Introduction

Alfred Jarry (1873-1907)

-‘Quel est ce pierrot? demanda-t-elle à Passavant, qui l’avait fait asseoir et s’était assis auprès d’elle
- C’est Alfred Jarry, l’auteur d’Ubu Roi. Les Argonautes lui confèrent du génie, parce que le public vient de siffler sa pièce. C’est tout de même ce qu’on a donné de plus curieux au théâtre depuis longtemps
- J’aime beaucoup Ubu Roi, dit Sarah, et je suis très contente de rencontrer Jarry. On m’avait dit qu’il était toujours ivre.’¹

In André Gide’s novel Les Faux-Monnayeurs (1925), Alfred Jarry suddenly appears among fictional characters at a literary banquet. He is the subject of the above conversation between Sarah, newcomer to the literary milieu, and the Comte de Passavant, fashionable writer and dandy. While the first views Jarry as a sort of curiosity, the latter is cynical about Jarry’s merits as a writer. Their words are in fact quite typical of the way some tended to view Alfred Jarry in real life: a drunken clown and creator of one infamous play, Ubu Roi (1896).

Jarry’s brief career, despite the notoriety of Ubu Roi, was problematic due to his often difficult personality and the non-conformity of his writing. Lack of success and income combined with his destructive behaviour eventually led to his early death at the age of 34. Jarry made his literary debut at the height of the Symbolist and Decadent movement and was a contemporary of writers such as Gide, Valéry, Claudel and Proust. Jarry’s work could however never be easily classified amongst that of writers or literary movements of his day. Furthermore, anecdotes about Jarry’s bohemian life have often overshadowed the merits of his writing. With the exception of Ubu Roi, his texts have remained known primarily by a handful of scholars, amateurs and artists.

Posthumously Jarry has been hailed by scholars, writers and artists as the embodiment of avant-garde experiment and artistic innovation. His work has often been compared to that of other singular authors such as Lautréamont, and labelled as an influence on a new generation of twentieth century writers and artists, including Apollinaire or Picasso, and avant-garde movements, such as Dada or Surrealism. Jarry’s self-invented (anti-) science of pataphysics led to the creation of the Collège de Pataphysique in 1948, which included writers and artists such as Max Ernst, Raymond Queneau, Jacques Prévert, Eugène Ionesco, Boris Vian, Joan Miró and Marcel Duchamp. Branches of the original ‘Collège’ are now found in several countries, including England and the Netherlands. Other evidence of Jarry’s continuing legacy is the fact that an important contemporary website for experimental media and poetry is named after Père Ubu.² The surprisingly

vivid after-life of pataphysics and of the character Ubu in literature and art, as well as in comics and pop culture, shows that Jarry’s work and ideas found their way into the twentieth century and remain influential up until today.

The Almanachs du Père Ubu

However, whereas many writers, artists and scholars have claimed him as the spiritual ancestor of several avant-garde movements, few, I feel, have sufficiently explained what exactly made Jarry’s work so singular in his own time and so inspirational for later generations. Studying Jarry I became intrigued by two texts which had escaped scholarly attention up until now; the Almanachs du Père Ubu, published in 1898 and 1901. They occupy a rather odd position in Jarry’s oeuvre, as they do not fit a specific label or genre, not even within the eclectic corpus that is Jarry’s literary work. I wondered if maybe the answer to the question how Jarry’s poetics challenged contemporary artistic norms could be found in these Almanachs, which even among Jarry’s own texts, seemed to defy labelling or literary norms. Could they perhaps provide keys to Jarry’s poetics and help explain Jarry’s place in literary and artistic history?

The Almanacs in print

The initial Almanach du Père Ubu, illustré was literally forgotten for a long time. The first ever edition of Jarry’s complete works published in 1948 left it out entirely. Despite its eight volumes, the edition was not as complete as its title suggested. For decades the first Almanac was only available in the original first edition preserved in libraries or in private collections. Over sixty years after its original publication in 1898 the first Almanac was finally reprinted, together with the second Almanac and the rest of the Ubu texts in the collection Tout Ubu in 1962. They were also included in the first volume of the Pléiade edition of Jarry’s collected works, published in 1972. Since then both Almanacs have appeared in re-editions of Tout Ubu as well as in the Bouquin edition, which contains a selection of Jarry’s works. Only very recently, a first critical edition of the initial Almanac, compiled by Henri Béhar, Jean-Paul Morel and myself, has been published, together with a facsimile.

The second Almanac has received slightly more attention throughout the years. It was included in the ‘complete works’ from 1948 mentioned previously. It was also reprinted separately in a facsimile edition in 1949.

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4 The Collège de Patahysique for example held the copy that had belonged to Henri de Régnier. Noel Arnaud, Alfred Jarry, D’Ubu Roi au docteur Faustroll (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974), p. 430.
Morel incorporated parts of the second Almanac in his edition of Ambroise Vollard’s Ubu works. More recently, in 2006, the second Almanac was published in a facsimile edition by Le Castor Astral.

The Almanacs in research

On the whole, scholarly attention for the Almanacs has been marginal. Even in publications by the Collège de Pataphysique, which have provided valuable context for Jarry’s work, the two works have rarely been discussed. Although in 1962 it was remarked, concerning the lack of critical commentary in the Tout Ubu edition, that someday someone would have to write a dissertation about the Almanacs,

Except for the recent annotated edition of the first Almanac, critical commentary of the two works has remained limited to a few scattered remarks. In 1974 Noèl Arnaud praised the first small almanac, in particular its ‘étonnante série de dessins de Bonnard’ and mentioned some of its themes. Béhar is the only Jarry scholar to have devoted a small article to an aspect of Ubu’s Almanac, but his remarks on the Almanacs are part of his more general observations on Jarry’s use of popular culture.

Jarry scholars such as Arnaud or Béhar showed a more or less positive or at least neutral approach to the Almanacs. Others have sometimes expressed uneasiness towards the two works. It is telling that in the preface to the 1948 edition of Jarry’s work, René Massat grouped the second Almanac together with Jarry’s ‘divertissements’. Some scholars dismiss the two works altogether or view them, like Massat, as pure entertainment. Discussing the figure of Ubu, Elke Krumm wrote that, compared to the other Ubu works, ‘the absurdities dominate’ and that ‘both Almanacs merely aim to entertain’. But even a Jarry scholar such as Keith Beaumont, who wrote a thorough study of Jarry’s work, is mostly dismissive. He labels some parts of the Almanacs as ‘mildly amusing’, while most of the satire and nonsense falls, according to him, ‘rather flat.’ Ubu is only staged as a ‘would be wit and entertainer.’ Beaumont’s harsh verdict is that for these and other reasons (although he fails to mention which ones) the two Almanacs must ‘rate as relatively minor works.’

Some have felt the need to explain that the Almanacs were written for mere amusement or financial purposes. Cutshall wrote for example: ‘Why

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12 Alfred Jarry, Almanach illustré du Père Ubu (XXe Siècle), présentée par Patrick Besnier (Le Castor Astral, 2006).
13 ‘Le Tout Ubu ne pouvait pas être une édition critique, mais un jour viendra certainement où un candidat au doctorat és lettres, ayant choisi l’œuvre de Jarry pour sujet de thèse, éclaircira toutes les allusions qui comportent les deux Almanachs’, Dossiers acénonètes du Collège de ‘Pataphysique, 1962, 20, p.72.
14 Arnaud, Alfred Jarry, D’Ubu Roi au docteur Faustroll, pp. 430-34.
Jarry should have composed this work is not immediately clear, but it probably arose partly as a much needed money-making exercise and partly as a nod to Rabelais. François Caradec, discussing Jarry’s journalism, described the Almanacs as a form of popular journalism and remarks, almost surprised, that Jarry appeared to take them quite seriously. In what little has been said about the Almanacs, scholars have mainly pointed to some of their obvious themes, such as the political satire. Ben Fisher linked the Rabelaisian spirit of Ubu’s Almanacs to the novel *Gestes et Opinions du Docteur Faustroll*. As for the works in general, they are often considered as humorous nonsense, absurd entertainment, ‘made up of stock jokes’ and not taken very seriously.

Positive evaluations of the Almanacs are scarce. In his biography of Jarry from 2005, Besnier calls the first Almanac an ‘atypical publication’, which would have escaped attention of the conventional press. Besnier does not comment on their ‘atypical’ nature any further, but in the recent facsimile edition he labels the second Almanac as a peculiar, collective work, defying contemporary aesthetics. He also, rightly so I believe, remarks its playful subversion of the almanac genre and the liberty of its lay-out and typography.

The most far-reaching appraisal of the Almanacs however can be found in an article by Mary Shaw. She briefly discusses the Almanacs as literary representatives of Montmartre’s humorist cabaret culture. Contrary to most scholars, she considers the Almanacs to be ‘in certain respects the most radical and avant-garde of Jarry’s productions’. Shaw believes that the use of Montmartre humorist strategies in the Almanacs result in a marginal and rebellious statement, similar to the goals of the cabarets. Shaw’s comments remain quite general as Jarry is not the focus of her article. However her remarks, together with Besnier’s observation that the Almanacs defied contemporary artistic norms, in my opinion, are a call for a closer look at these ‘atypical’ and ‘rebellious’ works.

**Aims of this study**

In this thesis I hypothesize that the Almanacs are indeed two of Jarry’s most radical works in which his subversive poetics came to full expression. Furthermore I hypothesize that with the Almanacs a breaking point occurred

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in Jarry’s oeuvre. I argue that the poetics expressed in these two works represented a departure from the Symbolism of his earlier works and a transition to a more singular and more ‘modern’ aesthetic, possessing many of the features that foreshadow literary and artistic innovations of the twentieth century.

A discussion of the Almanacs and Jarry’s poetics contributes to a broader understanding of literary and artistic changes in this period. By relating the Almanacs to their cultural historical context I will show how the aesthetics of the texts reflected contemporary culture. A rapid succession of new inventions and phenomena took place around 1900, such as the advent of faster means of transportation, press and advertising on a large scale, new ways of communication, cinematography etc. As a result, a new set of literary strategies responding to modern, everyday life seemed to surface in the Almanacs. In this book I will demonstrate how, in the Almanacs, this context affected concepts of authorship, the advent of a collage aesthetic, art’s relationship to everyday life and literature’s commitment to contemporary issues. More broadly it illustrates how literary works respond to cultural and social changes of their time, not only in content but also through form.

With this thesis I particularly aim to provide more insight in Jarry’s innovative poetics, of which the Almanacs are in many ways exemplary. Scholars have generally seemed wary when it comes to interpreting Jarry’s writing, considered hermetic and complex. Fisher for example, in the conclusion to his book on Faustroll, writes that it is often difficult to approach this ‘apparently unapproachable writer’. But one wonders what makes Jarry’s work so ‘unapproachable’. I will therefore discuss some key characteristics of Jarry’s writing and thinking through an analysis of the Almanacs. Furthermore, a study of the two Almanacs, about which very little has been written, reconsiders their importance and place in Jarry’s oeuvre and thus contributes to existing and ongoing research on Jarry. It will show the significance of the Almanacs for understanding Jarry’s work and ideas.

The title of this book, Ubusing Culture, is above all a reference to Jarry’s own love for wordplay, but it also relates to the argument I make. I will show that in the Almanacs Jarry made use of genres, forms, discourses and themes from a variety of cultural spheres. By combining these elements with his self-created Ubu universe Jarry, in the Almanacs, puts forward new concepts of genre, textual structure, language and authorship, as well as an off-beat, subversive perspective on contemporary society. Furthermore, because the Almanacs are representative of several crucial developments in art and literature around 1900 and later in the century, a discussion of these two works thus gains a broader cultural-historical significance. In short, by discussing the Almanacs, I intend to offer more insight in Jarry’s work and a better understanding of the place he and his work occupy in cultural history.

Approach and outline of the book

Considering these aims, I combine a textual analysis of the two Almanacs with a cultural historical perspective. The Almanacs are embedded in their time and without knowledge of their context, important keys to understanding Jarry’s texts are lost. Furthermore, since I argue that Jarry’s poetics in the Almanacs are representative of certain paradigmatic changes in art around 1900, linking the analysis to historical developments is vital. The two Almanacs make up the primary corpus for the textual analysis but whenever I make general statements about Jarry’s work and poetics I will refer to examples from his other writings as well. The theoretical and methodological choices are entirely pragmatic, depending on the questions under scrutiny in the analysis. Whenever a theoretical concept is introduced I will define and address it there and then in the chapter, such as for example the question of ‘authorship’ in chapter three or ‘collage’ in chapter four. I employ a range of methodological tools, drawing for example from textual analysis, semiotics or discourse analysis. While this might be understood as ‘anything goes’ an interpretation of Jarry’s heterogeneous and collagist work is in my opinion best served by an equally ‘collagist’ methodological approach.

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters mainly deal with the contexts and cultural spheres that influenced Jarry and in particular the Almanacs. They contain the necessary cultural historical background information for understanding Jarry’s poetics and his texts. In the other chapters I focus on an analysis of the texts in the Almanacs, moving from a discussion of their textual structure and form to a discussion of the narrative strategies and main themes.

Chapter one is an introductory chapter on Jarry’s life and work and a preliminary introduction to some important features in his poetics; the polysemic and heterogeneous text, genre crossing, the revaluation of contemporary (Symbolist) concepts of authorship and beauty. I also briefly introduce Ubu and pataphysics. This introduction will help situate the Almanacs in Jarry’s oeuvre at a time when, as I argue, he had moved away from the Symbolist aesthetics of his earlier works.

In chapter two I outline two other important contexts that helped shape the two Almanacs, namely Montmartre’s cabaret counter-culture and the popular tradition of the almanac genre. Cabaret culture appeared to have inspired Jarry to incorporate popular and non-literary genres in his work, and to choose the almanac genre. The characteristics of these contexts (e.g. mixing artistic media, appropriation of popular forms, heterogeneity) also helped pave the way for the collage aesthetic in the two Almanacs.

Chapter three is a historical reconstruction of how the Almanacs were created as a collective work. In this chapter I show which artists, and through them which cultural spheres influenced Jarry and the Almanacs. I also discuss how this collaborative creation defied contemporary concepts of (singular) authorship and originality. I argue that, in the Almanacs, Jarry puts forward a concept of collective authorship and a new concept of originality.

In chapter four I analyze the textual structure of the Almanacs and argue that Jarry makes use of a collage aesthetic avant la lettre in the texts. Apart
from the structure, I also discuss the textual and visual sources (such as newspaper or encyclopaedic texts) incorporated in the texts, the mixing of artistic media (text/image) and how this collage aesthetic of fragmentation and heterogeneity affects the narrative and the interpretation of the texts.

In chapter five I discuss how Jarry, in the Almanacs, engages with news and newspapers, within the context of the close bonds between writers and journalism in this period. Through examples from the Almanacs as well as from Jarry’s own ‘speculative’ journalism, I show how the boundaries between literature and journalism became blurred. Jarry’s texts appear to linger between fiction and non-fiction and this affects both the aesthetics of the literary work as well as the representation of events. In the Almanacs this also results in a satirical reflection on the media, on writers’ ties to journalism and on contemporary society.

The collage practice, the incorporation of non-literary, popular forms and journalistic texts in the literary work leads to a more general issue as well. In chapter six I therefore reflect on the new bonds that surfaced between art and mass culture around this time, and how the Almanacs are exemplary of those new, often ambiguous bonds (involving an embrace of the aesthetics, but a rejection of the uniformity of mass culture) which would also become characteristic of the later avant-garde movements.

In the last chapter, chapter seven, I focus on the way Jarry reflects on contemporary current events in the Almanacs, in particular the Dreyfus Affair in the first Almanac and colonial politics in the second. I will show that in the Almanacs and through Ubu, Jarry provides an original but complex, paradoxical and critical perspective on contemporary society. I argue that Jarry was a more committed writer than has previously been acknowledged, but that this commitment to contemporary issues was played out mainly in his text through his evasive, ironic style.

On a practical note: quotations from Jarry’s texts are all provided in the original French and taken predominantly from the three volume Pléiade edition of Jarry’s complete works (1978, 1987 and 1988). These are referred to in the footnotes as OC (Œuvres Complètes) followed by the volume and page numbers. Whenever references are made to manuscripts or other editions (such as the original editions of the Almanacs) this is indicated in the footnotes. The appendix contains the long list with names of contemporary cultural figures from the first Almanac, but is too long to include in the text. I have completed this list of contemporary cultural figures with a short biography of each person.