Brautigan's Sombrero Fallout: A Cathartic Case for Absurdism in Pedagogical Learning

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the use of absurdist techniques as cathartic process in pedagogical environments, primarily contextualized by Richard Brautigan's novel, Sombrero Fallout (1976). The essay will analyse Brautigan's writing style with focus on juxtaposition, Dadaist concerns, and stream of consciousness effects on literary freedom. Dadaism, as a sub-category of absurdism, employs various literary techniques, such as the cut-up method, stream of consciousness, and syllabic malleability and I present these techniques as viable for modern-day pedagogic use. It will analyse how utilization of these techniques can benefit Creative Writing students, with particular focus on autobiographical events as inspiration for creative output. The essay discusses authorial history to suggest absurdist writing techniques can function as a method for students, acting as a conduit to cathartic introspection in practice and in reasoning complex thoughts and feelings.

BACKGROUND

This essay explores the ways absurdism can be used as a form of cathartic learning for English and Creative Writing students through literary discourse. I aim to highlight the continued importance of absurdism and the ways students can develop their writing craft by utilizing absurdist techniques. This will be presented using the literary works of absurdist counterculture writer, Richard Brautigan, with a primary focus on their novella Sombrero Fallout (2012 [1976]) contextualizing the use of absurdist techniques to exercise socio-political fallacies and how this can be used as a therapeutic means of expression in pedagogical learning.

Earlier this year, I was provided the opportunity to teach Brautigan's poem All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, to undergraduate students as part of my formal pedagogical training. I have always admired, and been inspired by, the various works of Brautigan and, equally, fascinated by his life story and place within the 1960s and '70s counterculture arts scene. As a practitioner of absurdist literature before I even knew what absurdism was, I was thrilled to discover Brautigan's writing nearly a decade ago and have immersed myself in absurdist fiction, from Dadaist texts to online neo-dadaism, finding comfort in the fact the world has always been a strange and nonsensical experience. Absurdism is often considered to lack academic value, but this essay aims to dispel such beliefs, situating the absurd praxis in the pedagogical frame.

A point I found interesting in my teaching of All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace was how many students noted the duality of meaning in the words, questioning whether they were for or against the, at the time, developing technological world. My doctoral research focuses on the study of Dadaist lexical consideration, questioning the meaning and value of words themselves as a vehicle for illuminating the 'madness of the age,' (Gasiorek 2015: 334) surrounding the socio-political and economic climate of the First World War. Discussion among the students about the meaning of words in Brautigan's poem was interesting as they found value in the ambiguities, enabling them to find new avenues to create. From this, I began to think about ways absurdism can form a relevant pathway for creative writing practitioners to concerns they hold about the socio-political climate.

Absurdism as therapy can be held as a cathartic mode of expression, exhibiting deep unconscious thoughts through stream of consciousness writing or the Dadaist technique of cutting words from newspaper articles and re-arranging them at random to present their aversion to pro-war propaganda in the press – the same words, rearranged, were meaningless, and this was their artistic means of expressing opinions on of lexical value. We can utilize other expressive techniques to form an understanding of our conscious and unconscious states, cultivating enhanced personal reflection on confusing, or complicated, matters. In thinking about expressive writing, Catana Brown et al (2019) state this "may include the use of free writing and flow writing, stream of consciousness, journal writing, open dialogue and expressive creative writing," (Brown et al: 352) complimenting absurdist techniques with Freudian dream-like expression.

AGENT OF CHAOS

The internet is an agent of chaos. It simultaneously brings an immense information base to learn from, but it also creates civil division. When humans first discovered how to make fire, it brought warmth and cooked food, but also intentional injury and death. The internet and fire are examples of discoveries or inventions which have caused concern in the public conscious when introduced to periods of unprepared society. In All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, Brautigan allows the reader to question whether this was fear of technological advancement during the Cold War or an embracing message of hope of this technology setting humanity free from labour, able to pursue more soulful endeavours. The technology was an agent of chaos, an unknown.

Brautigan's Sombrero Fallout tells the story of an ice-cold black sombrero that falls from the sky and lands in front of the mayor, their aide, and an unemployed person, immediately causing division. Chaos ensues as crowds gather, arguing over how to approach the situation. The arguing leads to a riot, the riot leads to failed police involvement, the failed police involvement leads to military involvement, and so on, all while the sombrero sits untouched amongst the flaming wreckage. The sombrero, with all its unknowns, is an agent of chaos.

Sombrero Fallout taught me much about what is possible in fiction writing. Brautigan highlights dismay at disproportionately actioned scenarios witnessed every day, a cautionary story of mob

mentality reaction to complex issues. The complexity of the unknown is evident in the sombrero in Brautigan's story. The mayor attempts to dialectically reason a solution with their aide; however, the aide and the unemployed person disagree over who will pick up the sombrero with the aide believing it will bolster their political dreams and the unemployed person believing the mayor will reward them with a job. The situation is unknown because it was unprecedented to everybody in the story. The sombrero has created a chaotic scene with its presence, and everybody disagrees on how to proceed until the arguments devolve into nonsensical ramblings such as the mayor repeatedly yelling the licence plate number of a car he once owned. This devaluing of words and language is a Dadaist technique continued by Absurdist writers into the 60s and 70s counterculture used to convey empty gestures, a lack of answers, or deficiency in logical reasoning. It is in this nonsense we make sense of the nonsensical.

Rossen Ventzislavov (2014), writing on the topic of nonsense lyrics in music, notes syllabic nonsense, "usually defined as nonsense syllables or nonlexical vocables," (Ventzislavov: 510) as a possible subversion or short-sightedness, rather than a form of artistic anarchy. Ventzislavov sites Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da by The Beatles and the "la la la la la la la la" lyric in Kylie Minogue's Can't Get You out of My Head as examples of meaningless syllabic nonsense. (Ventzislavov: 510) This is certainly true of Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da with the titular lyric expressing meaningless events, imploring the listener not to dwell on mishaps. The lyric in Minogue's song could be considered a reflection on the madness caused by love, with love itself to be considered an agent of chaos.

The lyrics in Ventzislavov's examples are comparable to Hugo Ball's Dadaist nonsense poem 'Karawane', juxtaposed from various existing languages, 'for instance "jolifanto", alluding to the French for baby elephant and the "Men" of "goramen" to English, onomatopoeias such as "ba-umf" and "bung", and abstract sound clusters like "ssubudu", (Schaffner 2016: 124) creating a lexically abstract performance piece. Of course, Karawane was performed at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, so vocal and textual representations of this poem have variances in registry for the receiver. In typography, the words also do not need to follow form. They too can be presented in what could be considered an illogical

manner with lines of poetry presented in various fonts, shapes, text sizes, alignments, and any other way a writer could summon from the unconscious. On writing the album Kid A (2000) Radiohead lead singer, Thom Yorke, devised the lyrics by drawing cut-up fragments of text from a top hat as a means of addressing severe writer's block (Bogost, et al 2014: 125) echoing the cut-up literary techniques used by Dada artists. Yorke, however, utilized this technique as a tool to assist the creative process in what was a difficult period for the band following the tour of their critically acclaimed album OK Computer (1997). Yorke was attempting to reason with his writer's block similarly to how dada artists' experimentations,

> "with randomness in the early part of the twentieth century can be seen as a response to the sterile functionality of rationality and empiricism wrought by the Industrial Age and as a deliberate reaction against World War I," (Bogost, et al 2014:125)

It can be reasoned the cut-up Dadaist technique was therapeutic for Yorke in assisting with the creation of lyrics and the nonsensical, or random, nature of the words, irrespective of arrangement, mirrored the uncertainty of this period in Radiohead's history. Sombrero Fallout also contains a subplot about an author in the throes of a creative block as he writes of the sombrero; his writing comprises the main story, leading readers to question whether the sombrero story is, in fact, a narrative expression of the turmoil associated with creative block.

The decline in coherent discourse amongst the panic in Sombrero Fallout provides a legitimate question to the value of words. Nobody has produced any good ideas for the situation, and everybody is arguing. The citizens begin to hurl insults, which devolves into gibberish about old licence plate numbers and, in its devolution, Brautigan cautions irrationality seen in emotionally heated arguments or decisions. The quotes in these chapters are designed to be chaotic and confusing and the mayor crying because his aide will not stop crying is a direct reference to Brautigan writing about emotionally charged discourse.

Evidence of linguistic experimentation such as syllabic malleability, nonsense writing, non-sequiturs, and cut-up techniques used to convey real-world frustrations is evident in the works of Brautigan. Absurdist dada techniques were wide-reaching and evident in works by, amongst others,

Flann O'Brien, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Kennedy Toole. Franz Kafka utilized syllabic malleability as the speech of Gregor Samsa deteriorates in The Metamorphosis (2017 [1915]). Although not considered part of the dada movement, The Metamorphosis was published at the genesis of the dada movement with the story itself a commentary on personal socio-economic value when paternal employment expectations cannot be met (Anderson 2009: 85), presenting further evidence of linguistic experimentation as a credible means of cathartic expression.

Brautigan is known for exhibiting a "poetic sense of the absurd, filtered through a keen sense of the tragedy of life," (Cogan 2011: 78) and it is the elements of tragedy that inform absurdist textual subversion, testing the boundaries of the real. By unlocking unconscious thoughts through techniques such as stream of consciousness writing, writers can discover true feelings about difficult topics. This is akin to Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams (2015), where it is suggested the analysis of dreams can "reveal to us the genuine, significant source of the dream in the life of the day," (Freud: 136) and stream of consciousness writing can garner a similar result. Brautigan's narrative style is "about freeing language and fiction in general from the expectations of readers. Brautigan destroys the boundaries that are often set in place to both convey meaning and to allow the reader to follow the narrative," (Becker & Martin 2014: 105) and the combination of freedom and subversion helps Brautigan reason conflicting topics into narrative form. Sombrero Fallout begins with a writer "writing a scene, then ripping it up and throwing it in the trash. However, it takes on a life of its own, continuing without him," (Mills 2000: 17) reflecting Brautigan's rule-breaking narrative freedom in practice. Other counterculture writers of Brautigan's era often attempted to capture a utopian vision of America, but Brautigan wrote to subvert expectation, turning a figurative mirror toward global issues in his work (Becker & Martin 2014: 105), rendering the absurdities visible with analysis from the reader.

Reading Brautigan, and the texts of other such absurdist writers can be an enlightening experience. The freedom of form and language can open creative ideas for writers with a true embrace for the blankness of a page. Brautigan's free expression harboured an ability to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary, to turn a dull scene into a magical

one. There were no creative boundaries and reading Sombrero Fallout for the first time imbued me with the spirit of pure imagination, inspiring future creative endeavours. Absurdism, in "bending the boundaries of the established literary form," (MacFarlane 2007: 75) has an incredible power to creatively unlock the subconscious, exploring overwhelming sensations.

CATHARTIC USE

Stream of consciousness writing is often confused with automatic writing, so it is reasonable to make this distinction since automatic writing takes a spiritual form where the writer is unaware of the action of writing. Surrealists like André Breton, encouraged by Freud's dream theory, engaged in stream of consciousness techniques, leading to attempts at automatic writing as a literary method (Young 1983: 25), but stream of consciousness is a Dadaist cathartic means of exploring frustrations or confusion.

The cathartic elements of stream of consciousness writing can be seen in journaling. Journalising provides a method of externalizing thoughts, memories, and opinions. It can be a useful way to "work through issues caused by stress and trauma by creating distance to observe the problem more objectively," (Dodd 2020: 115) and this can even extract insights that may previously have lay dormant. The liberating act of journaling, abstracting from creative constraints like the writer in Sombrero Fallout and, by extension, Brautigan himself, can be beneficial for writers and non-writers alike since it can bring relief from the human condition. Dadaists would practice stream of consciousness, "where whatever comes to mind is written down, abandoning any concern about structure, grammar or punctuation," (Dodd 2020: 115) creating cathartic pieces of work focusing on the madness of the age.

Absurdist techniques can often produce results considered to be random. Although this may be true to an extent, I would suggest the better term would be visceral since, stemming from a place of legitimate concern, the creative output can often contain the rawest elements of the subconscious or deliberate acts of lexical or visual manipulation to highlight the absurdities of circumlocution. As Maxine Greene (1972) notes, both "Vonnegut and Brautigan explicitly satirize technology and abstraction in the name of kindness, concern, and love," (Green: 177) exemplifying the fact absurdist techniques can be

used as a valuable means of cathartic expression and not random works of diminished value. Writers like Brautigan expressed various concerns on both personal and external matters, rarely as a narrative jeremiad, but as an active means of reasoning thoughts.

Brautigan's absurdist texts often explore difficult ideas in the United States, such as views on abortion, violence in America, and the idea of national identity. Brautigan expresses the latter in The Hawkline Monster (1976 [1974]) where a duo of western gunmen find themselves in the state of Hawaii. They "have gone so far West that they are on the border of the East, and as a result they are disoriented and horrified at the dislocation," (Mills 2000: 12) and this could be an early attribution to Brautigan's fascination with Japan while, himself, being from the pacific northwest. Japanese themes are a continued motif throughout his work, from the 'Wilderness Haiku Alligator' in A Confederate General from Big Sur (1973 [1964]) to the Japanese cemetery in An Unfortunate Woman: A Journey (2001 [1994]). Brautigan lived in both Japan and the United States and married a Japanese native, Akiko Yoshimura, in 1977 (Giles 2018: 241). Sombrero Fallout contains the subtitle A Japanese Novel on account of the writer in the story being in love with a Japanese woman. The writer ponders "if there had ever been a Country and Western song written about loving a Japanese woman. He didn't think so," (Brautigan: 199) and in The Tokyo Montana Express (1980 [1979]) Brautigan refers to the chapters as stations between Tokyo and Montana, where he was spending his time between 1976 and 1978. Throughout his career, Brautigan reasoned with this cultural duality via the means of geographical poetic juxtaposition, like the Dadaist photomontage art of Hannah Höck. Brautigan experimented with the juxtaposition of west and east, with emphasis where "the stereotypical violent mobile American identity forms a faultline with the stereotypical still, composed, Japanese identity, sometimes in the same character," (Mills 2000: 15) and this same character can be said to be Brautigan himself, confronting ideas of his own identity.

USE IN PEDAGOGY

In my teaching and prior experience undertaking Autobiographical studies, absurdist techniques have proven valuable. From a teaching perspective, they can help students remember events and innermost feelings from their past. They can also help students reason with present feelings and future anxieties, providing a conduit from the brain to the page. The technique or techniques they use will depend on what they would like to portray in their writing. To discover which elements they would like to reason, experimentation with various techniques should be encouraged as they might find multiple entangled issues. Like Brautigan, they might find they want to integrate more than one concern into their creative work and juxtaposing them can enhance the feeling of absurdity in their writing.

Some students may be more open than others to share autobiographic events, particularly difficult stories. Anne S. Rasmussen (2010) notes the "relationship between Openness and rehearsal of autobiographical memories suggests that people who are open to explore their own inner experiences might use their memories more in everyday life than people who are less so," (Rasmussen: 775) and so this is where techniques like, for example, stream of consciousness may be beneficial. Stream of consciousness is advisable for use with closed students. It may help provoke memories and feelings, creating a transformative process. Indeed, those who are open with their feelings may not find stream of consciousness as useful as those who are not. Those who are open tend to use this for "identity-defining purposes, consistent with their enhanced intellectual, creative, and narrative abilities. They also experience their memories with a stronger sense of life story relevance," (Rasmussen; 785) but I would contend stream of consciousness writing to still be beneficial as a discovery tool for repressed emotions or feelings.

The cut-up technique used by Dadaists is a useful technique for those who are perhaps not as open about their personal lives, making it difficult to extract autobiographical creative writing from. Our past works in duality with how we inform the present and so this may cause unwillingness to, not only recall difficult events but to view these events in an absurdist manner. Indeed, some may find it trivializes their experiences. As an alternative, the cut-up technique could provide a means of indirect expression, for example, if a student were to use stream of consciousness or write consciously, about an issue from their past and then cut out words and phrases from their piece, before rearranging them. Taken further, if the words themselves were cut up, the resulting work could take the form of syllabic nonsense, akin to the poetry produced by Tzara and Ball. This could, in theory, produce interesting works

of autobiographic poetry, abstract and ambiguous enough for the student to be comfortable sharing.

Using the stream of consciousness technique "the subjective becomes a means of reapproaching fiction's obligation to explore and analyse collective and historical phenomena," (Wallace 2011: 234) and so the output is relative to the experiences of the writer. A case can be made for a lack of stability in a piece of writing using this method. Stream of consciousness does, at times, produce complete nonsense, but this nonsense is to be critically analysed by the practitioner to extract meaning. There will be times where no meaning is evident but, unlike with stimulated recall, stream of consciousness writing cultivates an environment where deeper truths can be found (Yong & Ng 2006: 103) and so this provides a suitable method for helping students find strengthened reflective practice through creative practice.

Australian poet, Les Murray, devised a three-point model of poetry, consisting of the conscious mind, the dreaming unconscious mind, and the body. Murray reasoned clarity of thought and technical skill, imaginative images to enhance the conscious thought, and conjuring metre and sound to please the reader's senses would be optimal (Roberts 2012: 153) and this also forms the all-encompassing and measured style of Brautigan. Brautigan's literary work – be it a poetry collection or narrative prose – could be considered as devised with a focused lens on internal and external struggles, executed with adept technical ability and dream-like poetic imagery and sounds. Combined, Murray's three-point model draws many comparisons to absurdist methodology. Joanna Gavins (2013) explains a framework called Text World Theory where writers formulate mental representations of any language they encounter, be it textual or verbal, factoring the way they perceive the language. Gavins suggests these "mental representations have the potential to become as richly detailed and immersive as the real-world stimulations from which they spring," (Gavins: 6) and, with further development, more representations, or worlds, can be created. This is comparable to Murray's model of poetry as it combines thought, imagination, and sound. This is a subjective experience due to the perception of language and one practitioner, hearing or reading the same language as another, could lead to widely differing results, echoing the dada questioning of lexical value.

Donald Davidson (1982) notes objectivity to be "the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures," (Davidson: 327) and his theory suggests, when two creatures interact with an object, their concept of the situation forms in their language, the baseline of their shared concept of truth. As such, this concept "makes sense of the claim they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world," (Davidson: 327) and so Davidson concludes rationality to be a social trait since it is exclusive to communicators. This links to Murray's three-point model since, if complex issues can be communicated through dream-like imagery in written language then, as communicators, we can therefore use this as a tool for rationalisation, even with the self. This is evident in the writing of Norman Mailer. Andrew Wilson (2008) notes Mailer's imagination became fixed on attempting to define the Vietnam war, channelling his energies toward stream of consciousness writing as a cathartic measure (Wilson: 94) and so, with the triangulation of consciousnesses (of the event), the unconsciousness (of imagination), and communication (his writing) he was able to communicate his protests via a "release of internalised energies," (Wilson: 94) which I propose would also be useful for students.

Absurd praxis has been used as a means of drawing the true self from practitioners in the form of symbolic-experimental therapy. Diane Gehart (2016) notes, in this form, absurdity is used "to perturb the system in a compassionate and caring way," (Gehart: 175) sometimes in the form of brutal truth, executed in the spirit of caring, somewhat similar to an intervention, but extreme to an absurd degree. Even though this could draw legitimate and powerful emotions from the recipient of personal truth, it perhaps would not prove such a suitable method in an involuntary creative learning environment. Therapy of the absurd often, however, employs "humor, playfulness, and silliness," (Gehart: 175) as a disarming tool for discussion of serious concerns, allowing therapists to "invite themselves as well as their clients into a more resourceful position in relation to the problem," (Gehart: 175) and this, I would suggest, is a more realistic and measured approach to coaxing creative inspiration from students since it would cause less upset, particularly in a non-voluntary group. Paradoxical techniques are also used in therapy. This consists of a therapist taking a symptom and exaggerating it to such a degree the client can see how absurd

their concerns are (Gehart: 175) and, if we replace therapist with writer, we are faced with exactly what absurdist writers do. They therapize themselves through creative expression, reasoning with their irrationalities and legitimate concerns.

Absurdism, and partially dada, is a proven disrupter. By disrupting the self, disrupting order and meaning, it has allowed writers to, not only disrupt their own beliefs and understanding of the world but has allowed them a means of issuing a direct challenge to their concerns. It can do this for students too, providing a cathartic approach to reasoning with their autobiographic events and confronting concerns or confusions in the present.

CONCLUSION

The emphasis on absurdism in creative writing pedagogy is crucial as it emphasizes the procedural exchange of ideas which require an alternative gaze. Subjective communication on the human condition is paramount in cultivating a deeper understanding of interpersonal and introspective relationships with the wider world. Through language dissolution, juxtapositions, logical fallacy, cyclical dialogue, the disruption of linear narrative, non-sequiturs, and, in the case of Sombrero Fallout extreme escalation, absurdism provides an essential tool which, unlike the technology in All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, has proven able to set us free.

Absurdist techniques can, and should, be utilized in pedagogy for their flexibility and variety, matching suitable techniques to individuals who might benefit from practicing them.

I have found absurd techniques useful in my autobiographical writing. In formulating ideas, unearthing unprocessed emotions or views, and reasoning my worldly concerns, these techniques have had a positive impact on my writing practice, and I believe can be helpful for others too. Dadaists were attempting to cure the madness of their time. These sentiments are echoed today and so the absurd is as necessary now as it ever was.

Brautigan's absurdist texts emphasize juxtaposition as resolution. Brautigan was able to write novels that standalone as stories, but with a wider analysis of the author, personal conflicts of identity and of the writing process itself are witnessed within the texts. Absurdism remains relevant today in placing personal and external troubles under its microscope for scrutiny. Its use in autobiographical modules is evident, but I believe it to also be useful in all other sub-sections of creative writing with its ability to remedy writer's block to its role as a disrupter. Absurdism encourages us to be free from form and frame, propelling writers toward ambitious literary endeavours.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Read is undertaking the third year of his PhD creative writing research at Cardiff Metropolitan University, where he is also an Academic Tutor. His literary work focuses on the practice of absurdism and other avant-garde movements. He has been published by Filling Station, ArtHole, and Ink Sweat, & Tears, amongst others.