Linguistic Lunacy as Transgressive Practice
Anna Katharina Schaffner

What are artists and poets to do when they consider reality to be totally beyond the pale, when real life is far worse than the most radically exaggerated and biting satires could ever be? What are they to do when all of society – its values, its rituals, its beliefs, its codes and symbols – has become so despicable and loathsome that they no longer find it sufficient to criticise individual aspects of it, but want to renounce the entire thing? What are artists to do if the historical circumstances require a critique which is so radical that it can accept nothing as given, a critique which renounces the most basic forms of social and cultural consensus?

This is how the Dadaists, in particular Hugo Ball and Raoul Hausmann, assessed the cultural circumstances during and immediately after the First World War in Zurich and in Berlin. They were looking for the most radical and transgressive gesture possible to express their disgust for what they considered an utterly corrupted and debased age. And they found it not in discursive and semantic statements, not in political, sexual or religious taboo breaking, but on a different level. They found it in the withdrawal of sense and in the revocation of the most basic form of social consensus, which is the adherence to the standards of enlightened reason. An age where the values of logic have led to the maddest outcomes – to a barbaric war and effacement of human life on a yet unknown scale – can neither be fully captured nor cured by means of logic, they felt.

The Dadaists renounced the prerogatives of reason and rationality, and instrumentalised its very opposite for their poetry: madness. However, their madness is of course deliberate, in fact it is a very reasonable and conceptually refined poetic and cultural strategy. They programmatically drew the rug of linguistic and logical certainty from underneath their audiences' feet, and effectuated their critique of reason performatively on the level of language. Language is not only the main means of communication and thus the most stable supporting pillar of a culture and its values, but also determines the range of concepts and epistemological frameworks, and thus what is speakable and thinkable. Language, as Saussure has pointed out, is a form of social contract, an agreement to enable effective communication between the members of a linguistic community. The Dadaists broke with that contract, and thus symbolically with all that comes with it.

The most important rhetorical devices of the mad are the creation of paradox and the utterance of partly or entirely non-referential statements. Lacan describes

madness, more particularly schizophrenia, explicitly as a linguistic disturbance: meaning, he argues, is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier, and he defines schizophrenia as a breakdown of this signifying chain, which leaves only a rubble of fragmented and isolated signifiers.[1]

In utterances of the mentally disturbed, the field of semantics turns into unstable, volatile territory, for causal links are often abolished or remain obscure and private, and the established linguistic and logical consensus is thus undermined. In dadaist poetry, the symbolic order of signs is similarly violated – but on purpose. Linguistic lunacy is an interventionist tool rather than an involuntary state or condition. In fact it is foolishness with system, and thus of course no insanity at all. They use the badge of lunacy, and also the fools' licence of freedom of speech, in order to express the most radical cultural critique possible. The dadaists counter the deadly logic of their age with a programmatic withdrawal of sense, and thereby confront the people with their own madness, which they magnify and exaggerate and drive to its utmost consequences. Their weapons are irrationality, paradox and the zero message.

*

Ruptures in the signifying chain can be found on many different linguistic levels in dadaist poetry, ranging from the level of semantic compatibility to grammar, morphology, syllables and down to the singular letter. The programmatically irrational approach is most clearly visible on the level of semantic compatibility. The deliberate creation of paradox, absurdity and contradiction by means of bringing together words and images which are neither conceptually nor semantically compatible is perhaps the best-known poetic dada strategy.[2]

> *weh unser guter kaspar ist tot*
> warum bist du ein stern geworden oder eine kette aus was-
>   ser an einem heißen wirbelwind oder ein euter aus
>   schwarzem licht oder ein durchsichtiger ziegel an der
>   stöhnenden trommel des felsigen wesens[3]

---

[1] Cf. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso, 1991.

[2] This strategy has later been explored by the Surrealists much more systematically.

[3] Hans Arp, "Die Schwalbenhode". In: Hans Arp, *Gesammelte Gedichte*. Wiesbaden: Limes, 1963, p. 25.

The creation of paradox can be implemented on the level of syntax, where causal relationships between concepts and sentence parts are suggested that are logically not possible or contradictory. To cite just a few examples: in Hans Arp's *Die Schwalbenhode* (The Swallow Testicle), verse one, *weh unser guter kaspar ist tot* (alas our good kaspar is dead), from 1920, the poetic persona asks "why did you turn into a star or a chain of water on a hot whirlwind or an udder made of black light or a transparent tile on the groaning drum of the rocky creature".[4]

> *te gri ro ro*
> te gri ro ro gri ti gloda sisi dül fejin iri
> back back glü glodül ül irisi glü bü bü da da
> ro ro gro dülhack bojin gri ti back
> denn
> berge mit eingebauten lärmapparaten
> apportieren erzene schmetterlinge[5]

In the first verse of Arp's *te gri ro ro* (no date), after a three line sequence of non-referential syllables, a causal explanation for the jumble of sounds is promised by the cohesive link "denn" (because): "because mountains with integrated noise apparatus retrieve bronze butterflies". This pattern, also adhered to in the subsequent verses, deliberately mocks the reader's quest for coherence and sense. An explanation is promised by the causal conjunction, but subtly withheld. The syntactic compatibility of Arp's lines contrasts starkly with the semantic incompatibility: mountains can not be agents which retrieve something etc. The text grossly violates pragmatic selection restrictions.

A very similar principle is at work in *Die Hyperbel vom Krokodilcoiffeur und dem Spazierstock* (The Hyperbola of the crocodile hairdresser and the walking stick) (1919), a collaborative piece by Arp, Walter Serner and Tristan Tzara, where mining lamps are retrieved from warts, and dumplings made out of nails are catapulted onto drift ice by singing. Moreover, words are fused into compounds which are in themselves of an incongruous nature, like the "crocodile hairdresser" in the title, or "marmalade belt" and "last supper marshals".

> *Die Hyperbel from Krokodilcoiffeur und dem Spazierstock*
> das elmsfeuer rast um die bärte der wiedertäufer

---

[4] All translations are by the author.

[5] Hans Arp, "te gri ro ro". In: Hans Arp, Hugo Ball [et. al.]: *Dada Gedichte. Dichtungen der Gründer*. Zurich: Verlag die Arche, 1957, p. 12.

> sie holen aus ihren warzen die zechenlampen
> und stecken ihre steiße in die pfützen
> er sang ein nagelknödel auf treibeis
> [...]
> auf dem marmeladengürtel turnen
> hinein ins abendbrot
> glitzerblöde affenbolde
> wiener hintere zollamtsvokabeln voll grauslichkeit
> der zirkusfeindliche kiel
> hänge das profil
> im internationalen kanäle
> abendmahlmarchäl[l]e
> quartettmephistophele
> skandierskandäle[6]

The recipient finds her or himself catapulted into a state of semantic confusion. There is no way in which one could, or should, for that matter, establish a determinate meaning of texts of this kind. Hermeneutic and any other logic-orientated approaches are frustrated, and the recipient is forced to proceed away from searching for meaning on the semantic level towards pursuing it elsewhere. Similarly, a psychiatrist would not primarily try to derive meaning from the puzzling verbal output of very acute cases, but would instead try to determine the causes of the linguistic and logical disturbances. A symptom – be it verbal or physical – is only the visible manifestation of a disease, indicative of damage which is to be found elsewhere.

<div align="center">*</div>

Hugo Ball is perhaps the most perceptive theorist of the strategy of deliberate linguistic lunacy. In his diary *Flucht aus der Zeit* (Flight out of Time) he refers to it in several passages. "An irrational age", he writes for instance, "will beget irrational art". Art, like the times from which it emerges, he proclaims, will be characterised by paradox and irrationality.[7] He maintains that the times are so

---

[6] Hans Arp, Walter Serner and Tristan Tzara, "Die Hyperbel vom Krokodilcoiffeur und dem Spazierstock." In: *Dada. Zurich – Paris.* Ed. Michel Giroud. Paris: Édition Jean-Michel Place, 1981, pp. 62–64

[7] Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit.* Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1992, pp. 74–75.
"In einer Zeit wie der unsern, in der die Menschen täglich von den ungeheuerlichsten Dingen bestürmt werden, ohne sich über die Eindrücke Rechenschaft geben zu können, in solcher

utterly contaminated, that nothing of it can be respected, and that its depravities can only be countered with calculated madness. "Our deliberate folly, our enthusiasm for illusion will wreck them."[8] The Cabaret in Zurich is a dionysian howl against the bankruptcy of ideas, the death of idealism and the atrocities of the war, which irreparably damaged the belief in a positive development of history and humanity.

Ball proclaims that no existing artistic technique can cope with this demise: "Neither art, politics or confessions are able to cope with this breach in the dyke, only the farce and the bloody travesty remain."[9] "The most lurid pamphlets were not enough to pour enough leach and scorn upon the generally prevailing hypocrisy",[10] he proclaims, and touches upon the very essence of the problem: a critique as essential, radical and profound as required by these circumstances, one which penetrates into the very foundations of culture, can no longer be expressed with the existing means of communication. A more radical strategy is required.

Language has been recklessly instrumentalised in the Wilhelminian propaganda machinery, from which it emerged spoiled and tainted, Ball suggests.[11] In Ball's "verses without words" from 1916, references to a world extrinsic to the language system are blurred and rendered ambiguous, partly even abandoned, for the sake of a retreat into the intricate and autonomous interplay of its sounds. This strategy, Ball argues, is necessitated by the specific circumstances of the times.[12] In these poems, the most famous one being "Karawane", Ball aims at evoking and touching upon concepts, alluding to them

---

Zeit wird das ästhetische Produzieren zur Diät. Alle lebendige Kunst aber wird irrational, primitiv und komplexhaft sein, eine Geheimsprache führen und Dokumente nicht der Erbauung, sondern der Paradoxie hinterlassen".

[8] *Op.cit.*, p. 92. "Jedes Wort, das hier gesprochen und gesungen wird, besagt wenigstens das eine, daß es dieser erniedrigenden Zeit nicht gelungen ist, uns Respekt abzunötigen. Was wäre auch respektabel und imponierend an ihr? Ihre Kanonen? Unsere große Trommel übertönt sie. Ihr Idealismus? Er ist längst zum Gelächter geworden, in seiner populären und seiner akademischen Ausgabe. Die grandiosen Schlachtfeste und kannibalischen Heldentaten? Unsere freiwillige Torheit, unsere Begeisterung für die Illusion wird sie zuschanden machen".
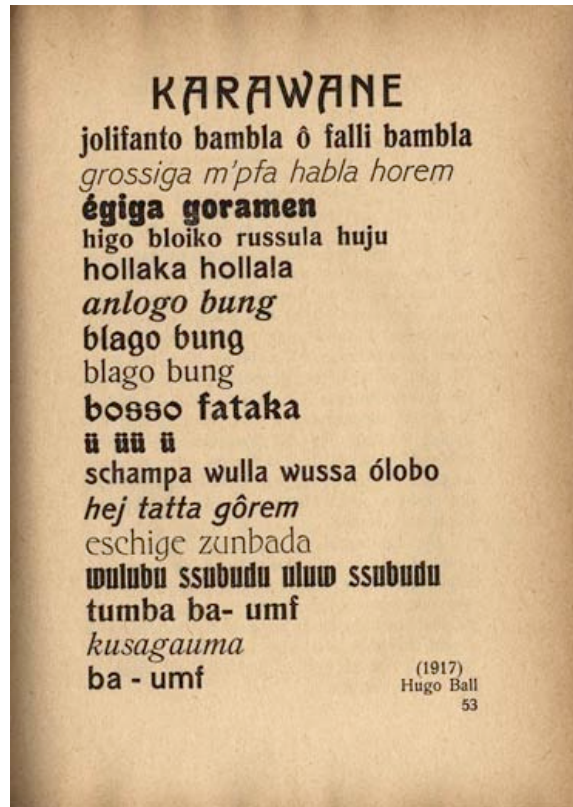
[9] *Op.cit.*, p. 99. "Da keinerlei Kunst, Politik oder Bekenntnis diesem Dammbruch gewachsen scheinen, bleibt nur die Blague und die blutige Pose".

[10] *Op.cit.,* p. 101. "Die grellsten Pamphlete reichten nicht hin, die allgemein herrschende Hypokrisie gebührend mit Lauge und Hohn zu begießen".

[11] *Op.cit.*, p. 106.

[12] *Op.cit.*, p. 101.

rather than clearly signifying them.[13] Ball's poem circumvents the rational faculties of the recipient in order to penetrate into the deepest strata of memory and to reawaken buried subconscious and irrational aspects. "Karawane", like music, is a direct and immediate appeal to the senses and to the imagination. This is a hermetic kind of poetry, a rejection of clear discursive statements for the benefit of musical, evocative, non-rational patterns.

Hugo Ball, "Karawane", 1916

In the opening manifesto of the first Dada evening at the Cabaret Voltaire, Ball envisages an anarchic language, a personal individualised vocabulary, corresponding to his own moods and perceptions – an idea which runs entirely

---

[13] *Op.cit.*, p. 102. "Wir suchten der isolierten Vokabel die Fülle einer Beschwörung, die Glut eines Gestirns zu verleihen. Und seltsam: die magisch erfüllte Vokabel beschwor und gebar einen *neuen* Satz, der von keinerlei konventionellem Sinn bedingt und gebunden war. An hundert Gedanken zugleich anstreifend, ohne sie namhaft zu machen, ließ dieser Satz das urtümlich spielende, aber versunkene, irrationale Wesen des Hörers erklingen; weckte und bestärkte er die untersten Schichten der Erinnerung. Unsere Versuche streiften Gebiete der Philosophie und des Lebens, von denen sich unsere ach so vernünftige, altkluge Umgebung kaum etwas träumen ließ".

counter to the principle of functional communication.[14] Ball aspires to deploy only words which he himself has invented in an effort to abstain from using existing language. The usage of a hermetic, personal, mystic language is yet another rhetoric specificity of the mad. They withdraw to a private usage of signs and symbols that is incomprehensible to everybody else, for all symbolic exchanges depend on the observance of the terms of social conventions.

Ball calls Dada a "foolsgame out of nowhere, which involves all higher questions; a gladiator gesture; a game with the despicable leftovers; an execution of […] morality […]."[15] At the end of his section on the Cabaret Voltaire, Ball reflects upon the fact that Lenin lived just across the street in the Spiegelgasse, where the Cabaret was, planning the October revolution. Ball then compares Dada with Bolshevism, which emphasises once more that he considered the programmatic lunacy as a very serious political strategy indeed. "Can Dada as a sign and as a gesture be considered as an counterpart to bolshevism? Does Dada oppose the destruction and perfected calculation with the donquishotique, dysfunctional (non-goal orientated) and ungraspable aspects of the world?"[16] Once more Ball posits irrational activism as the only reply to a perfectly rational world which has gone mad.

<div align="center">*</div>

Raoul Hausmann emphasises particularly the double function of Dada in this context: according to him, Dada is both reflecting the madness of the age as well as driving forward and radicalising this tendency, it is both symptom and tool simultaneously.[17] Hausmann claims that art has to act as a mirror, as visual

---

[14] Hugo Ball, "Eröffnungs-Manifest, 1. Dada-Abend. Zuerich, 14. Juli 1916". In: Klaus Riha and Joergen Schaefer (ed.), *DADA total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam Junior, 1994, p. 34. "Ich lese Verse, die nicht weniger vorhaben als: auf die Sprache zu verzichten. […] Ich will keine Worte, die andere erfunden haben. Alle Worte haben andere erfunden. Ich will meinen eigenen Unfug, und Vokale und Konsonanten dazu, die ihm entsprechen. Wenn eine Schwingung sieben Ellen lang ist, will ich fueglich Worte dazu, die sieben Ellen lang sind. Die Worte des Herrn Schulze haben nur zwei ein halb Zentimeter".

[15] *Op.cit.*, p. 98. "Was wir Dada nennen, ist ein Narrenspiel aus dem Nichts, in das alle höheren Fragen verwickelt sind; ein Gladiatorengeste; ein Spiel mit den schäbigen Überbleibseln; eine Hinrichtung der posierten Moralität und Fülle".

[16] *Ibid.* "Ist der Dadaismus wohl als Zeichen und Geste das Gegenspiel zum Bolschewismus? Stellt er der Destruktion und vollendeten Berechnung die völlig donquichottische, zweckwidrige und unfassbare Seite der Welt gegenüber?"

[17] The question whether non-mimetic, non-organic art is the loudspeaker of an alienated consciousness or its critique, which Theodor W. Adorno poses in *Ästhetische Theorie,* seems to
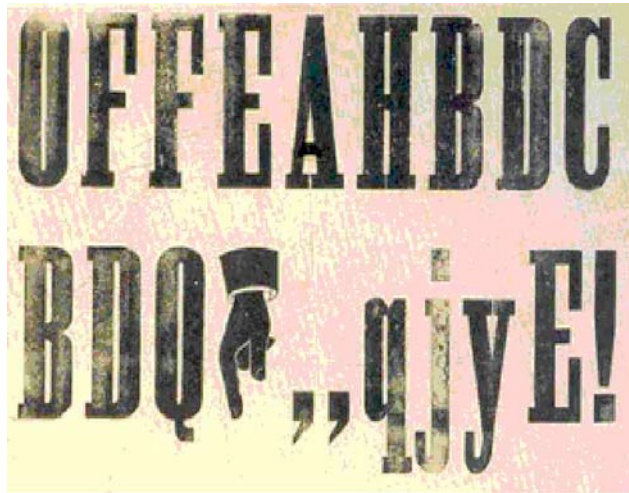
edification illustrating the true character of the times.[18] His "optophonetic" poetry is radically devoid of any semantic content: in his poster poems *OFFEAH* and *fmsbw* from 1918, letters do not refer to any external reality but only to themselves. Here, the linguistic signs have gained aesthetic autonomy. Signifiers become their own referents. Letters are no longer tools for representing an absent object, but refer only to their own material essence. Meaning and messages are programmatically annulled from his poster poems. The posterpoems seem to suggest that there is simply no declaration which could pay justice to and capture the new circumstances discursively.

In addition to the cultural mirror-aspect pertinent within dadaist art, however, Hausmann also emphasises its revolutionary potential, and recognises it explicitly as a means not only to reflect, but to instigate and bring about change. Crucially, he compares the shattering of pictorial orders with a dissolution of political or legislative orders.[19] Art, and literature, are thus functioning as models

---

be resolved in the case of Dada, where both readings apply simultaneously. Adorno writes: "Nicht ist generell darüber zu urteilen, ob einer, der mit allem Ausdruck tabula rasa macht, Lautsprecher verdinglichten Bewußtseins ist oder der sprachlose, ausdruckslose Ausdruck, der jenes denunziert." Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 179.

[18] Raoul Hausmann, "Die Kunst und die Zeit". In*: Raoul Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen. Texte bis 1933*, vol. 2. Edited by Michael Erlhoff. Munich: edition text und kritik, 1982, p. 7. "In dem ungeheuren Geschehen unserer Zeit, in dem alle alten feststehenden Werte relativ, unsicher wurden, musste vor allem auch die Kunst als lebendiger Anschauungsunterricht, den der Mensch sich gibt, um die Welt in sich und sich in der Welt zu erkennen, eine veränderte Stellung einnehmen".

[19] *Op.cit.*, pp. 10–11. "man löste die bisherigen Bildeinheiten ebenso auf, wie man etwa versucht, eine alte Rechts- oder Staatsform aufzulösen. Diese Versuche entsprechen einer geistigen Form des Lebens, einer geforderten Wahrheit statt einer bloßen Anerkennung der gegebenen Wirklichkeit".

Raoul Hausmann, "OFFEAH", 1918

for the organisation of society: that which is effectuated and realised on the level of signs, namely a radical assault upon existing orders, hierarchies and conventions, has symbolic significance – it can be considered as *Modellversuch*, as a symbolic act of dissolution and reorganisation.

There is also a carnivalesque quality to this linguistic operation – social conventions, norms, hierarchies and rituals are turned upside down, are parodied and temporarily disabled in these poems. Dadaist poetry is a carnival of signs on the terrain of the symbolic. The poems are performative acts of transgression, of subversion of the established order, and they are expected to exercise a cathartic, purifying function.

Hausmann considers the programmatic withdrawal of sense and logic, the attack upon strategies of perception and mechanisms of thinking as the most distinctive and important procedure of Dada. "We wish to deprive the sleepy security brain of the bourgeois of everything", he writes, and that includes above all semantic compatibility and logical coherence, discursive, communicative and semantic values and the abandonment of the message orientated deployment of language.[20]

An attack on language, and in particular upon its rational, orderly organisation, is thus a symbolic attack on the principles of rationality as such.[21] The audience of

---

[20] Raoul Hausmann, "Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten". In*: Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, bd.1. Hg. Michael Erlhoff. München: Edition text und kritik, 1982, p. 70. "Wir wollen dem schläfrigen Sicherheitsgehirn des Bürgers alles entziehen".

[21] More than fifty years later, Jean Baudrillard proclaims that even signs must burn, "[l]es signes doivent brûler eux aussi", a slogan which seems to capture poignantly the nature of many avant-garde activities, in which nothing, not even language, is accepted as given

the Dada soirées seems to have grasped this radical assault on their values intuitively:

> the most important manifestations were those where thousands of people, raging with fury, were ready to murder us – because they had understood that Dada threatened its highest goods, its holiest ideals.[22]

And these holiest ideals and highest goods are reason and logic. It was not the proclamation of heretic and offensive propositions or outrageous political messages which caused the outbreaks of rage at the Dada soirées, but rather the absence of any tangible messages at all. It was the zero message, the empty signifiers, the indeterminacy and the ultimate ambivalence which the audiences found unbearable. Hausmann's empty signifiers cannot be put to work, they are defunctionalised and depragmatised, they are essentially deprived of their use-value. Hausmann writes:

> Anti-art withdraws the use-value of things, as well as their concrete and civil meaning; it turns classical values upside-down and renders them semi-abstract.[23]

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The Dadaists seem to have considered a deliberate and strategic form of poetic madness as the only appropriate answer to an age and its perversions which they considered to be completely beyond the speakable. Linguistic madness – in a therapeutic dosage – is established as a serious alternative to the prevailing circumstances, as a legitimate alternative to the standards of normality, which by implication challenges and calls into question the very prerogatives of reason and

---

anymore. Jean Baudrillard, "Vers une critique de l'économie politique du signe". In: Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p. 199.

[22] Raoul Hausmann, "Dada empört sich, regt sich und stirbt in Berlin". In: *Dada Berlin. Texte, Manifeste, Aktionen*, Stuttgart: Philip Reclam jun., 1994, p. 9. "die wichtigsten Manifestationen waren selbstverständlich diejenigen, bei denen Tausende von Personen, toll vor Wut gegen uns, bereit waren, uns zu töten – denn sie hatten verstanden, daß DADA ihre höchsten Güter und heiligsten Ideale bedrohte".

[23] Raoul Hausmann, "Dada empört sich, regt sich und stirbt in Berlin", pp. 10–11. "Dada hätte vor allem eine anti-kulturelle Tat sein müssen. Die Anti-Kunst entzieht den Dingen und Materialien ihren Nützlichkeitscharakter, ebenso ihre konkrete und zivile Bedeutung; sie stürzt die klassischen Werte um und macht sie halbabstrakt".

rationality, and introduces their transgression as a culturally interventionist strategy.

The critique of the given circumstances could not be articulated within the conceptual environment and the prevailing systems of thought, the Dadaists had lost faith in reason and aimed to probe and expose its limits. With hindsight, this is not at all a mad approach, but perhaps the most serious form of cultural criticism that was possible at that moment in time. In a civilisation which is itself profoundly disordered, the only wise ones are the deliberate fools.

References

Adorno, Theodor W., *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003.

Arp, Hans, "Die Schwalbenhode". In: Hans Arp, *Gesammelte Gedichte*. Wiesbaden: Limes, 1963.

Arp, Hans, "te gri ro ro". In: Hans Arp, Hugo Ball [et. al.]: *Dada Gedichte. Dichtungen der Gründer*. Zurich: Verlag die Arche, 1957.

Arp, Hans, Walter Serner & Tristan Tzara, "Die Hyperbel vom Krokodilcoiffeur und dem Spazierstock." In: *Dada. Zurich – Paris*. Ed. Michel Giroud. Paris: Édition Jean-Michel Place, 1981.

Ball, Hugo, "Eröffnungs-Manifest, 1. Dada-Abend. Zuerich, 14. Juli 1916". In: Klaus Riha and Joergen Schaefer (ed.), *DADA total. Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam Junior, 1994.

Ball, Hugo, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1992.

Baudrillard, Jean, "Vers une critique de l'économie politique du signe". In: Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.

Hausmann, Raoul, "Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten". In: *Bilanz der Feierlichkeiten. Texte bis 1933*, bd.1. Hg. Michael Erlhoff. München: Edition text und kritik, 1982.

Hausmann, Raoul, "Dada empört sich, regt sich und stirbt in Berlin". In: *Dada Berlin. Texte, Manifeste, Aktionen*, Stuttgart: Philip Reclam jun., 1994.

Hausmann, Raoul, "Die Kunst und die Zeit". In*:* Raoul Hausmann, *Sieg Triumph Tabak mit Bohnen. Texte bis 1933*, vol. 2. Edited by Michael Erlhoff. Munich: edition text und kritik, 1982.

Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso, 1991.