
Addressing issues such as “What is ‘surrealist theatre’ and what are its characteristics? Where and when did it make its appearance and for what time span?” is an upfront, bold, and demanding task; especially when the answer is not meant to be confined into the boundaries of a historical account. Vassiliki Rapti, in her book *Ludics in Surrealist Theatre and Beyond*, examines the theatre of, within, and beyond Surrealism, searching for new tools and effective methods that can substantiate and unlock complex developments and obscure artifacts.

The broad scope of her work is fully justified as she discusses aspects of a “dramatic practice” hidden in various forms of art and scattered in pieces and performances across time. Rapti does not ignore historical material and original input. Her quest in surrealist theatre starts from André Breton’s seminal novel *Nadja* and his ambivalent, even hostile, attitude towards the theatre, and covers the efforts of the most notable surrealist dramatists and theatre practitioners, Roger Vitrac and Antonin Artaud. But, in her pursuit of “the poetics of play and game,” she does not treat surrealism and its ties to theatre as mere historical taxonomy, solely understood within the frame of its prime encounters. Therefore, she embarks on bridging literature, dramatic theory, and performance by examining plays written in the late 1950s by Breton’s disciple, Nanos Valaoritis, and the work of the highly influential postmodern artists Robert Wilson and Megan Terry.

This approach aims to illustrate the affiliation of surrealism to postmodernism through ludic principle and associates the Surrealists’ endorsement of the game strategies with the non-mimetic, transformational character of contemporary experimental play and performance.

From the very beginning, Rapti explains that she “treat[s] surrealist ludic activity as a research tool,” for Surrealists not only “invented their own games” (5), but they also built their relation to reality as well as drama theory by exploiting play and game techniques. As an attempt to defy the illusionist character of earlier drama, surrealist theatre, Rapti argues, should be disconnected from the Aristotelian *mimesis* and be read as “*methectic*, that is, initiative, participatory, and ritualistic” (6). Play in the Surrealists becomes the mechanism for rising above traditional dichotomies and antinomies and the hub where dreams, desires, chance, and language meet. It is also their way to negotiate prescriptive roles and seemingly opposing notions, such as stage and auditorium, author and actor, or text and performance. Analyzing this process, as she clearly states, Rapti uses ludic theory, performance analysis, psychoanalysis, and philosophy of language. More specifically, she focuses on the “one-into-another” ludic principle and follows its transformation into a stage game in all the texts she examines.
The first chapter, in which the author discusses Breton’s *Nadja* in order to unfold his dramatic theory, is in a way the most challenging. Theatre here is acknowledged as the medium *par excellence* in conceptualizing surrealist expression and grasping Breton’s hidden layers of language and stage game. In her reading of Breton’s autobiographical novel, Rapti pays particular attention to Nadja’s invitation to play, which opens up the game of self reexamination and transformation for the character/actress and the author/narrator/player. The second incident in the novel that couples with Nadja’s engagement into ludic activity, and works as a focal point for Rapti, is Breton’s remarks and fixation with Jean Pierre Palau’s grand-guignol piece *Les Détraquées* (*The Derouted*). In this piece, the spirit of modernity emerges triumphant in the emphasis on dream, paradox, and abstraction, in the lack of seriousness and the interest on entertainment and surprise. The “one-into-another” game is here used to unlock all sort of unusual experiences and leads to the casting of various roles for its participants. Nadja, hence, starts as “an infant-woman, . . . who plays a children’s game in a childish way” (27) and “melts into at least two other female characters” (46)—that is, Solange the main female dramatic character of *Les Détraquées* and Blance Derval, the actress who performed the role and for whom Breton had a great admiration. Breton, in his turn, according to the author, becomes the “demain joueur” who functions as a viewer and “a meticulous performance analyst” (44).

Rapti’s detailed and thorough analysis of ludic activity in *Nadja* may seem obscure or vague at certain points—especially when parallels are used as descriptive categories, for example from the “wireless imagination” to the “wireless connection between the spectator and Solange” (42-43)—but it most certainly succeeds in elucidating the prominence of theatricality and performativity in Breton’s writings.

Having established Breton’s latent ludic dramatic theory, Rapti moves on, in the two subsequent chapters, discussing Roger Vitrac’s and Nanos Valaoritis’ plays. The basic theme of both *Les Mystères de l’amour* (1924) by Vitrac and *L’Hôtel de la nuit qui tombe* (1957) by Valaoritis is “mad love,” a subject and a game that converge dream and reality and, following the “one-into-another” ludic technique, split into multiple “madness in love” and “love in madness” reflections (84). Both plays, moreover, are chosen and studied, for they offer key examples of the stage experimentations with the surrealist games. Especially Vitrac’s and Artaud’s stage proposals at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, where *The Mysteries of Love* was performed, complied in many respects with Breton’s dramatic principles, Rapti argues, when exploiting the mechanisms of dreams, laughter and violence and challenging language itself.

*Victor, ou les enfants au pouvoir* (1927), Vitrac’s best known play, is the model piece, through which Rapti attempts to dig into the social orientations, limitations and associations of surrealist drama. The reversal of rules and roles as children’s game in *Victor* is destined to “subvert normal power relations,” to change the “view of seeing and perceiving” (102) and to “dismantle the ill-con-
ceived bourgeois values” (113). Valaoritis’ texts, Henriette, où est-elle passée? and Les Tables rondes, written in 1957, follow Victor’s pattern but go a step further, as Rapti maintains, by allowing the language game to return on stage and thus to strengthen the relation of playfulness and paroxysm to marvelous.

In the last two chapters, Rapti anchors to the stage and the work of post-surrealist theatre artists. There are three particular cases she examines: Günter Berghaus’ staging of Artaud’s Le Jet de sang, a 1996 student production at the Department of Drama, University of Bristol; Bob Wilson’s stage experiments with language and image games; and American playwright and director Megan Terry’s “theatre of transformations.” The lineage of surrealism, as defined, among others, in ludic activity, in Artaud’s implementation of physicality on stage, in the juxtaposition of the theatrical codes, in the disorientation of the spectator’s senses, and the constant change of characters, bonds together this clearly diverse material. Rapti speaks at great length on these practices and expounds the ludic mechanisms which Wilson and Terry, in particular, employ and evolve in their performances and plays.

From the perspective of a theatre historian, this discussion is particularly intriguing as well as problematic: it dissociates elements and procedures from their historical momentum but offers a fine insight for both surrealist theatre and postmodern stage. What appears to be quite stimulating in this reading of surrealist theatre and its legacy is that it exemplifies the abstractive and contradictory counter-dialectics of surrealist theatre as a methodological tool for the approach of contemporary theatre and drama.

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