

Re-envisioning the Theatre of the Absurd: The Lacanian Spectator and the Work
of Fernando Arrabal, Arthur Adamov and Eugène Ionesco

Submitted by Lara Alexandra Cox, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in French, July 2011.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge all those who have given me personal support over the course of the three years of writing this thesis: Jennifer Barnes, Fiona Handyside, Helen Vassallo, Tobias Stevens, Paul Scott and Graham Matthews. I would also like to thank those who kindly agreed to proofread my work, including Hannah Lewis-Bill, Jon Lewis and Alice Barnaby. My thanks go to my parents, Natasha and Tony, for their financial and emotional support. Finally, to my two supervisors, Lisa Downing and David Jones, I would like to express my sincere gratitude. This thesis would not have been possible without their support, constructive criticism and continued encouragement.

Abstract

This thesis considers the interface between the theatre of the absurd and Lacanian cultural criticism. It conceptualises a 'theoretical spectator' produced by the play texts and examines its implications for a politics of spectatorship in a postmodern age. This methodology seeks to escape the trap of existentialist criticism that has dominated ideas on the theatre of the absurd since Martin Esslin's coining of the term in 1961. I posit the modern-day relevance of absurd theatre, by putting the plays under examination into dialogue with Lacanian and current post-Lacanian cultural and political thought. The chapters theorise various 'spectatorial positions' produced by three prominent playwrights of the theatre of the absurd: Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Fernando Arrabal. I seek to confirm and bolster my theoretical arguments by turning to contemporary empirical reaction to modern-day performances of two other absurdist playwrights, Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. One of the key postulates is that the theatre of these playwrights chimes with Lacan's notion of the split subject. Etymologically, the word 'absurd' refers to division; thematically and aesthetically, absurd theatre bears witness to the erosion of subjective stability. The conceptual parity between Lacanian theory and absurd theatre permits me to stake out a new critical pathway with regard to this body of theatre that paves the way for its re-politicisation in a postmodern world.

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