

## **The Concept of “Black Humour” at French and Greek Writers**

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### **Abstract**

*In the article in question, it will be analyzed the concept of “black humour”, one of the four main pillars, which sustained the surrealist creativity. In more specific terms, they are: automat writing, insane love and objective chance. As one of the strongest expressive means of surrealist writers, black humour turned into their symbol in order to better convey the objection against the reality of time. Colorations of black humour will be analyzed in comparative platform at the following writers: Francis Picabia, Jacques Rigaut and Nikos Engonopoulos, who converge into a common thematic point – death. Through the analysis of several parts selected by them, I will also reveal the similarities in expression, poetical images used, but on the other side, their particularities as well.*

**Keywords:** *Surrealism, black humour, poetical image, death, unaware.*

### **1. Introduction**

The first resource of this term's origin in English *humour* derives from the theory of Hippocrates on "body liquids". According to such medical theory, there are four mixtures in the human body, where each of them is related to the prevalence of one of these four liquids. When a harmonic mixture of such liquids exists, the man is healthy and in good mood (humour)...

Several people cannot fairly perceive what role jokes and humour play in their lives, even though Freud called it a *display of the unawareness* (Z.I. Siaflekis, *From the night of lighting to the poetry fact*, Epikairoitita Publications, Athens, pp. 93). It exists a category of people for whom humour is dangerous on the preservation of “seriousness” and of a hypocritical facade. Definitely here it is the analysis of *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Bakhtin, M.M. (1973) *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*, (Russian) Progress Moscow, 1979), a famous Russian critic, which assists us. He stipulated the role of “carnival” element, *subversive spirit* (Valaoritis Nanos, *For a theory of writing*, Eksandas Publications, Athens 1990, pp. 165), as the necessary fallen world, as a recreation, as an alternative, in comparison with the seriousness of scientific ideology. Hence, life is neither a farce, nor a continuous tragedy –but an alternating tragicomedy. It is the serious among the ridicule and the ridicule among the serious.

## **2. Surrealist humour and its significance**

In a particular way, surrealist humour, the so-called *black humour* often has a tragic shade. Humor which uncovers, such as the irony of *Socrates*, the infinity, the empty, the unmeasurable, the opening of endless opportunities beyond the narrow boundaries of daily life, the vincible.

Surrealist humour originates from *Comte de Lautreamont*, *Alfred Jarry*, *Jonathan Swift*, *William Blake*, *Arthur Rimbaud*, *Edgar Allan Poe*, *Charles Baudelaire*. In continuation, there were its first followers *Raymond Roussel*, *Guillaume Apollinaire*, *Marcel Duchamp*, *Francis Picabia*, *Tristan Tzara*, the Italian and Russian futurists and formalists. Through *Roger Vitrac* and *Antonin Artaud*, it passes to *Eugene Ionesco*, *Samuel Beckett*, and it comes to us in another form at *Franz Kafka* and *James Joyce*. In general, all modernists have adopted it.

In 1939, “*Anthology of Black Humour*” circulated, which is a shelter of an aesthetical and moral attitude towards modern spirit. *Breton* in this anthology collected extracts from the texts of *Fourier*, *Lachenaire*, *Poe*, *Allais*, *Baudelaire*, *Carrol*, *Lautreamont*, *Swift*, *Picabia*, *Peret*, *Sade* ( Z.I. Siafklekis, From the night of lighting to the poetry fact, Epikairoitita Publications, Athens, pp. 93) etc. – i.e. from writers who had no connection with surrealism. He inferred that he had found it at almost all the predecessors of surrealism. We can surprisingly convince ourselves that it does not exist a great poet or prose writer without humor, and even the “*surrealist*” one.

Relating such tragic humor, I can mention *Salvador Dali*, who, when being introduced to surrealists, was in a “psychotic situation” and laughed at large when they talked to him. Later, he told them that he had seen each of them in a hat with the form of a wavering cake.... The laughter of psychotics is tragic, because it is not controlled. The laughter of *Nitzsche*, when he got crazy or the laughter of the gothic satanic hero *Melmoth* was a clear grimace. Surprisingly, the climate of surrealism is somehow more general than we think it is. Modernism, part of which is realism as well, created its humor, with a rare sensibility which converges into a certain humor which is not missing in the works of cubism either, of *Picasso*, *Gertrude Stein* and many others.

If the *automat writing* is a way for the creation of a connection between the internal and external reality, *black humor*, as a technique, serves to the purpose of surrealists in order to reconsider their relations with the traditional literary creativity, by establishing a space where polemic and mining prevail as means of literary expression and elements of social behaviour.

The term *humor* is used by *Breton* time after time in different texts, such as “*Situation surrealiste de l’objet*” (1935), “*Limites non frontieres...*”(1938), “*Dictionnaire abrege du surrealisme*” (1938) and infers the preference of surrealists for such expressive means. To him, black humor is the absolute revolution of the soul. According to *Breton*, humour turns without doubt into the expression of triumphing subjectivity, in his connection with daily life, meanwhile such triumph is temporary and in no way eventually solves the antitheses and objections with social space. Such brief survival of objective humor, as well as the use of the same epithet for the casual, encouraged *Breton* to use the term *black humor* for the first time at the “*Anthology*”.

Annie Le Brun writes very accurately that: “Black humour in relation to objective humour are the same acknowledgement of the insufficient perception of the world and begging of the reaction on which awareness of life slams” (Annie Le Brun, *L’humour noir*, at *Entretiens sur le Surrealisme*, Paris et la Haye, 1968, pp. 14).

Pleasure and reality are two images directly affected by the process of black humour. Breton at the text of the “Anthology” shall seek at Freud psychological dimensions in the functioning of the black humour. In particular by making use of the work of Freud “Humour and its connections with the unaware”, observes that: “Humour does not have only the liberating part and economic element, but something greater and more sublime...Greatness definitely aims at the triumph of narcissism...” (Z.I. Siafklekis, From the night of lighting to the poetry fact, Epikairoitita Publications, Athens)

The value of humour is definitely found in this process of distancing from reality and expresses the impossible adjustment of man with the conditions of his existence. In this point of view, black humour appears as a self-protection means against any oppressive environment. The use of the *black* surname, shows in this manner the game with death, which does not come but to highlight the negation of the real regarding the human existence. The satiric dimension of the black humor function is obvious. It liberates from sweet sensualities each residual of romanticism and at the same time induces literature towards the lost originality. Insight of humour allows poetry to find readability. The same as at the automat writing, at black humor, linguistic expression is found under continuous doubt, regarding not only its “rules”, but also its own structure. Use of black humour creates new association states, where logical irregularity of language and its expressive force lose the opportunity to convince the reader, or at least lead him to a concrete orientation selected by the writer.

Contrary to automat writing, where the unaware has the primary role, in the case of black humour we have a preliminary forethought and logical organization of the absurd, by continuously and systematically referring to reality. Black humour assumes perfect acknowledgement and use of real details of daily life, history, geography and definitely literature. Certainly that a work containing black humour should mean without doubt a coherence with the reader. He is invited by the writer to give a new meaning for the text, because he has to perform herein a critical-active reading, not only with the aim of work’s comprehension, but also its framing into his personal mythology. This argumentation may be difficult if we take into account the words of Marco Ristic that: “Humor in its contact with poetry becomes the extreme expression of spasmodic antithesis” (Lecherbonnier Gerard Durozoi-Bernard, *Le surrealisme*, Paris, Larousse 1972, pp. 212). And, in the case of black humour, the liberation of self – continuous request of surrealists in numerous forms - , is made through the work of art.

### **3. Comparative analysis from selected extracts of Nikos Engonopoulos – Francis Picabia – Jacque Rigaut**

Let us study several texts where death is the main theme and at the same time the main resource of black humour, where inclinations for the autoirony and the automining of the self are created. The

question is about texts with strong autobiographical elements, where surreality is created by means of special expressive means. In these texts, death is described not as a kind of antithesis solution between the internal and external reality, but as a passing and overcoming stage into the surreal world, where the individual is released from the rules of conventional reality. It is not the question for texts with metaphysical purposes. On the contrary, the question is about the most serious form in discussing the omnipotence of the self, as well as the absolute character of literary creativity.

Let us first see a text of *Nikos Engonopoulos* from the summary “*Don’t talk to the driver*” (1938):

**“*Evening Maria*”**

*The other day after my death, or better of my murder, I took all the newspapers to read so as to learn as much as possible details about my execution. It seems that they took me to the tripod under strict attendance. I was wearing, it infers, clothes in yellow colour, latticed scarf and a hood. My hair looked like brush, maybe that of a painter. Then they threw my corpse far away, into a bog, where sometime it was the limer of French Descartes and where, many years ago there was also food for predacious poultries and the shelter of a so-called prostitute Evertipi...And the only useful thing, which I happened to read those days, was a long letter of the Italian Guiliam Tsitzi, my only friend of heart, whom I have never known and for whom I still doubt if he exists. In a few words, the whole content of this letter was as follows hereunder: “You are”, he used to say, I definitely mean Polikseni, “you are an old gramophone with bronze funnel down a black fabric. (Ikaros Publications, Athens 1966, pp. 66-67)*

In this text, the actuality of narration is identified already with the overcome time, which also creates the first impression for the reader. In a realist style, the narrator presents details of his death, by balancing his words through events and real characters. The real purpose of the narrator is to organize within logical narrator structures an entirety of elements without any logic connections between them. The result is that it is created a system of relations between the deepest and opposite situations, which in combination with the small expansion of narration, create to the reader the explosive feeling of a tragic blind alley. In general, the bling alley as a motive of black humour creates the feeling of boundaries of self opportunities.

Herein, irony is the determining element of style, with a double purpose: on one side it allows the narrator to distance from his object, i.e. self and on the other side to be reinforced the credibility of the text, notwithstanding the obscurity of its simasiologic function. Irony becomes a functional element of a surrealist writing. The surrealist humour maintains certain forms of the real in order to better transmit the surreal. At “*Maria of the evening*”, the forms of the real are present, but it is also clear the orientation of the writer towards the surreal, the internal reality. Narrative technique serves only to a strategy: highlighting of the individual’s interior and his connections maintained with the real (external reality). This is transmitted by means of strong symbols selected from the reality. However, the metaphores used are those which create the feeling of avoidance from the common code of communication and at the same time justify as well the innovatory character of the text (*her*

*hair was the same as brush, maybe that of a painter...).* The use of poetic images and interposition of proper nouns (existing or not) creates an allegoric meaning of the text.

The same interpretation I would also make about the painter and poet of Cubane origin *Francis Picabia* in his text entitled “*Cold eye*”, which is included in the “Anthology” of *Breton*:

*After our death, we should have been placed inside a sphere. Such sphere should have been made of wood particles in different colours. They would glide us to take us to graveyard and the gravediggers would look after, would wear transparent gloves, in order to remind lovers of the memories of fondling,*

*For those who would like to enrich their furnishing with the objective acknowledgement of the correct existence, crystal spheres would exist, through which someone would not distinguish the determining bareness of his grandfather or his twin brother!*

*Tracks (impure waters) of smartness, a lamp for the war with barriers, people look like immovable eye corbies, which take their impetuosity on corpses and all the redskins are station chiefs!(Anthology of Black Humour, volume A, Aigokeos Publications, Athens 1982, pp. 169)*

Contrary to *Engonopoulos*, the intensive illustration of the text does not match with a system of symbols, but underlines objective situations by aiming at their general acceptance. Love, family, society in general are some of the meanings to be highlighted by the poet.

At narration level, the analogies with the text of *Engonopoulos* are obvious. Chronic continuation on which the process of impressionism is based and where the continuation of “metaphysical life” starts from is the same.

Description, the basic function of narration, is herein based on real elements or those which seem to be real, heteroclit regarding the form and absurd regarding their place within the poetic image. In the text of *Picabia* the impression of the reader is reached from the first phrases and escalated, such as in the case of *Engonopoulos*. Consecutive poetic images do not make anything else, but give greater simasiologic sense, by including as well the title, which is a distance from the content of the text itself.

Time and death are the two basic meanings in the texts of this kind and which are put in doubt by the surrealist creativity. Awareness of the antithesis life – death and its humourous consumption strengthen the confidence in connecting things and lead the individual to a distanced doubt of the world.

Because, in essence, the word surrealist is nothing else, but a fundamental change of the point of view by which the individual perceives the material reality. In this case, black humour proves such connection of the individual with the reality, without avoidance towards automat writing or hyperbolas of crazy love and the poets use the technique of black humour within a language absolutely “logical” such a communication where the arbitrariness of the image is linked with a relation reason – consequence, by providing this way the complete surprising of the reader.

Black humour nourishes the unexpected, by giving this way the possibility to writers to exploit to the maximum their imagination, released from the reconciliations of a normal writing. As in any

forms of surrealist writing, even here, the image is the space where the limits of writing and his importance are judged. Both distant realities which coexist at this one, are not linked with one another consciously, such as in the case of the automat writing, but through traditional means of written communication. In their case of *Picabia - Engonopoulos* the freedom of creation is found in the selection of symbols and situations with which narration and the unexpected are realized. The concrete symbols of *Engonopoulos* and the general situations of *Picabia* are the two aspects of the same message, which is elaborated and organized with the same technique.

Even in the text below of *Jacques Rigaut*, which is introduced in the same category with the above two texts, we have almost the use of the same technique:

*The first time I committed suicide was in order to bother my girlfriend. This virtuous creature did not accept persistence to sleep with me, by withdrawing into regrets, as she said, to betray the love of her life. I did not know if I really loved her, I doubt that fifteen days away from her would have particularly reduced the need I felt for her; her denial irritated me. How could I go over? Did I say that she felt deep and continuous love about me? I committed suicide to bother my girlfriend. I forgive myself about such suicide when I take into account her young age in this season of adventure.*

*The second time I committed suicide was from laziness. Poor, having a kind of disdain for any kind of work, I committed suicide one day without any conviction, the same as I have lived. They keep rampage to me for this death, when they see what kind of bloomed view I have now.*

*The third time... I will make you the honour of not telling you the other suicides of mine, it is sufficient to accept to listen even this: I went for sleeping, after an evening when my gloom was more concerning than any other time...I stood up and went to find the only weapon of the house, a small pistol which one of my grandfathers has bought, filled in with old cartridge...I laid down in my bed, I was bare in the room. It was cold. I hurried up in order to stay under layers. .... Then I supported the weapon on a small table, by laughing maybe with a little seriousness. Ten minutes later I fell asleep. I think that I made an important little observation, as much as ... Definitely! It implies that not for a single moment I really meant to shoot myself for the second time. Important was that I had taken the decision to die and not that in reality I died !(Anthology of Black Humour, volume B, Aigokeos Publications, Athens 1982, pp. 156-157)*

Herein, the action of committing suicide is extended in meanings, hence it is the self which takes the decision for this initiative. This text is presented as classic, without using daring images. The effort of the narrator is in order to explain and justify consecutive suicides, by highlighting in this manner the dissatisfactions of daily life, feebleness of communication, lack of ideals and in general of purposes and ambitions. The language used is real within a surrealist frame. The logic of absurd may be easily understood by the reader, because the events are simple, with full transparency. Contrary to the above two texts, it is highlighted the real life of the individual. The whole strategy of *Rigaut* is based on the humorous investment of events “which could have happened to each of us”.

However, on the other side it should be highlighted the fact that the suicide for surrealists is a different meaning from that of the romantic ones. The subject herein is not jostled towards death by an unredeemed passion or dipped into full melancholy. Suicide of surrealists is the most sublime expression of social agresivity.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the texts of black humour, an important role is played by opposite situations or opposite argumentations by which the writer explains the concrete attitude of the individual and his innovatory relation with the external reality. These situations often originate from the world of dreams and hence we encounter another dimension of dream contrary to that of automat writing. Image of death and its approximation with humourous technique, showing of individual's relativity and mockery of any senses of external world are the main conditions for the creation of the surreality which these texts aim at.

Black humour, as *Yvonne Duplessis* also states: “*Not only introduces us into the world of imagination, but furthermore gives us the opportunity to achieve a philosophical concept of the world, according to which a logic larger than another would join the world of dream with that of the reality*” (Duplessis Yvonne, *Le surrealisme*, Paris, P.U.F. (serie que sais-je?), pp. 24)

At writing level, black humour is one more case for surrealists in order to reconsider and strengthen theri expressive means. Having nothing in common with romantic and symbolists, with the exception of using several symbols, the writers of these texts are the pioneers of a modernism product, which adapts elements from *happenings*, from self-improvision, but also as a figurative *collage* about the approximation of two distant realities.

More than any other technique, the texts of black humour preserve, maybe owing to their existential dimension, unchanged their diacronic message in form, as well as in content, by proving what *Breton* used to say at “*Vases Communicatives*” (1932) that: “*Poets gave us the possibility to accept, following centuries and allowed us to wait inducement offered in order to re-establish again the man in the center of the universe*” (Breton Andre, *The communicating vessels, the interpretation of dreams*, Aigokeros Publications, 1982, pp. 129)

Is is definitely such inducement in the heart of surrealist expression which, in black humour, touches the highest peaks of explosion, which is certainly not expressed only by literary means.

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