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Violence as Surrealist Play in Angela Carter's *Shadow Dance*

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Honeybuzzard, one of the main characters of Angela Carter's debut novel *Shadow Dance* (1966), has been described by one critic as playing like a big cat, tirelessly and cruelly; "anything and anyone is fair game" (Sage 11). He plays with and ridicules his friends and acquaintances, pulling whoopee cushions, blackface soap, plastic snot and exploding cigarettes out of his bottomless joke-bag. Honeybuzzard has organised his life completely in accordance with the play impulse, and he is not interested in anything structured by rational behaviour, work or profit. He is engaged in a constant process of making the Pleasure Principle triumph over the Reality Principle as he acts according to his capricious desires, which will turn increasingly violent and destructive as the narrative spirals towards its transgressive dénouement.

Shadow Dance has remained marginal in the Carter canon. This might partly be explained by the high degree of violence the female characters are subjected to, as they throughout the narrative systematically become disfigured, violated or infused with meanings beyond their own control. The apparent obsession with female victimisation in this novel can be difficult to reconcile with Carter's status as a feminist writer. Critics have adopted rather different stances to Honeybuzzard and his violent play: while some dismiss his violence as mere representations of his allegiance to "patriarchal values" (Day 16), others have tried to justify Carter's depiction of victimisation of women in reading the characterisation of Honeybuzzard as a "radical" or "moral pornographer," who, like the Marquis de Sade "strips away the mystifications of sex [...] to reveal the workings of power underneath" (Sage 12).¹ I think one can certainly read Honeybuzzard's violence as "a kind of (anti-)morality play which aims to undermine through exaggeration" (Gamble 54), but I think this reading does not fully acknowledge the subversive potential of his playful behaviour. In this paper, I propose to read Honeybuzzard's nihilist play through the prism of surrealism – a movement itself known for its proliferating playfulness as well as its self-professed subversive aims.

The surrealists used play as a method of investigation, intending to liberate the pleasure principle and break traditional/rational patterns of thought. The ludic practices of the group of surrealists gathered around André Breton were centred on the potential of chance to

critique and subvert rationality. They developed play strategies such as the surrealist *errance*, which Susan Laxton describes as “an aimless wandering in the city’s streets meant to encourage the eruption of unconscious images into the perceptual field,” or linguistic/visual games such as the well-known *cadavre exquis*. The Bataillean surrealists, on their part, focused on games of violence and transgression, largely inspired by Nietzsche’s aesthetic theories. Despite their different strategies, however, both the Bretonian and the Bataillean factions saw in the non-rational status of play a potential for provocation and destruction of the propriety of the bourgeoisie as well as of “repressive conventions and the institutions of power that keep them in place” (Laxton [unpaged]). In short, they saw in play a potential for transforming reality.

As Laxton points out, play as a signifier is of course inherently flexible, even contradictory. Johan Huizinga’s classic definition of play in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Elements in Culture* (1955), which has its roots in the aesthetic theories of Kant and Schiller, emphasises play’s opposition to reality: it is “a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary’ life” (28). This conception of play as a bounded and regulated activity, existing purely in an autonomous dimension with no stake in material reality, is, as Laxton maintains, clearly not applicable to the “surrealist ludic.” The surrealists insisted on play’s *lack* of limits and its potential for liberating unconscious desires, and its purpose, ultimately, was to subvert the “real” world (Laxton). In the following analysis, I will read Honeybuzzard’s actions in *Shadow Dance* as a meditation on such surrealist play.

Shadow Dance opens as Honeybuzzard’s lover and victim, Ghislaine, is newly released from hospital, where she has had to spend several weeks after having been knifed by him: her face is cut open by a raw scar that stretches from the corner of her left eyebrow, and down below the collar of her shirt. However gruesome this act seems to the other characters in the novel, as well as to the reader, Honeybuzzard’s moral standpoint is clear: the violence he exacts on Ghislaine is just play. Throughout the novel, the games he plays are essentially games of power and manipulation. This becomes evident for example in his relish for making jumping-jack caricatures of the other characters in the novel, or in the chess game he dreams up, in which real men and women would “click their heels and march forward” according to the orders he would call out from his megaphone (117). Ever the sadistic master of his playthings, he delights in pulling people’s strings, both figuratively and literally. The novel’s

title, *Shadow Dance*, alludes to Honeybuzzard's role as puppet master, controlling the moves of the other characters as if in a shadow puppet show.² Accordingly, Honeybuzzard refers to the characters affected by his violent acts as "shadows": "How can you be sorry for shadows?" he asks, reinforcing his impunity towards them (86). These shadow characters have for him no more autonomy or life than marionettes that jump or dance when he pulls their strings. The realm of the shadows, as Sage has pointed out, comes to stand, in the novel, for the dimension of art (or play) (12). Throughout the novel, however, Honeybuzzard's play persistently threatens the boundary between the realms of art and reality: in accordance with Peter Bürger's classic definition of surrealism as an attempted sublation of art in the praxis of life (94), Honeybuzzard transforms art into life and life into art as he plays. In opposition to Huizinga's account of play as a bounded activity which exists at a remove from reality, Honeybuzzard's surrealist play is excessive and bent on transgression.

In an essay from 1979 on Georges Bataille's pornographic novella *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928), Carter openly admits to her admiration of the surrealist writer, whom she dubs her "grand old surrealist fellow-traveller and sexual philosophe" ("Georges Bataille: *Story of the Eye*" 68). Like the transgressive games of a true Bataillean hero, Honeybuzzard's play with Ghislaine is essentially erotic. Seemingly harmless, the initial games he plays with her include posing together in soft-pornographic photographs, in which the erect Honeybuzzard is masquerading with "a wide variety of false noses, false ears, plastic vampire teeth etc." (16). However, Honeybuzzard's erotic play ranges from innocent games to sadistic aggression, and the pleasure invested in the making of the photographs is readily translated into his destruction of Ghislaine's beauty. His mutilation of her is also an essentially erotic act, as he creates with his phallic knife a monstrous representation of the female genitalia in her face (Gamble 55); the masochistic Ghislaine herself labels Honeybuzzard's knifing a "spiritual defloration" (132). Honeybuzzard's violent play with Ghislaine reaches its climax after she, in a final show of self-abasement, has given herself to Honeybuzzard to do with her as he likes. Honeybuzzard, drunk on his desire to master Ghislaine, takes her to a derelict house and murders her. Honeybuzzard's erotic games do not even end with death, however: after having strangled Ghislaine he lays her out on an altar-like table, and, in a delirium continues to play with her dead body.

In fact, Honeybuzzard's main plaything, the mutilated Ghislaine, is herself highly evocative of a surrealist (erotic) object: she is an ambiguous blend of sexiness, innocence, victimhood and provocation. She is a doll-like child-woman, "like a young girl in a picture book, a soft and dewy young girl. [...] She had such a little face, all pale; and soft, baby

cheeks and a half-open mouth as if she was expecting somebody, anybody, everybody she met to pop a sweetie into it” (2). Still, despite her apparent innocence, Ghislaine is highly sexually charged, and has, at some point or other, had sexual relations with almost every male character in the novel. She gives off a scent of “contraceptives and her own sexual sweat” (5). As her once-perfect beauty is destroyed by Honeybuzzard’s knife she is rendered all the more ambiguous, as the boundaries between innocence, eroticism and the grotesque uncannily dissolve. Her face is contradiction epitomised: one side is smooth, young and sweet; the other, “a mass of corrugated white flesh, like a bowl of blancmange a child has played with and not eaten” (152–53). In her violated state, Ghislaine invokes the image of woman produced in much surrealist art, usually marked by, at least seemingly, misogynistic attacks of sadism and mutilation as the female body is violated, disarticulated or forced through disfiguring transformations. Portraits of mutilated female forms abound in works by, for example, Alberto Giacometti, Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer: these images typically represent the female body as simultaneously violated, distorted and highly eroticised.³ In a very similar way, the characterisation of Ghislaine’s mutilated body is imbued with strong sexual undertones.⁴

What is really at stake in Carter’s participation in surrealism’s aesthetic of violence? To fully appreciate this we have to turn to the novel’s final scene, and Ghislaine’s murder. After having strangled Ghislaine, Honeybuzzard lays her out on an altar-like table, and continues to play with her dead body, as he proceeds to include a human-sized crucified plaster Christ in the ritual. On one level, I would argue, this transgressive play functions as sheer provocation; it is well-known that Carter delighted in shocking her audience, especially regarding issues of sexuality and morality. But much more importantly, the inclusion of the holiest of all symbols of Christianity in what will probably be an act of necrophilia is a statement of blasphemy which sets this novel squarely in the tradition of the surrealist avant-garde. The movement’s savage, and often violently erotic, attacks on religion include, for example, Luis Buñuel’s and Salvador Dalí’s *L’Âge d’or* (1930), in which Jesus Christ is envisaged as the monstrous Duc de Blangis, one of the four debauchees from the Marquis de Sade’s *Les 120 journées de Sodome*. The film’s anti-clericalism, which was grounded in the surrealist commitment to the Marxist “anti-religious struggle,” voices the surrealist conviction that religion is an agent of repression. The last scene of the film gives us half a dozen female scalps swaying on a wooden cross, presumably those of Jesus’ victims, perhaps signifying, as Robert Short has suggested, “that because repressive denial breeds violence, the self-proclaimed religion of love has always really been an infernal machine of female sacrifice.”⁵ Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil*, in the same vein as *L’Âge d’or*, features the pornographic

desecration of the body of a priest, while Max Ernst's painting *La Vierge corrigeant l'enfant Jésus devant trois témoins* (*The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses*, 1926) portrays the Son of God being spanked by the Virgin Mary, while three surrealists – Paul Eluard, André Breton and Ernst himself – watch the scene, peeping through a window. In line with these surrealist precursors, Honeybuzzard's sexual and deadly defilement of the plaster Jesus is the quintessential exhibit of transgression and blasphemy.

I would argue that the blasphemous thrust of the ending of *Shadow Dance* is the key to appreciating the subversive effect of Honeybuzzard's violent play. At the end of the novel we also find out from Honeybuzzard that Ghislaine is the daughter of a clergyman. His cruel debasement of her throughout the narrative thus in itself becomes a statement of blasphemy, leading up to the sacrilegious ending. Read as declarations of blasphemy, Honeybuzzard's play also becomes a symbol for Carter's own atheist and iconoclastic agenda, which underpins her oeuvre as a whole. In her essay on *Story of the Eye*, Carter sums up Bataille's novella with the following words: "Transgression, outrage, sacrilege, liberation of the senses through erotic frenzy, and the symbolic murder of God" (68). This description could have been an account of her own novel *Shadow Dance*, as it places her, alongside Bataille, within what she dubs "the fine European tradition of anti-clericalism" (68). Honeybuzzard's erotic, violent and blasphemous play is thus, in key with Bataille and surrealism as a whole, a declaration of human freedom against the repressive laws of patriarchy, church and state.

But, in the instant when Honeybuzzard's surrealist play seems to have completely shattered the boundary between the dimensions of play and reality, and when it seems to have fully achieved its subversive and blasphemous goals, it simultaneously undermines itself. At this moment, Honeybuzzard vanishes completely into the realm of play, a "dimension outside both time and space" where the real world no longer has any "authority" (181),⁶ and goes mad: "his hair trailed like mad Ophelia's and his eyes were too large for his head" (179). The narrative now foregrounds the distinction between the realms of play and the real, which have previously been threatening to collapse into each other: in the "real world," the text now emphasises, Honeybuzzard's crime is a gruesome and misogynist murder, nothing else.⁷

Thus, I would propose, the narrative in the end challenges the subversive potential of Honeybuzzard's surrealist play to actually transform reality. The surrealists compulsively staged their aesthetics of violence across representations of women, who, like Ghislaine, were mutilated, fragmented, objectified and eroticised, and themselves never allowed to play.

Although the surrealist project was bent on rejecting traditional gender stereotypes and notions of “normalcy,” it nevertheless obsessively cast woman as *object* of desire, rather than desiring *subject*. Perhaps, then, *Shadow Dance* exposes these surrealist acts of violence that claim to subvert patriarchal structures to instead actually contribute to maintaining the patriarchal status quo. I would argue that the novel ultimately adopts an ambivalent position vis-à-vis surrealist play: although *Shadow Dance*’s blasphemous dénouement aims at shocking and disturbing in key with surrealism itself, the text, in the final analysis, seems to suggest that as long as the logic of surrealism cannot imagine woman as subject instead of object, it can offer no genuine renewal.

In subsequent novels, Carter would re-visit the woman of surrealist representation, on a mission to imagine subjecthood for her. Gradually, her female characters begin to shed their roles as passive victims who get played with by the male characters. And, in a manner all the more subversive, the female characters start to play, themselves.

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¹ In addition, see Gamble, 54.

² There are of course several ways of reading the title *Shadow Dance*. As Linden Peach has aptly argued, the “shadow” can also refer to the role of Honeybuzzard as the evil, wish-fulfilling double, or shadow, of Morris, the other male protagonist of *Shadow Dance*. See Linden Peach, *Angela Carter* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 43.

³ See for example Alberto Giacometti’s *Femme égorgée* (*Woman with her Throat Cut*, 1932), Max Ernst’s collage-novel *La Femme 100 têtes* (*The Hundred-Headless Woman*, 1929), and Hans Bellmer’s *Poupée* sequences (1933–38).

⁴ The question of surrealist misogyny has provoked debate among many feminist critics, who have argued that whether the woman of surrealist representation is elevated (as is the tendency in surrealist poetry) or violated (as in much surrealist visual art), the category of “woman” nevertheless remains a projection of the masculine heterosexual imagination, never granted a voice of her own. Whilst I fully acknowledge the ethical complexities of surrealism’s representations of gendered violence, in this paper I have chosen (mainly due to limitations of space) not to dwell on the ambiguities of surrealism’s sexual politics. For a more in-depth discussion on surrealist violence in *Shadow Dance*, see Anna Fruchart Watz, “Convulsive Beauty and Compulsive Desire: The Surrealist Pattern of *Shadow Dance*,” in ed. Rebecca Munford, *Re-Visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 21–41.

⁵ Robert Short, voice-over commentary to *L’Âge d’Or*, dir. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí (1930. British Film Institute, 2004).

⁶ These are the words of Honeybuzzard’s friend Morris, who, in the end, chooses to follow Honeybuzzard into the dimension of madness/play.

⁷ This is made most obvious through the entrance on the scene of Honeybuzzard’s pregnant girlfriend Emily, who, unlike Morris, has managed to snap out of her enthrallment with Honeybuzzard.