Sadeian Women: Erotic Violence in the Surrealist Spectacle

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‘Please be advised that I will vaccinate the world with a desire for violent and perpetual astonishment’.

Dorothea Tanning ‘Legend’ (1949)

Figure 4.1 Dorothea Tanning, Notes for an Apocalypse, 1978. Oil on canvas, 50 x 62 in. Image courtesy of The Dorothea Tanning Foundation, New York.
In 1978 Dorothea Tanning painted Notes for an Apocalypse, a spectacular Dionysian canvas, representing both tragic tableau and magical rebirth. As this painterly visual narrative offers itself to the senses, the viewer is prompted to narrativise it or set the scene in response. A creased tablecloth crumples as a contorted, fleshy body materialises from beneath. She (for this curvaceous, blushing nude prompts us to read it as feminine) appears to hold a burning solar orb while a grotesque incubus squats at her feet. There is a convulsive, erotic violence suggested in this painting, a disruptive presence which, Tanning seems to indicate, underlies the grid-like order of reality. This chapter will consider the ways in which a violent erotic aesthetic in both text and image has been reclaimed by a distinctly feminist wing of artists and writers in the Surrealist and post-Surrealist pantheon, situated in rebellion against those normalising narratives of bourgeois masculinity to which many male Surrealist artists, writers and thinkers continue to adhere.

In Notes for an Apocalypse, Tanning is reminded of her strict Lutheran childhood Sundays when the pastor of her home-town of Galesburg, Illinois used to come to tea. Her participation in the Surrealist movement in the 1940s and 50s would have taught her that the religious authority figure was one to transgress; think of the raped priest in Georges Bataille’s novel Histoire de l’Oeil (Story of the Eye) (1928) or the Christ-like figure who emerges from the Sadeian castle after 120 days of bestial orgies and debauchery in Luis Buñuel’s film L’Age d’Or (The Golden Age) (1930). Outside of the historical parameters of the Surrealist movement, Notes for an Apocalypse could be said to mark an interesting theoretical moment for the wider cultural scene, and to illustrate the emerging strategy of subversion from within. Although Tanning has staunchly denied her participation in the feminist movement on numerous occasions, believing that it divorced her from her male peers, such an overthrowing of domesticated reality and sobriety strikes one as a feminist move and inspires one to recontextualise her work with reference to the feminist politics of the period. Two years before the painting was made, Hélène Cixous published the English-language version of her feminist manifesto ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976) and three years previously Laura Mulvey published her psychoanalytically-inflected critique of the male gaze and narrative cinema (1975). Tanning’s painting was also contemporaneous with Angela Carter’s critique of the masculine bias of Surrealism. In Carter’s essay ‘The Alchemy of the Word’ (1978), an otherwise eloquent micro-history of the movement, she acknowledged both her inspiration and her disappointment in the Surrealists. As she states, in a passage worth quoting at length: