

Email: xxx

Book Review: *Surrealism at Play*. By Susan Laxton. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019. 363 pp.

This book rewrites the history of Surrealist art through the perspective of play, understood as a 'mode of avant-garde engagement' (p1). Laxton focuses on the period when Surrealism gained its greatest momentum: 1922-1939, using a theoretical framework that crucially involves Walter Benjamin's writings on Surrealism and play, especially his concept of *Spielraum*, 'room-for-play'. Laxton employs *Spielraum* to denote a specifically modern aesthetics where ludic experimentation interacts with modern technologies, but which neither aims at producing reifiable art objects nor glorifies the utilitarian logic of labour. Such non-productive technological play is manifest in a range of Surrealist artworks and practices: Man Ray's rayographs that sabotage photography's function of realist representation (chapter 1); Eugène Atget's Paris street photos that are transformed by Man Ray's selecting and collecting processes into an irrational drift that trails through the city, re-experienced as a Surrealist playground (chapter 2); the famous game of the *cadavre exquis*, operating as a destructive 'automatic mechanism' (p139) challenging regulative uses of technology (chapter 3); and wordplay (chapter 4), starting with Raymond Roussel's ludic narrative strategies, through Michel Leiris's linguistic *bifur/biffure* (erasure), to the intersections between puns, image, and sculptural form in Joan Miró and Alberto Giacometti. Chapter 5 concludes by considering how sustained debates about play emerged from the 1930s-50s in four key theories expounded by Johan Huizinga, Émile Benveniste, Roger Caillois, and André Breton. Laxton thoughtfully discusses their common concern with the relation between play, the sacred, and art, positing the point where play breaks away from aesthetics as the postwar moment when art loses its 'auratic autonomy' (p268), which is foreboded by Surrealism. The book aptly addresses what was at stake for the

Surrealists in the ludic. Though Surrealists delighted in play's purposelessness and uselessness, they clearly considered play to be of immense value: as an intrinsically valuable and therefore anti-utilitarian activity; a method to challenge the modern obsession with work and productivity; a liberating alternative to instrumental rationality; and a transgression of hierarchies of high and low, seriousness and frivolity. These aspects of play run deep in theories of play that maximise the latter's subversive force, and are constitutive of the avant-garde's very nature. One might wonder, however, whether there is a degree of Surrealist romanticisation of play as pure transgression, without fully recognising the destructive aspects of play that can perfectly collude with and reinforce the very institutions and utilitarian logic which Surrealists rejected (for instance the implosion of work and play into each other which Huizinga darkly predicts)? Another implied question concerns the ludic in Surrealism's literary, anthropological, and philosophical strands, for Laxton's book focuses on artworks and visual materials and is best read as an art history study, despite the general term 'Surrealism' in its title. This certainly does not undercut the argumentative force and coherence of the study, though Laxton's reference to *Nadja*, *Paris peasant*, and Leiris's experimental poetics confirms that there is still much to say about literary and textual playfulness. Overall, Laxton's elegantly written study engages with the very topical question of play and points to future research on avant-garde and contemporary art along ludic critical lines.

Xiaofan Amy Li

Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge

word count: 515w