

Surrealism & Atheism

Review

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2010

a review of

Guy Ducornet, *Surréalisme et atheisme... "A la niche les glapisseurs de dieu!"* Ginkgo editeur, 2007.

Surrealist Guy Ducornet has been active in the Paris and Chicago groups since the late 1960s, as well as a participant in the para-surrealist Phases movement. In 2005, Ducornet began contacting surrealist groups around the world and announced his plans to re-issue the classic surrealist proclamation against religion from 1948, "A la niche les glapisseurs de dieu!" ("Get Back Into Your Kennels, You Yelping Dogs of God!").

Ducornet felt that the "Dogs of God" text was as sadly relevant now as it was then, and he planned on translating it into a variety of languages and to have it counter-signed by those surrealists today who still supported the statement (fifty had originally signed it sixty years ago).

Ducornet's proposal sharpened new debates within the surrealist underground about religion. Some questioned the reason for recycling a six decades-old document, especially one that is so heavily laden with very specific references to post-World War II French cultural politics.

At the time "Dogs of God" was first written, the surrealists of the newly-reconstituted Paris group were lashing out at various attempts by some French Catholic intellectuals (the "yelping dogs of god" referred to in the title) to co-opt surrealism as part of the Christian philosophical tradition.

French Catholics had collaborated with the Nazis during the Occupation and they were being further outflanked by ideas and culture being circulated by Communists in France after 1945. In desperation to become relevant, some Catholic philosophers plundered the work of different avant-garde groups, and a handful tried to colonize surrealism.

But there were surrealists in 1948 who strongly resisted signing "Dogs of God," and the arguments led to a great deal of conflict within the group. One of the more minor skirmishes came when automatist and libertarian communist Ramses Yunan of the Cairo surrealist group angrily rebuffed the need for the manifesto, saying that it was pathetically redundant since poet Benjamin Peret already had made perfectly clear the surrealists' absolute opposition to religion in the 1930s.

(The more serious falling out, involving Michel Carrouges, Henri Pastoreau, and several other surrealists, is discussed in Ducornet's chapter on that 1948 document.)

However, now, after all these years, many of those Catholic writers named in "Dogs of God" have (rightfully) disappeared into obscurity, even for those living in France. It was difficult, therefore, for some in 2005 to see how a re-publication of the statement could be relevant today, a position not unlike Yunan's.

The Paris Group of the Surrealist Movement, for instance, agreed not to counter-sign the old statement, and instead they issued a new one on Christmas Day, 2005, "Pour en finir avec le spectre de Dieu" ("To Be Finally Over and Done With the Ghost of God"). But in the end, some one hundred and seventy-five surrealists signed in support of Ducornet's project, and the "Dogs of God" manifesto (translated into German, English, Spanish, Greek, Italian,

Dutch, Portuguese, Czech, and Arabic) is the centerpiece of his satisfying book, *Surrealisme et atheisme* (Surrealism and Atheism).

Whether or not one agrees with Ducornet's reprocessing of the "Dogs of God" declaration, there is no denying that his study of surrealist approaches and attitudes toward religion is an important one. Chapters section off imperative moments and themes of surrealist anti-religious resistance, covering activities discussed in surrealist journals in France but also among other groups as well.

"Dogs of God" is positioned at the book's center and is key in helping to trace the continuities between the surrealists' pre-WWII activism and that of the latter half of the century. This positioning makes the document more relevant for our own time.

Somewhere in *Surrealisme et atheisme*, Ducornet wonders why recent scholarship on the history of free-thinking movements fails to mention surrealism. Part of the problem is that those who have spoken out against religion or in favor of atheism in the last eight or ten years have done so almost exclusively from a scientifically positivist point of view.

But surrealists were as wary of instrumental reason and vulgar materialism as they were of religion, so instead of simply dismissing religion as illogical or unreasonable, they emphasized the propensity of these dogmatic practices to neutralize free will and free thought from an anti-authoritarian perspective. Rather than simply negate religion and religious institutions with science and physical realities, the surrealists assailed religion on moral grounds with the idea of undermining it in order to overthrow it.

In "Dogs of God," the surrealists promote a "Promethean mysticism" that seeks to overthrow supernatural thinking about god and replace it with a supernatural thinking about human beings, a "mystical humanism" first articulated in left-Hegelian philosopher-anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach's devastating analysis of the faith-based self-delusion in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).

Ducornet's book provides a useful account of the full spectrum of the surrealist position, including strains of heresy, sacrilege, esoteric thought, and do-it-yourself counter-mythologies that were all used against the death cults of Judeo-Islamo-Christian monotheism. These interests are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented by surrealism's critics as the substitution of one religious tradition with some other.

But this is a dangerous misrepresentation of these pursuits—in many aspects, the surrealist interest in the fields of blasphemy, voodoo, gnosticism, the occult arts and sciences, folklore, and homemade alternative myth is better understood as a tactic of non-theistic demolition.

I am reminded here of the work of contemporary parody religions, like Ivan Stang's Church of the Subgenius, the anarcho-absurdist Discordian movement, the anti-capitalist street-preaching performances of Reverend Billy's Church of Stop Shopping, the goddess-worship sects of the Invisible Pink Unicorn [May Her Hooves Never Be Shod], and the anti-Creationist Pastafarianism of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

To say that surrealist interest in counter-myths was itself a religious endeavor is to miss the point entirely; it is like saying that all the pleasure taken from watching Christopher Lee in those old Hammer Studio vampire movies is centered on some latent Christian reverence for the divine omnipotence of crucifixes.

Religion's counter-revolutionary tendency to enforce a passive acceptance of the status quo is obvious and well-documented, but Ducornet rightfully points out that this paralyzing reactionary power is directly linked to religion's fierce drive to suppress the Marvelous.

Surrealist Pierre Mabille explained that the Marvelous is the sensation that one's imagination experiences when heretofore hidden dimensions or facets of reality are suddenly and startlingly unveiled, opening vistas "beyond limits imposed by our social structures—greater beauty, greater power, and greater pleasure of longer duration."

Sustained immersion in the icy water of religious ideology drowns the Marvelous and re-floats it as "proof" of the miraculous wonder of some god or another—the wildly enlightening disorientation that comes from a surrealist cultivation of the Marvelous is stabilized and recuperated by the pimps and prostitutes of god as something supernaturally and superhumanly alien, a process that eclipses the power and glory of the human imagination for a set of tired religious directives specifically designed for centuries to blunt our sensibilities.

While Ducornet's assemblage of surrealism's greatest anti-god hits gathered in a single volume is useful (and appreciated), it is this examination of how destroying religion would help liberate the Marvelous that is the most revelatory thing about this book.

Today, surrealists the world over are keenly attentive to the hideous surge into our communities of increasingly violent religious fantasies. The woods are full of them these days, it seems—ugly Catholico-Protestant neo-puritans, militantly mega-orthodox Talmudite statist, post-colonial paleo-Islamists, rural sex-cult Mormon survivalists, reactionary Hindu nationalist extremists—there is no end to grotesque concoctions of insipid superstition, rationalized political violence, and hierarchically-oppressive spirituality.

Each new perverse permutation needs to be met with a counter-offensive that goes well beyond the reasoned argumentative analyses of the so-called “New Atheists” (as espoused by the evolutionary biology professor Richard Dawkins: “God is very, very improbable”). Ducornet’s *Surrealisme et atheisme* aptly illustrates a more devastating attack than those limply offered up by these secular liberals.

The surrealist arsenal serves the insurrection of the Marvelous and the liberation of the imagination against the dementia of god-abettors with mordant humor and hoax, agitational propaganda, chaotic play, and aggressively confrontational godlessness.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #383, Summer, 2010

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