

Oxbridge & Tyrone surrealists: Monty Python & Kevin McAleer

When something in art is a bit new or different, it gets called 'surreal' or 'surrealist' (or 'absurd' or 'absurdist'). There was a movement in literature, visual art and film that started in France in the 1920s, that its practitioners referred to as surrealism, and there were surrealist groups elsewhere in Europe, in Britain, the US, and in the (then) Soviet Union.

This week we'll look at some comedy that is often described in this way and try to work out what is surreal about it, and maybe ask the question: is surreal just a portmanteau term for weird, or does it mean more? There is actually a surrealist manifesto, and there was a belief among the founding surrealists (just as there is among many artists and thinkers) that an excess of rational thought and of 'bourgeois' values can lead to the sort of self-justifying aggression and nationalism that ends in war. Therefore, surrealism characteristically mocks many elements of life that we feel safe and at home with, demonstrates the emptiness of so much human activity, and celebrates what is strange and dangerous, but with the fundamentally rational purpose: to avoid the madness of war. You can read the surrealist manifesto here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealist_Manifesto

You will also see this on the main Wiki entry on surrealism -

Freud's work with free association, dream analysis, and the unconscious was of utmost importance to the Surrealists in developing methods to liberate imagination. They embraced idiosyncrasy, while rejecting the idea of an underlying madness. Later, Salvador Dalí explained it as: "There is only one difference between a madman and me. I am not mad."

But bear in mind that almost every significant artistic development in the first half of the last century is said to have been influenced by the theories and practice of Sigmund Freud. (Bear in mind also that Freud was fascinated by the psychology of jokes).

However, we shall not be deflected into the poetry of André Breton or the paintings of Salvador Dalí (his lobster telephone is on one of the shop signs on

this website) or Max Ernst (above) or the photography of Man Ray or the delicious films of Luis Bunuel, because our interest here is in the transcendent art of comedy.

Monty Python's Flying Circus seemed more fashionable than funny when the four series of their sketches were first broadcast in 1969-1974. Plenty of people enjoyed them, and plenty of other people felt they ought to enjoy them.

I began to begin enjoying the Monty Python programmes when I watched them on Japanese TV in about 1977, maybe because each episode had Japanese subtitles (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqbVdNs7vrM>) – and maybe even a voice over, explaining the joke to unaware viewers, who may have thought all English people behaved in this way. Forty-five episodes and four series later, and three years after the last broadcast in the UK, I came to enjoy Monty Python's Flying Circus, a bit.¹ Early in 1976 Monty Python's Flying Circus was the most popular TV show in Japan. The title, translated as *The Gay Boys Dragon Hour*. Each show was followed by an hour long programme analysing the jokes and skits.

As ever, Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Python has more facts about Monty Python than you will ever need to know except, because it fits this week's theme, that their work is described as 'absurdist comedy'.

Many Monty Python sketches are still well-known. Most people know or know about the Dead Parrot and Spam sketches. The Spam sketch somehow led to Spam being the name we use for junk e-mail, except possibly in Korea, where spam (the food) is a luxury gift.

We saw the 'Nudge-nudge', (Wink-wink) sketch last week. Here are two surreal examples of Monty Python now follow:

1. Confuse-A-Cat: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2Je1CEPkUM>
2. Ministry of Silly Walks: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV2ViNJFZC8>

¹ For more on the Japanese reception of Monty Python see this blog: <http://worldofokonomy.wordpress.com/tag/monty-python-in-japan/>



Kevin MacAleer is a comedian from Omagh in Co. Tyrone, in Ireland. He had his first break at a club called *The Comedy Yoke* which was held weekly at the Club 29, usually a discotheque (how quaint that sounds) in the basement of the Harcourt Hotel at 29 Harcourt Street, Dublin. (The doorman's name was Frank Teeth).

The Comedy Yoke hosted some brilliant and some highly successful comedians: Oscar McLennan (pictured right), Keith Allen, MacAleer, and many unknowns and even entirely disappeared comedians, among whom the names Stillorgan Declan, Lysergic Leonard, Sven Accutron (the Dane with a sense of humour) and Frank Hanlon still ring a dusty bell.



For Kevin MacAleer, *The Comedy Yoke* provided a springboard for what is known in the trade as his breakthrough moment. Here he is remembering it fondly although the name of the Club escapes him:

Q: When did it become clear to you that you were destined for a life in comedy?

A: I drifted into comedy in my mid-20s. I did an open-spot at a club in Dublin* - I didn't have any material but I got a few laughs, and I was completely hooked after that. Then I moved to London and there were dozens of clubs there, and suddenly there was a chance of making a living doing something I enjoyed.

After **The Comedy Yoke* came national exposure on a TV show called *Nighthawks*, and soon the shy unknown from the quiet lanes of Omagh came close to, if not Transatlantic celebrity, then certainly celebrity on both sides of the Irish Sea, which does not often happen. Indeed, besides appearing on late night chat shows and probably getting on close terms with other celebrities, MacAleer was given his own column in a national newspaper (see his writings on <http://www.kevinmcaleer.com/index.html>).

Here's Kevin MacAleer on grand form conflating a football commentary with the rituals of the Church of Rome:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4F21YRRIOB8&list=RD024F21YRRIOB8>

[Beginning to just after 2 minutes]. And here he is on British TV, *Friday Night Live*, in the early 1980s giving a talk illustrated with photographs of owls and an easygoing kangaroo: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FMjCB5-xw8> [see it all: 7" 19']. Here's some of what he says, while he's showing us these creatures:



You take four normal people. Invite them into your home. Tie them down to the armchair. Ask them a few personal questions. Tickle them a bit. And this is what you get.

[Points at owl 4] He's the big one...

[Points at owl 1] This poor bastard - no arms...

[Points at owl 3] She's got arms...

[Points at left-hand wing of owl 2] That's one of them there...

[Points at right-hand wing of owl 4] ...and that's the other one over there...



Here's a quote from the Northern Ireland culture website that also uses the word absurdist again, so this must be relevant:

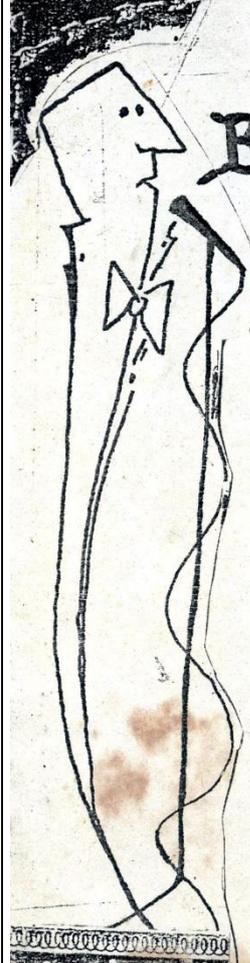
MacAlear's hyper-paranoid persona knows the world is watching him and duly wears his foil-lined crash

helmet to stop spies picking up transmissions. All this **absurdist** comedy is delivered in the dilatory manner of a farmer telling a stalling tale while leaning on a gate, chewing a blade of grass.

And that's it for surrealism and comedy. If time and circumstances permit, we may have a chance to see a bit of surrealist film. Finally, here's an original poster for *The Comedy Yoke*.

27th FRIDAY MARCH TONIGHT 8.30
11.00

Guarantee
THE COMEDY YOKE
Guarantee



Billy McGrath
COMPERE

DOWNSTAIRS
at
THE "29" CLUB,
HOLYROOD HOTEL,
29/30 HARCOURT STREET,
DUBLIN 2.
FRIDAYS 8.30-11.00

introduces, direct from nowhere:
FRANK 'RAGING BULL' HANLON
OSCAR McLENNAN
TOM McGINTY
STILLORGAN DECLAN
PORRICK

PLUS + PLUS + PLUS + PLUS + PLUS + PLUS + PLUS
THE VERY WONDERFUL & SIGNIFICANT
PUNTER in

THE AUDIENCE SPOT

The Comedy Yoke at the 29 Club, The Harcourt Hotel, 29 Harcourt Street, Dublin, ran for about 3 months in 1982 before being transferred to new premises following an unexpected change of management.