

Slavkova, Iveta

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A Different Causality and a Different Reality. Analysis of the Absurd in French Dada and Pre-Surrealist Theatre

Iveta Slavkova

Mariana Kunešová. *L'absurde dans le théâtre Dada et présurréaliste français*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2016. 257 pp. ISBN 978-80-210-8461-2.

Mariana Kunešová's book *L'Absurde dans le théâtre Dada et présurréaliste français* explores the concept of the absurd inherent to the artistic production of the Dadaists and Surrealists during and just after World War I. The author discusses the existing definitions of the absurd, including the one by Martin Esslin from 1961 (ESSLIN 1991), coined in order to characterise the theatrical productions after World War II. Kunešová's inquiry on the connections, the continuity but also the differences between the two, which has not been studied so far, is one of the undeniably important contributions of this book.

L'Absurde dans le théâtre Dada et présurréaliste français is organised around two distinct premises. On the one hand, it focuses on the definition of 'absurd' and how it applies to Dada and pre-surrealist theatre within the context of avant-garde theatre (Maeterlinck, Jarry, Apollinaire). On the other hand, it provides an in-depth analysis and interpretation of three examples of Dada and pre-surrealist theatre from 1916 to 1923 (which are the chronological limits of the book): Tristan Tzara's *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* (1916), *If you Please* co-written by André Breton and Philippe Soupault

(1919), and *The Mysteries of Love* by Roger Vitrac (1923).¹

In the first part, the author offers us a definition of her key concept, dividing it into two categories. First, the *indirect absurd* emphasises the scandalous, the shocking, and provoking aspect of the setting and the dialogues of its subject matter, very much in tune with Esslin's definition of the absurd (ESSLIN 1991: 25, 333), and leads to a reflection on the order of the world as incompatible with the aspirations of those who inhabit it; it points at the inevitable absence of order, and the disturbing impossibility of knowledge (49). Then Kunešová goes on to establish a definition of the *direct absurd* which, according to her, is more inherently theatrical than ideological. Exploiting thoroughly the formal means and the perlocutionary effects for themselves, it suggests the possibility of a different reality and a different causality, rich in significance and dramatic effects (51).

1 The first play has not been translated into English; while the two following ones can be found in (BENEDIKT and WELLWARTH 1966: 147–174, 227–268). More recently, Vitrac's play, the most famous of the three, was published in (VITRAC 2015).

The in-depth analysis of the three above-mentioned texts (by Tzara, Breton-Soupault and Vitrac), which occupies the third and longest chapter of the book, further explores the potentiality of the *direct absurd*. The study of Tristan Tzara's *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine*, a particularly challenging text whose narrative is slippery, is very insightful. The chapter draws attention to the rich theatrical potential of Tzara's text, often considered unstageable, insisting on its perlocutionary and prosodic forcefulness, underlining the subtle scenography hints it contains (131–136).

Kunešová's careful analysis of the purposeful 'interpretative chaos' of the plot convincingly argues that Tzara reveals the varied semantic potential of the words through unexpected and striking sequences which recreate the sensation of uneasiness of the modern mind plunged into the chaos of WWI with all the consequences we know the conflict had on discursive rationality (95). By using sophisticated perlocutionary effects to create dialogues which seem absurd, but whose coherence is explicated by Kunešová through the rigorous analysis of phonetics, prosody, and isotopy, Tzara induces the reader/spectator to ponder the absurdity of any exclusively 'celestial' aspiration which could only end up with a painful collapse (132). By creating ingenious isotopic connections around his protagonists, Tzara invites the reader to ponder the permeability of the human condition – man is objectified, animalised, vegetalised (137) – against the predominant totalising rational definition. In a sense, *The First Adventure* is the equivalent of a humanity objectively deprived from the presumption related to its integrative and discursive rationality.

Globally, and this concerns all three texts, the book demonstrates how Dada and pre-Surrealist theatre negates immediate clear-cut meaning, stimulating the interpretative effort through the insightful use of perlocutionary and prosodic effects and the multiplication of isotopical sequences suggesting the fluctuation of the protagonists' identity (194). It insists on the mental processes which it aims to literally make live through innovative use of seemingly non-coherent absurd dialogues. Thus, the spectator is 'tossed' into the fluctuant state of mind of the protagonists, an approach replacing the rational presumably objective description of a given situation, which would tend to diminish the latter's dramatic effect and complexity (250). This is particularly true for plots related to love, for example *If you Please* by Breton and Soupault or *The Mysteries of Love* by Vitrac, where objective descriptions would have led to a melodramatic, syrupy effect thwarting the convulsive state of being in love, which is often a disruption in the discursive rationality.

The reader of *L'Absurde dans le théâtre Dada et présurréaliste français* will find a very useful selective bibliography including franco-, anglo-, and germanophone references as well as less known Czech publications on linguistics and theatre studies (the latter are largely and relevantly used in the text). They might however find the outline rather scholastic, typical for a PhD dissertation, which could have been alleviated. A more sustained confrontation with the immediate avant-garde context of the three selected examples could have contributed to better situating these texts. However, the detailed analysis of Tzara's *The First Celestial Adventure* and

Breton/Soupault's *If you Please*, which are relatively understudied, is innovative and necessary.

Altogether, Mariana Kunešová's book is a valid contribution to the history of avant-garde theatre and more largely, to the study of the historical pertinence of the avant-garde from both a creative and a political perspective in a period where the values of Western civilization and culture were deeply shaken and could even appear absurd.

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