think it is for me to choose between the passage of the Tropics and those more distant dawns that dazzle me as soon as you open your eyes?” (Act 1, scene 1) (Breton & Soupault, 1964, p. 149). The sets and decors are conventional and make the spectators believe that they are going to see a boulevard play, but they are deceived.⁶ Another way of ridiculing conformist theatre is by using exaggeration in words and cliché expressions.⁷ For example, when the husband leaves, the lover says: “A door closes and our life begins” (Act 1, scene 3) (Breton & Soupault, 1964, p. 154).

³ The play is first performed on 27th March 1920 at the Salle Berlioz in Paris and is part of a programme which also includes Tristan Tzara's *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine*. Breton and Soupault both act in their drama, similarly as does Mile L. Moton, Paul and Gala Eluard, Theodore Fraenkel, Henry Cluquenois, and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. See: Matthews, 1974: 88. Because of its presentation in Dada evenings, scholars characterize the play Dadaist, but, as the playwrights cite, it is written at the same time with *Les Champs magnétiques* (1919), which is considered to be the most representative sample of surrealism and uses automatic writing. Breton, actually, mentions that this is the period that surrealism starts (1919) and not afterwards (1924, *First Manifesto*). See: Breton, 1993: 43-47; Witkovsky, 2003: 125-136. Moreover, it has to be mentioned that the term ‘surrealism’ is first made by Guillaume Apollinaire, who characterizes his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1917) as “drame surréaliste”. See: Stubbs, 1997: 69, 75-78; Durozoi and Lecherbonnier, 1972: 27-32.

⁴ The end of the scene depicts, precisely, the surrealists’ perception of the duality of love, since lovers can both adore and despise the object of their passion. This duality of love is common in most of Roger Vitrac’s plays. See: Auslander, 1980: 360-361.

⁵ “No intervention of the thinking function was to be applied; no ‘evaluation’ of ‘filtration’ on the part of the author would be exercised. [...] Breton and Soupault, with pen in hand, listened in rapt excitement to what they alluded to as their ‘spoken thought’. [...] It is from this layer within the unconscious that the sibylline pronouncements of the surreal catapulted forth, to be incorporated in *If You Please*”. See: Knapp, 1985: 38. About Breton’s automatic writing, see: Browder, 1967: 74-89.

⁶ Knapp notes: “Only as the scenes are enacted, one detached from the other, with no obvious link or meaning, do questions arise; a sense of disorientation emerges and a certain amount of malaise takes over.” See: Knapp, 1985: 45.

⁷ Knapp notes: “*If You Please* is fascinating: in its disregard for traditional theatre, in its imaginative forays into subliminal spheres, and especially in the humour emerging from its platitudes and non-sequiturs.” See: Ibid.

In a similar way, Louis Aragon parodies the matter of the love triangle in his play *L'armoire à glace un beau soir* (*The Mirror-Wardrobe One Fine Evening*, 1923), in which the lover is hidden in a wardrobe and Lénore, the woman, protects him from her husband with her body placed in front of the wardrobe.⁸ The playwright reverses the rules in this play, too, because Jules, the husband, does not open the wardrobe, but postpones it, hoping that the lover will die of suffocation. Lénore then confesses her sin and begs Jules for opening the wardrobe. Finally, Jules breaks the mirror of the wardrobe with a hammer and when the wardrobe opens, the audience realizes that the lover does not actually exist, but the woman pretended to be an adulterous wife hiding a lover in the wardrobe to make her husband jealous.

In Roger Vitrac's *Victor ou les Enfants au pouvoir* (*Victor or Children Take Over*, 1928), considered to be the finest example of surrealist theatre (Knapp, 1985, p. 19; Matthews, 1974, p. 30), the dramatist places his play in time and space which can be considered as the time and space of a boulevard play. The scenery consists of antique furniture and depicts the bourgeois sitting room of the Paumelle family. The time of the play is specified from the evening until the midnight and it's the 12th September 1909, Victor's birthday. Vitrac creates the appropriate bourgeois atmosphere (Dort, 1962, p. 129). The play has three acts, straight action and proper structure. All these restraints seem to be too far from the surrealist spirit, but Vitrac uses them in order to subvert them (Connon, 1994, p. 604). His purpose is actually to shock man out of his bourgeois complacency. At the end of the play the grotesque and the absurd prevail in this irritating and provoking play. That explains why Bernard Dort characterized the play as an 'anti-boulevard' play (Dort, 1962, pp. 126-131). The dramatist testifies a severe accusation towards the bourgeois family (Levitt, 1987, p. 515) for its hypocrisy, propriety, deceit and lack of maturity. Victor is the character which decides to unmask falsehood and show no respect for the established values. He is the person who uncovers the fake seriousness, morality and respectability, by showing the extramarital relation of his mother and Esther's father, ridiculing the French army, bringing to light the madness of Mr Magneau and uncovering the hidden truth.

3. Humour Coming from the Surrealist Writing

The characters usually soliloquise without listening one another in the dialogues of surrealist dramas. Dialogue is really, therefore, a play of parallel monologues which can result in a surreal juxtaposition of images (Auslander, 1980, p. 360). These situations cause laughter to the audience and abolish the convention of dialogue. In Breton's and Soupault's play *If You Please*, the "illegal" couple talks without listening one another, even when the one addresses a question to the other: "PAUL. You're not cold? VALENTINE. What time is it? Paul, my happiness is as sweet as starved birds" (Act 1, scene 1) (Breton & Soupault, 1964, p. 151). Misunderstanding is also common in Breton's and Soupault's play *Vous m'oubliez* (*You Will Forget Me*, 1920), in which the characters, Umbrella, Robe and Sewing Machine, talk incoherent and fail to agree: "UMBRELLA. Here are the frogs. SEWING MACHINE. You jump to the light of the moon" (scene 1).⁹

⁸ Read notes: "At one level, the drama can be read as a parody of romantic comedy. The woman alternately guards and offers entry to her armoire as the man approaches and retreats. At this level, the play is corrosively funny, exaggerating the tropes of sexual parry to an audience familiar with each move in the game. In contemporary music hall skits, armoires usually contained lovers, or at least voyeurs, and the scene of a husband returning to an unfaithful wife's boudoir had been played a thousand times." See: Read, 2005: 34.

⁹ In the present paper, the English translation of this play cited is my own.

Another characteristic of surrealist dramas is the use of witticisms and paradox mottos, which cause surprise and laughter but challenge the audience, too. "I often asked myself, what might be the speed, in a fast train or in love, of the flies which fly from the rear wall to the front wall of some sleeping compartment or other", says Paul in *If You Please* (Act 1, scene 1) (Breton & Soupault, 1964, p. 151) and in *You Will Forget Me*: "UMBRELLA. What is a crab, what is a half crab? SEWING MACHINE. Spiders do not make good bottles" (scene 1).

The absurd and the grotesque liberate the dramatists to express their unconscious and bring to the fore hidden desires and thoughts. In Breton's and Soupault's *You Will Forget Me*, the absurd comes out from the conception of having objects as roles of the play. Specifically, the characters of the play are Umbrella, Robe and Sewing Machine. At the beginning of Aragon's play, we watch the parade of an heterogeneous group of people: a naked woman holding a baby carriage, a twenty-year-old soldier, the President of the Republic, a negro General in leopard clothes, the Siamese sisters, Theodore Fraenkel, the surrealist columnist of *Littérature*, and a woman with a red flag. At the end of the play, when the wardrobe opens, the group of people comes out, bringing to mind the "gags" in cinema, when the crowd gets out and runs (Nadeau, 1964, p. 97). It is about a subversion which leaves the audience trapped in the delusion of the hidden lover in the wardrobe.¹⁰ The drawers and cupboards are usually connected with the hidden desires in surrealism.

Likewise, in Vitrac's *Victor or Children Take Over*, there are two grotesque characters which create a new perception of humour. The first one is Victor, who is a nine-year-old child but is 180cm tall and, in an absurd way, he is becoming taller during the play. Furthermore, Victor thinks and talks like an adult. It is about the convention of a child of a supreme intelligence, who denies any reconciliation with the bourgeoisie and denies to compromise with the reality of life (Béhar, 1980, p. 84). Victor reflects Vitrac's ideas and opinions and deals with scandal in a surrealist way, since scandal awakes, moves, provokes our thought, invites us to change and realize the human degradation and the unbearable living conditions (Béhar, 1980, p. 81). The other character is Ida Mortemart, who is synonymous with burlesque, tragic and macabre (Matesis, 1990, p. 28). Vitrac uses black humour, since Ida keeps breaking wind, symbolizing the decay of the body and death itself. His conception is to relate death with Ida's inappropriate manners in a bourgeois house, where people try to pretend that such bodily functions do not exist. The audience laughs during the play but at the end it perceives the play as a tragic farce in which humour is black.¹¹

Another option of humour can be found when the characters of the surrealist plays rave. In Breton's and Soupault's *You Will Forget Me*, Sewing Machine is in delirium while Robe and Umbrella repel her (scene 2). Jules is also in delirium when he breaks the mirror of the wardrobe and chases Lénore in Aragon's *The Mirror-Wardrobe One Fine Evening*. Jules talks to her continuously: "The hammer on the floor, overhead the roof, and over the roof the sky, all the summer evening sky, all the last sky of your life, vast, vast, with its small bullfinch singers of regret..." without end (Aragon, 1964, p. 193). Victor in Vitrac's play soliloquises all the time, as well. His words are full of irony, sarcasm, cynicism and result in delirium:

¹⁰ It is actually connected with the rejection of reality, which we find in Breton's *Second Manifesto*. See: Roudiez, 1952: 99-100.

¹¹ Cannon, 1994: 597; Knapp notes: 'Victor is both painful and satiric; on stage audiences are exposed to the most preposterous of situations, characterisations, and gestural sequences, clothed in a combination of low- and highbrow humour- black humour!' See: Knapp, 1985: 19.

Behold ladies and gentlemen! The terrible enfant. The inappropriate father. The affectionate mother. The adulterous wife. The naive cuckold. The elder Bazain. Long live the swallow! Long live the bird of paradise! Long live the parrot! Long live the birdfish! Long live the birds of the whole world. (Act 1, scene 3)¹²

Humour also comes out when the situations presented are exaggerated and beyond the standards. For example, in Aragon's play, Jules and Lénore quarrel and at the same time Jules collects matches from the floor, counts them and plays by putting them in rows. Additionally, in terms of the directing instructions, the dramatist plays with the light and dark. More precisely, at the end of the play, the light alternates with the dark and the audience feels as if it is itself inside or outside the wardrobe.¹³ In this way *mise en scène* creates an atmosphere of a dream and leaves the audience free to imagine whatever it likes or desires.

In Vitrac's play, Victor's actions and behaviour are excessive. During the whole play he insults the adults and their actions. He leads Mr Magneau to madness when he reminds him of Bazain, his General in the army. Victor also hides himself behind the sofa to observe his adulterer father making love to Esther's mother and then appears to them reciting Iliad's verses. Furthermore, he reveals the adultery of his father, presenting the scene with Esther as a play in front of his and her parents, ridiculing them. Vitrac's humour is not only against the bourgeois morality, but it is "anarchic" as well (Antle, 1988, p. 14; Faudemay, 1999, pp. 467-484).

The songs found in surrealist dramas are also humorous because of their absurd content and they offer gaiety and hilarity. Such songs can be found in *The Mirror-Wardrobe One Fine Evening*, in which the President of the Republic sings at the end of the play and in *You Will Forget Me* which ends with Robe's and Sewing Machine's song. Actually, their song is Breton's poem *La pièce fausse* (Aspley, 2000, p. 59) that refers to a Bohemia vase and has an ironic style. What is remarkable here, as far as the surrealist humour is concerned, is that the verses of the song are written in a way, line by line, that they take the shape of a vase.

Conclusion

In conclusion, humour in surrealist theatre comes out from the automatic writing that liberates the unconscious, the exaggeration, the unconventional situations, the misunderstanding, the use of mottos, the delirium of persons speaking and the parody of bourgeois life. It is the deep melancholy after the War that makes surrealist dramatists use black humour, willing to rebel against the logic world. Likewise, surrealist humour works as a revolver which abolishes reality through the unfamiliar and the incidental.

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¹² In the present paper, the English translation of this play cited is my own.

¹³ Read explains: "The armoire as a threshold between light and dark, inside and outside, shifts its identity in the course of the play. [...] The actors are lit, the house lights dim and the interior of the armoire is presumably dark. As the play proceeds, the brightness on stage grows dimmer while light reflected in the mirror becomes comparatively brighter until the armoire appears as a source of light. Toward the end of the play, the stage lights have dimmed to a tenebrous haze as if the audience were also inside a box. [...] The lights then dim to black in both hall and stage leaving the audience in complete darkness, so they no longer perceive the enclosure of the room." See: Read, 2005: 35-36.

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