

“The Multimedia of Our Unconscious Life”:  
Anais Nin and the Synthesis of the Arts

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I, Sandra Rehme, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores Anaïs Nin's idea of a synthesis of the arts in writing and its extension to different media through an analysis of her interdisciplinary collaborations with artists and composers in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s. I discuss these collaborations within the context of Nin's unconventional understanding of the unconscious as multidimensional space and her interest in the sensory effects of different art forms, which are at the centre of Nin's art theory. I look at the sources she drew on to formulate her ideas in Paris of the 1930s, including Symbolism, D.H. Lawrence's writing, French Surrealism and various psychoanalytical models, and discuss how they relate to cultural and socio-political developments in America at mid-century. This includes a strong focus on Nin's ambiguous negotiation of female identity and female creativity in her writing and the frictions it causes when it is translated into other media by her male collaborators.

While Nin's interest in different art forms and her attempt at imitating their sensuous effects in writing has been explored from a literary perspective, Nin's extra-literary collaborations remain largely unexplored. Similarly, the work of most of the artists Nin collaborated with has not been analysed critically in a scholarly context. Unlike previous studies of Nin's work, then, the approach of this thesis is an interdisciplinary analysis of her collaborations, which focuses equally on Nin's writing and on the work and input of the artists she worked with. Each of the four chapters focuses on a different collaboration and art form including photomontage, film, music and collage. This thesis argues that Nin's artistic encounters and her engagement with different art forms in America of the 1950s and 60s open up interesting new discourses around interdisciplinarity and gender, the legacy of surrealism in America and counterculture art production in the 1960s.

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## Introduction

Anaïs Nin may seem like an unlikely subject for academic research in the field of interdisciplinary art practice. Since her death in 1977, the controversial writer of esoteric novels, erotica and a multi-volume diary that spans more than five decades has come to stand for many, often contradictory things – from hedonistic socialite, proto-feminist and anti-feminist, narcissistic nymphomaniac, pornographer, pathological liar to cult figure – but art practitioner? Even ‘serious writer’ remains a contested job description. Nin’s diary, on the other hand, has become a popular source of information for certain scholars due to her mobility across different historical and geographical contexts.

Nin has been described as a woman who “poise[d] herself directly in the path of all that was fresh, exciting, and frequently controversial”.<sup>1</sup> She was an active member of the historical avant-garde in Paris, a firm fixture in New York avant-garde circles of the 1940s and 50s and engaged with the emerging counterculture on the West Coast in the 1960s and 70s. Nin grew up in an artistic household in France – her father was the Cuban pianist Joaquín Nin and her mother the Danish-Spanish singer Rosa Culmell. In the 1920s and 30s she began mingling with writers associated with the Parisian avant-garde including Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell and Antonin Artaud, and members of the diverse Surrealist group around André Breton.<sup>2</sup> Shortly before

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Tookey, *Anaïs Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Using the term ‘Surrealism’ as an aesthetic category is, of course, problematic, considering the stylistic diversity of artists grouped together as ‘surrealist’, as scholars like Rosalind Krauss have pointed out. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1986). Also Krauss, ‘Photography in the Service of Surrealism,’ in *L’Amour Fou - Photography and Surrealism*, eds. Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, Dawn Ades (Washington D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1985) pp.15-40.

the outbreak of WWII, Nin and her husband Hugh Guiler – an American banker who later worked as a film-maker under the pseudonym Ian Hugo – had to immigrate to the United States like many members of their circle. In New York, where they first settled, Nin soon became part of a diverse group of European expatriates and American artists, writers and composers including Maya Deren and Louise and Edgard Varèse. From 1947 Nin spent half of every year in California with her bigamous husband Rupert Pole who had a house in Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> There, she met writers of the San Francisco Renaissance, Beat poets and artists of the emerging California counterculture who distanced themselves from the New York art market.<sup>4</sup>

Nin documented everything in her diary that she started in 1914, when she was 11 years old, as an open letter to her absent father. It often reads like a ‘who’s who’ of French and American avant-garde circles. Literary portraits of artists and writers fill many pages, alongside reviews of plays, exhibitions and concerts she attended. The many volumes of her original diaries now kept at the UCLA archive in California illustrate her keen interest in the arts particularly well; they are decorated with ephemera including concert tickets, newspaper reviews, programme notes and photographs. Not surprisingly, her diary has become a sourcebook for those looking for information on art activities in Europe and America. Nin’s name began appearing in writing that focuses on the legacy of Surrealism in America and the impact of exiled European artists on art production in the United States in the 1940s and 50s. Excerpts from her epic diary describing the artistic climate in New York and

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<sup>3</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Anais Nin: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p.334.

<sup>4</sup> For accounts of the ‘counterculture experiment’ in California see *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*, eds. Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

California feature in monographs, PhD theses and artist biographies.<sup>5</sup> Anaïs Nin, it seems, did have certain credibility, if only as a time witness.<sup>6</sup>

It is often overlooked that Nin was actively involved in art production in the 1950s and 60s, and not only as a writer. Some of her encounters with different artists and composers from her circles lead to diverse collaborations based mainly on her experimental debut-novel *House of Incest* first published in Paris in 1936. This includes a special edition of the novel published in 1958, which was accompanied by a series of surreal photomontages by Val Telberg, who was commissioned by Nin; Ian Hugo's experimental film *Bells of Atlantis* (1952) based on the prologue to the same novel, which featured Nin as protagonist and included voice-overs of her reading excerpts from the prologue accompanied by an electronic score by Louis and Bebe Barron; and the vocal piece *Nocturnal I* (1961) by French composer Edgard Varèse who used Nin's novel as raw-material for the libretto. In 1964, Nin published her final novel *Collages* (1964) in which she engaged with the practice of collage and assemblage through the work of the California counterculture figure Jean Varda. It is these diverse art works and artistic encounters which are the subjects of my PhD thesis.

Nin's engagement with different art forms was the result of her modernist interest in what she described as the "cross-pollination" of the arts, which she had developed in

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<sup>5</sup> Nin's relationship to surrealist activities in America has been discussed in recent studies which explore the legacy of Surrealism in post-war America, although Nin only appears as a minor character. Joanna Pawlik's thesis uses Nin's writing as one example of how Bretonian Surrealism has been re-appropriated in the American context. Joanna Pawlik, *Negotiating Surrealism: Post-war American avant-gardes after Breton*, PhD Thesis, University of Sussex 2008. Martica Sawin looks at similar themes, but with a focus on the visual arts. She uses passages from Nin's diary to illustrate the artistic climate and the sense of alienation experienced by European immigrants, but again, Nin remains a minor character. Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> According to Deirdre Bair, however, Nin's diary entries were heavily edited by Nin herself and, after her death, by Rupert Pole.

the 1930s in Paris.<sup>7</sup> Like many modernist writers at that time, Nin believed that the non-literary arts – especially the time-based ones – music, film and dance – were more advanced than writing when it came to creating the language of dreams and affecting the senses, which were her main concerns. This was part of her ambition to find a new form for the modern novel that fused conscious and unconscious, emotion and intellect, body and mind to eliminate the gap between reader and art, and therefore between art and life.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on the ‘sister-arts’ first through the imitation of their effects in writing and from the 1950s directly, through collaborations with artists and composers, became a solution to what seemed like a literary dead-end. Looking back, Nin explained:

“As a writer I wanted simply to take all the various expressions of art into writing, for I believed that each art must nourish the other, each one can add to the other... In every form of art there is something that I wanted to include, and I wanted writing, poetic writing, to include them all.”<sup>9</sup>

In her fiction, especially in her prose-poem *House of Incest*, Nin used a language which can be described as highly synaesthetic, although she never used the term herself. She tried to imitate the sensory effects of painting, dance and music through rhetorical devices such as symbolism, parallelism, metonymy and rhythmic repetitions. In addition, cinematic effects like vivid descriptions of scenes, jump-cuts and dissolves were a much-used strategy. She also embedded ekphrastic descriptions of specific works of art and music into the narrative, which functioned as metaphors to capture moods or the inner states of her characters.

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<sup>7</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, first published in 1968, (Peter Owen: London, 1969), p.164.

<sup>8</sup> William Burford, introduction to Anaïs Nin, *On Writing* (Yonkers: Alicat Bookshop, 1947).

<sup>9</sup> Anaïs Nin, *A Woman Speaks: The Lectures, Seminars, and Interviews of Anaïs Nin*, ed. Evelyn J. Hinz (The Swallow Press: Chicago, 1975), p.177-8, cited in Tookey 2003, p.137.

The origins of Nin's attempt at a synthesis of the arts has been traced back to a variety of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources including Symbolism, Surrealism, the writing of D.H. Lawrence and the literary journal *transition*, all of which Nin allegedly fused and appropriated to suit her needs.<sup>10</sup> It is also important to note that Nin's understanding of the 'unconscious' as she applied it to her search for the ideal art form, was similarly composed from diverse sources. It did not draw on any particular school of psychoanalysis. Nin would often use the terms subconscious and unconscious interchangeably as terms to broadly describe processes that are not conscious.<sup>11</sup> Her notion drew on a range of different sources which she adapted and appropriated to suit her needs. When I refer to Nin's use of the term, then, it will appear in inverted commas to distinguish it from its Freudian use.

In the following, I want to elaborate on how Nin appropriated these sources and draw out the main themes in her writing. This is important for a reading of her collaborations in America. We will see that in dialogue with different art forms and artists the themes that haunt Nin's writing open up complex discourses around hybridity, gender and the legacy of the historical avant-garde in America.<sup>12</sup> We have to consider that *House of Incest* was written in Paris of the 1930s and reflected certain ideas popular at the time, but that her collaborations took place in America in the 1950s and 60s. And although Nin's *Collages* was written in California of the 1960s, we will see that it still negotiated similar ideas Nin had engaged with back then, but appropriated them to fit into the new context. This would create interesting

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Sharon Spencer *Collage of Dreams: The Writings of Anais Nin* (Chicago: Swallow Press 1977) and Tookey 2003.

<sup>11</sup> For instance in Nin, *Novel*.

<sup>12</sup> 'Hybrid art forms' is the umbrella term used by philosopher Jerrold Levinson to describe art forms that are not what has been described as 'pure', but combine two or more different art forms which can stand in different relationships to each other. See Jerrold Levinson, 'Hybrid Art Forms', in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18 (1984), 5-13, and reprinted as chapter 2 of J. Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), pp.26-36.

points of friction not only in Nin's writing, but also in her collaborations with different artists.

Nin's 'artistic associations' were either European immigrants or Americans who had spent time in Europe. While their work displays an engagement with similar ideas that occupied Nin, especially Bretonian Surrealism, they also absorbed what was going on in the arts around them. That this was not always in Nin's interest will be apparent when I look closer at her collaborations in the following chapters. They were produced in a transitional period in American Modernism. While Europe was in demise, and with it Paris as the most important art centre, American artists began developing their own identity, which meant either rejecting or appropriating previous models.

We will find a similar dualism in Nin's approach and her continuous appropriation and fusion of pre-war sources and new ideas, which also affected her search for new art forms and collaborations. Nin continuously followed new developments in the arts and looked for suitable art forms to recreate what she described as the 'atmosphere, the colours and textures' of dreams, which would eventually lead to her collaborations in the 1950s and 60s. The list of artists and art works was constantly updated and become increasingly heterogeneous and multimedia oriented: from Claude Debussy's modern classical compositions to the rhythmic improvisations of jazz; from Marcel Duchamp's cubist paintings and Paul Klee's experiments with 'visual music' to assemblage and kinetic sculpture; from surrealist film to multimedia light shows.<sup>13</sup> All these art forms were supposed to best recreate the 'language of the unconscious'. For instance, Nin compared the structure of the unconscious to jazz. She regarded both as "ruled by flow" and free association, and

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<sup>13</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.118.

“constantly improvising”.<sup>14</sup> Literary scholar Helen Tookey has read this as typically modernist attempts of modernisation and Americanisation. She argues,

“the modernist interest in the “cross-fertilisation of the arts ... involves an emphasis on the modernity of the forms being invoked, a desire to find aesthetic forms somehow appropriate to the time, and a rejection of ‘antiquated’, outmoded forms of styles.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, modernisation, to Nin, also meant drawing on ideas promoted by the historical avant-garde. Like many of her contemporaries in Paris of the 1920s and 30s, Nin devoured the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and especially Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>16</sup> These poets used techniques such as metaphor, analogy and symbolism to create synaesthetic effects as a means to create a heightened sensory awareness and thereby change how people experienced poetry.<sup>17</sup> In the opening lines of his sonnet, *Les Voyelles* (1872), for instance, Rimbaud assigned colour values to different vowels: “A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles”.<sup>18</sup> Baudelaire created chains of sensory links in his poem *Correspondences* (1868) where “scents, sounds and colours respond to one another”.<sup>19</sup> Also Guillaume Apollinaire’s writing resonates in Nin’s ideas on language. In his essay ‘*The New Spirit and the Poets*’ (‘*L’Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes*’, 1918) Apollinaire predicted a new form of writing beyond the limits of verse and prose – a “synthesis of the arts, of music, painting,

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<sup>14</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.28, also pp.98-91.

<sup>15</sup> Tookey 2003, p.138.

<sup>16</sup> Paris of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a Rimbaud-cult. In her diary Nin described herself romantically as having a “fundamental Rimbaud innocence, a certain purity”. Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1931-1934*, vol.1, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (Quartet Books: London, Melbourne and New York, 1979), p.35.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Jeremy Strick, ‘Visual Music’, in *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*, eds. Kerry Brougher et al (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp.15-21. Also Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the serpent: modernism in music, literature, and other arts* (Chicago, Ill. ; London : University of Chicago Press, 2000). S. Baron-Cohen and J. Harrison (eds.), *Synaesthesia: Classical and contemporary readings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997). John E. Harrison, *Synaesthesia : the strangest thing* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, ‘*Les Voyelles*’ (1872).

<sup>19</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘*Correspondences*’, in *Fleurs du Mal*, 1868.

and literature”.<sup>20</sup> From Symbolism, Nin also took the form of the prose-poem as the ideal form of writing – a free-flowing monologue that used an imagist language and symbolism usually associated with poetry, but without the restrictions of metre and rhyme. Nin argued that prose was too “literal” and had to be more like poetry, which she regarded as “dimensional”.<sup>21</sup> Nin also adapted Rimbaud’s Romantic idea of the poet as ‘seer’ or visionary and the notion of artistic creation as mystical process, which she would defend and promote in her work throughout her life.

Commentators on Nin’s work usually point out, however, that it was mainly Nin’s discovery of D.H. Lawrence’s ‘physical’ language which led to her first open engagement with the use of non-literary effects in writing. In her first published piece of writing, *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* (1932), Nin had praised the English writer’s physical and sensory language that, she thought, could be apprehended like music, dance or visual art. The slim volume was an expanded version of a preliminary paper which had appeared in the *Canadian Forum* in October 1930 under the title ‘*The Mystic of Sex: A First Look at D.H. Lawrence*’. Nin came across Lawrence’s *Women in Love* in winter 1929 and became strongly interested in his writing and ideology. She described his novels as “concerned only with the description of feelings, sensations, conscious and unconscious”.<sup>22</sup> Nin believed that to achieve this, Lawrence had to “torment and transform ordinary

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<sup>20</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘The New Spirit and the Poets’ (1918), *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, transl. by Roger Shattuck (London: Harvill Press, 1950).

<sup>21</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.12.

<sup>22</sup> Nin, *The Early Diary of Anais Nin 1927-1931*, vol.4, ed. Rupert Pole (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p.267, cited from Tookey 2003, p.125. It is important to note that this was before Nin first engaged with psychoanalysis and the term unconscious here is used to loosely describe inner processes.



language; words are twisted and mishandled, sometimes beyond recognition”.<sup>23</sup> She argued that Lawrence gave writing

“the bulgingness of sculpture, the feeling of heavy material fullness ... the nuances of paint: thus his effort to convey shades of colour with words that had never been used for colour. He would give it the rhythm of movement, of dancing: thus his wayward, formless, floating, word-shattering descriptions. He would give it sound, musicality, cadence: thus words sometimes used less for their sense than for their sound.”<sup>24</sup>

Nin connected this “physical impression” to his use of pictorial descriptions, dreams and symbolism, and that “he projected his physical response into the thing he observed”.<sup>25</sup> She described the “vividness of his senses”, which she regarded as “acutely developed: scent, touch, sight, hearing, taste”.<sup>26</sup>

Nin described Lawrence metaphorically as a painter of “real bodies”, which shows her awareness of his essay ‘*Introduction to These Paintings*’ (1929) and ‘*Cezanne’s Apples*’ (1929).<sup>27</sup> There he had accused modern morality of a deep-seated “hate of the instinctive, intuitional, procreative body” and condemned art history for merely producing empty shells – clichés of the body covered in clothes, but no “real bodies” – with the exception of William Blake and Paul Cézanne.<sup>28</sup> Nin explained, “Lawrence worked like a painter who works on the anatomy, from which he paints the figure and over that the draperies”.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, Nin would later be criticised for

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<sup>23</sup> Nin cited from Tookey 2003, p.125.

<sup>24</sup> Tookey 2003, p.125.

<sup>25</sup> Anais Nin, *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*, first published in 1932 (Athens: The Swallow Press/Ohio University Press 1964), p.60.

<sup>26</sup> Nin, *Lawrence*, p.62.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the impact of Lawrence’s essay on the visual arts see Tamar Garb, *The Painted Face: portraits of women in France* (New Haven Conn. and London: Yale University Press 2007).

<sup>28</sup> See Keith Sagar, *D.H. Lawrence’s Paintings* (Chaucer, 2003). On aspects of gender and the body see Cornelia Schulze, *The Battle of the Sexes in D.H. Lawrence’s Prose, Poetry and Paintings* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> What Nin could not have known then is that Lawrence was also a painter, although his paintings are fairly obscure. The ‘resurrection of the body’ was a crucial element in his paintings which, in their

not being able to create ‘rounded’ characters in her fiction, but only flat and one-dimensional figures.

Most Nin-scholars have emphasised the subjective nature of Nin’s study of Lawrence, which they regard as more revealing about her own future directions, than about Lawrence’s writing.<sup>30</sup> Most of what she saw in Lawrence’s writing – especially also what she regarded as his ‘whole vision’ – became the key-stones of her own project which would later be padded out with theories by other thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Marcel Proust and psychoanalytical concepts by Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung and her analyst Otto Rank. Looking back, Nin argued that “[d]efending and explaining D.H. Lawrence then gave me my own orientation”.<sup>31</sup> She called him her “most important influence because he sought a language for instinct, emotion, and intuition, the most articulate part of ourselves”.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, I also want to introduce another, as yet overlooked source which haunts Nin’s attempt to create a connection between art and the body: the poet, playwright and Surrealist dissenter Antonin Artaud. Her engagement with his *Theatre of Cruelty* in which he proclaimed that art should shock the audience into awareness by attacking their senses resonates at least in part in *House of Incest* – a subject, which will be discussed in chapter three. Sarah Poole has identified certain parallels between the ideas of Lawrence and Artaud with regard to their interest in

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explicit rendering of the naked body and sexuality, were banned in England just like his controversial novels.

<sup>30</sup> Philip K. Jason, *Anaïs Nin and Her Critics* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1993). Evelyn J. Hinz, *The Mirror and the Garden: Realism and Reality in the Writings of Anaïs Nin* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973). Hinz calls Nin’s interpretation and her terminology critically inadequate, and argues that Nin’s book, like Lawrence’s own writing, is a new kind of creative “criticism that is simultaneously art”. She believes that Nin is not trying to explain Lawrence, but uses him to formulate her own ideas. She does not regard her study as contributing greatly to Lawrence criticism, nor does she think that reading Lawrence can tell us more about Nin.

<sup>31</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.117.

<sup>32</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.118.

the body and instincts, although we will see that Artaud's idea of the role of the physical body in art was ambiguous.<sup>33</sup> Nin's association with Artaud made her attractive to members of the Beat Generation and emerging counterculture who idolised the taboo-breaking outsider. Her short story 'The Story of Pierre' (1941) based on Artaud was one of the sources that first introduced Artaudian ideas to the American counterculture before Artaud became their celebrated (anti-) hero.<sup>34</sup>

Helen Tookey's book *Anaïs Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (2003) adds a new angle to the contextualisation of Nin's use of language by including the modernist journal *transition* to the list of sources. Tookey draws out the different strands of modernism that are interwoven in Nin's approach. She regards Nin's project as "self-conscious modernism" triggered mainly by her discovery of D.H. Lawrence in winter 1929 and *transition* a few years later, which Nin described as having "expanded the world Lawrence had given her".<sup>35</sup> She argues that Nin's concern with the body, the cross-fertilisation of art forms and dreams in relation to language was symptomatic of twentieth-century, literary Modernism, which Peter Nicholls described as a shift to "a new consciousness of language as a *medium*" triggered by socio-political changes during the Second Empire.<sup>36</sup> Tookey argues that "while Nin's 'peripatetic' life produced a pattern of displacement and experiences of alienation, she also sought the connections across different temporal,

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<sup>33</sup> Sara Poole, 'The Utmost Response': *A Comparison of the Writing and Thought of Antonin Artaud and D.H. Lawrence*, PhD Thesis, University of Reading, 1989. See also Stephen Barber, *Artaud: The Screaming Body*, (London: Creation, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Anaïs Nin, 'The Story of Pierre,' *Experimental Review*, Issue 3, 1941, unpaginated. See Pawlik 2008. Also Pawlik, 'Artaud in performance: dissident surrealism and the post-war American literary avant-garde', 2010, [www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk).

<sup>35</sup> Tookey points out that Nin regarded her affinity with Modernism as a shared vision rather than as a fashion she gave in to. Nin wrote, "If now I am more conscious of my modernism, at least my work remains natural, because modernism came to me through vision and is not ... an acquired tendency." Tookey, p.126.

<sup>36</sup> Nin grew up multilingual which has often been credited for her implacable accent and strange use of vocabulary. She explained: "Having come to America as a foreigner and not knowing English I caught a new perspective of the language". Nin, *On Writing*, p.25.

geographical, and cultural contexts, making interesting – sometimes awkward, sometimes bizarre – attempts to graft ideas from one context onto another.”<sup>37</sup>

Tookey emphasised the important role *transition* played in Nin’s connection of dream and art. In October 1930, Nin first wrote of reading *transition* and its “tremendous, immeasurable importance” for her work.<sup>38</sup> *Transition* was founded by the American expat Eugene Jolas in Paris in 1927 (the last issues was published in spring 1938) and published writing by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, C.G. Jung and many others. The journal announced a “revolution in the English language” and declared that the source of creation was the unconscious, which necessitated a new language to express it.<sup>39</sup> Tookey connects Nin to other modernist writers published in the journal who drew on non-literary effects to create a new language of the unconscious. In the *Novel of the Future*, Nin admitted her indebtedness to these writers. She explained,

“Many writers (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Marguerite Young) have sought to reproduce the true flow of man’s thoughts, feelings, reveries, but they found the old forms too inflexible. They were forced to adopt the techniques of Freud to track down the sinuosities of these underground rivers: free association, dream imagery, study of symbolic acts.”<sup>40</sup>

Tookey emphasises particularly Nin’s use of cinematic effects, which has been ignored in scholarship so far, and discusses it in relation to the cinematic writing of other modernist writers like H.D. and Virginia Woolf. But she does not concern herself with Nin’s active involvement in film production such as *The Bells of Atlantis* or any other media. David Seed later discussed Nin’s use of cinematic

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<sup>37</sup> Tookey 2003, p.8.

<sup>38</sup> Nin cited in Tookey 2003, p.126.

<sup>39</sup> Noël Riley Fitch, ‘Introduction’, *In transition: A Paris Anthology: Writing and Art from transition Magazine 1927-30* (London: Secker & Warburg 1990), cited in Tookey, p.127.

<sup>40</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.83.

effects in relation to Henry Miller's similarly cinematic writing in a chapter of his book *Cinematic Fictions* (2009). Again, the emphasis is, however, on Nin's literary output.<sup>41</sup>

Tookey argues that it was reading *transition* that triggered Nin's life-long enthusiasm for psychoanalysis. Nin became interested in the 'language of dreams' after reading the essay 'Psychology and Poetry' by Jung published in the journal in December 1930. In his short essay, Jung discussed the relationship between literature and psychic processes. He wrote:

“It is incontestably certain that psychology – as the science of psychic processes – may be brought into relation with the science of literature. The soul is the mother and the receptacle of all the sciences as well as of every work of art. The science of the soul should thus be able to demonstrate and explain the psychological structure of the work of art on the one hand and the psychological postulates of the artistic-creative man on the other.”<sup>42</sup>

Nin's use of psychoanalytical ideas in relation to her dream-language is a well-explored subject, although apart from Tookey, most scholars play down the fact that Nin's understanding of dream and unconscious did not belong to any particular school of psychoanalysis. To Nin, the 'unconscious' was a store-room for sensory dream images of hallucinogenic intensity, which she would later refer to as the “multimedia of our unconscious life”.<sup>43</sup> She explained in 1947, that she tried to create “a new synthesis” in art that reflected the “new dimensions” of the 'unconscious', the “collective richness flowing underground below our consciousness”.<sup>44</sup> For Nin psychoanalysis was a “detective story”.<sup>45</sup> She became

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<sup>41</sup> David Seed, *Cinematic Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2009).

<sup>42</sup> C.G. Jung, 'Psychology and Poetry' (extract), *In transition. A Paris Anthology*, 1990, pp.141-2.

<sup>43</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.93.

<sup>44</sup> Nin, *On Writing*, p.23.

<sup>45</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.7.

obsessed with the idea that there was an “indigenous structure” or pattern to the ‘unconscious’ which could be explored through the study of dreams and transformed into art. She explained in 1947: “By following rigorously and exclusively the patterns made by the emotions, I found that in the human unconscious itself there is an indigenous structure and if we are able to detect and grasp it, we have the plot, the form and style of the novel of the future.”<sup>46</sup> The study of dreams became Nin’s main focus, especially after undergoing analysis first with René Allendy and later with Otto Rank. She began keeping a dream-diary in which she recorded her dreams and studied their structure. In February 1934, she announced: “The dream world is becoming my speciality.”<sup>47</sup>

Like Lawrence, Nin was sceptical of Freud, but drew on his writing nevertheless, although she strongly ‘appropriated’ his ideas.<sup>48</sup> She exclaimed that she favoured the “study of dreams with emphasis on the image rather than the intellectual smokescreens”.<sup>49</sup> Nin used the term ‘unconscious’, but saw it as a source for artistic creation and not site of psychic conflict.<sup>50</sup> Freud believed that certain material, especially sexual content, is repressed and stored in the unconscious because it is dangerous for the ego; it only becomes noticeable in distorted form such as cryptic dream images. Nin acknowledged Freud’s theory of repression. But rather than seeing it as self-defence mechanism against disturbing emotions and memories, she

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<sup>46</sup> Nin, *On Writing*, pp.26-7.

<sup>47</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, pp. 322-23.

<sup>48</sup> Suzanne Nalbantian, *Anaïs Nin: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Nalbantian (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). Nin’s diary illustrates her awareness of Lawrence’s hostility towards Freud and psychoanalysis. In a section of her diary from April 1947, Nin tipped in Frederick J. Hoffman’s article ‘Lawrence’s Struggle with Freud’ (*Quarterly Review of Literature*), which dealt with Lawrence’s pre-Freudian understanding of the unconscious. Anaïs Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Folder no.72. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, California.

<sup>49</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.4.

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Spencer has argued that Nin understood the unconscious as a source of visions and imaginary experiences which enrich life. But she does not contextualise this notion. Spencer 1977, p. 20.

referred to it as the gate-keeper which suppressed the “primitive instinctive nature in us”, something she wanted to unleash, like Lawrence.<sup>51</sup> She wrote, “[a]ttempts to repress, as Freud demonstrated, result in unbalance and deformed or destructive eruptions. We had to learn how to coexist intelligently with our irrational or natural primitive self”.<sup>52</sup> She defined the dream more generally as “ideas and images in the mind *not under the command of reason*”.<sup>53</sup> This included “reverie, imagination, daydreaming, the visions and hallucinations under the influence of drugs – any experience which emerges from the realm of the subconscious”.<sup>54</sup>

Nin’s positive view of the unconscious has been linked more closely to Jung who regarded it as a rich source of imagery.<sup>55</sup> Jung promoted the idea of a collective unconscious which was the source of archetypal images. He believed that the “creative process” consisted “in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work”.<sup>56</sup> Drawing on Jung, Nin asserted that there was a universal language of symbols:

“The psyche is the soul, which, as Jung and other psychologists have pointed out, exists collectively and individually, and is revealed in dreams. That is why we have to learn symbolism – to understand what happens within us. The psyche is a dual sort of current in our lives; it’s from there that the richness comes, the whole tie with the universal world, and the whole potential for creation.”<sup>57</sup>

Jung’s writing had a major impact on Nin’s understanding of the ‘unconscious’ as a place that can be easily reached through art. She declared that the dream “instead of

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<sup>51</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.48.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48 and p35.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>55</sup> C.G. Jung, ‘On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry’ (1922), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, XV, eds. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). See also Tookey 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Jung 1922 in Routledge & Kegan Paul 1966, p.81.

<sup>57</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p.131.

being something apart from reality, a private world of fantasy or imagination, is actually an essential part of our reality which can be shared and communicated by imagery”.<sup>58</sup> Jung explained that “the conscious and unconscious contents of the mind are linked together [...] Part of the unconscious consists of a multitude of temporarily obscured thoughts, impressions, and images that, in spite of being lost, continue to influence our conscious minds”.<sup>59</sup> Artists and poets, Nin believed, could easily move between states of consciousness and fuse them with the conscious realm. But the division of conscious and unconscious or “physical and metaphysical levels”, would lead to neurosis.<sup>60</sup> She described the dream as a “sensory image” which “bypasses the censor of the mind, affects our emotions and our senses”.<sup>61</sup>

Nin turned Jung’s phrase “proceed from the dream outward” into her guideline, which implied that the dream was only raw material which had to be transformed into art by the artist or poet. Nin advocated that writing should be like a “directed dream” or “waking dream” – a concept she would also apply to other art forms.<sup>62</sup> She argued that the dream “was incomplete, abstract, suggestive, atmospheric and could only be rendered by metamorphosis, by magic alchemy of poetic images”.<sup>63</sup> She believed that “images and sensations have to become a work of art, or else we cannot share them with others”.<sup>64</sup> Looking back, she explained in 1968:

“[...] I discovered that the dream had to be expanded, recreated, could not be told literally for then it became as flat and one-dimensional as representational realism. One had to find a

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<sup>58</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.23, cited in Tookey, p.129.

<sup>59</sup> See Tookey 2003.

<sup>60</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.6.

<sup>61</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.11.

<sup>62</sup> Nin referred to Robert Desoille’s waking dream technique; he asked patients to follow the images they see when they close their eyes which Nin described as “dreaming while awake”. Nin, *Novel*, pp.41, 22, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.119.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.



language for it, a way of describing atmosphere, the colours and textures in which it move.”<sup>65</sup>

Paul Grimley Kuntz argues that this idea also displays her knowledge of Freud’s essay ‘*The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming*’ (first published in *New Revue* in 1908) in which he compares art to the sharing of dreams.<sup>66</sup> He links child’s play to the artistic imagination – both create a world of their own which they separate from reality.<sup>67</sup> But he argues that unsatisfied wishes are the driving force of ‘daydreaming’. To make his personal daydreams appealing to an audience, the writer “soften[s] the egotistical character of the daydream by changes and disguises” and “bribes us by the offer of a purely formal, that is aesthetic, pleasure in the presentation of his fantasies”.<sup>68</sup> He argues that the “true enjoyment of literature proceeds from the release of tensions in our minds”; we can enjoy our daydreams “without reproach or shame”.<sup>69</sup>

Nin’s free interpretation of the ‘unconscious’ has also been linked to the pre-psychological variations of the term used in the nineteenth century. Drawing on Raymond Williams, Tookey points out that in ‘avant-garde’ circles the term ‘unconscious’ came to function as “a catch-all, representing among other things the modern version of the very old idea of artistic creation through inspiration”.<sup>70</sup> Anna Balakian adds that in the salons of Paris in the 1920s and 30s, lay-psychoanalysis was a popular fashionable “rather than seriously scientific form”.<sup>71</sup> Tookey argues

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Grimley Kuntz, ‘Art as Public Dream: The Practice and Theory of Anaïs Nin’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Summer, 1974), pp. 525-537.

<sup>67</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming’, re-printed in *Twentieth Century Theories of Art*, ed. James M. Thompson, pp.124-131 (Ottawa : Carleton University Press, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Freud in Thompson 1990, p.131.

<sup>69</sup> Freud in Thompson 1990, p.131.

<sup>70</sup> Tookey 2003, p.133. See Raymond Williams, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’, in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>71</sup> Anna Balakian, ‘Anaïs, the Poet’, in Nalbantian 1997, p.69.

that Nin's notion of unconscious is specifically mediated through transcendentalist poet Ralph Waldo Emerson who regarded the unconscious as a source for artistic creation.<sup>72</sup> In her diary, Nin revealed that she "fed on" Emerson, Poe, Melville, Whitman and the concept of transcendentalism when she was a teenager.<sup>73</sup> She described the poet as a transcendentalist who "sees the symbolic story".<sup>74</sup> This pre-psychoanalytic notion of unconscious as 'inspiration' or 'world beyond' is also visible in Nin's description of the poet as predecessor of the psychologist, as alchemist and magician, who knows the "relation between dream and conscious acts", and has to create a "synthesis among intellect, intuition, emotion, and instinct" in writing.<sup>75</sup> Nin explained that "This fascinating underworld of symbolic acts has always been known to the poets. It was Freud who complained that every time he made a discovery he found some poet who had been there before him".<sup>76</sup> Nin's unscientific notion of the unconscious has also been linked to the appropriation of Freud's term by American artists and writers of the 1940s and 50s, who distanced themselves from psychoanalysis and Bretonian uses of the concept.<sup>77</sup> We will find a similar loose understanding or even rejection of the unconscious in the work of the artists Nin collaborated with.

In terms of the specific make-up of the dream, Nin argued that the "dream happens without language, beyond language."<sup>78</sup> She drew partly on Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, although she appropriated her findings to suit her needs. She adapted Freud's dream mechanisms based on the principles of symbolisation, condensation and displacement. Nin regarded the dream as focusing only on

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<sup>72</sup> Tookey 2003, p.134-5.

<sup>73</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 6, 1979, p.212.

<sup>74</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.111.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5-7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>77</sup> See Pawlik 2008.

<sup>78</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, pp. 322-23.

essential images “like a spotlight choosing only what concerns it”.<sup>79</sup> For writing this meant leaving out what was unnecessary and descriptive which she called a “process of distillation”. She explained:

“the unconscious does not see, does not clutter its vision with objects or details which do not play a role in the abstract drama. Psychic states select their stage set with great economy. Observe the voids, blanks, dark spaces in dreams in which there never appeared a completely furnished room.”<sup>80</sup>

In the first volume of her diary she recalled explaining to Henry Miller that writing that imitated dreams should not be explicit, “[i]t all needed to be blurred, the outline must be less definite, one image must run into another like water colours.”<sup>81</sup> Dialogue or coherent language had to be reduced to a minimum, “only a phrase, now and then”, because the “verbalization of thought in dreams was short and rare”, she stated.<sup>82</sup> She also used this observation to defend herself from accusations that all her characters are flat and underdeveloped. She explained that “in our dreams, fantasies, stream of consciousness, there are fewer of the differences which mark our personality (nationality, class, accent, education) by which we categorize people”.<sup>83</sup> Nin also drew on Freud’s idea of the dream-language as un-chronological and asserted that the unconscious was “a composite of past, present, future”.<sup>84</sup> She wrote, “The unconscious cannot express itself directly because it is a composite of past, present, future, a timeless alchemy of many dimensions. A direct statement, as for an act, would deprive it of its effectiveness. It is an image which bypasses the censor of the mind, affects our emotions and our senses”.<sup>85</sup> She placed this under the umbrella

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<sup>79</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.27.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>81</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, p.316.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.317.

<sup>83</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.63.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>85</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.11.

term “multidimensional” or timelessness of the unconscious which was sending up images in dreams in no particular chronological order.<sup>86</sup> This “new order”, she wrote, was “made by memory”, a “chronology of the emotion, not of dates”.<sup>87</sup>

To Nin, the ‘unconscious’ was also determined by flow and fluidity, which may derive in part from her discussion of Lawrence’s ‘world view’ based on mobility and personal growth. His writing on intuition and experience, and life force has also been linked to Bergson’s writing on flux and duration, and his concept of *élan vital*.<sup>88</sup> Emerson discussed similar concerns in his essay ‘*Circles*’ (1841), where he wrote that “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees”.<sup>89</sup> Nin later fused this idea of flow with Gaston Bachelard’s notion of water and fluidity which he discussed in his *Poetics* series. He argued that poets usually use one of the elements as a main symbol at the expense of the others. Nin chose water as her element, which Bachelard discussed in *Water and Dreams* (1942).<sup>90</sup> She links water to the “universal symbol” of the ocean for the unconscious similar to the surrealists around Breton.<sup>91</sup> In the second volume of her diary, Nin acknowledged: “In the interior monologue there is no punctuation. James Joyce was right. It flows like a river.”<sup>92</sup> If writing wanted to connect to the unconscious, it had to create such fluid, sensory images, which was impossible through conventional language.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.123.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp.48, 52-54.

<sup>88</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: George Allen, 1912); Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1911), tr. Arthur Mitchell, Henry Holt and Company (Dover Publications 1998). See also Nalbantian 1997, p.49.

<sup>89</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Circles’, in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

<sup>90</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.120.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Anais Nin, *The Journals of Anais Nin 1934-1939*, vol.2, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (London, Melbourne and New York: Quartet Books, 1979), p.59.

Nin emphasised the close resemblance between dreams and visual art. She argued that “Freud revealed that in our dreams we paint like Dalí, or Rousseau, we monologue like Joyce, we have fabulous visions, and that this inner space which we thought the familiar abode of artists was now shown to exist in every man”.<sup>93</sup> But in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, the dream is not described as the fantastic place of Nin’s imagination, even though, as Trevor Pateman explains, Freud’s terminology is very similar to that used in literary writing which uses words such as metonymy, simile, metaphor, synecdoche.<sup>94</sup>

It has mostly been overlooked that Nin’s Lawrence-study displays the first signs of her pre-psychoanalytical idea of the ‘multimedia of the unconscious’. This resonates in her emphasis on his world-view based on fusion, “a threefold desire of intellect, of imagination, and of physical feeling”, “on a plea for whole vision: ‘to see with the soul and the body’”.<sup>95</sup> While Nin was aware of psychoanalysis at this point, she most likely had not yet studied any writing by Freud or Jung.<sup>96</sup> Lawrence, on the other hand, had engaged with Freud’s writing on the unconscious. But despite his portrayal of characters’ dreams to enhance the narrative, he mistrusted psychoanalysis, especially in its Freudian variety.<sup>97</sup>

Nin saw the visual elements in Lawrence’s writing as providing symbols through which to reach ‘unconscious’ material. She argued that Lawrence’s imagism “reaches a consciousness of planes or meta-text: the plane of the visible, the plane of

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<sup>93</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.32.

<sup>94</sup> Trevor Pateman, 'How to do things in dreams', in *Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Texts in Culture, ed. Laura Marcus (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.75.

<sup>95</sup> Nin, *Lawrence*, p.13.

<sup>96</sup> Her diaries show that she had been aware of Jung’s writing since the mid-1920s, but had not read any of his work. Nin, *Early Diary* 1995, pp.370, 372.

<sup>97</sup> For instance Sara Poole, *'The Utmost Response': A Comparison of the Writing and Thought of Antonin Artaud and D.H. Lawrence*, PhD Thesis, University of Reading, 1989, p. 214.

the corresponding thought and the plane of subconscious life in continuous flow and movement – the ‘blood consciousness’.<sup>98</sup> She described Lawrence as a ‘seer’ who drew on visions from the ‘unconscious’, which she equated with intuition and instincts, to transform reality in his writing, rather than his intellect.<sup>99</sup> Diane Richard-Allerdyce argues that Nin used Lawrence’s dream imagery as a way to access an unconscious connection between perception, memory, and bodily sensation, which anticipated her own use of dream.<sup>100</sup> While she does not elaborate on this observation, it is useful in thinking about Nin’s definition of ‘unconscious’ as she applied it to her search for suitable new art forms.

This search for a new art-form based on dreams was created in the shadow of André Breton and the diverse Surrealist project in Paris. In the 1930s, Nin moved in similar artistic circles, although she never considered herself part of the movement. In an interview from the early 1970s Nin explained, “when living in France, I never joined the Surrealist movement. I wasn’t a part of it. But we were breathing it, the way you’re breathing psychology today”.<sup>101</sup> That was, of course, not completely out of choice. Susan Suleiman explains that during the heyday of Surrealism, between 1924 and 1933, not a single woman was included as an official member of the group.<sup>102</sup> In the writing and art production of the Surrealists, Nin saw the practical application of Freudian dream analysis. In 1924, Breton described Surrealism as a “means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in ‘an

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<sup>98</sup> Nin, *Lawrence*, p.13.

<sup>99</sup> Nin quoted D.H. Lawrence as saying: “The primal consciousness in man is pre-mental and has nothing to do with cognition”. Nin, *Lawrence*, p.13.

<sup>100</sup> Diane Richard-Allerdyce, ‘Transference, Mourning, and Narrative Recovery in *House of Incest*’, in Anais Nin’s Narratives, ed. Anne T. Salvatore (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), pp.89-112.

<sup>101</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p.68.

<sup>102</sup> Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.29.

absolute reality, a surreality”<sup>103</sup> Nin praised Breton as “one of the first literary writers to accept Freud as one of the great forces in helping man rediscover the meaning and vitality of words and in giving importance to dreams and the subconscious of man”<sup>104</sup> Initially, however, Breton’s understanding of the unconscious was similarly pre-Freudian, and only later merged, in part, with Freudian ideas of dream work.<sup>105</sup> Nin placed a similar emphasis on symbolism in art to connect to the unconscious like the artists around Breton. She declared that symbolism was “*the most important form of expression of the unconscious*”<sup>106</sup> She argued that symbolism and Surrealism were the two “ways of describing the unconscious”, which “paralleled exactly the development of the psychological study of dreams”<sup>107</sup> But Nin always remained suspicious of Breton’s literal, unfiltered use of free association, which was antithetical to her emphasis on the artist’s role of transforming dream.<sup>108</sup> In a diary from autumn 1937, Nin proclaimed after a visit from Breton:

“I never took surrealism seriously. [...] Breton’s attitude toward music, his hatred of it, his deafness, clearly betrays the intellectual fabricant, the man of the laboratory. The reaction against surrealism was born today.”<sup>109</sup>

Nin’s ambiguous reaction towards Breton parallels certain views on Bretonian Surrealism expressed in *transition* in the 1930s. Pawlik explains that Jolas criticised Breton and his group for their expression of the unconscious through automatism, as

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<sup>103</sup> André Breton, *Manifeste du Surrealism* (Paris: Gallimard, 1924), p.1.

<sup>104</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.15.

<sup>105</sup> One can only speculate about the awareness of first-generation surrealists of Freudian theories as Freud’s works were translated much later in the 1920s. See David Lomas, ‘The Omnipotence of Desire: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Hysteria’ in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (London: Tate Publishing 2001), p.58.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6, 9.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.118, 32.

<sup>109</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, 1979, p.257.

to him it demanded new means. He proclaimed, like Nin, that the “products of the unconscious were only the raw material for art, which must admit other influences if it were to remain in a vital relationship with reality”.<sup>110</sup> This rejection of Bretonian Surrealism also reflected the views of many other writers and artists Nin would encounter when she moved to America. But Nin’s apolitical agenda has to be set apart from *transition*, even if it displayed certain parallels in relation to a call for a new type of language – a subject I will discuss at a later point.

Nin’s aversion to Breton, however, did not hinder her from drawing on certain surrealist themes and strategies, especially in *House of Incest*. The Surrealist group around Breton were the first to explore the imagistic nature of dreams. Nin became particularly interested in surrealist film. From modernist writers published in *transition* she had learned how to adapt cinematic effects in writing and began using them to imitate dream states. Nin saw how filmmakers like Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí attempted to recreate dream-states and tried to adapt this to writing. This included estrangement techniques, jump cuts, dissolves and superimposition which were modelled on the dream mechanisms as described by Freud.<sup>111</sup> But we will see that her adaptation of the Surrealists’ exploration of eroticism and desire as expressed in their art was different, although she adapted their stereotypical portrayal of women as femme fatale, female muse or hysteric, which would become a constant point of friction in her writing and collaborations. This also related to her ambiguous negotiation of female identity and creativity.

From 1937, Nin slowly began to attach a specific ‘feminine aesthetic’ to her attempt at creating a physical language of the ‘unconscious’. She described it as a “writing

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<sup>110</sup> Pawlik 2008, p.25

<sup>111</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, p.316.



from the womb”, which expressed a woman’s experiences. This has often been placed within the context of French Feminism and called *proto-écriture féminine* – a term first coined by Hélèn Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), which describes the inscription of the female body and female difference in language. Nin’s complex and often contradictory relationship to different strands of Feminism has been discussed exhaustively. Tookey explains:

“Critical considerations of Nin in relation to gender and art look in two directions: backwards, to the slightly earlier context of modernist women writers such as [Virginia] Woolf and [Dorothy] Richardson and their attempts to formulate a new ‘feminine’ aesthetic; and forwards, to the predominantly French feminist theory of the 1970’s which focused on the idea of a feminine language, an *écriture féminine*.”<sup>112</sup>

Tookey looks at Nin’s ideas of a ‘new’ language and the synthesis of artistic forms in relation to similar ideas by other contemporary writers and ‘avant-gardes’, and in the context of issues of gender and aesthetics, female creativity and *écriture féminine*.<sup>113</sup> She highlights shifts in Nin’s ideas over time and in different contexts, including “the tensions as well as the links among her ideas about femininity, creativity, and radical art” in relation to different schools of Feminism and psychoanalysis.<sup>114</sup> Maxie Wells, on the other hand, has argued that Nin’s writing differed from both the modernist project and that of French Feminist writers of the 1970s, and introduces it as a “third modernist poetics”.<sup>115</sup> She argues that Nin’s modernist ‘*écriture féminine*’ “shares the nonlinear narrative structure practiced by Cixous, Irigaray and Julia Kristeva”, but “focuses on developing a poetics that seeks

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<sup>112</sup> Tookey 2003, 120.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Tookey 2003, p.124.

<sup>115</sup> Maxie Wells, ‘Writing the Mind in the Body - Modernism and *Écriture Feminine* in Anaïs Nin’s *A Spy in the House of Love and Seduction of the Minotaur*’, in *Anaïs Nin’s Narratives*, ed. Anne T. Salvatore (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001).

to express the ways in which the female body reflects the female mind”.<sup>116</sup> This integration of body and mind, she argues, is antithetical to formal modernism which recycles “Eurocentric male-centred language that reinforces the hierarchical, binary oppositions of Western metaphysical thought – male over female, reason over emotion, mind over body”.<sup>117</sup>

Another gender-related aspect, which affected Nin’s extra-literary collaborations was a shift away from her utopian ideal of ‘wholeness’ of the self, which she first explored through Lawrence’s “philosophy that was against division”, and her struggle with what she perceived as the fragmentation of the female self, which she viewed as either negative triggering a search for ‘wholeness’, or positive.<sup>118</sup> Already in the first volume of her diary she admitted: “I have always been tormented by the image of the multiplicity of selves. Some days I call it richness, and other days I see it as a disease”.<sup>119</sup> This ambivalent relationship to fragmentation, multiplicity and ‘wholeness’, was acted out by the characters in her novels, which is well documented in Nin-criticism. All her female protagonists experience a form of disintegration of personality, which is often brought about by a traumatic experience with a male father figure. This mainly refers to their struggle with traditional notions of femininity – including the obedient daughter, wife and mother – and the conflicting urge to reclaim authority and be recognised as a female artist. Specific works of art were used as metaphors and blueprints to contain the changing notions of fragmentation Nin wanted to express, such as Marcel Duchamp’s painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Nin would later re-define her unscientific ideal of

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<sup>116</sup> Wells in Salvatore 2001, p.214.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p.215.

<sup>118</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.75ff and p.13.

<sup>119</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.54.

‘wholeness’ and describe it as a flexible synthesis of independent parts, which allowed for a harmonious co-existence of multiple selves.

Nin’s position within Feminism, as we will see, was highly ambiguous. In her writing, Nin seemed to perpetuate the stereotypical notions of femininity that she claimed to critique. In their ‘fragmented state’, Nin’s female characters always looked at male father-figures for self-empowerment. This also applied to Nin’s formation of her own artistic identity. She seemed to affirm phallogentrism by drawing only on male role-models, from Henry Miller and Otto Rank to Jean Varda. We will see a similar pattern in her collaborations with exceptionally male artists.

Although Nin discussed her view on art and writing extensively in her diary throughout the 1930s, she only formulated it as an ‘art theory’ after she came to America, in the form of three self-printed pamphlets: *Realism and Reality* (1946), *On Writing* (1947) and *The Novel of the Future* (1968). In these works, she promoted her Romantic ideas of art and writing, which were rooted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thought. At the same time she proclaimed that she wanted to modernise writing. These texts have been regarded as a form of reaction against the anti-Europeanism of the New York publishing world and the commercial failure of her self-printed novels.<sup>120</sup> When Nin moved to the United States in 1939, her ‘experiential’ language and her emphasis on feeling, unconscious, mysticism and dream were met with mixed reactions. In the New York publishing world, which was dominated by social realism during the 1930s and 40s, her esoteric style was not taken seriously.<sup>121</sup> She was told that in America, “no one would be interested in books dealing with life in Paris, and that the style was too esoteric and

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<sup>120</sup> Paul Heron, ‘The Birth of Anaïs Nin’s Writing Theory’, *The Official Anaïs Nin Blog*, <http://anaïsninblog.skybluepress.com/2012/05/the-birth-of-anaïs-nin%E2%80%99s-writing-theory/>.

<sup>121</sup> Tookey 2003, p.129.

subjective”.<sup>122</sup> Although, as mentioned earlier, she was never a member of the Surrealist group in Paris, her writing was now associated with the bygone era of Surrealism.<sup>123</sup> Nin described the climate in 1940s New York as “provincial”, “anti-poetic, anti-spirit, anti-metaphysical”, and “anti-European”. She remembered:

“I did not realise that with war and emigration to America would come a totally different kind of struggle. In France we felt a part of a pioneering group, but in America we found ourselves isolated and in the minority. Literature was for the masses, it was in the hands of the social realists, dominated by the social critics, all more concerned with politics than psychology or human beings in particular. In America the aim was not to be original, individualistic, an innovator, but to please the majority, to standardize, to submit to the major trends.”<sup>124</sup>

Nin strongly criticised the “misconception” of Surrealism, “an unpopular term in the 1940s”, often “confused by academic critics with baroque horror stories” or associated “only with ‘Dalí’s pranks’”.<sup>125</sup> She put this down to the fact that only “few in America had read the original texts written by French surrealists”.<sup>126</sup> Many American artists, especially in New York, resisted the importation of European avant-gardes, although some would appropriate certain ideas. Pawlik argues that in the 1940s, American artists’ and writers’ encounters with Surrealism also “prompted them to crystallize their own plans for avant-garde activity”.<sup>127</sup> But she points out that for many, “Surrealism was of interest purely on account of its break with social realism, and its suggestion to American writers of non-reactionary artistic experimentation. Of Surrealism’s actual route beyond Stalinist aesthetics, Americans

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<sup>122</sup> Nin’s *Ladders to Fire* was attacked for being surrealist. See Nin, *Novel*, p.2.

<sup>123</sup> See Gunther Stuhlmann’s foreword to Anais Nin, *Under a Glass Bell*. For a discussion of New York’s largely hostile attitude towards Bretonian Surrealism see: Sawin 1997 and Pawlik 2008. Also Dickran Tashjian *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001). James Boaden, *The Avant-Garde as Swain: A Critical American Pastoral*, PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, May 2008.

<sup>124</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.1.

<sup>125</sup> Nin, *Novel*, pp.2-3.

<sup>126</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.2.

<sup>127</sup> Pawlik 2008, p.38.

seemed to think very little”.<sup>128</sup> Many artists, including those grouped under the term Abstract Expressionism, drew on Bretonian Surrealism, but subjected it to substantial modifications. Nin described this in her diary where she argued that

“America is rejecting all European influences like children who reject their parental influence. ... They are too busy trying to find their own style, their own art. But they borrow and imitate as we did when we were young, only we were grateful to our influences ... Here I feel a kind of shamefaced stealing from the European artists and a quick turnabout to deny any such influence.”<sup>129</sup>

Nin’s love-hate relationship with American art however also included her dislike of Surrealist activity in New York. She lamented the corruption of Surrealism in New York, especially their alignment with commercialism and popular culture.<sup>130</sup> Nin frequently visited parties at the home of Rebecca and Bernard Reis, and documented her experience in her diaries. She described everyone who went to the parties, mostly exiled European surrealists, with unfavourable comments. Matta was described as “surrealist, neurotic, politically pernicious anarchist”, Max Ernst and André Breton “as dead as [Eugene] Jolas, Leger, Kay Boyle”; Louis Buñel was criticised “for using naked truth of his film politically”, Peggy Guggenheim for “completing corruption of the surrealist group”, and finally Tanguy for producing work which was “stagnant self repetition”.<sup>131</sup> But Nin also believed that these people were “a force by their coalition, certainly the *only* art group”.<sup>132</sup>

Nin and her circle became the target of influential critics like Clement Greenberg who regarded Formalism as the only way forward for the avant-garde. In 1940 the *Partisan Review* published a defeating article by Greenberg on the literary magazine

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.31.

<sup>131</sup> Bair 1995, p.290.

<sup>132</sup> Bair 1995, p.290.

*Experimental Review*, titled ‘*The Renaissance of the little Mag*’, in which he pronounced his dislike for “unconscious creativity” as propagated by Nin and her circle. Greenberg criticised the revival of avant-garde writing which he connected to the influx of writers and artists from Europe at the outbreak of WWII.<sup>133</sup> It is worth quoting the entire paragraph:

“There is a flavour of cult and there are saints living and dead: D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Rexroth, Patchen, and the editor’s private saint, St. John Perse [pseudonym for the French poet Alexis Léger]. There is a definite, if only negative direction – negative because it is direction away from rather than towards something; away from the lighted world of distinctions and ordered relations the acolytes go, to spread out and scatter off in different directions into the vast regions of what is not. Unfortunately most are not enough acquainted with what is to be able to determine what is not. The enormous universe of the nether, sub- and unconscious turns out to be rather shabby and provincial for all its glitter moderne, something like California, a refuge for those who have just enough culture to be tired of it’.”<sup>134</sup>

Greenberg, just like Michael Fried, also promoted a ‘purist’ Modernism with regard to media specificity, which was antithetical to Nin’s hybrid manifestation. Nin stubbornly insisted that it was not her writing which was outmoded, but that America was far behind France in terms of modern writing. Nin also drew a direct line from the French experimental poets to American writers who were ‘neglected’ by Greenberg because of their “common grounding in poetics”.<sup>135</sup> She used the very terms and concepts which came under attack as proof of the ‘modernity’ of their ideas. In *Realism and Reality* she outlined her distinction between *realism*, which she regarded as ‘life-less’ documentation of external reality driven by intellect, and

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<sup>133</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1983), p.88.

<sup>134</sup> Faas 1983, p.88.

<sup>135</sup> Balakian in Nalbantian 1997, p.66.

*reality*, which did not refer to the external world, but to the co-existence of intuition and intellect, unconscious and conscious, body and emotion. Nin claimed that *Realism and Reality* may not have been “an innovation in terms of French literature”, but that it was new to a ‘Puritan’ America.<sup>136</sup> Even many years later, in *The Novel of the Future*, Nin glorified the great sense of innovation that dominated the Parisian avant-garde:

“In Paris, in the thirties, many writers around me were breaking the moulds of the conventional novel and experimentation was encouraged. More than that, French literature at that time was dedicated to war against the cliché, the obvious, the traditional, and the conventional – all energies were engaged in innovation. Even those who were not dogmatic surrealists were influenced by its spirit.”<sup>137</sup>

She lamented that it seemed “as if no one in America intended to follow the direction indicated by D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Djuna Barnes, or André Breton” who had shaped her own writing.<sup>138</sup> Nin fashioned herself as saviour who rescued American readers from social realism by introducing them to a “psychological reality”.<sup>139</sup> Nin argued that the “Calvinist Puritanism of speech weighed heavily also on colour, rhythm, musicality of language [...] our senses were undernourished”.<sup>140</sup> She believed that the American art world, on the other hand, was much more advanced when it came to promoting this “psychological reality” and much more open to innovation, in contrast to the literary scene. She explained that “[w]orks of imagination and psychological reality asserted themselves in films, in the theatre’, but only in ‘a few scattered novels’.<sup>141</sup> She declared that she wanted to bring

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<sup>136</sup> Nin, *Novel*, pp.2-3.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p.94.

<sup>141</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.3.

“magic” back into writing, which she found lacking in American literature. This included her promotion of the Rimbaudean notion of the artist as visionary. Tookey has traced this back to a *transition* manifesto from 1927 titled ‘*Suggestions for a New Magic*’. It proclaimed:

“Realism in America has reached its point of saturation. We are no longer interested in the photography of events, in the mere silhouetting of facts, in the presentation of misery, in the anecdotic boredom of verse”; writers need ‘new words, new abstractions, new hieroglyphics, new symbols, new myths.’<sup>142</sup>

Although Nin may have latched on to the idea, her reasons for promoting ‘magic’ when she moved to America were quite different. It was not connected to socio-political concerns, but served to defend and promote her own project which had come under attack. Nin has often been accused of being apolitical and leading a self-indulgent, hedonistic life-style, while Europe was going up in flames. Instead of engaging with reality in a critical way, Nin always chose the way inwards which has been described as either a form of escapism or a naïve denial of uncomfortable truths.

In New York and California, Nin surrounded herself with artists who promoted similar poetics that she cultivated in her own writing. She began mingling with the members of the emerging underground scene including Kenneth Anger and Robert Duncan. Nin’s collaborators, however, were often lesser know figures, apart from Edgard Varèse. Although they were not part of one movement or artistic group, their work engaged with similar themes: it displayed an engagement with inner processes, a re-appropriation of strategies that derived from European Surrealism, a concern with the physical effect of art on the audience and the integration of different art

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<sup>142</sup> Cited in Tookey 2003, p.129.



forms. But we will see that these themes also became attached with different meanings; this strongly applied to Nin's already dubious negotiation of female identity.

All the artists Nin collaborated with were male which leads to the question of what happened to Nin's 'writing from the womb' when it was 'translated' by these artists. This question parallels similar problems in Julia Kristeva's writing. For Kristeva, all the protagonists of '*écriture féminine*' are male avant-garde writers. We shall see that Nin's position to the male avant-garde was ambiguous and complex. We cannot simply explore the outcome of her collaborations in a formalist sense, but have to look closely at the interplay between 'masculine' and 'feminine' voices. I will demonstrate that a certain tension arises in each of these adaptations, which derives not only from the fact that, like in any collaboration, it was the coming together of different artists and art forms, but also from the fact that it was the coming together of different genders.

Commentators on Nin's engagement with different art forms such as Sharon Spencer and Suzanne Nalbantian have approached the topic only from a purely literary angle.<sup>143</sup> Individual art references are discussed as part of a hermeneutic analysis of her novels, while the iconographical meaning of these art works and what they may tell us about the cultural and historical context Nin was writing in are ignored. In her book *Collage of Dreams* (1977), literary scholar Sharon Spencer has written extensively on Nin's use of extra-literary effects, although she analyses her writing uncritically. She mainly focuses on Nin's musical writing and its roots in Symbolism. Nin's involvement in art production beyond writing, on the other hand,

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<sup>143</sup> See Spencer 1977. Also Spencer, 'The Music of the Womb: Anaïs Nin's "Feminine" Writing' in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989).

is largely unexplored with only a few exceptions including scholars from other disciplines who look at the work of Nin's collaborators, which I will discuss in the relevant chapters.<sup>144</sup> But a lack of information about the themes in Nin's writing often undermines their studies.

Unlike previous studies of Nin's writing, then, the main focus of my thesis will be an interdisciplinary analysis of Nin's practical application of her idea of a synthesis of the arts with a main focus on her involvement with artists and composers in the America of the 1950s and 60s. This will take into account these complex and intertwined aspects relating to Nin's approach to art in relation to the body and her notion of the 'unconscious' negotiated in *House of Incest* and *Collages*, and what happens when they are extended into different media in collaboration with male artists in mid-century America.

*Chapter One* starts with Nin's collaboration with Val Telberg. Although chronologically, this is not Nin's first extra-literary collaboration in America, it is most suitable for introducing Nin's use of inter-art analogies and its complex psychological subtext. It serves as a point of reference for the subsequent two adaptations which focus on select aspects from the book. I will discuss analogies and points of friction in Telberg's visual translation of the texture of Nin's language and the themes in the novel on two levels: poetics and gender.

*Chapter Two* looks at Ian Hugo's experimental film *The Bells of Atlantis* released in 1952 which was based on the prologue to *House of Incest*. Like all films, it was a collaboration between several artists: Nin provided the text and voice-overs, and also

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<sup>144</sup> For instance: P. Adams Sitney's analysis of *Bells of Atlantis* in *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) and Peter Evans, 'Nocturnal: The Sound Universes of Edgard Varèse and Anaïs Nin', *Sonus*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2004).

played her own protagonist; Hugo filmed and edited the footage, Len Lye created abstract colour effects, and Louis and Bebe Barron composed the soundtrack. I will look at each element and explore how they relate to each other and to Nin's text.

*Chapter Three* deals with Edgar Varèse's vocal piece *Nocturnal I* which premiered in New York in 1961. It is less a collaboration as Nin only provided the text for the libretto and had no direct input into the composition process. But Varèse's treatment of her prose-poem opens up interesting discourses around music, language and gender, and different notions of the relationship between art and the body. This will also include a discussion of Antonin Artaud's idea of the 'theatre of cruelty', which, I will argue, resonates in Varèse's staging of Nin's text.

*Chapter Four* focuses on Nin's last novel *Collages* published in California in 1964. Its content and narrative structure drew on the collages of Greek artist Jean Varda who also featured as a character in the novel and created the cover design for the book. I will argue that Nin's engagement with Varda and his decorative collages mobilises various issues relating to contemporary developments in the arts in California: a turn in visual representation and perception of self, the rise of assemblage and feminist craft-based art.

A main problem for research of this kind is the lack of information on most of these artists and the outcome of their joint projects. A reason for the lack of information may be that, apart from Varèse, most of these artists were marginal figures whose work did not fit into dominant currents in American art production. This is particularly true in the case of Jean Varda's 'proto-hippie art' which belongs to the type of counterculture art production marginalised in academic research as apolitical 'naval-gazing'. Often Nin's diary and letters are some of the only sources of

information and cannot always be read as representative of ‘true circumstances’. Nin constantly edited and re-wrote sections of her diary as Deirdre Bair’s Nin-biography illustrates. However, often even these subjective accounts reveal information about Nin’s motivations.

In *The Colours of Rhetoric* (1982) Wendy Steiner has argued that the “ways that different periods interpret and use the inter-art analogy reveals much of what is essential to the period’s, genre’s, or writer’s overall aesthetics and also their connection to conceived realities both philosophical and historical”.<sup>145</sup> To reveal these aesthetics concerns and connections is the aim of this study. I will document the extent to which Nin’s approach relies on non-literary art forms and their aesthetic ideas, and what happens when her writing is translated into different media by male artists in America of the 1950s and 1960s. This mobilises complex issues related to a very particular moment in American modernism shaped by the interpolation of cultures at the outbreak of WWII, an emerging counterculture, second-wave Feminism, and the formation of an American artistic identity.

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<sup>145</sup> Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Literature and Modern Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1982).

## Chapter One: “Spiritual X-Rays” – Val Telberg’s Photomontages for Anaïs Nin’s *House of Incest* (1958)

Towards the end of the 1950s, Anaïs Nin gradually began to republish her self-printed novels, although her writing had provoked little interest in New York literary circles. This also included her surreal debut-novel *House of Incest* (1936), which had gone out of print by the late 1940s. Nin had hired the Chicago-based offset printer Edward Brothers who could reproduce copies of the novel from the 1947-edition that Nin had hand-set and -printed on her own printing press, and published under the imprint Gemor Press.<sup>1</sup> She noted in her diary in summer 1958: “Bypassing the reviewers, I have found the most wonderful direct contact with my readers. They write me, they order books from me, they send books to friends. I sell books at cost.”<sup>2</sup>

*House of Incest* was based on Nin’s dream diary which she kept while undergoing therapy with Otto Rank and transformed into fiction. She wrote, “a batch of dreams kept for a year served as a take-off for *House of Incest*. They supplied the atmosphere, its climate and texture”.<sup>3</sup> Like the novels that followed her debut, it was more about *affecting* than telling with its stream-of-consciousness style and synaesthetic language. In keeping with her belief in the imagistic nature of dreams on which her novel was based, Nin was planning to incorporate images in the re-issue to enhance her writing. With its lack of conventional narrative structure and symbolic content, *House of Incest* did not offer many reference points for traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Heron, ‘Anaïs Nin’s Artistic Associations: Val Telberg’, *The Anaïs Nin Blog*, posted 9<sup>th</sup> February 2010, <http://anaisninblog.skybluepress.com/2010/02/anais-nin%E2%80%99s-artistic-associations-val-telberg/>.

<sup>2</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1955-1966*, vol.6, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann, (Quartet Books: London, Melbourne and New York, 1979), p.172.

<sup>3</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (Peter Owen: London, 1969), p.118.

book illustration. Nin had to use an artist whose visual language was similarly based on symbolism rather than realism. For the first edition of the novel, Nin had chosen the organic forms of Ian Hugo's etchings, which can be described as mainly decorative rather than engaging with the narrative in a more complex fashion. For the new edition, Nin found her ideal candidate in photographer Val Telberg who she commissioned in 1954 to design the entire book.<sup>4</sup> When it was published in 1958, it included ten photomontages by Telberg: nine inside the book and one on the front cover [Figs. 1.1-1.10].<sup>5</sup>

Nin had met the photographer, who also worked in film, at a meeting of film-makers that she and her husband Ian Hugo hosted in their New York apartment in 1950. Hugo had by then started experimenting with film himself and both became interested in Telberg's work. Like Nin and Hugo, Telberg saw himself as labouring against realism.<sup>6</sup> In his photomontages, he created richly textured dream-scenarios through the over-layering of multiple negatives similar to superimposition in film, which often featured the human figure, body parts and street scenes [Fig. 1.11]. The technique of manipulating photographs goes back to the nineteenth century, but the

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<sup>4</sup> There is very little written material available on Val Telberg and his collaboration with Nin. In 1994, Jim Richard Wilson curated the exhibition 'Val Telberg & Anaïs Nin: House of Incest' first shown at the Opalka Gallery of The Sage Colleges in Albany, which featured Telberg's photomontages alongside the correspondence between Telberg and Nin during their collaboration for the 1958 edition of *House of Incest*. Most of Telberg's photomontages for the book and other material documenting their collaboration are kept in the Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>5</sup> Although the book only used ten photomontages by Telberg, he produced over 100 studies for the project. See 'Val Telberg & Anaïs Nin: House of Incest', Ackland Art Museum exhibition brochure 1997.

<sup>6</sup> For more information of the life and work of Val Telberg see Van Deren Coke, Introduction to *Val Telberg* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1983); Cynthia Wayne, *Dreams, Lies, and Exaggerations: Photomontage in America* (The Art Gallery, University of Maryland at College Park, MD., 1991); Val Telberg, 'Art and the Subconscious: The Multi-Negative Photography of Vladimir Telberg-von-Teleheim', *American Artist* (Jan. 1949). Van Deren Coke and Diane C. Du Pont, *Photography: A Facet of Modernism* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986); Doreen Tiernan, 'A Batch of Dreams – The Collaborative Art of Anaïs Nin and Val Telberg', in Opalka Gallery brochure for the exhibition *Val Telberg and Anaïs Nin: House of Incest* (1994).

term ‘photomontage’ was coined by the Berlin Dadaists after WWI.<sup>7</sup> The ‘invention’ of the technique as art practice, however, is claimed by both Berlin Dadaists and Russian constructivists who began experimenting with the method of collaging photographic elements in the same year, 1919. Benjamin Buchloh argues that the question who introduced the technique into the “transformation of the modernist paradigm” is unimportant. What is of importance, he writes, is the “inherent potential and consequences of the reintroduction of (photographic) iconic imagery at precisely the moment when mimetic representation had seemingly been dismantled and definitely abandoned.”<sup>8</sup> Artists like Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters began creating montages out of cut-up photographs with a collage-like appearance to critique power structures. Their composite images were made to resemble propaganda posters and often included satirical slogans. In the late 1920s and 1930s, European surrealists began using montage techniques to create dreamscapes and explore the “marvellous transformations of objects”, but in their work the montage-process was often hidden.<sup>9</sup> Max Ernst’s photomontages of the late 1920s were still largely based on a collage-approach, whereby photographs were cut out from various sources and combined in different ways. In the 1930s, however, photographers like Raoul Ubac, Brassai and Man Ray began developing different techniques to manipulate the negative itself through solarisation, superimposition and petrification. New ‘realities’ were now created in the dark-room and not through a process of cutting and pasting. We will see that Telberg drew on similar strategies as these surrealist photographers, but his use of the art practice in America of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p.12. Also Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, ‘From Faktura to Factography’, *October*, vol.30 (1984), pp.82-119. Robert Sobieszek, ‘Composite Imagery and the Origins of Photomontage’, Part I and II, *Artforum*, September/October 1978, pp.58-65, and pp.40-45.

<sup>8</sup> Buchloh, 1984, p.96.

<sup>9</sup> Ades 1976, p.111.

1950s also differed from that of his predecessors. He also referenced other art practices to represent what he described as “what goes on unseen in one’s mind”.<sup>10</sup>

Before Nin commissioned Telberg to design her book, he had acted as technical advisor to Hugo during the making of his ‘poetry film’ *Bells of Atlantis* (1952) which was based on the prologue to *House of Incest*.<sup>11</sup> He later also helped Hugo with the superimposition effects for his film *Jazz of Lights* (1954).<sup>12</sup> In the early 1950s, the American poetry film revival was at its peak when filmmakers like Hugo explored the close relationship between the way poetic language and film were structured – a subject I will explore in my next chapter on *Bells of Atlantis*. Telberg’s work drew heavily on strategies adapted from film and he also shared the belief in the enhancing cross-fertilisation between poetry and image. He was not only familiar with the relationship between poetry and film, but had experimented with the juxtaposition of poetry and photomontage. Telberg used strategies like symbolism, condensation and juxtaposition to create what can be called a poetic visual language. This may also explain why Telberg got most attention not from other photographers, but poets and film-makers.<sup>13</sup> He was friends with Greenwich Village poets like Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch and John Ashberry, and had been previously hired to produce cover designs for volumes of poetry including Louise Varèse’s translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell* (1945) [Fig. 1.12].<sup>14</sup> He had also experimented with poetry himself. For an exhibition at the Colorado Springs Fine

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<sup>10</sup> Telberg 1949 p.60.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Strickland, ‘Anais Nin’s Kindred Photographic Spirit’, *The New York Times* (New York, May 22, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> See P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Emersonian Heritage* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Telberg explained that “Poets were more interested in my work than photographers”. Telberg cited in Strickland 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and The Drunken Boat*, transl. Louise Varèse, with cover design by Val Telberg (New York: CT New Directions, 1945).



Arts Center in 1949 he composed poetic phrases to create greater coherence among the 100 prints on show.<sup>15</sup>

Telberg started working on Nin's book in 1954. Nin gave him free reign not only over the choice of images he was to contribute, but over the entire design of the book, including the front cover and sectioning of the text. She wrote to Telberg: "In my letter I told you to design the book as you pleased, to enhance and suit the photographs".<sup>16</sup> In preparation for the project, Nin only advised him to read her writing, which he must have been familiar with already through his work on *Bells of Atlantis*.<sup>17</sup> She still remained a strong presence during the development process though, as Telberg cleared every creative decision he made with her first. He sent Nin different variations of photomontages for each chapter and asked for her opinion.<sup>18</sup> She sometimes commented directly on the back of the prints and sent them back to him with an accompanying letter [Fig. 1.13]. Most of her comments, however, were relatively brief. We can see from these remarks and the letters she wrote to Telberg that she did not intervene heavily in any artistic decision, but only stated whether she liked or disliked a particular image Telberg had sent her.<sup>19</sup>

The final selection process took place in 1957 and the book was published the following year. Nin was pleased with the result. She wrote to Telberg in 1957/8: "I truly feel you have done it, captured the book's intent without illustration. Beautiful work – subtle textures and suggestiveness."<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Telberg made use of

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<sup>15</sup> In 1949, Telberg produced his own illustrated book *The Man Who Fell Dead on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* which combined both text and images. Coke, Introduction to *Val Telberg* 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Anais Nin, letter to Telberg written from Rapallo, Italy probably in 1957. Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>17</sup> Coke 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Telberg wrote: "Anais, I have been very close to these pix and may have lost all perspective as to what is right. Do not hesitate to eliminate or change – I am not happy with all of them but I guess there is never an end." Letter to Nin, 1957, Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>19</sup> Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>20</sup> Excerpt from Nin's letter to Telberg, dated between 1957 and 1958, Opalka Gallery archive.

the creative freedom Nin granted him, which is even more pronounced in another letter. There, Nin explained that the images were “poetic in their own right – in their own language”.<sup>21</sup> Both comments suggest that Telberg’s pictures were not mere illustrations of the narrative content of the novel, but somehow visualised its intention. *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* defines an illustration as “a picture or diagram that helps make something clear”.<sup>22</sup> According to this definition, book illustrations are determined by a co-dependency between text and image, whereby the emphasis however lies on the text. But Nin’s comments imply that Telberg’s visual language somehow differed from the text, was even independent of it. It is important to note that originally, Nin had thought about using existing photomontages from Telberg’s Colorado Springs exhibition for her book, which had no direct relation to her writing, but then abandoned the idea in favour of newly commissioned work.

This emphasis on a more dynamic relationship between text and image suggests a lineage to surrealist books created in the 1920s. In collaborations between writers and artists on surrealist books, the relationship between text and image often differed from that of classic book illustrations.<sup>23</sup> Until the mid-nineteenth-century, book illustrations were based on a mimetic relationship between text and image which meant that the images served as a “graphic paraphrase” of the text with an emphasis on a description of the narrative.<sup>24</sup> Renée Riese Hubert describes the nineteenth-century illustrator as a “penetrating reader” or a “perceptive but submissive critic”,

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<sup>21</sup> Nin wrote: “I love the photomontages, the sections, the cover – Perfect, I feel. It’s wonderful how you have included the images and the texts – they are poetic in their own terms – in their own languages. The feeling of a floating world – is so powerful.” Excerpt from Nin’s letter to Telberg written between 1957 and 1958, Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illustration>.

<sup>23</sup> See Vincent Gille, ‘Love of Books, Love Books’, in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (London: Tate Publishing 2001). Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Hubert 1988, p.3.

who transferred the narrative into his own language and emphasised certain important and recognizable moments.<sup>25</sup>

By the turn of the century avant-garde books began dealing more with inner processes of the narrator, which called for a distancing from the mimetic approach in illustrations.<sup>26</sup> The artist was forced to treat the text metaphorically and not metonymically.<sup>27</sup> In numerous surrealist book collaborations in France of the early twentieth century the relationship between text and image was mostly analogical meaning that the images were not literally referring to the narrative, sometimes they even seemed to have no relation to it at all.<sup>28</sup> Such illustrations, Hubert argues, imposed a “grid” on the text “by translating it into another language as well as by supplementing it with commentary”.<sup>29</sup> Text and image had to keep their autonomy, because their fusion would run counter to these artists’ rejection of structures and coherence.<sup>30</sup> Hubert compared this analogue relationship to the threshold between the everyday and the surreal world, which had to exclude referentiality and mimesis.<sup>31</sup> While this description of the relationship between text and image in avant-garde books will be a useful framework for thinking about Nin’s and Telberg’s collaboration, the examples these studies are based on only draw on collaborations between men. Neither of the authors mentions male-to-female collaborations, which probably relates to the fact that they did not exist or are as yet unknown. That this is an important distinction becomes obvious when we look at Telberg’s photomontages for Nin’s *House of Incest*.

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<sup>25</sup> Hubert 1988, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Hubert 1988, p.4.

<sup>27</sup> Hubert 1988, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> There were also exceptions, such as the erotic books of George Bataille and Louis Aragon. There, the artist, in both cases André Masson, worked closely to the text. See Gille in Mundy 2001, p.130.

<sup>29</sup> Hubert 1988, p.23.

<sup>30</sup> Hubert 1988, p.23.

<sup>31</sup> Hubert 1988, p.25.

If we open the book to get a first glimpse of what Nin described as the pictures' "own language", we are faced with a challenging set of images [Figs. 1.1-1.10]. On the first page, we see a photomontage which has at its centre a female nude spread out over a rock like a human sacrifice to be devoured by the eyes of the (male) viewer; her head is turned away to make way for the voyeuristic gaze [Fig. 1.2]. In subsequent images more nudes appear, sometimes cropped or veiled by superimposed images, and sometimes accompanied by a disembodied 'phallic' arm which gropes their bare breasts [i.e. Fig. 1.6].

Telberg's work has been described as drawing on surrealist themes and strategies, by which writers usually refer more generally to his interest in mental processes and the use of symbolism.<sup>32</sup> But it was also his depiction of the female body and body parts which connected him to the work of photographers like Man Ray who depicted women as fetishes and objects of male desire – a subject discussed and debated by scholars like Susan Rubin Suleiman, Dawn Ades and Hal Foster.<sup>33</sup> This however constitutes a conundrum: what we have here is a novel with an apparently female consciousness raising narrative concerning issues of female identity, which is translated by a male artist whose visual language seems to have drawn on the same traditional forms of expression that Nin's writing sought to undermine.<sup>34</sup> From 1937, Nin proclaimed the need for a type of "woman's creation", which was "far from

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance Strickland 1994.

<sup>33</sup> For instance Hal Foster, 'Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as fetish, as shattered object, as phallus', in Mundy, 2001, pp.203-226. Dawn Ades, 'Surrealism, Male-Female', in Mundy 2001, pp.171-202. Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass. and London : Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> See Philippa Christmass, ' "Dismaying the Balance": Anais Nin's Narrative Modernity', in *Anais Nin's Narratives*, ed. Anne T. Salvatore (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001); also Sharon Spencer, 'The Music of the Womb: Anais Nin's "Feminine" Writing', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989); Lynette Felber, 'The Three Faces of June: Anais Nin's Appropriation of Feminine Writing', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (University of Tulsa, Autumn, 1995).

being like man's".<sup>35</sup> If man's language was so inadequate, what was at stake in Nin's and Telberg's collaboration? And what is the relationship between verbal and visual languages?

These questions are made more complicated by the fact that Nin's novel displayed ambiguities with regards to the roles she ascribed to her female characters as either femme fatale, hysteric or female muse, troubling gender-stereotypes which inhabited the fantasy of most pre-war surrealist artists and writers. Nin-scholars Ellen G. Friedman, Diane Richard-Allerdyce and Suzette Henke have pointed out the ambiguities in Nin's writing in terms of her relationship to patriarchal values and traditional forms of artistic expression – trying to gain independence from and simultaneously aligning herself with them – which they trace back to her troubled relationship with her father.<sup>36</sup> Should we read Telberg's problematic images simply as visual translation of themes in Nin's own novel and interpret her complicity in their creation psycho-biographically, as symptomatic of her alignment with male values caused by repressed past trauma? Or did Nin's complicity signify the opposite and allow for a feminist reading of the images *because* they appear in the context of a 'female' narrative? In other words, did the apparently 'proto-feminist' subject matter (if we can call it as such) of the text spill over into the visual realm, subverting its objectionable message? I want to show that the 'two-directional

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<sup>35</sup> Anais Nin, *The Journals of Anais Nin 1934-1939*, vol.2, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (London, Melbourne and New York: Quartet Books, 1979), p.181 and pp.242-4. Helen Tookey argues that Nin's negotiation of 'feminine writing' grew out of her struggle with fiction writing as opposed to diary writing, whereby diary writing was regarded as a "feminine activity" and fiction writing "the masculine alchemy". Helen Tookey, *Anais Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p.155.

<sup>36</sup> Suzette Henke, 'Anais Nin's Journal of Love: Father-Loss and Incestuous Desire', in *Anais Nin: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Nalbantian (London: Macmillan Press 1997); Diane Richard-Allerdyce, *Anais Nin and the re-making of self: gender, modernism and narrative identity* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998) and 'Transference, Mourning and Narrative recovery in House of Incest', in Salvatore 2001; Ellen G. Friedman, 'Sex with Father: The Incest Metaphor in Anais Nin', in Salvatore, 2001.

interplay of image and text' in Nin's *House of Incest* was much more complex than a black-or-white interpretation would allow for – a recurring problem in Nin's collaborations with male artists.<sup>37</sup> The juxtaposition of Nin's writing with Telberg's images in the 1958 edition of *House of Incest*, then, prompts us to consider the interplay of verbal language and visual language on two levels: the level of poetics and the level of gender.

### ***Anais Nin's House of Incest (1936):***

In order to analyse the complex relationship between text and image in the 1958 edition of *House of Incest*, I first want to establish the major themes in Nin's novel. *House of Incest* was Nin's first experiment with trying to recreate a 'language of dreams' and drew strongly on non-literary effects. It was a surreal dream scenario written in a stream-of-consciousness style that used an imagistic language and symbolism to describe a complex psychological subtext.<sup>38</sup> Nin described it as "visionary, symbolic dream sequences which are woven together".<sup>39</sup> It was heavily influenced by her exposure to Bretonian Surrealism in Paris, her experience of undergoing psychoanalysis with Otto Rank and her obsession with the symbolist poetry of Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>40</sup> The novel was also Nin's first application of the

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<sup>37</sup> Hubert 1988, p.11.

<sup>38</sup> A five-page fragment of *House of Incest* appeared in issue 27 of *transition*, April-May 1938, where Nin had been mentioned as part of the "heroic period of surrealism", according to Nin's own account in her diary. Nin, Nin, *The Journals of Anais Nin 1947-1955*, vol.5, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann, (Quartet Books: London, Melbourne and New York, 1979), p.224.

<sup>39</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.119 .

<sup>40</sup> Nin explained to Oliver Evans who reviewed *House of Incest* that the origins of her work were "surrealism and psychoanalysis". Nin, *Journals*, vol. 6, 1979, p.376. In a diary entry from April 1932 Nin explained that she had written the "first two pages of my new book, *House of Incest*, in a surrealistic way. I am influenced by *transition* and Breton and Rimbaud". Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, p.84.

Jungian credo “proceed from the dream”.<sup>41</sup> She emphasised that it was partly based on dreams she had, dreams that she then edited and transformed into fiction.

It described a woman’s struggle to find identity from a fragmented self and cure herself from a stifling neurosis.<sup>42</sup> The theme of a protagonist’s search for identity has been loosely linked to André Breton’s novel *Nadja* (1928) which has been described as semi-autobiographical account of Breton’s encounter with the *femme enfant* Nadja who was a mental patient of Pierre Janet. *Nadja* starts with the (male) narrator’s question “Who am I?”, which is echoed by Nin’s (female) protagonist who asks ‘Do you know who I am?’. Apart from this shared theme, the narrative structure and content of both novels, however, diverge considerably. Nin described her novel as “a woman’s season in hell” after Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en Enfer* (1873), which was similarly based on his own dreams and nightmares.<sup>43</sup> This was emphasised in the original title of Nin’s novel, *House of Incest (A Fantasia of Neurosis)*.<sup>44</sup> Nin explored this theme through a range of psychoanalytical metaphors loosely based on Otto Rank’s writing, including ‘birth-trauma’, ‘incest’ and ‘the double’.<sup>45</sup>

Neurosis in Nin’s writing was a romantic condition, which was a reinterpretation of ideas she read in Rank’s *Art and Artist* (1932). Nin explained that she used neurosis

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<sup>41</sup> Nin explained: “It was a phrase from Jung which inspired *House of Incest*: Proceed from the dream [...]”, and that “a batch of dreams kept for a year served as a take off for *House of Incest*. They supplied the atmosphere, its climate and texture”. Nin, *Novel*, p.118.

<sup>42</sup> Evelyn J. Hinz points out that the theme of all of Nin’s writing is “woman at war with herself”. Evelyn J. Hinz, *The Mirror and the Garden: Realism and Reality in the Writing of Anais Nin* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p.35.

<sup>43</sup> See Nin, *Novel*, p.34.

<sup>44</sup> Her original diary covering the period between March and August 1936 contains a tipped-in title page of *House of Incest* which reads: “*House of Incest (A Fantasia of Neurosis)* by Anais Nin”. Anais Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Folder no.50. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>45</sup> Otto Rank discusses these concepts in *The Trauma of Birth (Das Trauma der Geburt, 1924; English translation 1929)*; *The Double: a psychoanalytical study (Der Doppelgänger, 1914)* and *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation (Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage, 1912)*.

as a “modern form of romanticism”, which originated from “an obsession with living out what one has imagined”, which, when “found to be illusory” lead to “a rejection of reality”, and turns “the creative force ... into destruction”.<sup>46</sup> The entire novel was heavily padded out with a lay-psychoanalytical subtext mostly drawn from Rank’s writing. During the time of writing, Nin was under analysis by Rank whom she had met in Paris in November 1933, after her break with her previous analyst René Allendy. Rank also helped her edit *House of Incest*.

The stages of neurosis are represented by two interconnected themes in the novel: birth and incest. The novel begins with the birth of the female narrator from the ocean, recounting memories of a previous life in the underwater-realm Atlantis, which is Nin’s symbol for the prenatal space of the womb and pre-conscious. The narrator’s longing to return to Atlantis drew on Rank’s description of return-to-the-womb fantasies.<sup>47</sup> In this protective space, the narrator is in harmony with the environment, everything is cared for. Nin described the womb as “a place of peace: nonlife”, which is the “only peace a neurotic can conceive of, [...] absence of conflict by submerging into the womb”.<sup>48</sup> Nin’s description of pre-birth sensations within a dream-scenario also corresponded with Rank’s assertion that there are traces of pre-natal life in our dreams which he explained in *The Trauma of Birth* (1929).

Atlantis, like the amniotic water of the mother’s womb, is a fluid space, through which the narrator is “moving without effort, in the soft current of water and desire”.<sup>49</sup> Nin considered water a traditional metaphor for the unconscious and

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<sup>46</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 2, 1979, p.31.

<sup>47</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.35.

<sup>48</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.35.

<sup>49</sup> Nin, *House*, p.17.



claimed it as her element after reading Gaston Bachelard's *Water and Dreams*.<sup>50</sup> Nin's emphasis on progress, flow and fluidity also drew on various other sources including the writing of D.H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Fluidity was an important theme also in the surrealist imagination. Mary Ann Caws has pointed out that the "ideal surrealist space is flexible, fluid. Just as in the baroque imagination, the watery is the correspondent of glass and responds, in all its fluidity, to the hardness of the mirror, repeating and reflecting."<sup>51</sup> The notion of water as reflecting mirror resonated indirectly in Nin's incest metaphor, which stands for narcissistic self-love, the love for the mirror image, explored in the novel's main part.

At the end of the prologue, the narrator finds herself washed up on a rock, which marks her birth into consciousness, a traumatic experience which evokes Rank's 'birth trauma'. Because the narrator's wish to regress into the safety of the womb is utopian, just like the dream of a previous life on Atlantis, she retreats from reality and withdraws into the house of incest, or neurosis.<sup>52</sup> This house is a dark place full of nightmares, which is the setting for the following chapters. Nin explained that in *House of Incest* she described "what it is to be trapped in the dream, unable to relate it to life, unable to reach 'daylight'".<sup>53</sup> Incest provided a metaphor for the stifling love for one's double and the struggle to form individual identity from a fragmented self. This was partly modelled on Rank's book *The Double (Der Doppelgänger, 1914)* in which he discussed the motif of the doppelgänger as metaphor for the dark, but integral parts of oneself.

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<sup>50</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.119.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Ann Caws, in *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination: A Study of Breton and Bachelard* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p.48.

<sup>52</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.34.

<sup>53</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.34.

In Nin's book, this theme is symbolised by the narrator's obsession with two different women who haunt the house, and are different facets of herself: the heavily eroticised femme fatale Sabina who wears a mask of "primeval sensuality" and the crippled aristocrat Jeanne who desires her brother.<sup>54</sup> Jeanne is described as sensuous, but proud with "[d]ilated eyes, noble-raced profile, wilful mouth", who walks with her "head carried high, nose to the wind, eyes on the stars, walking imperiously, dragging her crippled leg".<sup>55</sup> The crippled leg becomes the symbol for sexual and emotional paralysis. The theme is picked up again through various metaphors including the figure of the paralytic and the "modern Christ" who is longing to "escape from this house of incest, where we only love ourselves in the other" and wishes to "save you all from yourselves".<sup>56</sup>

Many commentators on Nin's novels have discussed her portrayal of Sabina's archetypal femininity: heavily perfumed, bestowed with "an ancient stare" and a voice "rusty with the sound of curses and the hoarse cries that issue from the delta in the last paroxysm of orgasm".<sup>57</sup> Gary Sayre argued that Sabina embodies a "carnivorous, incestuous" desire, which would destroy the narrator if she continued to identify with her.<sup>58</sup> Oliver Evans sees Sabina as 'naturally' destructive in contrast to the narrator, the "earth-mother archetype".<sup>59</sup> Nancy Scholar described Sabina as "the shadow side of 'proper' femininity" or "woman as OTHER".<sup>60</sup> In the novel, this is revealed by the narrator who exclaims: "I am the other face of you ... this is the

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<sup>54</sup> Spencer 1977, p.163.

<sup>55</sup> Nin, *House*, p.43.

<sup>56</sup> Nin, *House*, p.70.

<sup>57</sup> Nin, *House*, pp.18-19.

<sup>58</sup> Gary Sayre, 'House of Incest: Two Interpretations,' in *Anais, Art and Artists: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Sharon Spencer (Greenwood, Florida: Penkevill, 1986), p.47.

<sup>59</sup> Oliver Evans, *Anais Nin* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p.31.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy Scholar, 'Anais Nin's *House of Incest* and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*: Two Variations on a Theme' in *Anais, Art and Artist, a collection of essays*, ed. Sharon Spencer (Greenwood, Florida 1986), p.145.

book you wrote and you are the woman I am”.<sup>61</sup> This metaphor of a seemingly impossible union of different sides of femininity is picked up again in Nin’s *Seduction of the Minotaur* (which features the same character Sabina), as Scholar points out:

“It was a desire for an impossible union: she wanted to ... BECOME Sabina [...] and be one with her and both arise as ONE woman; she wanted to add herself to Sabina, re-enforce the woman in herself, the submerged woman, intensify this woman Lillian she could not liberate fully .... By adding herself to Sabina she would become a more potent woman.”<sup>62</sup>

Scholar argues that the narrator’s longing reflects aspects repeated in all of Nin’s writing: “woman’s struggle to liberate the submerged aspects of herself, to resurrect and confront qualities considered socially unacceptable, such as overt sexuality and creative ambition”.<sup>63</sup> This is an important observation which I will unpack further in my discussion of Telberg’s photomontages.

The house is the locus where the narrator fights her demons; it represents the opposite of growth and flow which determined the pre-natal paradise, and refers to the stifling effect of this neurosis. It is a dark place ‘without windows’ where “everything had been made to stand still”.<sup>64</sup> The house with its many rooms becomes a metaphor for the many layers of selfhood – a theme developed further in Nin’s subsequent novels such as *Cities of the Interior*.<sup>65</sup> The house was also a central metaphor in the work of many first-generation Surrealists, although it had many different connotations. It has been traced back to Freud’s *The Interpretations of Dreams*, but as Jane Alison pointed out, Freud used the house to represent the

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<sup>61</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.

<sup>62</sup> Nin, ‘Seduction of the Minotaur’, in *Cities of the Interior*, vol.2, (London: Quartet 1979), p.578.

<sup>63</sup> Scholar in Spencer 1986, p.146.

<sup>64</sup> Anais Nin, *Winter of Artifice & House of Incest* (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p.198.

<sup>65</sup> See Suzanne Nalbantian, ‘Aesthetic Lies’, in *Anais Nin: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Nalbantian (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p.8.

organism as a whole.<sup>66</sup> She argues that the Paris group of Surrealists “thought of the house not as Freud’s medical body, but as a metaphor for the imagination or the unconscious itself”.<sup>67</sup> For Breton, it represented the many layers of the unconscious, which is closer to Nin’s use of the metaphor.<sup>68</sup>

Nin’s house-metaphor invokes further aspects connected to the work of the Surrealist group around Breton. Surrealist philosopher Gaston Bachelard regarded the house as “one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind”.<sup>69</sup> He called it the first cosmos after the womb.<sup>70</sup> Tristan Tzara connected the house to the safety of the womb and the “intrauterine”.<sup>71</sup> Sara Poole writes that metaphors for the unconscious such as the nocturnal landscape, the cave, the underground, water are traditionally linked to woman, via associations of the womb (the cave, the rooms, water as amniotic fluid), and to rebirth (emergence from water and through tunnels).<sup>72</sup> But in Nin’s novel, womb and house were distinctly separate spaces. Nin’s house is the opposite of the pre-natal realm, it is a dark space and, like for many first-generation Surrealists, “a vessel for dreams, fears and desires” as Jane Allison has put it.<sup>73</sup> Nin’s house was a hotbed of desire: the narrator’s desire for Sabina who in turn is described as a desiring subject, and Jeanne’s incestuous desire for her brother. Woman also becomes the object of male desire in a reference to the

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<sup>66</sup> Jane Alison, 'The Surreal House', in *The Surreal House*, ed. Jane Alison (New Haven and London: Barbican Art Gallery in association with Yale University Press, 2010), p.15.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.; Hal Foster, however, points out the surrealist awareness of Freudian psychoanalysis is a problematic field as Freud’s books had not been translated into English until the 1920s. See Foster in Mundy 2001, p.206. Also David Lomas, ‘The Omnipotence of Desire: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Hysteria’ in Mundy 2001, p.58.

<sup>68</sup> Kate Bush, foreword to *The Surreal House*, Alison 2010, p.8.

<sup>69</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, cited from Alison 2010, p.15. Bachelard wrote in 1947: “images of rest, of refuge, of rootedness... The house, the stomach, the cave, for example, carry the same overall theme of the return to the mother”. Cited from Caws ‘How to House the Surrealist Imagination?’, in Alison 2010, p.44.

<sup>70</sup> Alison 2010, p.17.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Sara Poole, ‘*The Utmost Response*’: *A Comparison of the Writing and Thought of Antonin Artaud and D.H. Lawrence*, PhD Thesis, University of Reading, 1989, p.208.

<sup>73</sup> Alison 2010, p.10.

Biblical tale of father-daughter incest, the story of Lot in chapter four. The narrator enters the ‘room of paintings’ where she sees a painting of Lot who reaches for the breast of his daughter – an important art-reference which I will explore at a later point in relation to Telberg’s engagement with the incest-metaphor.

The story of dangerous sexuality and identity was a subject with which surrealist artists of the 1920s occupied themselves. Jennifer Mundy explained that “the word ‘desire’ runs like a silver thread through the poetry and writings of the surrealist group.”<sup>74</sup> Desire was regarded as “the authentic voice of the inner self” and as a “path to self-knowledge”, which also rings true for Nin’s narrator.<sup>75</sup> By facing her inner demons and forbidden desires, she finally cures herself. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Hal Foster points out that the surreal house may also symbolise the ‘hysterical body’ which is “associated with the feminine, the infantile and the historical”.<sup>76</sup> Nin’s ambiguous ‘hysterical discourse’ is a complex subject, which will be unpacked in relation to Edgard Varèse’s musical rendering of Nin’s narrator as mad woman in chapter three. But we may also think of Louise Bourgeois’s *femme maison* (woman house) and its humorous subversion of surrealist stereotypes and the association of the house with the feminine. Mignon Nixon has described Bourgeois’s fusion of *femme fatale* and *femme maison* (housewife) as a parody of the Surrealists’ ‘exquisite corpse’ and their use of the female body as “symbol of desire and dread”.<sup>77</sup> Bourgeois conflated the female body with the house in a series of drawings (1946-1947) which showed different versions of a naked female figure with her head trapped inside a house [Fig. 1.14]. Nixon argues that in these works, the “femme

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<sup>74</sup> Alison Mundy, ‘Letters of *Desire*’, in Mundy 2001, p.11.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Hal Foster in Allison 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Mignon Nixon, ‘*Femme Maison* (Woman House): What’s So Funny About Fetishism?’, in *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (London and Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press 2005), pp.53-82.

fatale of pre-war surrealist fantasy becomes the *femme maison* of war and exile, neither medusa nor Madonna, muse nor mannequin, nor any other figure from the repertory of surrealist imagination, but a new feminine type, a figure struggling to free herself from the burdens of displacement and domesticity, motherhood and masculine desire”.<sup>78</sup> Can we perhaps see a similar critique in Nin’s narrative around a woman who struggles to identify with female stereotypes acted out between the maternal realm of the womb and the uncanny space of the surreal house? The *femme maison* of Bourgeois drawings exposed and parodied the empty gesture of André Masson’s *Mannequin* (1937) displayed undressed with a birdcage on its head at the international surrealist exhibition of 1938 [Fig. 1.15]. Incidentally, Nin appeared dressed just like Masson’s mannequin at Renate Druks’ famous ‘Come as Your Madness’ party in 1953 which Kenneth Anger drew on for his film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* shot in 1954 [Figs. 1.16-1.17]. But whether this was a parody of or conscious critique confronting stereotypes of femininity in the style of Bourgeois is doubtful. We will see in the course of this chapter that Nin’s negotiation of the house, the uterine space and related notions of the female body, desire and identity was highly ambiguous and can neither be solely seen as perpetuating surrealist role models nor as their critique.

*House of Incest* ends with the symbolic ‘dance of the women with no arms’ into daylight, which stands for the narrator’s escape from the house of incest, for life and cure from paralysing neurosis. The scene was based on Nin’s experience of watching a Peruvian dancer in a theatre on the Rue de la Gaité who “did strange and wild dances, like voodoo dances”.<sup>79</sup> In the novel, Nin’s dancer “danced with the music

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<sup>78</sup> Nixon 2005, p.56.

<sup>79</sup> Nin explained that it “ended with the dance of the woman without arms which I wrote about in *House of Incest*”. Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, 1979, p.89.

and with the rhythm of earth's circles; she turned with the earth turning, like a disk, turning all faces to light and to darkness evenly, dancing towards daylight".<sup>80</sup> Nin summarised the plot as follows: "The characters are three different women who blend into one and are represented by one woman. Watery birth, symbolism, the imprisoned inner life, then deliverance into the light of day".<sup>81</sup> Nin explained that while the prose poem is a description of neurosis, the dreamer desires to find a 'way outward' into life and daylight.<sup>82</sup> The emphasis on light and dark is also connected to Nin's unscientific understanding of neurosis. She explained in her diary that neurosis "causes a perpetual double exposure" which "can only be erased by daylight, by an isolated confrontation of it, as if it were a ghost which demanded visibility and once having been pulled out into daylight it dies".<sup>83</sup>

Critics have emphasised that the end does not imply an exorcism of the narrator's different 'selves', although opinion as to whether this can be read as positive or negative vary. Ellen G. Friedman points out that this image of freedom that the dancer symbolises does not resolve the narrative issues around the multilateral state, which she describes as an "impasse that marks most of Nin's writing".<sup>84</sup> In the end, "the 'I' who says 'all movement choked me with anguish' stands watching her double who is 'dancing towards daylight'".<sup>85</sup> Sharon Spencer, on the other hand, argues that in the end the narrator "learns the necessity of fusion and of separation".<sup>86</sup> Nancy Scholar regards the book as a woman's struggle to accept her shadow-selves and suggests that the dance signifies the beginning of a maturing process and not the

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<sup>80</sup> Nin, *House*, p.72.

<sup>81</sup> Anais Nin's letter to Joaquin Nin, cited in David Seed, *Cinematic Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2009), p.248. Dance was a recurring metaphor for freedom and self-awareness in Nin's writing. See Spencer 1977.

<sup>82</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.119.

<sup>83</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 2, 1979, p.65.

<sup>84</sup> Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.82.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

<sup>86</sup> Spencer 1977, p.31.

end of it. It is a move towards the “acceptance of the light and dark sides of the self” and “towards completion of her ‘uncompleted self’”.<sup>87</sup> This is in keeping with Rank’s writing on the double. He argued that one cannot free oneself from the double which is the repressed self. These readings of the end mirror Nin’s own ambiguous and shifting views on the female self. From the 1930s, Nin was writing about her struggle with a feeling of being split into different selves, which became a recurring theme in all of her writing. Initially, this usually triggered a search for a utopian notion of ‘wholeness’. At the same time, however, multiplicity and fluidity could also be something positive in Nin’s writing, which has been regarded as anticipating the notion of fluid identity suggested by certain second-wave feminists of the 1970s. Nin’s position within Feminism and identity politics is complex, and will be discussed in greater detail in my analysis of Nin’s final novel *Collages*.

*House of Incest* was Nin’s first adaptation of the Jungian credo: ‘proceed from the dream’. It illustrates her understanding of dream mechanisms loosely based on Freud. The language of *House of Incest* is a string of the narrator’s memories, symbolic visions, sexual obsessions and anxieties condensed within a stream-of-consciousness monologue. It is more episodic than the prologue which focused on the poetic description of pre-birth sensations. We can clearly see how Nin applied Freud’s principles of symbolisation, condensation and displacement. She also argued that the dream consists of ‘erotic images, or sensations, but it has no vocabulary... no dialogue ... and very few words’ which are ‘condensed like the phrases of poems’.<sup>88</sup> In writing this meant using symbolic images, rather than realistic descriptions, and leaving out what was unnecessary which she called a ‘process of distillation’. She also used this observation to defend herself from accusations that

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<sup>87</sup> Scholar in Spencer 1986, p.152.

<sup>88</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, pp. 322-23.



all her characters are flat and underdeveloped. She explained that “in our dreams, fantasies, stream of consciousness, there are fewer of the differences which mark our personality (nationality, class, accent, education) by which we categorize people”.<sup>89</sup> As we have seen, Sabina and Jeanne are certainly types, or better stereotypes, through which Nin explored notions of femininity.

Literary synaesthesia was a major stylistic feature of the novel, especially the prologue, which will be described in greater detail in relation to *Bells of Atlantis*. The use of a poetic rhythm in the otherwise prose-like narrative was intended to imitate musical structures which Nin described as ‘symphonic writing’. The text orchestrates the flow, speed and intonation of the reader’s ‘voice’ like a musical score through alliterations, repetition and punctuation. In the first volume of her diary Nin explained that writing that imitated dreams should not be explicit, “It all needed to be blurred, the outline must be less definite, one image must run into another like water colours”.<sup>90</sup> This blurring of colours and forms is reflected in her description of the underwater-life of Atlantis. It featured vivid descriptions of colours and forms running into each other, textures, sounds and other sensations. Scholar described the language fittingly as “hypnotic” and “incantatory”.<sup>91</sup> She also adapted cinematic strategies to recreate dream-mechanism, such as jump-cuts and dissolves to connect different scenes. The ebb and flow of waves was evoked through long strings of sentences, repetitions and alliterations which gave her language musical rhythm and melody.<sup>92</sup> Nin wrote, for instance: “There was always the water to rest on, and the water transmitted the lives and the loves, the words and the thoughts”.<sup>93</sup> The

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<sup>89</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.63

<sup>90</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.316.

<sup>91</sup> Scholar in Spencer 1986, p.141.

<sup>92</sup> See Suzanne Nalbantian, ‘Aesthetic Lies’, in Nalbantian 1997, p.20.

<sup>93</sup> Nin, *House*, p.16.

extensive use of the comparative ‘like’ had a similar function, and signified a breakdown of the sense of self of the narrative ‘I’. This ‘ecstasy of dissolution’ the narrator experiences is also mirrored in the metaphor of ‘wall-less rooms’ through which she floats, and corresponded with Nin’s belief that in dreams “there are no walls, no contours”.<sup>94</sup> Literary scholar Diane Richard-Allerdyce argues that these passages describing intermingling colours and dissolution “combine a surrealist appreciation of unconscious fluidity with a welcoming of protective blindness, as the narrator floats unhampered by physical obstructions through a river-like labyrinth”.<sup>95</sup> But she also reads this as a sign of the “psychological disruption” of the narrator who can’t form a coherent identity. Towards the end of the prologue, the flowing language is slowed down through the use of words with hard consonants. They create an onomatopoeic link to the rough surface of the rock the narrator is washed up upon after being expelled from the sheltered paradise of the womb. She tells us: “I awoke at dawn, thrown up on a rock, the skeleton of a ship choked on its own sails”.<sup>96</sup> The language in the novel’s subsequent chapters is still hallucinogenic, but less emphasis is placed on sensations and flow, which reflects the stagnation experienced in the house.

### ***Val Telberg’s “Spiritual X-Rays”:***

Nin’s free adaptation of Freudian dream-mechanisms in writing mirrored Telberg’s approach to photomontage in many ways. He also used techniques that drew on film and other art forms to portray the dream. As a photographer, Telberg began as a self-taught amateur, which nurtured his experimental approach to photography. He had

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<sup>94</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.27.

<sup>95</sup> Richard-Allerdyce in Salvatore 2001, p. 97.

<sup>96</sup> Nin, *House*, p.17.

received a degree in Chemistry and was about to set up his own business in China where he had been raised by his Russian parents. But the Japanese invasion forced him to flee the country and move to the United States in 1938.<sup>97</sup> In 1942, Telberg started taking evening classes in painting at the Art Students League in New York.<sup>98</sup> He made his first experiences with photography in 1944 when he developed and printed pictures of night-club patrons in Florida to make a living. Although this was limited to so-called 'straight' portrait photography, he described this time as formative. Telberg became fascinated by what he called 'unexpected accidents' that happened in the darkroom during the development process. He explained: "With an abandon not possible in painting, the 'direct-positive' method of 'while-you-wait' portraiture was rife with unexpected accidents: double-exposure, fogging, solarisation, distortion."<sup>99</sup>

His interest in chance happenings and experimental uses of the medium was given a theoretical framework when he met experimental filmmakers at the Art Students League who introduced him to the work and writing of artists associated with surrealism including Salvador Dalí, Pavel Tschelichew, Maya Deren as well as French surrealist poets.<sup>100</sup> Subsequently he abandoned painting and began experimenting with photography, which he considered more immediate than painting and better suited to depicting mental processes.<sup>101</sup> He explained: "The space between

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<sup>97</sup> Telberg's biography has been narrated most detailed by Van Deren Coke who interviewed the artist for his introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Val Telberg*, 1983. Jim Wilson, the director of the Opalka Gallery in Albany, added useful information.

<sup>98</sup> Coke 1983.

<sup>99</sup> Telberg quoted in Wayne 1991, p.64.

<sup>100</sup> Strickland 1994, unpaginated.

<sup>101</sup> Coke 1983.

conception and performance is very short in photography. Photomontage is more exciting, more immediate than oil painting, which is very laborious.”<sup>102</sup>

He began working with photography at a time when a number of photographers and artists from other disciplines turned to the medium to express more abstract ideas often drawing on the symbolism of European surrealist artists and the abstraction of members of the New York School. Kathleen McCarthy Gauss explains that photomontage “not only laboured against the established aesthetic and purpose of the documentary, but it was in large measure founded upon an assault on what had been considered the essence of photography – its credibility as simulacrum, a bona fide representation of the truth.”<sup>103</sup> In an article published in *American Artist* in 1954, Telberg explained that the medium was ideal to portray mental processes and pose an alternative to realism:

“although a conventional photograph may record every physical fact of a scene exactly as it registers on the retina of the eye, it does not record the scene as the mind visualises it, fusing the things that are seen with memories they may evoke of another time, a different place. [...] I try to invent a completely unreal world, new, free and truthful, so that the real world can be seen in perspective and comparison.”<sup>104</sup>

While this may recall Breton’s definition of ‘surrealism’ in the first surrealist manifesto, Nin’s and Telberg’s idea of an alternative to realism was motivated by the ambition to turn dreams into art rather than radically changing reality. Telberg’s strategies show his awareness of Freud’s description of dream-mechanisms. He used superimposition to create an effect similar to condensation, described as the

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<sup>102</sup> Telberg cited in Strickland 1994, unpaginated.

<sup>103</sup> Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, ‘Surrealism, Symbolism and the Fictional Photograph’, in *Photography and Art: Interactions since 1946*, eds. Andy Grundberg and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss (Abbeville Press, New York 1988), p.45. See also Rosalind Krauss, ‘Photography in the Service of Surrealism’ in *L’Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, eds. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, exh. cat. The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (New York and London: Abbeville Press, 1985).

<sup>104</sup> Telberg cited from Coke 1983.

“superimposition of different elements on one another” in the dream.<sup>105</sup> His oeuvre and writing, however suggests that Telberg drew on Freudian ideas in an intuitive sense. In fact, it may have been channelled through the work of Maya Deren and other American artists who appropriated Bretonian and Freudian ideas rather than primary sources. Telberg’s interest in dreams seemed less occupied with psychoanalysis or the unconscious than with perception. He often used the term ‘mind’ where Nin would speak of the ‘unconscious’. In an article from the 1950s, he explained his understanding of the optics of the inner eye:

“The mind blends many images and my pictures attempt to do likewise. To accomplish this, it seems obvious to me that the ideal technique is the manipulation of several superimposed transparent surfaces.”<sup>106</sup>

Telberg described his “Method of Working” in two stages: “Derive design, subject etc. from unrelated, unplanned negatives” and then “Plan the finished product completely in advance”.<sup>107</sup> For Telberg, the dream was not connected to repressed material from the unconscious, but its conception was of interest as source of new pictorial strategies and the expression of general human experiences. Nin was aware of the re-appropriation of surrealism, which marked the work of many other artists working in America at that time. She pointed out in 1968 that surrealism was not “a school or dogma anymore, but a way of expressing the unconscious.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> William L. Kelly, *Psychology of the Unconscious: Mesmer, Janet, Freud, Jung, and Current Issues* (Buffalo and New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), p.80.

<sup>106</sup> Telberg, ‘Art and the Subconscious’, cited from Wayne 1991, p.64.

<sup>107</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Van Deren Coke, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1982, cited in Coke and Du Pont 1986, p.108.

<sup>108</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.35. Joanna Pawlik describes American artists’ and writers’ appropriation of surrealist and psychoanalytical concepts in the 1950s in her unpublished PhD thesis *Negotiating Surrealism: Post-war American avant-gardes after Breton*, University of Sussex 2008.

Like Nin, Telberg considered film the ideal medium to portray what Freud called “the psychic field of vision”.<sup>109</sup> He had seen how Maya Deren and Frances Lee recreated mental images through the use of dissolves and jump-cuts. But film equipment was expensive and the team-work involved in film production would have meant less control over the development process, and he never pursued it.<sup>110</sup> Instead he tried to adapt cinematic effects to photography like Nin and other modernist writers had done in writing. He achieved these effects through a technique which involved sandwiching multiple layers of negatives on top of each other, arranging them on a light table in the dark-room, and then making enlargements.<sup>111</sup> The compressed layers of images were set in motion as the viewers moved their eyes from one element in the composition to the next, which was to create the cut and dissolve effects. MacCarthy Gauss described them as condensing action into one “dense and detailed frame, with the viewer determining whether the scene moves forward, backward, or both.”<sup>112</sup>

While Nin condensed fact, fiction and dreams in her experimental narrative, Telberg merged material shot at different times and in different places to create multiple layers of time and space. Telberg accumulated an archive of images over time and when he was working on a new composition, he experimented with multiple images taken at various dates.<sup>113</sup> Nin described Telberg’s photomontages as a “spiritual X-ray” of a dream which extends “into past, present and future, memory, divination and

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<sup>109</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Wordsworth, 1997), p.17. Telberg explained: “Film is the ideal material for this, and so I use it”. Telberg, ‘Art and the Subconscious’, cited in Wayne 1991, p.66.

<sup>110</sup> Telberg stated: “I was yearning to become a film maker, but I couldn’t afford the equipment”. Cited in Strickland 1994.

<sup>111</sup> Coke 1983.

<sup>112</sup> McCarthy Gauss 1988, p.50.

<sup>113</sup> Coke 1983.

interpretation happening simultaneously.”<sup>114</sup> Echoing Nin’s Jungian credo “proceed from the dream” and a loose understanding of automatism, he explained that each image he created for Nin’s book was like a dream he dreamt for each chapter.<sup>115</sup> He described waiting for a sign from the “subconscious” to help him choose the right combination of negatives in the dark room. He explained:

“I don’t have a binding formula .... I reject most of the material that emerges in the darkroom and continue on to other images until I find a composition that speaks to the subconscious. The waste is tremendous, but I recognize the final product with a sense of familiarity almost of predestination.”<sup>116</sup>

Telberg described the development process as coming “very close to being stream of consciousness in visual form.”<sup>117</sup> However, while there was an element of automatism involved in his approach, it did not draw on Breton’s understanding of the term. Automatism for Breton represented the opposite of representation, which he strongly opposed, and regarded as unmediated and immediate to experience.<sup>118</sup> Telberg’s approach can be described as a form of controlled free association which paralleled what Nin called the ‘directed dream’ which she executed in *House of Incest*. Here, dreams were only the starting point, the raw material for a piece of art, which had to be shaped by the poet/artist. This becomes clear if we consider the vast amount of negative combinations Telberg played with until he arrived at the final

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<sup>114</sup> Anais Nin, letter from 1955, Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>115</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Nin, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1957. He also invented working titles accordingly. He explained: “[...] in my mind there is already a name for each picture which of course we won’t use but it gives me the satisfaction of identity – ‘First birth in water’, ‘Alraune’s face in the darkness in the garden’, ‘I am floating again...’, ‘Isolina all in fur’, ‘There sat lot’, etc. I am not really that literal but these [are] like dreams, vague but in focus, which I dreamt about each chapter”.

<sup>116</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Cynthia Wayne, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1991. Cited in Wayne, p.66.

<sup>117</sup> Val Telberg, ‘Val Telberg – My Work In My Medium’, *New Mexican Quarterly* spring 1954.

<sup>118</sup> See Krauss 1985, p.24.

images for the book. Each finished print was a unique work of art, which could not be re-created exactly again.<sup>119</sup>

Film was not the only medium Telberg drew on to depict the dream. He had also become interested in the abstract structures and textures he saw in the paintings of Willem De Kooning and other artists associated with the New York School.<sup>120</sup> He tried to recreate similar effects in photomontage in order to imitate the abstractions that happen in dreams. He began using a second enlarger to superimpose more images over the already exposed paper that lead to a partial solarisation of the photograph. He also used bleaches to make negatives more transparent and other methods to create abstract patterns and rich textures.<sup>121</sup> However, the very nature of the material he worked with distinguished itself from the dynamism and tactility involved in attacking the canvas with a dripping paint brush. While abstraction was an important part of his work, it never overshadowed his interest in figuration and symbolism. His juxtaposition and layering of seemingly unrelated figures, objects and structures for the viewer to unravel echoed Freud's belief that "one cannot make the dream as a whole the object of one's attention, but only the individual components of its content."<sup>122</sup>

### ***A woman's nightmares re-imagined: House of Incest 1958***

For *House of Incest*, Telberg proceeded in the same way as in his independent work.

He began to create a pool of negatives, and in the following three years he combined

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<sup>119</sup> A batch of photomontages he sent to Nin in Italy for the book got lost in the post and could not be replaced. Val Telberg's letters to Nin, Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>120</sup> Coke explains: "He was aware of the developing movement and had a nodding acquaintance with Willem de Kooning and Balcomb Greene and heard them talk about their work at the 8<sup>th</sup> Street "Club" where Abstract Expressionist artists exchanged ideas." Coke 1983.

<sup>121</sup> Coke explains, "He would dip the negative in ferrocyanide for 15 seconds and then quickly stop the bleaching action with hypo. He did not know what was happening in the bleach, but became very adept at calculating the time it took to erase parts of the imagery." Coke 1983.

<sup>122</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1997, p.17.



them into over one hundred different combinations, of which only ten were chosen for the book.<sup>123</sup> Telberg had considered the design of the pictures and their arrangement within the book carefully. Each chapter opened with a full-page photomontage, either on the left page with the text on the right or vice versa. Whereas in traditional illustrated books we often find the image framed and accompanied by a caption, he let each photomontage take over an entire page. This suggests their almost equal weighting to the text. He described the relationship between the photomontages and their position within the book in terms of ‘tempo’ which was to parallel the dynamic of the narrative flow.<sup>124</sup> He included more pictures towards the end of the book to go, he wrote, with “the mounting excitement” of the novel’s dynamic. He expressed this dynamism through a visual score in a letter to Nin which assigned each of the nine images a specific pitch; the lowest position referring to slow-moving action or, as towards the end, resolution, and the higher to narrative climax:<sup>125</sup>



He tried to run his series of images parallel to the narrative like a mirror image rather than a counterpoint. Compared to traditional surrealist books, then, Telberg’s visuals maintained a close relationship to the text and often paraphrased scenes from the corresponding chapters. He used the first line of each chapter as a starting point and working title for the corresponding picture. An aspect in which Telberg’s approach

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<sup>123</sup> 45 of these alternative versions are kept in the archive of the Opalka Gallery in Albany, New York.

<sup>124</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Nin, 1957.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

was close to that of the avant-garde book illustrator was his focus on recreating certain moods and the symbolism of the novel, as well as his attempt to match the physicality of Nin's synaesthetic language. He condensed the complex psychological content of each chapter into one multi-layered frame.

The importance of symbolism and synaesthesia in text and images also resonates in the hieroglyphs which Telberg created for each of the chapters. There is no indication of their meaning or whether they contained meaning at all. They may point towards what Baudelaire described as the "hieroglyphic" nature of dreams in *Paradis artificiels* (1860). They may also correspond to the engagement with Chinese characters as 'visual language' by other writers at that time including poet Henri Michaux, *transition* editor Eugene Jolas and Antonin Artaud.<sup>126</sup> As hybrid characters, hieroglyphs have been described as combining visual and phonetic language; they stand for a pictorial language that does not rely on a phonetic system, but on likeness.

Telberg created a pool of symbolic images as counterparts to those Nin created in the text. In each photomontage these visual elements were juxtaposed in new combinations to allow different readings in accordance with the content of each chapter; this repetition also created a narrative-like coherence between the photomontages. He explained: "The way the present choice stands there is similarity of style and the pictures go more closely with the text. Certain symbols reappear in several pictures such as the contours of the house, your face, the water texture."<sup>127</sup>

The image of the house and water were obvious choices. What may seem surprising

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<sup>126</sup> Stefanie Heraeus, 'Artists and the dream in nineteenth-century Paris: towards a prehistory of surrealism', eds. Daniel Pick and Lynda Roper, *Dreams and History: The Interpretation of Dreams from Ancient Greece to Modern Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.142.

<sup>127</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Nin 1957, Opalka Gallery archive.

is Telberg's use of Nin's portrait – a topic I will return to later.<sup>128</sup> Among this pool of images were also those of a disembodied arm and female nudes which Telberg used to represent the narrator's doubles, Sabina and Jeanne.

I want to illustrate his use of symbols by looking at the first photomontage with the working title *My First Vision of Earth* [Fig. 1.2], which accompanies the prologue [chapter one]. It depicts a female nude, the narrative 'I', resting on a cliff surrounded by water, which corresponds with the setting as described in the text. Her back is arched and her face is turned away from the viewer, so that we can only see her profile. For the composition, Telberg did not use an actual image of a cliff, but may have manipulated a negative of creased fabric from his archive to make it look like the structured surface of rocks. He gave this 'cliff' a spiked outline, which pointed upwards, towards the dark contours of a house, which represents the putative house of incest. Telberg recreated the dark, nocturnal atmosphere of the novel through the use of rich blacks and shades of grey.<sup>129</sup> He was particularly concerned about the printers' use of the right shade of black. He wrote:

“We need good black blacks. Without good contrast somehow the essence, the air of night is lost. Edwards [Brothers'] people should tell you frankly if they can get solid blacks even if some detail is to be sacrificed.”<sup>130</sup>

Within the dark setting he created in this manner, the translucent skin of the nude is the only source of light and creates a sharp contrast to the surrounding. Most figures in subsequent images are depicted with closed eyes as if they were sleeping or sleep-walking, which supports the overall mood of the night-dream. These light and dark

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<sup>128</sup> Val Telberg wrote in an undated letter to Nin: “I would like very much to have more time, to develop some pictures using you as the main model”. Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>129</sup> Nin described the dream-realm Atlantis in the prologue as space that “could be found again only at night, by the route of the dream”. Nin, *House*, p.16.

<sup>130</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Nin, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1957/58.

contrasts also created a dramatic effect which made the black monolithic shadow of the house more threatening.

Telberg recreated a sense of floating through images of water texture and the ethereal body of the nude which seems so flat, translucent and unreal that it literally floats in the composition. The related notion of dissolution was created by the seamless over-laying of negatives which were condensed into one frame like a cinematic dissolve. The theme of floating in water is maintained throughout the series. It is most pronounced in the photomontage for the third chapter titled *I Am Floating Again*, [Fig. 1.4], which refers to the lines:

“I am floating again. All the facts and all the words, all images, all presages are sweeping over me, mocking each other. The dream! The dream! The dream rings through me like a giant copper bell when I wish to betray it.”<sup>131</sup>

The corresponding image literally illustrates these lines. This time, we see Nin as her narrator seemingly floating under water in almost complete darkness – an effect which is created through the superimposition of water texture over her body and face which is raised towards the grey sky. The ripples of waves evoke the vibrations of the “giant copper bell” that Nin described in the prologue, which may stand for the sensory quality of Nin’s dream.

Telberg’s creation of texture and moods through the orchestration of greys and blacks, and superimposition of close-ups of structured surfaces drew on the etchings of Gustave Doré with their fine lines and subtle tonalities. Telberg emphasised the strong impact that seeing the illustrated Bible of Doré as a child had had on his later work. With Nin’s novel’s infernal theme and biblical references to Christ, sin,

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<sup>131</sup> Nin, *House*, p.37.

resurrection and rebirth, *House of Incest* was not too far removed from a Doré-scenario. The ripples of moving waves and the surface of the rocks in *My first Vision of Earth* and *I Am Floating Again* create a very similar pattern of lines as that seen in Doré's Bible illustrations, especially *The Creation of Light* [Fig. 1.18] based on Genesis 1:3 of the Old Testament.

Almost every picture featured architectural details which refer to the house of incest. In *My First Vision of Earth*, for instance, the black contours of roof-tops loom above the female figure like a dark foreboding. Its monumental physicality creates a sharp contrast to the atmosphere of floating; it mirrors the sense of stagnation experienced by the narrator. In other images this is emphasised by brick-walls which enclose human figures like a prison. In chapter seven we catch an unsettling glimpse of the inside of this uncanny space. The narrator guides us through the individual rooms of the house, which are filled with memories and nightmares. This is mirrored by Telberg's cluttered pictorial space in *I Walked Into My Own Book* [Fig. 1.9].

Telberg chose the format of a double-page spread for the image because, as he wrote to Nin, "there is a feeling of summary in this picture".<sup>132</sup> This may relate to the description of the rooms in the house as vessels holding collected memories, dreams and nightmares. We see a room with a window in the background occupied by a female figure crouched on the floor, hugging her knees, with her head resting on her arms – possibly the narrator, this time embodied again by an anonymous model. Around her we see all the recurring symbols Telberg adapted from the narrative and used in previous illustrations: the black roof-tops, brick-walls, a broken sculpture of

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<sup>132</sup> Telberg wrote in a letter to Nin from 27<sup>th</sup> July 1957: "I am sending several versions of #6 'I Walked Into My Own Book'. The first version with just a bending figure over lying torso applied just to 'I walked into my own book'. Somehow it got extended to the whole chapter and the whole book – the paralytic and the feeling of more characters and more episodic." Opalka Gallery archive.

a male torso embodying the paralytic, a female nude and the author of the book represented by Nin's face in profile.

Telberg often added images of half-open doors, gates and windows, which connect the inside of the house with the outside. It not only emphasised the darkness inside the house, but also suggests Bachelard's 'daydream of elsewhere'.<sup>133</sup> This refers to the interplay or possibility of expansion of intimate and exterior spaces, which he linked to the power of poetic imagination.<sup>134</sup> Open doors mark the surrealist house as a free space and oppose restriction and rule-setting.<sup>135</sup> The light/dark and outside/inside contrasts are taken to the extreme in Telberg's *Isolina Opened All the Doors* [Fig. 1.8] which features the silhouette of a woman opening a door which lets light shine into the house.<sup>136</sup> This image anticipates the final photomontage, *Dancing Towards Daylight* [Fig. 1.10]. It is a vignette placed in the bottom half of the last page of the book which resembles a fade-out in films.

This vignette is a very literal illustration of the last paragraph showing a woman dancing in the grass. The light background suggests that it is daytime, whereas the rest of the illustrations are set at night. Telberg explained: "[...] somehow she is armless and simultaneously her arms feel the earth's turning and the sky and world being there and night is breaking and the book ends with the dawn; somehow all other illustrations except your birth in water had the mood of night."<sup>137</sup> The exterior space has seeped into the interior and suggests dissolution of walls and an end of stagnation. So far, Telberg's visual rendering of the main themes in Nin's prose poem seems true to Nin's narrative. But a closer look at his treatment of the

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<sup>133</sup> Caws in Alison 2010, p.44.

<sup>134</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp.62-3, cited from Caws in Alison 2010, p.44.

<sup>135</sup> Caws in Alison 2010, p.47.

<sup>136</sup> *Isolina* was the name Nin had given to her protagonist in an early version of the novel.

<sup>137</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Nin, 1957, Opalka Gallery archive.

psychological subtext, especially the incest theme, suggests a certain friction between verbal and visual language; more specifically, a discrepancy between male and female language.

### **House of Incest's 'subversive bodies'**

In her letters to Telberg, Nin had praised his depiction of “drugged figures” which to her emphasised the dream atmosphere.<sup>138</sup> However, there is something unsettling about Telberg’s visualisation of Nin’s female characters, which seems to draw on a set of stereotypical signifiers from an artistic tradition that Nin claimed she wanted to undermine. While Nin’s novel presents the female characters – the narrator and her doubles, Jeanne and Sabina – as desiring subjects, Telberg’s photomontages present them as objects of male desire.

This is particularly strong in *My First Vision of Earth*. In the prologue, Nin emphasised sight and optical vision, which has been linked to her attempt at imitating cinematic effects.<sup>139</sup> But unlike Nin’s narrator whose “water-veiled” eyes scan the hostile new world she is born into like a camera, Telberg’s nude does not see, nor do any of the figures in the subsequent images. While this also applies to male figures as we shall see and may serve to emphasise the dream-state, there is something unsettling in his depiction of the blind female figures; not only are their eyes closed but their faces are turned away from us as Telberg presents their naked bodies to the viewer. Mirroring the iconography of much western figurative painting, female figures are displayed undressed while male figures are generally clothed.

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<sup>138</sup> Nin had praised Telberg’s photomontages for their “mood and atmosphere and the drugged figures and mythical happenings” which mirrored that of her own narrative. Anais Nin, letter to Val Telberg, part of correspondence dated between 1957 and 1958, Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>139</sup> I will discuss Anais Nin’s engagement with film in chapter 2.

Naked and blind, the female figures are exposed to the viewer's gaze; their torsos cut and twisted into shape and sandwiched between negatives like mere ornaments.

In *My First Vision of Earth*, the image of the female body is cut into shape and squeezed into an arrangement of phallic rock splinters that penetrate her skin. The surrounding textures draw attention to her hairless, stylised body, which does not seem to bare any weight unlike that of living beings. The glow of her white skin against a dark background creates a strong visual effect which seduces the viewer into looking at her naked body. She becomes the object of the (male) viewer's desire and not the desiring subject herself. We can see something quite similar in numerous paintings and photographs by artists associated with French Surrealism. For instance, René Magritte's painting *The Elusive Woman* (1928) depicts four hands and a female nude entrapped like a fossil in a bed of cobbled stones [Fig. 1.19]. The smooth skin of the hands and nude body contrasts with the textured surface of the surrounding space. Also Raoul Ubac's *Group I* (1938) springs to mind with its fracturing and abstracting of the smooth female body embedded within a textured surrounding [Fig. 1.20].

MacCarthy Gauss argued that there is no eroticism in Telberg's depiction of nudes as if to brush away any reading of these depictions as problematic. She writes that:

“The figures in these photographs are subordinate to the demands of the composition; the nudes, for example, lose their eroticism in the cacophony of details. All of this may suggest a concern with abstraction, and in fact the structures of some of the compositions are substantially abstract.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> McCarthy Gauss 1988, pp.50-51. However, when the book was published in the 1950s, Nin and Telberg experienced censorship problems due to the explicit nature of the book.



But it is exactly this ornamental use of the female body cropped or veiled by superimpositions which turns it into a fetish – a familiar motif in the work of photographers associated with the heyday of surrealism. Their version of femininity, as is well documented, was constrained to woman as desirable object or as Medusa-like threat. The nudes often contained what Hal Foster called a fetishistic aspect drawing on Freud.<sup>141</sup> In such images, he writes, the “phantom of the penis returns uncannily on the female body (even as the female body) that was imagined to lack it”.<sup>142</sup> He detects such an ambiguity in depictions of women in surrealist photography which oscillate between the “castrative and fetishistic”:

“the fetish is one response to the traumatic sighting of castration in which the boy/man turns to an often penile object in order to disavow the lack of the penis in the female body, as if to say “it is not really gone as long as I have this”. The great trick of some surrealist photographs that evoke this traumatic sighting is that they reshape the very body that is said to signal the threat of castration into a fetishistic form that may defend against this same threat.”<sup>143</sup>

The nude becomes a fetish which simultaneously disavows castration through its phallic appearance and recalls it “when the cropping that reshapes the body into fetish-form simultaneously marks it with a castrative cut”, as Foster explains.<sup>144</sup> While the cutting and cropping of the female body in Telberg’s images may correspond to the narrator’s feeling of being ‘split into parts’, Telberg’s nudes seem not to be concerned with female identity, fractured or not. The posture of the nude in Telberg’s *I walked into my own Book* strongly resembles the penile form of nudes seen in many surrealist photographs and paintings. Telberg’s images also seem to

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<sup>141</sup> Hal Foster, ‘Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus’, in Mundy 2001, p.203.

<sup>142</sup> Foster in Mundy 2001, p.209.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Foster in Mundy 2001, pp.203–6; see also Rosalind Krauss, ‘Corpus Delicti’ in Krauss and Livingston 1985.

evoke castration and its disavowal through the re-occurring image of a ‘phallic’ arm, which always appears either superimposed onto or below the nude body as in *The Night Surrounded Me* [Fig. 1.3].

Telberg sometimes obscured the nude bodies through abstraction as seen in *Dilated Eyes ... Isolina All in Fur* [Fig. 1.5]. We see the phallic silhouette of a female figure standing in the frame of an open door, light shining in from the outside. Her body is entirely veiled by hair – an effect Telberg possibly achieved by superimposing the negative of one of his models over a close up of dishevelled hair. The image may refer to the narrator’s encounter with the proud aristocrat “Jeanne, all in fur, with fur eyelashes”.<sup>145</sup> The attribute of fur emphasises her noble background and poise. But it may also refer to animalistic, uncontrollable sexuality – a classic motif in western artistic and literary traditions. Covered in fur she evokes Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s erotic novella *Venus in Furs* (orig. *Venus im Pelzmantel*, 1870), the story of a sadomasochist relationship of a ‘suprasensual man’ with a dominating woman. Nin certainly knew the novella and Telberg must have at least heard of it, as it was well-known in avant-garde circles. In her diary Nin wrote:

“I love walking through the streets of Paris with the image of Sacher-Masoch as he appears on a paperback cover, dragging himself at the feet of a beautiful naked woman who is half-covered with furs, wearing boots and whipping him. [...]. The figure of a cringing Masoch does not appeal to me. What appeals to me is this violent tasting of life’s most fearful cruelties. [...] I had such a passion for fur, a real passion, so that if I had money I would carpet a room with fur, cover the walls with it, and cover myself with it. Is it possible, I wanted to ask, that we remember having once been an animal? That this incapacity to destroy,

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<sup>145</sup> Nin, *House* p.43.

which Henry [Miller] accuses me of, may soon be reversed? That my cruelty wears a velvet mask and velvet gloves?”<sup>146</sup>

With her curvaceous silhouette and upright posture like Botticelli’s nude in *Birth of Venus* Telberg’s rendering seems to be an even more pronounced visual pun on Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*. The nude’s excess of hair spills out from her body into the surrounding area overlaying parts of Nin’s portrait. Here the controlled Doré-like lines seen in previous images move towards the wild chaos of abstraction. The image seems to correspond with Hal Foster’s discussion of the mechanism of the veiled phallus. The threatening, castrative female sexuality of Nin’s femme fatale is contained through Telberg’s transformation of her body into a veiled fetish.<sup>147</sup> Drawing on Lacan’s ‘The Meaning of the Phallus’, which attributes the phallus a purely symbolic function, Foster suggests that the “veiled nudes of surrealist photography” allow for a “perfect misrecognition of feminine beauty as phallic plentitude”.<sup>148</sup> He writes:

“Not only is the castrated/castrative woman transformed fetishistically into a penile form, but this form is also disguised, raised to the power of a signifier. And the result is that the male subject may not only contemplate this body-turned-signifier with peace of mind, all castration anxiety allayed, but may also admire this phallus as if it were the beauty of woman to which he pays homage and not the inflated prowess of his little thing.”<sup>149</sup>

Drawing on Rosalind Krauss’s description of the surrealist photograph as “fetishisation of reality”, he labels this a “phallicisation” of reality.<sup>150</sup> The containment of potentially threatening female sexuality continues in Telberg’s photomontage for chapter two, *The Night Surrounded Me*. In the chapter the narrator

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<sup>146</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, pp.267-8.

<sup>147</sup> For a discussion of veiling and blurring see also Krauss, ‘Corpus Delicti’ in Krauss and Livingston, 1985.

<sup>148</sup> Foster in Mundy 2001, p.218.

<sup>149</sup> Foster in Mundy 2001, p.221.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

describes her desire for Sabina and her attempts to break free from the mirror-self.<sup>151</sup> Telberg's photomontage accompanying the chapter is an almost literal translation. It features the bodies of two female nudes joined together like Siamese twins. Their bodies and heads are twisted away attempting to break free from the other. Telberg made one of the nude models wear a plain necklace for the shoot possibly to identify her as Sabina who wears a necklace of steel in the novel, which she carried "like a trophy wrung of groaning machinery, to match the inhuman rhythm of her march".<sup>152</sup> They are depicted without arms, but instead a disembodied arm is superimposed vertically over their bodies. Sky and earth in the background are reversed, mirroring the narrator's unstable world which has been turned upside down. It seems to illustrate the following lines from the novel: "I see two women in me freakishly bound together, like circus twins. I see them tearing away from each other. I can hear the tearing, the anger and love, passion and pity."<sup>153</sup>

Nancy Scholar described this paragraph as "nightmare of total duality" which is the "desire for unity, intimacy, counterbalanced by the fear thereof".<sup>154</sup> She also points out that Nin's allusion to freakish circus twins suggests the "spectral fear of 'abnormality' which leads to conflict and anxiety" and may also have a darker subtext of the fear of homosexuality, which underlies Nin's writing. The character of Sabina was partly based on Henry Miller's eccentric and sexually liberated wife June Miller with whom Nin allegedly had a lesbian affair.<sup>155</sup> This latent fear of homosexuality in the novel becomes a general fear of female desire in Telberg's depiction.

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<sup>151</sup> See Dawn Ades in Mundy 2001, p.194.

<sup>152</sup> Nin, *House*, p.21.

<sup>153</sup> Nin, *House*, p.30.

<sup>154</sup> Scholar in Spencer 1986, p.151.

<sup>155</sup> Nalbantian 1997 .

In an ‘untitled study’ for *There Sat Lot ...* [Fig. 1.21] we see the image of a female nude and a hand reaching for her breast; this time, we can clearly see that the slender arm with small hand belongs to a woman as opposed to the more muscular arm superimposed over the twinned bodies in the published image; a bracelet identifies the arm as belonging to the narrator. In the prose poem, the narrator wears a bracelet which Sabina gave her, which has been read as corresponding to the bracelet June Miller gave to Nin as a gift.<sup>156</sup> In a therapy session in April 1935, Otto Rank analysed Nin’s urge to buy a bracelet as a symbol of “woman’s dependency and enslavement”.<sup>157</sup> Nin turns this into a symbol for her narrator’s enslavement by her shadow self Sabina. The bracelet comes to signify Sabina’s sexual power over the narrator in an almost sadomasochistic relationship: “Around my pulse she put a flat steel bracelet and my pulse beat as she willed, losing its human cadence, thumping like a savage in orgiastic frenzy. [...] the cracking of our bones distantly remembering when on beds of down the worship we inspired turned to lust.”<sup>158</sup>

In Telberg’s ‘untitled study’ the image clearly depicts female same-sex desire, but for unknown reasons Telberg chose not to include it in the book. The motif of a single male hand/arm reaching for the nude’s breast turns up in subsequent images and creates a threatening male presence. It becomes Telberg’s emblem of incest but with a very literal meaning: father-daughter incest. It quotes the painting of Lot and his daughter, which the narrator encounters in the room of paintings in chapter five. Lot is sitting on an oriental rug, his hand placed on the bare breast of his daughter, while the city of Gomorrah goes up in flames behind them. Telberg was so fascinated by this scene that he created an extra image just for this paragraph, titled

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<sup>156</sup> See Nalbantian 1997.

<sup>157</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 2, 1979, p.44.

<sup>158</sup> Nin, *House*, p.23.

'*There Sat Lot...*'. He felt the need to comment on what he described as the "most beautiful paragraph" in the novel. In a letter to Nin, Telberg explains:

"The one extra #6 'and there sat Lot...' may be too strong, but there is a kind of rising violence which I felt requires it. Somehow #5 is the entry and the preface and #6 is the delivery of expectation. Also somehow I had to comment in pain on the most beautiful paragraph in the book."<sup>159</sup>

Telberg superimposed the image of a man and a nude figure in such a way, that the nude covers the right side of the man's face and his entire body. This created the effect of her standing in front of him with her naked body on display for the viewer, while 'Lot' reaches out for her naked breast from behind.

His depiction echoes the classical iconography of Lot and his daughters in western painting – a convenient position to display the nude body to the viewer. While in Telberg's image, her body and face are mostly obscured through superimposed layers of negatives, her breasts remain clearly visible. A disembodied arm in jacket sleeves with outstretched hand rises up above the doomed couple's head like Damocles phallic sword, pointing towards the monolithic house of incest above them. On the left side of the picture we see the structure of a brick wall which adds an atmosphere of entrapment. In two alternative versions Telberg included a window, although in Nin's novel, incest is described as taking place inside a windowless room, which introduces the aspect of spying.<sup>160</sup> Caws writes, "[o]ne of the major considerations for the idea of the surrealist house is that of the voyeur

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<sup>159</sup> Val Telberg, letter to Anais Nin, 1957, Opalka Gallery archive.

<sup>160</sup> Incest takes place in a windowless room, "a room which could not be found, a room without window, the fortress of their love, a room without window where the mind and blood coalesced in union without orgasm and rootless....". Nin, *House*, p.52.

peering into the construction” as in Frederick Kiesler’s *Endless House* (1958-59) or Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant donnés* [Figs. 1.22-1.23].<sup>161</sup>

Telberg superseded this image with another depiction of incest, which chronologically does not follow the Lot episode according to the novel: Jeanne’s love for her brother. He moved the image titled *She Led Me Into the House of Incest* [Fig. 1.6] from chapter four to chapter five, thereby revealing his dubious fascination with the incest theme. Next to the couple, on the floor, lies a broken sculpture of a male nude torso, which invokes Nin’s figure of the paralytic. A closed gate in the background re-enforces the impression of entrapment. However light shines through its iron ornaments, emphasising the darkness which surrounds the trapped couple even stronger. Again, Telberg added a disembodied hand to the image, which reaches for Jeanne’s exposed breast, thereby alluding to something much darker. The woman seems oblivious to what is happening to her, while the viewer becomes complicit in this violation of her body.

This male presence that haunts the house and threatens to violate the bodies of its female inhabitants is even more pronounced in the image of the twinned women. Again, an arm appears below the women’s torsos. But this time, a small image of a topless middle-aged man is superimposed onto the arm like a tattoo. We only see his back as he is walking away from the viewer deeper into the pictorial space as if to lead us to an underlying subtext. While Telberg’s obvious obsession with the incest theme may be read as reflecting a general fascination with the story of incest throughout western painting and literature where it has been used as an excuse to depict woman as temptress, this image (supposedly) unintentionally alluded to the underlying gender thematic of Nin’s novella.

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<sup>161</sup> Caws in Alison 2010, p.42.

### **House of Incest and the name of the father**

Like most of Nin's writing, *House of Incest* has been regarded as an attempt at self-analysis and the product of her unscholarly approach to psychoanalysis.<sup>162</sup> Literary scholars like Suzette Henke, Diane Richard-Allerdyce and Ellen G. Friedman who analysed Nin's work psychoanalytically have suggested that both *House of Incest* and her second novel *Winter of Artifice* (1939), which grew out of the same manuscript, negotiated Nin's troubled relationship with her authoritarian and abusive father, Joaquin Nin, his abandonment when he left the family for a younger woman and his seduction of Anais into an incestuous relationship as an adult, which Nin herself admitted in a volume of her diary titled "Father" in summer 1933.<sup>163</sup> The novel was partly based on her dream-diary, which she kept while undergoing analysis with Otto Rank to overcome her obsession with her father. It corresponds to Rank's belief that "In the individual, dreams and literature provide release for the impulses repressed in the course of cultural development – the impulses that have become unconscious".<sup>164</sup>

Nin's father was by all accounts a philandering, emotionally cold and violent husband who left the family for a younger woman when Nin was 10 years old.<sup>165</sup> In a passage from her early diary she wrote that "it is my father who is the big theme of my past" and in the index reference to this passage Nin added: "Father obsessive

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<sup>162</sup> See Laura Marcus (ed.), *Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Texts in Culture (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>163</sup> Anais Nin, Diary 41. 'Father'. 1933 May 7 – June 1933. Anaïs Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>164</sup> Otto Rank, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend*, 1992, p.223.

<sup>165</sup> Nin wrote: "[...] A few months later Father left us, apparently on another concert tour, but having planned never to return ... This time when Father walked away he was obliged to come back several times while I kissed him wildly and called for him, weeping hysterically and clinging to him". Nin, *The Early Diary of Anais Nin II. 1920-1923*, ed. Rupert Pole (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p.365, cited from Henke, in Nalbantian 1997, p.121.



theme of my book".<sup>166</sup> Nin's entire oeuvre was filled with descriptions of female characters who struggle with authoritarian father-figures, torn between the attempt to win their love and attention and to gain independence from them.<sup>167</sup> As a child, Nin worshipped her father and was deeply affected by his abandonment. In her early diary of November 1920 she wrote:

"To me, 'Father' is a mystery, a vision, a dream. What infinitely beautiful stories I have wound around the magic name, .... Father! Father! All my life has been one great longing for you ... Oh, dearly beloved shadow, what a great emptiness your absence created in my life!"<sup>168</sup>

Nin's journals dwell on the great impact this father-loss had on her development as a woman and artist. In fact, Nin's continuous diary was initially written for her father in 1914, when her mother took her and her brother to New York to start a new life without him.<sup>169</sup> She explains that it "began as the diary of a journey, to record everything for my father. It was really a letter, so he could follow us into a strange land, know about us".<sup>170</sup> Henke explains how this experience for the child Anais turned into a fully grown father-fixation:

"Like many children who lose parents at an early age, Anais judged herself somehow responsible for paternal loss in a scenario far beyond her control. Unconsciously, she accused herself of an original sin of filial desire, a primordial transgression that drove Daddy away. She virtually apotheosized the figure of the absent parent, transforming him into an imaginary God of judgement and devotion. The adolescent girl

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<sup>166</sup> Anais Nin, *Diary 41*, Anais Nin Papers, UCLA.

<sup>167</sup> See also Henke in Nalbantian 1997 and Friedman in Salvatore 2001.

<sup>168</sup> Nin, *Early Diary*, p.87.

<sup>169</sup> See Nin, *Journal*, vol.1, 1979, p.287.

<sup>170</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p. viii, cited from Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.120-121. Henke suggests that this desire to share her thoughts with her father, an audience, created her literary persona. She writes: "What is revealed is not the pure, unmediated, private self, but a self-conscious literary persona generated by an intense desire for love and reassurance – first from the absent father, then from a worldwide audience of surrogate lovers who would valorise the insecure subject-position of a vulnerable, abandoned child."

was obsessively compelled to prove herself worthy of paternal love, over and over again.”<sup>171</sup>

As an adult Nin was aware of these inner processes which she tried to make sense of.

In the first volume of her diary she wrote:

“The old legends knew, perhaps, that in absence the father becomes glorified, deified, eroticized, and this outrage against God the Father has to be atoned for. The human father has to be confronted and recognized as human, as a man who created a child and then ... left the child fatherless and then Godless.”<sup>172</sup>

Later on we learn of another side of this father-obsession. She remembers him beating her mother, and spanking her and her brother.<sup>173</sup> In an unpublished excerpt from her diaries Nin fantasises that her father not only spanked her but penetrated her, until she has a ‘violent orgasm’.<sup>174</sup> Finally she confesses, “I do not believe my father penetrated me sexually but I believe he caressed me while or instead of beating me”.<sup>175</sup> Nin grapples with these memories in her diary and novels which, as Henke points out, are laced with “fantasies of sexual union” with a brutal father figure, which she reads as a Freudian example of masochism.<sup>176</sup> When Nin wrote these recollections between 1933 and 1936 she had been studying Freud, Jung, Rank and Adler and one does not know whether Nin over-interpreted her memories to make them more dramatic or whether the sexual abuse really took place, as various scholars have pointed out. She may have read Freud’s essay “*A Child is Being*

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<sup>171</sup> Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.122.

<sup>172</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.76. Cited from Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.122.

<sup>173</sup> She wrote: “I would do anything to keep him from lifting my dress and beating me.” Nin, *Early Diaries*, II., pp.85-6. Cited by Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.123.

<sup>174</sup> Nin, unpublished diary written between 1933 and 1936, cited in Deirdre Bair, *Anais Nin: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995) pp.17-18.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Henke writes that Nin “attributes to her fictive alter ego Lillian Beye [*Seduction of the Minotaur*] a bewildering mixture of pleasure and pain in response to her father’s brutality”. Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.123.

*Beaten*” (1919) and most certainly knew Freud’s *The Pleasure Principle*.<sup>177</sup> Whether the sexual abuse during the spankings was real or imagined, it was, as Nin’s first psychoanalyst Dr Clement Staff pointed out, her “first humiliation at the hands of a man”.<sup>178</sup>

Nin’s father-obsession culminated in her seduction by her father into an incestuous relationship when she was a grown woman. This came out in 1992 with the publication of *Incest*, a collection of unexpurgated sections from her diary of 1932-34. Nin initially revelled in her final triumph and the attention she finally got from her father, substituting incest with sexual liberation. But, as Henke writes, she was also aware of the implications, as illustrated by her reference to the biblical parable of Lot and his daughters, which she wove into her novel. Like Lot, her father turned her into an “amorous partner”, but held his “temptress/daughter morally responsible for his own spiritual perdition”.<sup>179</sup> The double/narcissism theme in her novel now gets an added dimension. Nin becomes her father’s double in his narcissistic union with his own flesh and blood. Henke writes:

“Anais serves as both physical replica of her father and exact mirror image of her lover’s egotistical desire. In seducing his daughter, the father can physically embrace his own genetic model and copulate with himself in an ultimate narcissistic orgy.”<sup>180</sup>

From then on incest appears as a central metaphor in Nin’s writing. Friedman pointed out that from 1931-32, Nin used the term ‘incest’ to describe her “alliance with male values and male power, particularly in regard to the traditionally male

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<sup>177</sup> Nin, *Early Diary IV.*, July 1931.

<sup>178</sup> Bair 1995, p.319.

<sup>179</sup> Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.128.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*.

domains of creativity and mysticism”.<sup>181</sup> Nin describes herself as a “woman who loves incest”.<sup>182</sup> However Nin had by then also read Rank’s books and may have seen her own life exaggerated through the filter of Rank’s psychoanalysis. Rank writes: “Whereas the man (father) is able to live out his repressed incestuous impulses toward his daughter in violent and satisfying fantasies, in the woman (daughter), for whom such a solution is not available, the repression of attraction to the father, objectionable in our culture, frequently leads to neurosis.”<sup>183</sup>

Friedman regards *House of Incest* as “the work in which she transforms her affair with her father into art, incest is a trope for a constellation of ideas having to do with structures enforcing patriarchal values”.<sup>184</sup> When Nin wrote *House of Incest* she was not only entangled with her father, but also grappling with her ties to other male figures: Henry Miller, Otto Rank and her husband Ian Hugo. All of them tried to gain influence over her, either artistically or emotionally. Miller criticised her work and Rank tried to force her to give up her diary.<sup>185</sup> Nin’s first manuscript is directly connected to her experiences with controlling men in her life. *House of Incest* and *Winter of Artifice* were part of one manuscript with the working titles *Alraune I* and *Alraune II*.<sup>186</sup> *House of Incest* was the first to be published and wrapped this theme into a surreal dream narrative. The original working title *Alraune* was a key to this subtext of both novels. *Alraune* was a novel by German author Hanns Heinz Ewers published in 1911. It was based on a German tale from the Middle Ages which

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<sup>181</sup> Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.76.

<sup>182</sup> Anais Nin, *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anais Nin*, ed. Rupert Pole (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p.246. Friedman in Salvatore 2001.

<sup>183</sup> Rank, *The Incest theme in Literature and Legends*, 1992, p.301.

<sup>184</sup> Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.80.

<sup>185</sup> In November 1933 Nin wrote in her unpublished diary: “Rank asked me to give up my journal and I left it in his hands. He delivered me of my opium”. Nin, *Diary* 44, 1933, p.233. Anais Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>186</sup> *Winter of Artifice* is a selection of short stories all dealing directly with a female narrator’s troubled relationship to an authoritarian father figure such as the psychoanalyst.

Ewers turned into a story about artificial insemination and the notion of individuality: A professor of genetics impregnates a prostitute with the semen of a hanged murderer. The female child which develops from this ‘unholy union’ has no concept of love and throughout her life suffers from obsessive sexuality and perverse relationships. When she learns of how she was conceived, she takes revenge on the professor who had adopted her.<sup>187</sup> Nin visibly identified herself with the character Alraune. In her unpublished diary in 1933 she compares herself to Alraune,

“a creation ... as I had been the spiritual creation of Allendy – Alchemist falls in love with his creation – Alraune tries to destroy him. Idea that when you tamper with nature you get punished. Allendy tampered with me. Created and produced a force – for [?] evil or good. And as I am awakened he falls in love with me, not as he should, as a Father, but carnally and then I realize this is not the tie of true marriage and I turn to the earth, to the man, to Henry....”<sup>188</sup>

This quote also illustrates that at the same time as she was trying to gain independence from male influences, she was deeply dependent on male attention and admiration. In 1934, Nin wrote about trying to break with her father by starting a relationship with Henry Miller.<sup>189</sup> Nin finally breaks off contact with her father in June 1933. She proclaimed: “I’m free! I’m free” and “I am sailing away from all dependence”.<sup>190</sup> Overcome by a wave of confidence due to her newly-won freedom, she boasts how she deceived Rank, her father and Miller with her betrayals – with all of whom she had affairs at the same time. If we follow the genesis of the many

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<sup>187</sup> The novel was turned into the film *Alraune* (also *Unholy Love*) in 1928 directed by Henrik Galeen and starring Brigitte Helm as Alraune. In Nin’s original manuscript, the female character was also called ‘Alraune’. Presentation copy of *House of Incest*. Anaïs Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>188</sup> Nin, Diary 40. Flagellation. 1933 March 12 – May 1933 pp.173-4. Anaïs Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>189</sup> Nin’s diary of that time was titled ‘Novel of Henry and June’ and ‘Break with Father’. Nin, Diary 45. February-July 1934. Anaïs Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>190</sup> Nin, Diary 45, 1934, pp.229-230. Anaïs Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

volumes of her diary we can see how Nin narrates and dramatises her struggle to simultaneously gain approval of the men around her and become an independent woman artist. For Nin, as for other female writers, the highly personal form of diary writing became a revolt against what she described as the “male alchemy” of fiction writing. Tookey has argued that Nin’s idea of ‘feminine creation’ originated in the 1930s, in Nin’s conflict between diary writing, which was marginalised by her male writer-friends Henry Miller and Laurence Durrell, and fiction-writing.<sup>191</sup> Nin wrote: “I must continue the diary because it is a feminine activity, it is a personal and personified creation, the opposite of the masculine alchemy. I want to remain on the untransmuted, untransformed, untransposed plane. This alchemy called creation, or fiction, has become for me as dangerous as the machine. Feelings and emotions are diverted at the source, used as the fuel to other purpose.”<sup>192</sup>

Corresponding with Freud, Nin’s novels, although fictionalised, have been regarded as dealing with repressed erotic wishes as residual from her childhood, which are used on a meta-level to discuss more general issues relating to female identity. In such a reading the ‘house of incest’ becomes the space of the uncanny. Freud explained in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919) that ‘uncanny’ in some languages can only be translated as ‘the haunted house’. Nin’s house is haunted by her repressed memories. Richard-Allerdyce who undertakes a Lacanian reading of *House of Incest* with focus on the concept of ‘the name of the father’ argues that it

“embodies the themes of mourning, remembering, and moving through the residual effects of previously unresolved material in her psyche in a way that highlights the psychoanalytical process of transference and reconstruction as well as the materiality of

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<sup>191</sup> Helen Tookey, *Anaïs Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp.154 ff. Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, p.181.

<sup>192</sup> Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1934-1939, vol.2* [New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1967], p.181.

language [...]. Both the theme (moving out of paralyzing effects of early trauma) and form (a fluid, disparate structure) of *House of Incest* speak to Nin's readiness to find a voice [...].<sup>193</sup> Nin's traumatic relationship with her abusive father prevented her from developing 'clear identity borders' which causes the child when it grows up to develop 'difficulty in distinguishing between self and others.'<sup>194</sup>

She regards the narrator's struggle with issues of fusion and separation as indicative of both, the narrator's and Nin's "traumatization by a lack of ego boundaries".<sup>195</sup> She argues that the feeling of "identificatory fragmentation, weak self-esteem and relational chaos" are experienced by many adult survivors of childhood trauma and can be linked to a "traumatic disruption in their identification with whoever has 'the name-of-the-father'".<sup>196</sup> Described as a cruel and seductive femme fatale, Nin's character Sabina comes to symbolise all the negative aspects Nin associated with her father, a father-double. Nalbantian explains that in Nin's writing, her father becomes an aspect of herself that she wanted to reject or as Nin wrote, "the Anais I never wanted to be".<sup>197</sup> These selves are bound together, but try to break free. Friedman suggests, "one half of the double suggests a woman constructed by society, obedient to her father; the other half suggests a woman suppressed in this construction and by such obedience."<sup>198</sup> Sabina was partly modelled on June Miller with whom Nin allegedly had a lesbian affair. In a session with Rank in November 1933, he told Nin that it was not lesbianism, but that she was just imitating her father. He allegedly said: "You replace the lost object of your love by imitating him". Nin agrees: "I knew all the storms and wars at home were due to my father's interest in women...I became my father. I was the intellectual adviser of my mother. I wrote. I read

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<sup>193</sup> Richard-Allerdyce in Salvatore 2001, p.91.

<sup>194</sup> Richard-Allerdyce in Salvatore 2001, p.92.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p.95.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>197</sup> Nalbantian 1997, p.10.

<sup>198</sup> Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.81.

books.”<sup>199</sup> In the same volume of the diary, in November 1933, Nin remembers a conversation with Rank about the double:

“‘Isn’t this a narcissistic fantasy, that the Double is one’s twin?’ I asked. ‘Not always. The Double, or the shadow, was often the self one did not want to live out, the twin, but in the sense of the dark self, and the self which one repudiated. [...] if Don Juan liked to mirror himself in the eyes of adoring women, why did he need a valet-servant, disciple-devotee-shadow? You are right when you feel your father was trying to stress and reinforce the resemblances so that you would become duplicates, and then he could love his feminine self in you as you could love your male self in him. [...] you could have been the perfect Androgyne. There is so much more in all this than the simple fact of incestuous longings’.”<sup>200</sup>

Incest, as these scholars suggest, can be read as a much broader metaphor for patriarchal oppression. Friedman argues that it “speaks literally of her affair with her father”, “woman’s relationship to man” and “the woman artist’s relationship to traditional forms of expression and to the patriarchy in general”. She writes:

“the imagery of incest suggests limitation, artistic and other, imposed by the father, who allows only repetitions of himself and the world he has created in his own image. [...] Incest is the strategy to keep the daughter imprisoned in the father’s world. It serves the daughter as well in that incest allies her with the father’s power, yet it prevents her from choosing any objects of desire outside of the father, who represents the dominant culture, represents law and patriarchy. As the term is developed by Nin, one implication of “incest” for the artist is conforming to conventional modes; escaping the father would allow innovation, the formulating of new modes.”<sup>201</sup>

If, as Henke and Friedman argue, incest in the novel also speaks of the “woman artist’s relationship to traditional forms of expression and patriarchy in general”, what are we to make of Telberg’s images? Nin lamented in her diary that traditional

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<sup>199</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.291.

<sup>200</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.297.

<sup>201</sup> Friedman in Salvatore 2001, pp.80–81.



writing was using a male language and that she tried to establish a 'writing from the womb' which expressed female experiences. She wrote: "[...] most women painted and wrote nothing but imitations of phalluses. The world was filled with phalluses, like totem poles, and no womb anywhere."<sup>202</sup> The world Telberg created in his series of photomontages were certainly full of phalli. In the context of the incest-narrative, the male phallic hand superimposed onto female bodies can be read as symbolising the dominating presence of *the father* and patriarchal values in general, which violates not only the female body, literally through incest, but also stifles female creativity.

Rank discussed the tale of Lot in his book *The Incest theme in Literature and Legends* (1912).<sup>203</sup> Here, Rank discusses castration as punishment for incest in the context of ancient myths. Most of the time, this defence mechanism transfers castration to the chopping off of other body parts. In mother-son incest this is usually the severed foot or finger and in father-daughter incest the hands/arms and/or breasts of the daughter. He refers to versions of the Brothers Grimm's tale of *The Girl without Hands* which tells the story of a girl who refuses her father's desire to marry her and as punishment has her hands and breasts cut off and is then expelled into the world. In the Helena story of *Roman de la Manequine* by Philippe de Reims the daughter rejects the father and cuts off her own hand which is then worn around the neck by the king like the phallus of Osiris.<sup>204</sup> We may read this motif as repeated in Nin's figure of the dancer without arms who dances into daylight. It may signify her freedom from the father's desire and the price she has to pay: she loses her arms as punishment for rejecting him. Telberg's images invoke this theme continuously

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<sup>202</sup> Nin cited from Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.85.

<sup>203</sup> Rank, *The Incest theme in Literature and Legends*, 1992.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p.317.

through his depiction of severed hands and breasts, although the arms always seem to belong to a man. They simultaneously speak of incestuous desire and its punishment. But once again, it is the daughter who gets punished.

What are we to make of Nin's complicity in the creation of these images or at least her inclusion of them alongside her text? These questions become more complex if we consider that Nin's portrait appeared in almost every image, often in conjunction with a female nude. Does this cement her complicity as silent witness aligning with patriarchal values or was there more at stake? One way of looking at it would be the victim-narrative of a psycho-biographical reading. Nin herself became the object of male desire and the male gaze as a child. From Nin's diaries we know that apart from spanking, Joaquin Nin liked taking pictures of his naked children with his camera when they were bathing. Whether this was a pederastic action or not, Nin describes these incidents in retrospect as simultaneously traumatic and pleasurable as they represented the only time she got attention from her father. One has to be careful of such accounts as Nin had started reading Freud and Rank by then and started lay analyses of her childhood and relationships, which were often oversimplified. She wrote:

“[My father] liked to take photos of me while I bathed. He always wanted me naked. [...] All his admiration came by way of the camera. His eyes were partly concealed by heavy glasses (he was myopic) and then by the camera lens. Lovely. Lovely. How many times, in how many places, until he left us, did I sit for him for countless pictures. And it was the only time we spent together.”<sup>205</sup>

In this scenario, Nin became the object of male desire through the camera eye.

Friedman suggests that:

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<sup>205</sup> Nin cited from Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.80.

“With the camera, Nin suggests, her father’s naked eye does not confront the actual daughter. Instead, through the two lenses he transforms the daughter he had called “ugly” into an object shaped to his desire.”<sup>206</sup>

Henke reads this as exemplification of the Lacanian gaze, whereby Joaquin Nin replicates the desire to possess his daughter’s body through his pederastic photo-sessions. She argues:

“[...] Objectified by Daddy’s bespectacled gaze, Anais is conditioned to expose her naked body as aesthetic object for Joaquin’s lascivious enjoyment. The signature of the artist-father marks the daughter, the photograph, and the iconic image that channels his own explosive libidinal drives into the framework of pornographic art. The “graphic” suggestion of the photographic negative encode the father’s desire in the body of his victimized daughter and reinforces his paternal right/rite of filial possession.”<sup>207</sup>

This brings up important relations between what Henke called the “pederastic gaze of the artist/father” and Telberg’s photomontages. We can see the visualisation of this encoding process in Telberg’s image of the twinned nudes with single arm in *The Night Surrounded Me*. Here male desire is literally imprinted on the skin of the female body like a tattoo or branding mark. Henke continues to explain that the child is exposed to...

“her father’s gaze doubly distanced and shielded by glasses and a camera lens. She feels that her body is symbolically being raped and humiliated by Daddy’s photographic instruments. From these early modelling sessions, Anais ascribed to the eye of the camera powers of voyeuristic exposure. [...] The camera represented the father’s ever-present gaze of scopophilic recrimination: ‘Eye of the father behind a camera. But always a critical eye. That eye

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<sup>206</sup> Friedman in Salvatore 2001, p.80.

<sup>207</sup> Henke in Nalbantian 1997, p.125.

had to be exorcised, or else like that of a demeaning god, pleased'.”<sup>208</sup>

But was her book an exorcism or an act of pleasing the camera eye of the father? Nin's complicity in the creation of Telberg's controversial images could be read as an expression of what Henke called her “narcissistic injury”, which made her align with patriarchal values. However, I want to suggest another reading which is based on the presence of Nin's portrait in almost every picture in the book. In Telberg's pictures, Nin is never the object of the gaze. She is fully dressed with her eyes open, although she never directly confronts the viewer. This is emphasised most strongly in *I Walked Into My Own Book*. We see Nin's oversized portrait with impassive face literally entering her own book. Telberg called his photomontages for the book his ‘tribute’ to Nin.<sup>209</sup> In this sense, we can also read the inclusion of her portrait as a form of artist's signature. Telberg is the creator of his photomontages, but simultaneously gives her credit as the author of the book. However in the background we see a nude figure, vulnerable, crouching on the floor, protecting her naked body from the gaze of the viewer. In this picture, then, we see both, woman as subject and object: an independent woman and published writer, and a victim of exploitation and object of male desire.

Nin's writing displays a strong occupation with female object/subject status and the act of ‘looking’. A passage from her early diary, October 1927, demonstrates Nin's critical awareness of the male objectifying gaze. She described her impression of an art school she visited and writes:

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> In a letter from 27<sup>th</sup> July 1957, Telberg wrote: “I did not realise the possibilities of the book; [the] longer I worked on it [the] deeper the book became and my tribute to it had to mature and become more exciting, which it is now”. Opalka Gallery archive.

“The atmosphere of the art school depressed me. The model [...] walked about the room naked without reason, and the periods of rest caused me feelings of disgust. The men in the class could not help watching her. When I met their eyes their expression did not change, and I felt myself confused with the other woman, likened to her; felt myself made of the same flesh and attracting the same brutal curiosity.”<sup>210</sup>

The best example, however, is Nin’s erotica written to order for Henry Miller’s anonymous benefactor. It was published posthumously in two volumes, *Delta of Venus* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979). Nin’s erotica has become a hotly debated subject since it was published after her death in the late 1970s. It is worth considering whether it was conventional pornography written for a male readership or, as the author was a woman, could they be seen as parodies that hold the mirror up to a patriarchal society that lets such abuse happen.<sup>211</sup> The latter position is held by Karen Brennan and Diana Richard-Allerdyce. Both point out how Nin’s strategies of avoiding ‘narrative closure’ and of shifting between subject and object positions allow for a feminist reading.<sup>212</sup> Nin uses a style of narration in her erotica which shifts between multiple points of view including that of the reader, narrator, voyeur and object. This enables the reader, Richard-Allerdyce explains,

“to go beyond, what Freud considered the feminine position and what Teresa de Lauretis has described as the female spectator’s position: the double identification or vacillation between subject/object positions and between perspectives traditionally considered masculine (identifying with the gaze) and those traditionally considered more feminine (identifying with the image).”<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Nin, *The Early Diary* (Peter Owen, 1994), p.26.

<sup>211</sup> See for instance Diane Richard-Allerdyce, ‘Anais Nin’s “Poetic Porn”: Problematising the gaze’, in Salvatore 2001, pp.17–36. Karen Brennan, ‘Anais Nin: Author(iz)ing the Erotic Body’, *Genders* 14 (1992), pp.66-86.

<sup>212</sup> Richard-Allerdyce in Salvatore 2001, p.18.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

Richard-Allerdyce suggests that Nin subverts the objectivising male ‘gaze’ of the reader, her anonymous male patron, through narrative strategies which parody traditional expressions of male desire and expose sexual exploitation of women through men. She argues that “Nin’s texts encourage the readers to notice the ways in which their responses have been manipulated by the text and by the culture at large and, ideally, to begin to analyse their complicity in that manipulation”.<sup>214</sup> They “call into question men’s and women’s responses to situations that might reflect their complicity in oppression” and reflect Nin’s own response to her traumatic childhood experiences.<sup>215</sup>

Richard-Allerdyce explains that the erotica contains a multiplicity of perspectives which thematises ‘looking’. Her erotica often features characters who are conscious of being looked at as objects. She explains that Nin’s ‘looking motif’ reflects the Lacanian gaze, but less in terms of the act of looking or being looked at, but rather in terms of seeking approval and recognition in the eye of the onlooker. She continues that this shifting of viewpoints eventually makes the voyeuristic reader identify with the female object who is being taken advantage of by a male authority figure, and thereby realises the female object’s position as ‘desiring subject’. Thereby the erotica exposes forms of expression that perpetuate sexual injustice.<sup>216</sup>

Richard-Allerdyce uses examples of Nin’s erotic stories to illustrate her points. One example, her analysis of the story ‘*Mathilde*’ from *Delta of Venus*, is particularly relevant for my discussion, as it clearly shows Nin’s awareness of the objectification of the female body in surrealist art. ‘*Mathilde*’ focuses on a woman who becomes the object of male desire by taking part in opium-fuelled orgies. On one occasion a male

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Richard-Allerdyce in Salvatore 2001, p.20.

participant, Martinez, starts fantasising about erotic images of fragmented women with unnaturally twisted and spread apart legs, which almost seem severed from their bodies, while Mathilde begins questioning female sexuality and the objectification of the female body at male hands.<sup>217</sup> Richard-Allerdyce suggests that Nin/the narrator's attitude towards such male obsession with women as body parts is clearly critical. The narrator describes Martinez's violation of the female body into parts as if "one had taken a tulip in the hand and opened it completely by force".<sup>218</sup> Mathilde remembers the story of sailors who made a rubber woman as sex toy for the time spent at sea, which gave them sexual pleasure but also syphilis. Again, Richard-Allerdyce points out, Nin uses an ironic twist to 'make her point'. She argues that these stories show that, "Nin's disquieting sabotage of erotic expectation with exposure of exploitation ... subverts the structure of voyeuristic privileges. [...] Nin's erotica subverts not sexual pleasure in general but sexual pleasure achieved through the devaluation of subjectivity."<sup>219</sup>

In *House of Incest*, the narrative 'I' compares herself to a marionette, manipulated and pulled apart by external forces: "I am ill with the obstinacy of images, reflections in cracked mirrors. [...] I am a marionette pulled by unskilled fingers, pulled apart, inharmoniously dislocated; one arm dead, the other rhapsodized in midair".<sup>220</sup> Further evidence of Nin's awareness of female objectification in photography is that, according to Bair, Nin was uneasy with the cover photograph for *Delta of Venus* which depicted a nude woman averting her eyes from the viewer and looking down at her body.<sup>221</sup> Drawing on Brennan, Richard-Allerdyce concludes

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>218</sup> Anais Nin, 'Mathilde', in Nin, *Delta of Venus* (London: W.E. Allen, 1978).

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>220</sup> Nin, *House*, pp.29-30.

<sup>221</sup> Bair 1995, p.516, footnote 5.

that “Nin avoids the trap of reinforcing the systematic oppression of women through her complicity in the process of her representation as object because her work also calls such representation into question [...]”<sup>222</sup>

One can find a similar subtext of male-female object/subject positions in *House of Incest*. In chapter four, for instance, Nin directly engages with the depiction of the female body in painting and sculpture when the narrator reaches ‘the room of paintings’ where she sees a painting of “Lot with his hand upon his daughter’s breast”. She writes:

“[...] the turmoil which shook them showed through the rocks splitting around them ... through the sky smoking and smouldering red, all cracking with the joy and terror of their love. Joy of the father’s hand upon the daughter’s breasts, the joy of the fear racking her. Her costume tightly pressed around her so that her breast heave and swell under his fingers, ... No cry of horror from Lot and his daughter but from the city in flames, from an unquenchable desire of father and daughter, of brother and sister, mother and son.”<sup>223</sup>

On one level this passage can be read again as an expression of Nin’s ambiguous relationship to her father, which like the daughter in the painting, is similarly received as traumatic and joyful. But it can also be read as dealing with masculine forms of artistic expression. This view is reinforced on the following page of the chapter. The narrator encounters

“a forest of decapitated trees’ with ‘women carved out of bamboo, flesh slatted like that of slaves in joyless slavery, faces cut in two by the sculptor’s knife, showing two sides forever separated, eternally two-faced, and it was I who had to shift about to behold the entire woman. Truncated undecagon figures, eleven

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<sup>222</sup> Richard-Allerdyce in Salvatore 2001, p.19.

<sup>223</sup> Nin, *Winter & House*, p.199.



sides, eleven angles, in veined and vulnerable woods, fragments of bodies, bodies armless and headless. [...].”<sup>224</sup>

Nin’s description of the fragmented sculptures of women echoes the cubist portraits of Picasso and Braque, and their fragmentation of the female body. Her critical stance towards such depictions is revealed in the final paragraph in which the sculptor becomes the object of ridicule when one tree dares to grow a live branch. It becomes alive and independent, “laughing at the sculptor”. But what about Telberg’s “drugged figures”?

Roland Barthes wrote in *Music-Image-Text*, “all images are polysemous, they imply, underlying their signifiers, a floating chain of signifieds”.<sup>225</sup> Telberg’s images are no less ambiguous than Nin’s writing. His objectification and fetishisation of the female body drew on traditional forms of male artistic expression. But the juxtaposing of these fetishised bodies with Nin’s portrait within the context of a narrative dealing with a woman’s struggle for independence causes an intervention. Considering what Nin’s oeuvre represents, her portrait calls forth the presence not only of Nin-the-author, but an author of literature that deals with female identity. While Nin’s stance and impassive face suggest ambiguity, her presence as woman-author embeds a critical ‘voice’ into the otherwise troubling pictorial language, thereby exposing the exploitation of women as object of male desire rather than perpetuating/reinforcing it. Her portrait creates an ‘uneasy’ presence in the picture which can be argued to disrupt the voyeuristic pleasure of looking. Her face disrupts the male economy of sexual desire thematised by the female nude.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p.200.

<sup>225</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977).

Telberg's photomontages for *House of Incest* illustrate Dawn Ades's argument in her essay 'Surrealism, Male-Female'.<sup>226</sup> She points out that 'surrealism has been criticised for idealising woman while marginalising real women, for its indifference to female artists and writers, for the celebration of heterosexual love at the expense of other sexualities, and for a pervasive misogyny, especially in the apparent violence done to the female body in representation'.<sup>227</sup> She alleges that this has led to "a tendency to reduce surrealism to a single voice and forget its complex and extra-artistic character".<sup>228</sup> The collaboration between Nin and Telberg illustrates that the relationship between identity, desire and sexuality in surrealist photography, even in its *tamed* American variety, was much more complex than criticism often wants to make us believe. As I have tried to show, Nin's text and Telberg's images are complex and highly ambiguous and do not allow for a simplistic reading which would brand them as either exclusively (proto-) feminist or misogynist.

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<sup>226</sup> Dawn Ades, 'Surrealism, Male-Female' in Mundy 2001, pp.171-202.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two: Between Trance Film and Psychedelic Cinema – Ian Hugo’s *Bells of Atlantis* (1952)

In late 1950, Anaïs Nin and her husband Ian Hugo escaped the grim New York winter and set off to the tropical climate of Acapulco. By the late 1940s, Acapulco had turned into a popular holiday destination for Hollywood stars and wealthy Americans who populated the beach and busy sea front restaurants. The main drawing point of the location for the couple, however, was the volcanic Mexican landscape, with its rocky coastline and exotic lagoons, which Nin described enthusiastically in her diaries.<sup>1</sup> They spent most of their time exploring remote beach areas – Hugo always armed with his hand-held camera, filming everything that caught his attention: the sandy beach, rocks, moving waves as well as his wife strolling about or sunbathing. It was their second trip to the location in 1950. Earlier that year, after struggling to finish his first project, *The Dangerous Telescope* (1949), Hugo and Nin had travelled to Mexico, where Hugo filmed footage in the lagoons near Acapulco that later became his first completed film, the self-titled “poetic documentary” *Ai-Ye* (1950).<sup>2</sup> Encouraged by the productivity of their previous trip, which Hugo put down to the “primitive Mexican environment” that apparently induced mystical visions in him, he was eager to return a second time.<sup>3</sup>

This time, during one of their excursions, Hugo and Nin came upon a ship wreck by the sea shore, which reminded them of the prologue to Nin’s *House of Incest* (1936) which described a woman’s birth from the sea. Hugo had already toyed with the idea

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<sup>1</sup> Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin*, vol.5, 1947-1955, vol.5, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann, (Quartet Books: London, Melbourne and New York, 1979), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Hugo, ‘The Making of Bells of Atlantis’, *Mosaic*, 11:2 (1978: Winter). See also James Broughton, *Coming Unbuttoned: a memoir* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1993) for a description of the filming. Also P. Adams Sitney’s account in *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Emersonian Heritage* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p.53.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo 1978, p.77.

of using the novel as a basis for a new film project, but was lacking ideas as to how to go about it. He remembered:

“Anaïs and I were walking along the beach and suddenly came upon an old sea vessel half buried in the sand, its hull exposed, the curved ribs jutting up above the sand and one porthole like an eye looking in and out. We both had the same thought almost simultaneously: “THIS IS THE WOMB – AND HERE IS THE LOCATION FOR THE FILM”. I had my camera with me and at once, holding it by hand, as I usually do, I started filming [...]”<sup>4</sup>

By 1952, the footage Hugo shot on the beach was edited into a 10-minute film and released under the title *Bells of Atlantis*.<sup>5</sup> The film focused on Nin as lyrical ‘I’ sleepwalking through a surreal under-water dream-space. After its general release in 1952, the film had moderate commercial success and was screened at the Venice Film Festival in 1952.<sup>6</sup> Pleased with the result, Nin announced, “As a result of several trips to Mexico, Ian Hugo made the transition from engraver to film maker.”<sup>7</sup> It was not only Hugo’s birth as a film-maker, but also Nin’s own first experiment with the medium. While *Bells of Atlantis* is usually referred to as the work of Ian Hugo alone, film-scholar P. Adams Sitney uncovered Nin’s strong input into various aspects of the film’s development process, which makes it one of her most significant and direct collaborations.<sup>8</sup> She acted in the film, was involved in directorial decisions, editing and also suggested the composers Louis and Bebe

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<sup>4</sup> Hugo 1978, p.77.

<sup>5</sup> *Bells of Atlantis* can be watched on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE-7qEftad8>.

<sup>6</sup> Sitney writes that the film “had brought Hugo a mild degree of conventional success”, but that it “was minimal in filmmaking terms”. He adds that there was “an exotic, picturesque gloss to his films that abetted their acceptance by festival organisers and audiences otherwise alienate by the moral and aesthetic challenges posed by his more radical contemporaries.” Sitney, 2008, p.63.

<sup>7</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.59. Before he turned to filmmaking, Ian Hugo worked as an engraver in his free time and contributed the illustrations to Nin’s ‘continuous novel’ *Cities of the Interior* which combined the books: *Ladders to Fire*, *Children of the Albatross*, *The Four-Chambered Heart* and *A Spy in the House of Love*. It was first published by Nin in 1959. He also illustrated the first edition of *House of Incest* (1936).

<sup>8</sup> By drawing on both, Nin’s and Hugo’s unpublished diaries and correspondence from the UCLA archives, Sitney established Nin’s huge input into his films *Bells of Atlantis* (1952) and *Melodic Inversions* (1958). He argues that “Hugo’s dependency on her was nearly pathological”. Sitney 2008, p.48.

Barron for the soundtrack.<sup>9</sup> Nin exclaimed: “I deserve half the credit for those films [including Hugo’s *Ai-Ye*]. I found the shipwreck and told him how to film it.”<sup>10</sup> In an unpublished part of her diary, Nin even went as far as to claim, “I dominated Hugo artistically – I started this film in Acapulco by posing in a ship wreck and suggesting super impositions of the sea – We unconsciously turned out part one of *House of Incest*. [...]”<sup>11</sup>

*Bells of Atlantis* is generally associated with the genre of poetry film or film poem – short, non-narrative experimental films often literally based on poetry or poetic prose. Film-scholar David E. James has described the film poem as dealing with a “metaphoric elaboration and intensification of a kernel situation or moment, rather than its narrative extension in action.”<sup>12</sup> The American film-poem had its roots in the experimental films of French Surrealists and Dadaists, including Jean Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un Poet* (1930), Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* (1924), René Clair’s *Entr’acte* (1924) and Marcel Duchamp’s *Anémic cinema* (1926), which were shown in small cinemas and film-clubs in New York and on the West Coast.<sup>13</sup> The freedom of individual artistic expression and break from traditional structures that these films expressed was embraced by the artists of what would become the first American film avant-garde spearheaded by Maya Deren. Deren popularised the cinempoem in America through her films of the 1940s, which drew heavily on themes and strategies of French surrealist film, although she distanced herself from Bretonian

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<sup>9</sup> Sitney 2008, p.48-50; Nin had met Louis and Bebe Barron in San Francisco and referred them to Hugo when they moved to New York in 1949.

<sup>10</sup> Nin cited in David Seed, *Cinematic Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2009), p.245.

<sup>11</sup> Nin cited from Sitney 2008, p.60.

<sup>12</sup> David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Wheeler Winston-Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster in the introduction to *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Winston-Dixon and Foster, (London: Routledge, 2002), p.5. Also Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1993).

Surrealism and only appropriated it to negotiate structural concerns.<sup>14</sup> Her films and theoretical writing had a strong impact on younger filmmakers like Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington and James Broughton who became part of Nin's and Hugo's circle.<sup>15</sup> These experimentalists also played an important role in Hugo's formational years as a filmmaker.

The interest of American filmmakers in poetry in motion went hand in hand with the emergence of the New American Poetry scene and culminated in the seminal 'Poetry and Film' symposium of 1953 sponsored by Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 film club. The panel was composed of Maya Deren, Willard Maas, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas and Parker Tyler. Although the panel members disagreed if and to what extent poetry can be recreated through film, Deren delivered her influential theory of film and poetry in terms of 'horizontal and vertical development'.<sup>16</sup> A vertical development, she argued, could be seen in lyrical texts or films. It refers to an accumulation of separate elements which describe the same experience and intensify a kernel moment. A horizontal development describes a story-line with a "logic of action", a string of related events which is the basis for conventional theatre plays and narrative film.<sup>17</sup> Deren later explained that film "lends itself particularly to the poetic statement, because it is essentially a montage and, therefore, seems by its very nature to be a poetic medium".<sup>18</sup> During the 'Poetry and Film' symposium, Amos Vogel referred to Hugo, together with Willard Maas and Sidney Peterson, as one of

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<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of Maya Deren's films see, for instance, John David Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/BFI, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> See James 2005, p.181 or Winston-Dixon and Foster 2002. Nin met Alexander Hammid and Maya Deren in 1944, when they were filming *At Land*. In spring 1948 she met other filmmakers in California including Curtis Harrington, Kenneth Anger and James Broughton. Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.25.

<sup>16</sup> See Amos Vogel, *Poetry and the Film: A Symposium*, Film Culture (No. 29, Summer 1963), in Sitney (ed.) 1971, pp.171-186.

<sup>17</sup> See Vogel in Sitney 1971, pp.171-186.

<sup>18</sup> Maya Deren cited in Daniel Kane, *We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Cinema and Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p.15.

the major proponent of the genre of film poem.<sup>19</sup> This does not come as a surprise considering his roots in the Parisian avant-garde. Hugo and Nin had already been familiar with most of these original poetry films young American filmmakers saw for the first time in the 1940s and 1950s. In Paris of the 1920s, Nin frequently attended film screenings of surrealist films at the Cinémathèque club, which were also attended by Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Reviews of films by Cocteau, Dalí and Buñuel, and their depictions of night terrors and erotic dreams filled many pages of Nin's Diary from the 1920s onwards. After seeing Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), she recorded: "I felt last night that it is only in *film* that reality and unreality, poetry and science, can be fully achieved and communicated."<sup>20</sup>

In the 1970s Sitney coined the term 'trance-film' to describe specific film-poems like Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *Bells of Atlantis*.<sup>21</sup> The content of the trance film is a "dream in which the somnambulist protagonist, often played by the film-maker, wanders through enigmatic landscapes toward a climactic scene of self-realization."<sup>22</sup> Nin's prologue focusing on a mysterious woman moving through a dream space was *the* generic motif for a trance film, epitomised in Hugo's film. Nin seemed to be right when she proclaimed: "I think my work is well suited to film as we had intended film to be, which is to handle the inner life, the fantasy, the dream".<sup>23</sup> This may have been true for the French film-avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s and American experimentalists of the 1940s, but things looked quite different in the 1950s when *Bells of Atlantis* was made.

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<sup>19</sup> Vogel in Sitney 1971, p.172. Stuart Liebman also adds James Broughton to the group. Stuart Liebman, '1949-1958', in *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema*, ed. Marilyn Singer (exh. cat., New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Seed 2009, p.244.

<sup>21</sup> Sitney 1971, p.185.

<sup>22</sup> See Sitney 1971.

<sup>23</sup> Nin cited in Seed 2009, p.245.

By 1952, the genre of film-poem including the trance film was already in decline, which is reflected in Jonas Mekas's criticism of Hugo's surrealist stream-of-consciousness style as outmoded.<sup>24</sup> While America witnessed a short-lived revival of the poetry film the genre died out as a 'generic option' by the mid-1950s.<sup>25</sup> As film-poem or trance film, *Bells of Atlantis* may have been outmoded by the time the film was released, however, it became popular again in the 1960s among a specific audience. I will argue that this was the result of the fact that the film also dealt with issues with which a new wave of artists and film-makers would concern themselves in the 1960s: expanded consciousness, synaesthesia and mysticism. This illustrates the argument made by certain scholars of surrealism and its legacy in America that surrealism did not slowly die out after it was uprooted to America, but was appropriated and turned into something different.<sup>26</sup>

Jan-Christopher Horak regards the first American film avant-garde as running from 1919 to 1945, with a second wave of young film-makers emerging in the early 1960s, who experimented with new styles.<sup>27</sup> If we accept this rigid time-categorisation, Hugo's *Bells of Atlantis* falls in-between the first and second wave. The 1950s are usually described as a quiet, transitional period in which not many remarkable films were produced.<sup>28</sup> Stuart Liebman explains that the films that were made in this time show a certain tension brought about by "a dual orientation: back toward the formal models of their predecessors, and forward, as they challenged and

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<sup>24</sup> Jonas Mekas attacked the extremely subjective introspection of filmmakers like Hugo, Stan Brakhage, Willard Maas and Kenneth Anger in his article 'The Experimental Film in America', in *Film Culture* (No. 3, May-June, 1955), excerpt reproduced in *Film Culture: An Anthology*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), pp.21-26.

<sup>25</sup> Liebman in Singer 1976, p.85.

<sup>26</sup> See: Sawin 1997, Pawlik 2008. Also James Boaden, *The Avant-Garde as Swain: A Critical American Pastoral*, unpublished PhD Thesis, The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak referring to Lewis Jacobs in *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (London and Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Liebman 1976, p.85.



progressively disburdened themselves of the limiting set of structures and theoretical assumptions that history had made available.”<sup>29</sup> He argues that the period’s most interesting films distanced themselves from dramatic narrative and suggested “structural alternatives”, which involved a more radical interpretation of the extra-filmic modes of dance and dream which had inspired Maya Deren and Kenneth Anger, often drawing on Abstract Expressionist painting and contemporary music.<sup>30</sup>

I will show that we can see signs of such a “dual orientation” in *Bells of Atlantis*. Topically, the film certainly belongs to the genre of the trance-film of the 1940s, with its generic theme of the somnambulist dream and surrealist stream-of-consciousness style. But what has been overlooked so far is that Hugo’s use of innovative techniques in sound and vision, and his focus on the mystical content of Nin’s prologue, also aligns the film with the formal concerns of the film- and counterculture of the 1960s. Hugo hired experimental filmmaker Len Lye who had created a technique of painting and stencilling images directly onto film material to add abstract colour effects and create ‘visual music’.<sup>31</sup> The electronic soundtrack composed by Louis and Bebe Barron was also a noteworthy contribution. It has been described as the first ‘orchestrated all-electronic’ film score. In combination with Hugo’s extensive use of superimposition – another innovative strategy – and voice-overs of Nin reading excerpts from the prologue with the incantatory voice of a shaman, these effects created a quasi-psychedelic experience even though the film was made years before artists of the burgeoning counterculture began exploring altered states of consciousness through multimedia happenings. In fact, while criticising his outmoded stream-of-consciousness style, Jonas Mekas also linked him

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> See Tyler Cann, *Len Lye: The Body Electric* (exh. cat Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2011).

to younger filmmakers including Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger.<sup>32</sup> Brakhage's 'brain movies' – an expression coined by his poet-friend Michael McClure – which often focus on a rhythmic play of colour and light, engage with synaesthesia and 'hypnagogic' vision (the shapes and colours we see with closed eyes), and have been described as paving the way for expanded cinema.<sup>33</sup> Sheldon Renan has described Brakhage as "the major transitional figure in the turning away of experimental film from literature and Surrealist psychodrama, and its subsequent move toward the more purely personal and visual".<sup>34</sup>

*Bells of Atlantis* was made just before the dawn of what Gene Youngblood described as the "Paleocybernetic Age", which brought about a growing interest in 'cosmic consciousness' and mysticism.<sup>35</sup> Cosmic consciousness refers to the idea that the universe is composed of a collective of interconnected consciousnesses. This idea can be found throughout history, for instance in Zen Buddhism, pantheist beliefs and the esoteric writing of Richard Maurice Bucke, P.D. Ouspensky and others.<sup>36</sup> It also loosely evokes the notion of collective unconscious as described by C.G. Jung. Users of LSD have reported to have experienced such 'cosmic consciousness' under the influence of the drug. The renewed interest in mysticism and spirituality has been interpreted as a reaction to technological innovations which alienated a younger generation who turned to alternative forms of spirituality and mind-expanding drugs.<sup>37</sup> Artists believed that they could reach a new state of consciousness by

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<sup>32</sup> Mekas in in Sitney 1971, p.22.

<sup>33</sup> Liebman 1976, p.87. See also Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision* (Film Culture, no.30, New York, Fall 1963).

<sup>34</sup> Sheldon Renan, *The Underground Film. An Introduction to its Development in America* (London: Studio Vista 1968), cited by Singer 1976, p.14.

<sup>35</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970).

<sup>36</sup> Richard Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901). P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1912).

<sup>37</sup> Kerry Brougher, *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900*, eds. Kerry Brougher et al (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), p.158.

creating a “super-sensory environment” and began creating works supposed to “operate directly on the body and mind”.<sup>38</sup> This manifested itself later in multi-media happenings, expanded-cinema events and psychedelic ‘liquid-light’ shows which used kaleidoscopic colours, hypnotic lights and music to recreate a mind-expanding experience.<sup>39</sup> *Bells of Atlantis* as well as Nin’s *House of Incest* seemed to have similar concerns: the evocation of sensory images to un-cage the inner life. But as I will demonstrate in the following, Nin’s artistic agenda differed from that of the new generation of the ‘Age of Aquarius’, a term coined by Jung to describe the ‘New Age’, which was adapted by the hippie movement.<sup>40</sup>

*Bells of Atlantis* was at once deeply outmoded and also forward-thinking. This ‘dual orientation’ also illustrates Nin’s own interim position within French and American avant-gardes. The film’s dramatisation of Nin’s surreal text simultaneously showcased the antagonistic nature of her artistic vision in the 1950s as well as its currency in certain strands of American art and culture: deemed too esoteric and unfashionably surrealistic for American ‘high or dominant culture’, her exploration of art in relation to the senses and her references to mysticism tied in with the concerns of the counterculture of the 1960s.

But as I will show, although Nin recognised these shared concerns, it was Hugo’s keen interest in the new possibilities of film as artistic medium and not only as vehicle to evoke unconscious material, which aligned it with Youngblood’s

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<sup>38</sup> Brougher 2005, p.158.

<sup>39</sup> Brougher argues that visual music films are fundamentally bound with the “Paleocybernetic Age”. Brougher 2005, p. 158.

<sup>40</sup> C.G. Jung, letter to H. G. Baynes, 12 August 1940, in *C. G. Jung Letters*, ed. Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C. Hull, vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 285.

expanded or “synaesthetic cinema” which was to replace outmoded concepts like narrative for “mind-expanding film experiences operating on all the senses”.<sup>41</sup>

### *Anaïs Nin’s cinematic writing*

Film was Nin’s most favoured artistic form, although Hugo’s *Bells of Atlantis* (1952) and *Melodic Inversions* (1958) were her only direct involvements in the film-making process, apart from cameos in Maya Deren’s *Ritual in Transfigure Time* (1946) and Kenneth Anger’s *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954). If a fusion of the arts to create a ‘directed dream’ was at the heart of Nin’s aesthetic, film as combination of sound, images and motion was the ultimate synthesis. Helen Tookey points out that Nin’s stress on the “imagistic nature of dreams” made her “seize enthusiastically on film as the medium more suited than any other to portraying dreams and the interactions of conscious and unconscious realms.”<sup>42</sup>

In Nin’s idea system, initially only the poet, who she regarded as magician or alchemist, was able to undertake a synthesis of reality and fantasy, conscious and unconscious. Later she would ascribe this ability to the filmmaker. In the *Novel of the Future* she wrote: “It was not the writers but film-makers, who opened the way to the language of images, which is the language of the unconscious.”<sup>43</sup> Already her early writing displays a serious engagement with cinema – first the surrealist films of Jean Cocteau and Louis Buñuel, later she would frequently write about Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Henri Jaglom and Federico Fellini. To Nin they

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<sup>41</sup> Brougher 2005, p.120.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Tookey *Anaïs Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p.141.

<sup>43</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.97.

were some of the few poetic filmmakers able to capture dream-states.<sup>44</sup> In autumn 1953 she proclaimed in her Diary:

“We are living in the age of the image but this means not only that we can register more perfectly with cameras the external image, but that we can now also penetrate and photograph our inner life as if with an undersea camera. Our unconscious life is composed of free associations of ideas, fragments of memories, musical flow of impressions, or symbolic scenes. In our dreams and in our fantasies we are all surrealists, impressionists, abstractionists, symbolists. The camera more exactly than words is capable of reflecting this inner life and revealing the metamorphosis which takes place between a realistic scene and the way our moods color, distort, or alter the scene as through a prism.”<sup>45</sup>

Nin, of course, was not alone in her enthusiasm about film and its uses for exploring unconscious processes at that time. It was the time when psychologists like Hugo Munsterberg and later Otto Rank discussed film in relation to psychoneurology and psychoanalysis. In his book *The Double (Der Doppelgänger, 1914)*, for instance, Rank used the German silent film *The Student of Prague* (1913) to discuss the psychological concept of the doppelgänger. A similar tendency can be detected in America. Film-writer Parker Tyler described the cinema as “place of waking dream, a psychoanalytical clinic for the average worker and his day- not his night-dreams!”<sup>46</sup> David Seed has compared Nin’s (and Henry Miller’s) interest in film to Walter Benjamin’s conviction expressed in 1936 that “the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses”<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Nin discusses Ingmar Bergman’s films in her essay ‘Ingmar Bergman’, published in Nin, *In Favour of the Sensitive Man and Other Essays* (London: W.H. Allen, 1978).

<sup>45</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.136.

<sup>46</sup> Parker Tyler, *The Hollywood Hallucination* (New York: Creative Age, 1944), cited from Seed 2009, p.252.

<sup>47</sup> Seed 2009, p.234.

Watching surrealist films not only opened Nin's eyes to the usefulness of film to portray the dream, but also made her aware of the limits of writing to compete with the possibilities of the new medium. Reading a well-crafted poetic novel may create a film in the reader's mind, but Nin wanted this experience to be more immediate. Making films herself never seemed an option, although she kept trying to interest film directors into adapting her novels, but without success.<sup>48</sup> She considered herself a "slave to words" and was never interested in the materiality of a given medium, which will become obvious when looking at her involvement in *Bells of Atlantis* as well as further collaborations. Her Diary illustrates that she had a romantic image of herself as struggling writer and poet – a female Rimbaud. But her aim to create a language of dreams, and her realisation that film was possibly the most suitable medium made her experiment with the adaptation of cinematic effects to language. In an interview, Nin claimed that "the novel will come closer to the film ... the films have brought us back to the importance of the image and the study of dreams ... the dream and the film resemble each other very strongly".<sup>49</sup>

Tookey regards Nin's interest in film as symptomatic of modernist concerns with new aesthetic forms and discusses it in relation to the ambivalent attitudes of modernists towards new technology.<sup>50</sup> She stresses that Nin's ambition to restore "magical power" to writing by introducing filmic qualities links her to other modernist writers who experimented with the new art form, because it was both magical and modern.<sup>51</sup> She discusses how Nin, like other modernist writers of the early twentieth century, such as H.D. and Virginia Woolf, regarded film as an

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<sup>48</sup> See also Robert A. Haller's musings on why Nin never wrote about avant-garde and diary film in the 1960s in 'Anaïs Nin and Film: Open Questions', in *Anaïs, Art and Artists, a Collection of Essays*, ed. Sharon Spencer, (Florida: Greenwood, 1986), pp.135-138.

<sup>49</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p.210.

<sup>50</sup> Tookey 2003, p.141.

<sup>51</sup> Tookey, 2003, pp.142-3.

exciting new medium whose main features and vocabulary should be adapted to writing.<sup>52</sup> She argues that they share the same belief that film could capture ‘our inner life’, that it includes a synthesis of the arts, and of art and life.<sup>53</sup> Henry Miller was equally fascinated by film and created cinematic effects in writing. In 1932, Miller and Nin even co-wrote a book on film.<sup>54</sup> David Seed also emphasises the importance of Djuna Barnes’s cinematic writing on Nin’s approach. She frequently quoted *Nightwood* (1936) as having had a great impact on her own work.<sup>55</sup> Playwright and poet Antonin Artaud expressed a similar belief in film as the perfect medium to depict the dream.<sup>56</sup> Nin wrote, “When Antonin Artaud first became involved with films he was exhilarated because it would be such a perfect medium for the depiction of dreams”.<sup>57</sup> The modernist journal *transition* was a main site for the promotion of film for writing. Michael North even wondered in “what sense might *transition* itself, and perhaps even the general modernist project behind it, be considered a kind of ‘logocinema’, a revolution of the word accomplished quite literally by bringing to language the physical dynamism and energy associated with film?”<sup>58</sup>

Nin began experimenting with cinematic effects in writing and used cinematic terminology to describe the language of dreams. Drawing on Freud, Nin called for a technique of writing she described as ‘condensation’ or ‘distillation’ whereby all ‘nonessential’ baggage like dialogue and realistic descriptions were excluded in

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> H.D. for instance emphasised that “film art is the ‘synthesis’ – of all the arts, of ‘dimensions’, of art and life – because it is ‘the art of dream portrayal’”. Tookey 2003, p.145.

<sup>54</sup> See David Seed’s chapter ‘Into the Night Life: Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin’, for a discussion on both writers’ involvement in cinema. Seed 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Seed 2009, p.244.

<sup>56</sup> See Anaïs Nin, ‘Henry Jaglom: Magician of the Film’, in Nin, *In Favour of the Sensitive Man*, 1978.

<sup>57</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.6, 1979, p.119.

<sup>58</sup> Michael North, ‘Words in Motion: The Movies, the Readies, and the “Revolution of the Word”’, *Modernism/modernity* 9.2 (April 2002), pp. 205-23. Cited in Kane 2009, p.208.

favour of condensed emotions through symbolism, metonymy and the imitation of effects used in non-literary art forms. She saw how surrealist artists recreated these mechanisms through techniques such as jump-cuts, montage, superimposition, fade-outs and dissolves. She adapted these techniques to verbal language to create a “flow of images without interpretation”, images “resembling film sequences”.<sup>59</sup> Especially the texture created through the superimposition of multiple images interested her, which she likened to the multi-dimensional state of the unconscious and the condensation happening in dreams.

The language of *House of Incest* makes strong use of cinematic strategies. Seed argues that it draws self-consciously on Luis Buñuel’s films, especially *Un Chien Andalou* with regard to Nin’s use of dissolves as ‘transition device’ and ‘textual gaps’ to imitate jump-cuts.<sup>60</sup> He also suggests that Nin evokes Buñuel’s film in her imagery. She seems to refer to his infamous slicing-of-an-eye-with-razorblade scene with the line: “there is a fissure in my vision and madness will always run through.”<sup>61</sup> The influence of his film on her writing is exemplified in a passage from her diary of February 1934. There she describes *Un Chien Andalou* as the ideal example of dream language “where nothing is mentioned or verbalised”, and which used “a telescoping, a condensation in words”, “scenes without logical, conscious explanations”. She continued: “It is a silent movie of images, as in a dream. One phrase now and then, out of a sea of sensation.”<sup>62</sup> Seed also points out the narrative

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<sup>59</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.27.

<sup>60</sup> Nin cited in Seed 2009, p.248.

<sup>61</sup> Seed 2009, p.249.

<sup>62</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, p.317.



links to the German science-fiction silent film *Alraune* (1928), which I discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>63</sup>

Nin had hoped to turn *House of Incest* into a film ever since she began working on it. Her Diary also documents her unsuccessful attempts at trying to convince filmmakers to adapt her other novels like *A Spy in the House of Love* (1954) for which she tried to convince French actress Jeanne Moreau to play the role of the protagonist Sabina.<sup>64</sup> In February 1934, Nin mentioned Miller's attempt at turning *House of Incest* into a 'scenario' for a surrealist film.<sup>65</sup> Not long after, Miller produced a film-script based on *House of Incest* titled *Scenario: A film with Sound* (1937). To Nin's dismay, however, it was a satire on Nin's esoteric style of writing and not a serious film-script of the poem. It was not until the early 1950s, that her plan of a film-adaptation would be fulfilled with the help of her husband, who considered *House of Incest* Nin's "most inspired work".<sup>66</sup>

Between 1935 when Nin started work on the novella and the 1950s, when Hugo started filming *Bells of Atlantis*, much had changed for the couple. The themes that shaped Nin's novella – Bretonian surrealism, Rimbaud, psychoanalysis, dreams – drew on ideas promoted by the historical avant-garde and have to be re-contextualised within the new context of the film's production in post-war America of the 1950s. They were now exposed to a different culture shaped by a different artistic heritage – a culture that nurtured young artists who, while appropriating certain themes popularised by the European avant-garde, used them to experiment with new forms of artistic expression and create something that responded to their

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<sup>63</sup> Seed 2009, p.244

<sup>64</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.7, 1980, p.86.

<sup>65</sup> Nin wrote in her diary: "If the films are the most successful expression of surrealism, then the scenario is what suits the surrealist stories and the dreams best. Henry sensed this when he suggested a scenario be made out of *House of Incest*". Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, p.316.

<sup>66</sup> Hugo 1978.

own experience of life in America.<sup>67</sup> As I will show, it was Hugo, rather than Nin who readily assimilated these tendencies in his work.

### *Ian Hugo's 'birth' as a film-maker*

Ian Hugo had turned to film-making quite late in life, around the time of his retirement in 1949, when the couple lived in New York. While throughout her career, Nin had been fighting for her acceptance as a serious female writer in the male-dominated Parisian avant-garde, Hugo was fighting his own battles: with his notorious insecurities as an artist and the stigma of his bourgeois existence. For most of his married life, Hugo had been leading a double-life: torn between his ambition to be an artist, and social and financial pressures to earn a living to sustain a comfortable life-style for himself and his wife.<sup>68</sup> He worked for a bank under his real name Hugh Parker Guiler; in his remaining free-time he worked as an engraver under the pseudonym 'Ian Hugo'.

When the couple met in the early 1920s they had shared the same artistic ambition and interest in poetry, but unlike Nin, Hugo abandoned his plans to become an artist in favour of financial security – a decision which would torment him throughout his life and be the subject of many therapy sessions with his analyst Inge Bogner.<sup>69</sup> She advised him to face up to the fact that he was not an artist after all.<sup>70</sup> Hugo disregarded her advice, bought himself a 16 mm camera and started filming.

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<sup>67</sup> See for instance: Sawin 1997, Pawlik 2008 and Boaden 2008.

<sup>68</sup> See Deirdre Bair, *Anaïs Nin: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

<sup>69</sup> Inge Bogner was Ian Hugo's analyst in the late 1940s and 1950s. See Sitney 2008, p.49.

<sup>70</sup> In a letter to Nin, Hugo wrote: "Bogner has this week broken the news to me that I have been deceiving myself into thinking that I am an artist. She says that I am primarily a businessman, and on the side, an artist". Ian Hugo to Anaïs Nin, December 4, 1949. Young Research Library, UCLA. Cited

Like many other protagonists of the so-called ‘first American film avant-garde’ of the 1940s, Hugo was an amateur and attracted by the possibilities of this new medium, which had become more accessible and affordable for non-professionals.<sup>71</sup> Soon amateurism became a badge of honour for these artists of little financial means who regarded themselves as independent filmmakers.<sup>72</sup> Amateurism became synonymous with ‘artistic integrity’, while professionalism was regarded as commercial.<sup>73</sup> This attitude is reflected in Maya Deren’s essay ‘*Amateur Versus Professional*’ in which she proclaimed:

“Cameras do not make films; filmmakers make films. Improve your films not by adding more equipment and personnel but by using what you have to the fullest capacity. The most important part of your equipment is yourself: your mobile body, your imaginative mind, and your freedom to use both.”<sup>74</sup>

Although Hugo aligned himself with the film avant-garde, there is no proof that he understood amateurism as a radical political act.<sup>75</sup> As a retired banker, he was much older than his peers and did not have to rely on government funds for support. While he wanted to prove himself as an artist, there was far less urgency to his approach. Sitney points out, “Hugo was older, more conservative, much wealthier, and utterly lacking in the exhibitionism that characterised most of the leading artists of the emerging American avant-garde cinema of the late 1940s.”<sup>76</sup>

He may have been much older than his peers and had the money to buy expensive equipment, but technically he was even more of an amateur than they were.

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in Sitney 2008, p.49. Joanna Pawlik writes of analysts in New York who encouraged patients to reject their artistic urges and return to their conventional jobs. Pawlik 2008.

<sup>71</sup> On the rise of amateur filmmakers see Horak 1995, p.21.

<sup>72</sup> Horak 1995, p.19.

<sup>73</sup> Horak 1995, p.19.

<sup>74</sup> Maya Deren, ‘Amateur Versus Professional’, *Film Culture*, No.39, cited in Marilyn Singer, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema: a film exhibition* (New York, 1976), p.12.

<sup>75</sup> See Sitney 2008, p.52.

<sup>76</sup> Sitney 2008, p.63.

Reportedly, Hugo relied strongly on the help of more experienced young filmmakers such as James Broughton, Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington and Alexander Hammid whom he met through Nin.<sup>77</sup> Broughton was also present when Hugo filmed *Bells of Atlantis* in Acapulco. He remembers in his autobiography *Coming Unbuttoned*:

“[Hugo] had acquired expensive camera equipment on which to learn filmmaking and he sought my collaboration. Wanting to enjoy a holiday while filming he invited me to accompany him to Mexico. There he travelled extensively and photographed randomly.”<sup>78</sup>

Hugo shared Nin’s romantic interest in mysticism, dream and poetry as well as her emphasis on synaesthesia. He also showed a commitment to intuition and rejection of the intellectual and the explicit. But while Nin was *writing* about creating a language of dreams through a synthesis of the arts, Hugo tried to put it into practice. In the 1970s Hugo explained:

“I felt that there was a wide field for the enhancement of written poetry through motion and colour. My wife, Anais Nin, had at that time completed what I considered, and still consider, her most inspired work: *House of Incest*, a prose poem. It presented a great challenge – I was eager to make the attempt – not with the whole long poem, but with a few selected passages. [...]”<sup>79</sup>

Hugo used a similar process of free association or proceeding from the dream, which he explained in his lecture ‘The Making of *Bells of Atlantis*’ (1978). It also illustrates Nin’s and Hugo’s shared interest in symbolism and synaesthesia:

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<sup>77</sup> Nin had met Alexander Hammid together with Maya Deren in 1944 when they were making *At Land*. In 1948 she met Curtis Harrington, Kenneth Anger and James Broughton. Anger who was more experienced than Hugo purportedly urged him to stop looking at other filmmakers and “pursue filmmaking intuitively, self-taught”. Sitney 2008, p.49

<sup>78</sup> James Broughton, *Coming Unbuttoned* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1993), pp.72-73.

<sup>79</sup> Hugo 1978, p.77.

“I myself have been working on the frontiers of my dreams and have tried to liberate them from the cages of rigid forms, scripts and words. My aim has been to liberate the imagination by free association of meaningful images in such a way that each spectator can make his own associations and respond with his own feeling, as in music.”<sup>80</sup>

He claimed that he let his intuition, or ‘the dream’, lead him when he was filming in Acapulco: “I waited for the dream to lead me where it would. And this actually happened!”<sup>81</sup> These statements almost sound like excerpts from Nin’s diary. No wonder then, that Stuart Liebman conflates Nin’s and Hugo’s ambitions. Quoting Nin, Liebman argues that it was the aim of Hugo’s films to embody “the language of multiple dimensions of our inner world”.<sup>82</sup> This is an easy mistake to make as Nin became Hugo’s major spokesperson. She praised Hugo’s ‘intuitive’ approach to film making and use of free association – very much a key theme in her own approach. She wrote in her diary: “He followed the process of free association; he filmed whatever touched him or appealed to him, trusting to an organic development of themes.”<sup>83</sup> As in her study of D.H. Lawrence and subsequent collaborations, she praised aspects of Hugo’s work which were major themes in her own aesthetic, and uses him as a springboard to discuss her own ideas of film. She wrote:

“The freedom of improvisation expressed in Ian Hugo’s films correspond to our emotional life, which is continuously projecting and retaining on our inner screen previous images...He also seeks to capture how our thoughts jump from scene to scene in an apparently unrelated way, to better match the structure of our emotional life, which is fluid, symphonic, and composed on several levels at once ... By following such improvisations,

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<sup>80</sup> Hugo 1978, p.80.

<sup>81</sup> Hugo 1978, p.77.

<sup>82</sup> Liebman 1976, p.89.

<sup>83</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, p.59.

assembling images according to the design of our emotions, we also enter this region below consciousness.”<sup>84</sup>

With their apparently similar approach, Nin regarded Hugo as the ideal person to adapt *House of Incest* to film. She wrote, “Ian Hugo has used film to depict exactly the atmosphere, the symbolism, the lure of dreams.”<sup>85</sup> But there were also subtle, but important differences between text and film. The film was never meant to be a direct adaptation of the poem. Hugo explained, “I was determined to avoid the mistake of trying to make a literal translation from words into film”.<sup>86</sup> Dudley Andrews defined a film adaptation as “the matching of the cinematic sign system to a prior achievement in some other system” and that “in a strong sense appropriation of a meaning from a prior text”.<sup>87</sup> Brian McFarlane argues that a film adaptation of a text aims “to offer a perceptual experience that corresponds with one arrived at conceptually”.<sup>88</sup> In the following, I want to illustrate that the film takes major aspects from the novel – in content and style – but develops its own aesthetic. I follow Christopher Orr’s argument that “the issue is not whether the adapted film is faithful to its source, but rather how the choice of a specific source and how the approach to that source serve the film’s ideology.”<sup>89</sup> While Nin and Hugo shared similar ideas about art and writing, Hugo was a film-maker who was interested in experimenting with the medium of film, whereas Nin saw film as a vehicle to channel the artist’s personal imagination. At this point, I want to take a closer look at the structure of the film.

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<sup>84</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 136-7.

<sup>85</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.6, 1979, p.119.

<sup>86</sup> Hugo, p.

<sup>87</sup> Dudley Andrew, ‘The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory’, in *Narrative Strategies*, eds. Syndy Conger and Janice R. Welsh (West Illinois University Press: Macomb, Ill., 1980), p.10, cited from Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.21.

<sup>88</sup> McFarlane 1996, p.21.

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Orr, ‘The Discourse on Adaptation’, *Wide Angle*, 6/2 (1984).

### ***Ian Hugo's Bells of Atlantis (1952)***

Hugo decided only to focus on the prologue of the novel for the film project. How far Nin was involved in this decision is unclear. *Bells of Atlantis* condenses the moments of birth and rebirth described in the novel into an intense 10-minute dream-sequence. In this intensification of a kernel moment, Hugo was working in the tradition of the poetry or trance film. Nin explained that during the editing process, Hugo had focused on the line from the prologue, “I remember my first birth in water”, and described the plot as a “lyrical journey into prenatal memories, the theme of birth and rebirth from the sea”.<sup>90</sup> As I explained in the previous chapter, the prologue focuses on return-to-the-womb fantasies and pre-birth sensations. In a hallucinogenic monologue, a female narrator describes her previous life on the sunken continent of Atlantis which is a symbol for the uterine space of the womb. She floats through this paradisiacal, sensory realm and describes its magical underwater life.

In accordance with Nin's birth metaphor, the primary image of *Bells of Atlantis* is water, like the amniotic fluid in the mother's womb [figs 2.1 and 2.2]. Like the narrator, whose vision is “water veiled” and who sees everything through “a curtain of sea”, we see Hugo's dreamscape veiled by superimposed images of the sea. The film opens with shots of the Mexican coastline superimposed upon which is footage of gently moving waves. Then we hear Nin read the first lines of her prologue, which are central to the film:

“My first vision of earth was water veiled. I am of the race of men and women who see all things through this curtain of sea and my eyes are the colour of water. I looked with chameleon

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<sup>90</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.60. P. Adams Sitney argues that this excerpt is most likely written in 1952, after the film was completed rather than in 1950. Sitney 2008, p.60.

eyes upon the changing face of the world, looked with anonymous vision upon my uncompleted self.”<sup>91</sup>

Underscored by the warbling electronic sound, we see Nin swing in a hammock, which encloses her like a cocoon – possibly a reference to the theme of birth and the safety of the womb as Sitney suggests.<sup>92</sup> As we have already heard, the main womb-symbol of the film is the hull of the boat that Nin and Hugo discovered on Acapulco beach. Throughout the film we see Nin move slowly around the shipwreck half-obscured by superimposed images of waves, sometimes her body is silhouetted against a white sail which make her appear more ethereal, as if she was floating or sleepwalking. Eventually Nin reads the second excerpt from the prologue which describes the narrator’s return to the womb/Atlantis in dreams, which is in accordance with Otto Rank who wrote that pre-natal memories may emerge in dreams: “This Atlantis could only be found at night by the route of the dream.”<sup>93</sup>

While Nin walks about the shipwreck the superimposed waves change colour to scarlet-red. In the middle of the film, we see Nin “washed up on the beach”, which alludes to her narrator’s birth into consciousness. While the colour of waves shifts to an orange tone, Nin reads the third excerpt from the novel spoken by the narrator *after* she emerged from the sea: “The terror and joy of murders.....”<sup>94</sup>

This last film-sequence is the only one that did not draw on the prologue. It alludes to the final chapter of Nin’s *House of Incest* in which the narrator meets the “modern Christ”. In the film, the Christ figure is also played by Nin who is leaning against an

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Sitney 2008, p.61.

<sup>93</sup> Nin’s engagement with birth may also have been triggered by her alleged pregnancy. During the time of writing the novel, Nin was pregnant with what she described as an “unwanted child”. In an unpublished volume of her diary of 1934 she wrote about planning an abortion. On the title page of Diary no.46 titled ‘Flow’ which covers the period between July and November 1934, Nin lists “Otto Rank”, “Child-Birth” [large underlined], and “Rebirth” among other key themes. Anais Nin Papers (Collection 2066). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>94</sup> Nin, *House*, p.16.



upraised plank on the ship with outstretched arms alluding to the crucifixion [fig 2.3]. While in the prose-poem, the Christ figure speaks the lines which are the key to the symbol of incest, i.e. narcissistic self-love, in the film these lines are omitted. Here, the Christian symbol is used to signify rebirth. This crucifixion image is accompanied by Nin's voice-over reading the dramatic line from the prologue, "Only a monster brought me up on the surface", which, again, refers to the trauma of birth. Then we hear the last line, this time taken from the monologue of 'the modern Christ': "When anger has corroded me, I rise, I always rise after the crucifixion." The camera pans towards the sky as the background lights up suggesting resurrection. Then it pans back down, and we see Nin's feet still resting on the ground, which may signify the infinite cycle of birth and rebirth, ascension and fall.

We can immediately see the film's affinity to the trance film. It displays a strong resemblance to Maya Deren's *At Land* (1944), especially the opening scene comes to mind, which starts with a dishevelled Deren descending from the sea just like Nin's female narrator. Nin was fascinated by Deren's films *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *At Land* (1944).<sup>95</sup> Sitney suggests that there may have been a cross-fertilisation between Nin's novella, Deren's film and *Bells of Atlantis*. He writes:

"It is just possible that a reading of *The House of Incest* (privately printed first in 1938) influenced Deren's vision of an alienated Aphrodite figure who comes out of the sea and experiences quasi-erotic adventures with several men and at least one woman in a quest for self-definition. But I have found no corroborating evidence of Deren's knowledge of Nin's text that early. In any case, Hugo returned the compliment by working in Deren's genre, filming Nin's oneiric emergence from the sea along with

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<sup>95</sup> For a discussion of Maya Deren's films see, for instance, John David Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/BFI, 2012).

other unacknowledged debts to the film she and Hammid made together.”<sup>96</sup>

Water was also a popular theme in earlier experimental films of the 1940s, which focused on lyrical depictions of nature, such as Ralph Steiner’s *H2O* (1929) and *Surf and Seaweed* (1931), and Slavko Vorkapich and John Hoffman’s *Moods of the Sea* (1942). Even if abstracted, Horak explains, lyrical documentations of nature often became a “visual metaphor for the expression of human (mostly male) subjectivity”.<sup>97</sup> It displays their fascination with nature’s “infinite variety of patterns of form, movement, light”.<sup>98</sup> Horak describes this ‘romantic subjectivity’ as “particularly American in terms of its aesthetic” and “far from the European modernist project”.<sup>99</sup> He argues that many experimental film-makers working in America at that time used “modernist forms in connection with expressions of highly romantic, even anti-modernist sentiments”, which Horak regards as symptomatic of their “contradictory relationship to the modernist project”.<sup>100</sup>

We can see a similar tendency in Hugo’s fascination with the reflection of light on water and the movement of waves. Hugo evokes water not simply through superimposed images of waves, but also through various filmic strategies. Liebman explains,

“The camera sways gently in contrasting directions over each of the three layers of superimposed images that are usually present. Hugo uses inner-cutting, slowly changing one layer of imagery (usually by dissolves, fades, and plastic cutting on black), while the other layers remain constant. The ebb and flow effects thus produced convey the rhythms and even the visual textures of

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<sup>96</sup> Sitney 2008, p.62

<sup>97</sup> Horak 1995, p.31

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Horak 1995, p.27; There have been various attempts at establishing a topology of avant-garde cinema by writers and filmmakers including Jonas Mekas, P. Adams Sitney and Dana Polan. Horak argues for being careful with such narrow categorisations and sees avant-garde film as reaction against “classical cinema”. Horak 1995, p.28

water. The movements of the narrator (performed by Anais Nin) can be glimpsed through the ‘aquatic’ space.”<sup>101</sup>

Sitney has traced this romantic interest in nature, especially with water and fluidity, to American filmmakers’ fascination with the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman.<sup>102</sup> He describes Hugo as an Emersonian filmmaker who only singled out the Emersonian themes in Nin’s *House of Incest* for his film – vision, flow and the infinite cycle of birth and rebirth – which draws on Emerson’s essay ‘*Circles*’ (1841).<sup>103</sup> Emerson described the circle as a ‘primary figure’ in nature and human life which refers to the circularity of human actions and continuity. Emerson writes:

“The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. [...] the circular or compensatory character of every human action. [...] around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning [...].”<sup>104</sup>

Sitney sees this passage reflected in the final episode of Nin’s novel, which describes the armless dancer who moves with “the rhythm of the earth’s circles ... turned with the earth turning, like a disk, [...]”<sup>105</sup> He points out that “[f]or Emerson’s conjunction of eye and horizon, Nin substitutes eye and water.”<sup>106</sup> The circular motif in relation to water appears in the film from the beginning through the circles Len Lye painted onto the film material showing water imagery. Sitney argues that they “invoke an eye, the sun, and the expanding concentric reverberations made by an object dropped into water [...]”<sup>107</sup> David Seed also points out links to Emerson and

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<sup>101</sup> Liebman 1976, p.89.

<sup>102</sup> Sitney 2008, p.56.

<sup>103</sup> Sitney 2008, p.56.

<sup>104</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson cited in Sitney 2008, p.57. See also Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983).

<sup>105</sup> Nin, *House*, cited in Sitney 2008, p.57.

<sup>106</sup> Sitney 2008, p.56.

<sup>107</sup> Sitney 2008, p.59.

Whitman by drawing attention to the centrality of vision in the prologue. He writes: “Miller’s Whitmanesque ‘I see... I see’ formula finds its counterparts in Nin as she explores images of the self (‘I see two women in me’, ‘I saw a city’, for example).”<sup>108</sup> He links this also to Nin’s adaptation of Artaud’s belief in the poet as seer. In *The Novel of the Future* Nin stated: “The poet, or the novelist who writes poetically, is what Antonin Artaud called the voyant. The seer. He has merely found a way to shut out the appearance of things and concentrate on the invisible, life of spirit and emotion.”<sup>109</sup> Seed argues that this is what Nin tries to do in *House of Incest* where the visionary “does not imply privileged access to a transcendental truth so much as a willed exclusion of external reality so that she can depict the self’s quest for a way towards life.”<sup>110</sup>

While Seed makes no clear distinction between Emersonian and Whitmannian aspects in his discussion of the lyrical elements in Hugo’s and Nin’s work, Sitney uses a sharp Whitman/Emerson dichotomy as vehicle for a psycho-biographical reading of *Bells of Atlantis* and *House of Incest*, which becomes synonymous for the pairing dangerous (female) sexuality vs. (male) morality. As opposed to the ‘Emersonian’ prologue, he calls the erotically charged main part of *House of Incest* a ‘Whitmannian scenario’: a “series of confessional encounters excite varieties of psychic crises in the narrator after she emerges from the narcissistic pansensorium of the sea”.<sup>111</sup> He argues that the personal tensions between Nin and Hugo are expressed in *Bells of Atlantis* [and *Melodic Inversion*].<sup>112</sup> In his reading, *House of*

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<sup>108</sup> Seed 2009, p.248.

<sup>109</sup> Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, cited in Seed 2009, p.249.

<sup>110</sup> Seed 2009, p.249.

<sup>111</sup> Sitney 2008, p.57.

<sup>112</sup> Sitney points out that at the time of filming, after 1947, Nin already lived a double life, spending half the year with her husband Hugo in New York and the other half with her bigamous husband Rupert Pole in California. This and further accounts of Nin’s affairs are regarded as direct influence

*Incest* is reduced to an expression of Nin's "extra-marital fantasies".<sup>113</sup> It becomes a study of "the extreme satisfactions of hell from the point of view of a siren mesmerized by her own sexual destructiveness".<sup>114</sup> He argues that Hugo as Emersonian film-maker omits these 'infernal' and sexual undertones of Nin's 'Whitmannian scenario' and focuses on the purely Emersonian themes. He identifies Hugo as imposing changes to the meaning of Nin's text through editing and superimposition, to express his "anger at his dependence on her" and as "an enlarged emblem of his own capability of poetic transcendence".<sup>115</sup> Hugo apparently reversed the meaning of Nin's text "without changing a word" by "almost exclusively representing and quoting from the opening, oceanic passage and by systematically replacing the prose poem's infernal progression with images connoting flight and ascent".<sup>116</sup> This is viewed as an attempt to show his domination of Nin, if not in real life than at least in the fantasy world of the film. It becomes "a version of Apollo's conquest of a sea nymph, illuminated by allegorical references to the creative power of cinema: the focusing light, the screen silhouette, the inventive energy of superimposition and camera movement".<sup>117</sup>

Sitney regards the lyrical intention of the film as reason why Hugo chose the prologue rather than the erotically charged main part of Nin's novella.<sup>118</sup> Sitney's subjective approach using biographical material from Nin's and Hugo's personal life to analyse the film is highly problematic. Sitney's claim that Hugo used the film to re-establish his manhood through the mastery over a domineering wife reveals less

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on Hugo's film. He writes, "I dwell on this dramatic detail of their married life because it is pertinent to my interpretations of *Bells of Atlantis* and *Melodic Inversion*". Sitney 2008, pp. 48, 52

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., pp.60 and 48.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p.58.

<sup>117</sup> Sitney 2008, p.62.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p.57.

about actual circumstances than about the patriarchal judgement towards female artists at that time. It also says more about Sitney, than it says about Hugo as a film-maker. It is a prime example of how female artists and film-makers of the New York avant-garde were stereotyped – a topic discussed by Lauren Rabinovitz. Maya Deren was often portrayed as the type of the “exotic, Romantic woman”, and Shirley Clarke as the “eccentric Beat girl”.<sup>119</sup> Sitney happily conflates Nin-the-writer with her protagonist and stereotypes her as domineering *femme fatale* who has to be put in her place by her film-maker husband. In writing on Nin, we can see this persistent tendency to equate Nin’s fictional characters with the real-life persona – a man-eating monstrous female. Such a narrow reading based on pseudo-biographical material ignores the rich discourses the novel and the film opens up.

Hugo may well have focused on the prologue of the novel to explore Emersonian themes, but certainly not to ‘tame’ his wife. We need not deny that Hugo’s portrait of Nin’s narrator opens up questions in relation to gender, but whether this was personally motivated is of little concern to a reading of the film. Hugo’s construction of Nin/the narrator through imagery and text may evoke the prototype of the ‘monstrous feminine’ – a subject that crops up in the works of many surrealist artists and poets Nin and Hugo drew on. The association of woman as dangerous is created, for instance, in the juxtaposition of Nin on screen with the voice talking of “The terror and joy of murders”, while the colour of waves shifts to warmer tones signalling heightened tension. The following line, “Only a monster brought me up on the surface”, makes the wrecked hull of the boat look like a carnivorous vagina, and the superimposition of ‘phallic’ body parts, disembodied leg and arm, can be easily

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<sup>119</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, ‘The Woman Filmmaker in the new York Avant-Garde’, in Winston-Dixon and Foster, 2002. See also Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

interpreted as serving to disavow castration as we have seen in Telberg's surrealist photomontages. What it illustrates is Hugo's awareness of a set of images and strategies that drew on surrealist film and photography: the veiling of the female body, the body-parts etc. These themes reflect the surrealist obsession with the figure of the *femme fatale* and dangerous eroticism – a theme that haunted Nin's own work where it can be seen as a highly problematic aspect, which is reflected in Sitney's dubious misreading of the novel and film. But if it had been Hugo's intention to construct and frame Nin's castrating *femme fatale* or Nin herself, he would have had a field day with the novel's main part – we only need to think of Telberg's photomontages. However, he chose the prologue.

I want to suggest an alternative reading: Hugo's decision to make a film that focused specifically on Nin's synaesthetic prologue shows his interest in the genre of 'visual music' on film and anticipates expanded cinema. My argument is supported by the fact that Hugo asked various experimental film-makers for advice, which not only shows his insecurities as an artist, but his keen interest in the possibilities of the medium. As a poetic filmmaker, Hugo may have focused on water as a lyrical depiction of nature, but he was clearly engaging with the sensory and optical effects that were being experimented with by film-makers associated with 'visual music'. It was not a coincidence that he employed Len Lye, a main proponent of the genre, to add visual effects; the circles he painted onto the film material reveal more about the film than an Emersonian aesthetic.

*Bells of Atlantis* opens up a rich discourse on ideas that film-makers of the late 1950s and especially the 1960s concerned themselves with. While the 1950s are seen as the end of a creative period of the first wave of American experimental film, it saw the emergence of film-makers like Stan Vanderbeek who were involved with

‘synaesthetic cinema’.<sup>120</sup> In the few years leading up to the 1960s, certain filmmakers began experimenting even more radically with ‘structural alternatives’ which often drew on Abstract Expressionist painting, dance and contemporary music.<sup>121</sup>

*Bells of Atlantis*, as I will show, channels Nin’s interest in dream and synaesthesia, which was deeply steeped in esoteric and transcendentalist thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and put it into practice with the help of new techniques in film and sound. In its use of obsolete themes and strategies the film may have been outmoded, as Jonas Mekas pointed out, but in its attempt at weaving these themes into a multi-media experience to appeal to all the senses, it was on the threshold of the emergence of psychedelic film. To illustrate my argument I want to take a closer look at the interplay of text, voice, music, images and colour effects in the film.

### ***Bells of Atlantis as synaesthetic dream***

The film-title ‘The Bells of Atlantis’, which references the line of the prologue, “Born full of memories of the bells of the Atlantide”, reveals much about the aim of the film beyond a mere adaptation of the text.<sup>122</sup> The evocation of Atlantis, and most importantly on Atlantis as a musical or sonorous space evoked through the reference to bells, alludes to the film’s focus on the visionary and synaesthetic nature of Nin’s dream realm which the lost continent comes to symbolise. It highlights the extra-filmic ambitions of the film, not only as visual poetry, but also as visual music with

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<sup>120</sup> Singer 1976, p.14

<sup>121</sup> Liebman 1976, p.85.

<sup>122</sup> Jim Herlihy had suggested the title *The Bells of the Atlantide*, which Nin changed to *Bells of Atlantis*. See Sitney 2008, p.62, footnote 18.



the aim of creating a consciousness altering, mystical experience. The images that the film and novel evoke – Christ on the cross, church bells and Atlantis – all alluded to mystical visions. Hugo would show his more structural concerns in his next film *Jazz of Lights* (1954), which uses the changing lights at Times Square in New York to create rhythmic patterns and forms, while Nin and blind composer Moondog walk through the city all set to a score by Louis and Bebe Barron. The following film *Melodic Inversion* (1958) had a similarly structural approach and was accompanied with music by Schoenberg; the film had a strong impact on Stan Brakhage when he first saw it at the Second Experimental Film Competition in Brussels.<sup>123</sup> As free adaptation of a prose poem, *Bells of Atlantis*, however, was more complex and fused psychological and mystical subject matter with structural concerns, which is epitomised by Atlantis quoted in the title.

In Nin's prose-poem, the myth of the sunken continent of Atlantis is a carrier of multiple layers of meaning. It became the vehicle for Nin to express her idea of the 'multi-media of the unconscious', and at the same time it also satisfied her desire for bringing 'magic' back into writing. In October 1942, Nin writes into her diary:

“Atlantis has always bewitched me. It was said to be the place where people had a dimension unknown to us, a sixth sense, and a prodigious musical development. I made of this my true astrologic sign, Neptune. Clairvoyance, divination, intuition, native land. Its legend suited my needs. It corresponds to my and the ocean being the unconscious, which swallowed the earth.”<sup>124</sup>

Nin's Atlantis is a mystical place at the bottom of the sea inhabited by an ephemeral super-race with magical powers. Like many ideas and concepts Nin worked into her writing – from psychoanalytical concepts to surrealist themes – her version of the

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<sup>123</sup> See Sitney 2008.

<sup>124</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, 1979, p.215.

Atlantis myth was most likely tailored from various sources to ‘suit her needs’. The legend of Atlantis originally goes back to Plato, but there are various alternative versions of the myth which became widespread during the occult-revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Sir Francis Bacon’s utopian novel *New Atlantis* (1626) which inspired a number of utopian novels in the 1930s and 40s. Nin’s emphasis on the “prodigious musical development” of the Atlanteans suggests that she may have drawn on sources other than Plato, as his original version does not mention such a characteristic. On the contrary, Plato’s Atlanteans were aggressive warriors and not the hypersensitive inhabitants of an ephemeral realm, who Nin regards as her spiritual ancestors. She wrote in her diary in October 1942:

“Racial memory. Is it a racial memory which stirs when I am shaken by certain scenes? I was deeply affected by the scenery of the Azores. I was disturbed in an obscure, mysterious way. Later I discovered it belonged to Atlantis; it is said to be one of its remaining fragments. It had for me the hauntingness of a dream, the ephemeral, fragile incompleteness of a dream, the black sand, the black rocks, the light, the multicoloured houses.”<sup>125</sup>

There are striking similarities between Nin’s description of Atlantis and Francis Bacon’s description in a passage from *New Atlantis*.<sup>126</sup> He even mentions the sound of the bells of Atlantis. He writes:

“We have also sound-houses, where we practise and demonstrate all sounds, and their generation. We have harmonies which you have not, of quarter-sounds, and lesser slides of sounds. Divers instruments of music likewise to you unknown, some sweeter than any you have, together with bells and rings that are dainty and sweet”.

While there is no evidence in her published diaries that Nin had read Bacon, it is highly likely that Nin may have come across his essay through her circle of artist-

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<sup>125</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, p.214.

<sup>126</sup> See Gary Lachman, *The Dedalus Book of the 1960s: Turn Off Your Mind* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2010).

friends. Throughout her career, Nin and Hugo mingled with artists and writers in Paris and the USA who were heavily into occultism and astrology such as Henry Miller and astrologer Moricand in Paris, and Kenneth Anger and Renate Druks in New York. Nin's mentioning of a 'racial memory' of Atlantis also suggests that her version of the myth was mediated through other sources such as Madam Blavatsky and her dubious ideas of the five 'root races' which included the Atlanteans. It also hints at Jung's concept of collective unconscious – which refers to shared archaic memories of ancient symbols, which are hidden below our unconscious.

I want to draw attention to this underlying subtext of esoteric thought at the core of Nin's aesthetic and her idea of synaesthesia, which strongly resonates in the film. Atlantis for Nin, had a deeply spiritual connotation, connecting the idea of synaesthesia and hypersensitivity with Bucke's mystical 'cosmic consciousness' and Jung's collective unconscious. Nin's writing channels a wide range of ideas taken from occult literature that became fashionable especially in the 1960s. It is often overlooked that one of Nin's most important mentors, Jung had written extensively on the occult and was on the reading list of everybody vaguely interested in expanded consciousness.<sup>127</sup> Nin's aim of bringing magic back into writing was deeply rooted in transcendentalist thought and mysticism. For Nin, the poet was a transcendentalist who "sees the symbolic story".<sup>128</sup> Not surprisingly, Nin attracted young American poets and Beat writers who drew on similar ideas such as Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg and later Patti Smith. Also the idea of Atlantis became an increasingly popular metaphor. Duncan, who was brought up by transcendentalists, wrote a poem titled *Atlantis Dream*, which used Atlantis as metaphor for birth and

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<sup>127</sup> Gary Lachman, *Jung the Mystic: The Esoteric Dimensions of Carl Jung's Life and Teachings* (London: Penguin 2010).

<sup>128</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.111.

rebirth as well as pre-natal memories. For young Americans witnessing the cultural shift from Europe to America at the outbreak of WWII, Atlantis became a metaphor for the decline of Europe and the rise of America as a new hub of cultural production. This is pointed out by artist John Dudley who Nin met at the house of Caresse Crosby in Hampton Manor in July 1940. She wrote: “[John Dudley’s] eyes filled with tears: ‘You came from a sunken Atlantis’. (Again! How eager they are to imagine Europe sunken, and they able to create a new world!) ‘A lost world, you are a survivor of a lost world. You have seen death, but you have not died. You and Henry are more alive than the artists of my age’.”<sup>129</sup>

In the prologue of *House of Incest* Atlantis becomes the symbol for the sensual, multi-dimensional nature of the unconscious described as sensorium of colours, textures and abstract sounds. Music was of great importance in establishing the mood of the prose poem, although it was not addressed directly, which is symbolised in the image of the bells of Atlantis – a key symbol for the sensory nature of Nin’s dream:

“Born full of memories of the bells of the Atlantide. Always listening for lost sounds and searching for lost colours, standing forever on the threshold like one troubled with memories, and walking with a swimming stride I cut the air with wide-slicing fins, and swim through wall-less rooms. Ejected from a paradise of soundlessness, cathedrals, wavering at the passage of a body, like soundless music.”

Atlantis is described as a sonorous underwater world where sounds are not heard with hearing organs, but sonorous vibrations are felt with the entire body. The paradox of the silent musicality of the oceanic realm is symbolised by the ringing of the ‘soundless bells’ of Atlantis, referenced in the film title. The chiming of bells,

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<sup>129</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, 1979, p.48.

which is possibly one of the most sonorous sounds that can be created with an acoustic instrument, becomes synonymous for the physicality of music. Nin associated it with the intense feeling of ecstasy, which she compares to the bodily sensation of hearing loud noise. Nin wrote, “There are various forms and states of ecstasy. Some are musical, one is possessed by sound, as if one lived inside a vast bell”.

Atlantis is a ‘paradise of soundlessness’, but just like Nin’s synaesthetic language, music is evoked through vibrations and rhythm carried by the water which encloses the narrator – she “moved within colour and music”. The texture and rhythmic flow of the melodic sentences was to create this ‘silent’ music in the mind of the reader, just like the unreal sounds that, she believed, we perceive in dreams.

The emphasis is on dissolution whereby the narrator leaves behind the heavy physicality of the body and merges with her environment, where “colours [are] running into one another without frontiers [...]”<sup>130</sup> The body is weightless, floats and only reacts in response to sensations. Nin used a rhythmic stream of consciousness language, repetitions and long strings of sentences to imitate the rhythmic ebb and flow of waves, and create water music. In her later novel *A Spy in the House of Love* Nin used similar strategies and described the repetitious sea symbol as the “background music of the book”.<sup>131</sup> In *House of Incest*, this is illustrated by the following ‘fluid’ passage:

“the water transmitted the lives and the loves, the words and the thoughts’. [...] / ‘There were no currents of thoughts, only the caress of flow, and desire mingling, touching, travelling, withdrawing, wandering ....”

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<sup>130</sup> Nin, *House*, p.16.

<sup>131</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.31.

Interestingly, a passage from *Winter of Artifice*, which evolved from the same manuscript as *House of Incest*, reveals Nin's vision of a film-version of the Atlantis myth. In this passage, written in the early 1930s, the protagonist watches a film, "the story of the Atlantis accompanied by the music of Stravinski."<sup>132</sup> The first scene is "like a Paul Klee, wavering and humid, delicate and full of vibrations." There is no evidence, that Hugo was aware of this passage, but we would see a similar emphasis on vibration in the film's electronic soundtrack, which I will explore at a later point in this chapter. There is also a first link to the heritage of Hugo's films which drew on the abstract visual music films of the 1930s and anticipated the structural films of the 1960s.

Paul Klee, who Nin referenced in the passage, had attempted to incorporate rhythm and movement into his paintings through metonymy, which has been described as a prime example of early visual music before film. Kerry Brougher lists three different approaches to visual music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which anticipated the birth of visual music on film: abstract painting, colour-hearing composition, and colour-organ performances. She explains that in the early 1920s, these approaches were united in cinema by artists like Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter and Hy Hirsch.<sup>133</sup> These film-makers explored the fact that film, like music, is a time-based medium and experimented with abstraction in motion and its relation to music.<sup>134</sup> Hans Richter, for instance, created geometric forms that moved across the screen like "sequences of sound".<sup>135</sup> From the 1930s onwards, with advanced technologies in film, artists like Oskar Fischinger, Harry

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<sup>132</sup> Anaïs Nin, 'Stella' in *Winter of Artifice & House of Incest*, 1979, p.29.

<sup>133</sup> Brougher 2005, p.97

<sup>134</sup> Brougher 2005, p.158.

<sup>135</sup> Jeremy Strick, 'Visual Music', in Brougher et al 2005, p.19.

Smith and later John and James Whitney, and Stan Brakhage combined colour, form, motion and sound to create a synaesthetic experience.<sup>136</sup>

Nin's awareness of visual music is illustrated in another passage from her writing which referred to probably the best known example of visual music, Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940).<sup>137</sup> In her diary, Nin referred to *Fantasia* in the same paragraph in which she announced her 'racial memory' of Atlantis. She described the Genesis episode of the film, which portrayed a prehistoric planet earth accompanied by Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, which bares striking resemblance to Nin's fictitious film of Atlantis, although it predated *Fantasia* by a few years. She wrote: "Why was I so affected by the undersea explosions of Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, the section on the creation of the world, fire and water, the inner explosion? It is in this way that Atlantis disappeared. Why do these scenes have such strong vibrations in me whereas others leave me completely indifferent?"<sup>138</sup> Nin's and most likely also Hugo's awareness of *Fantasia* strengthens my argument for *Bells of Atlantis*'s conception as visual music. In fact, Hugo's collaborator Len Lye has been described as the 'English Walt Disney' (although he originally came from New Zealand), due to his ground-breaking experiments with drawing on film-strips.

In *Bells of Atlantis* Hugo tried to create similar synaesthetic effects to those Nin had achieved in her prologue. Hugo explained:

"My aim has been to liberate the imagination by free association of meaningful images in such a way that each spectator can make his own associations and respond with his own feeling, as in

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Kerry Brougher, 'Visual-Music Culture', in Brougher et al 2005, p.91.

<sup>138</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, 1979, p.214.

music. It has, in fact been remarked that my films are closer to music than to any of the other arts, except perhaps poetry.”<sup>139</sup>

He acknowledged that “In 1950 ..., I felt that there was a wide field for the enhancement of written poetry through motion and colour”.<sup>140</sup> This was particularly pronounced in his next film released in 1954, *Jazz of Lights* and *Melodic Inversions* (1958). In *Bells of Atlantis* synaesthesia is evoked with the help of new editing techniques, colour effects and synthetic sound. The common denominator which binds these elements together is fluidity. Fluidity in this context can be described as a flowing ongoing rhythm which is created visually through editing techniques and colour effects, musically through pulse, and in language through Nin’s intonation as she reads from her novel. Nin wrote that the Barron’s soundtrack “matched the fluid images and narration. The three elements, sound, image, and music, fused. It was an unusual collaboration.”<sup>141</sup> While Nin suggested the Barron’s to enhance the dream-like character of the film through sound, Hugo invited Len Lye to add abstract colour effects, which displays an advanced sensibility for visual music. Lye was an avant-garde filmmaker whose pioneering experiments with painting and stencilling directly on film, as seen in *Color Box* (1935) and *Kaleidoscope* (1936), anticipated the concerns of certain filmmakers of the 1950s [fig 2.4].<sup>142</sup>

In the opening sequence of *Bells of Atlantis*, we hear Nin’s voice read what seems like an excerpt from *House of Incest*. However, it is not an original quote, but spliced together from every line of the short prologue, which refers to colours and sounds and emphasises the physicality of seeing and hearing, which intensifies the synaesthetic experience:

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<sup>139</sup> Hugo 1978, p.80.

<sup>140</sup> Hugo 1978, p.77.

<sup>141</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.98.

<sup>142</sup> Liebman 1976, p.89.



“I remember my first birth in water. [...] I sway, and float, stand on boneless toes listening for distant sounds, sounds beyond the reach of human ears, see things beyond the reach of human eyes. Born full of memories of the bells of the Atlantis. Always listening for lost sounds and searching for lost colours, [...] Lost in the colours of Atlantis, the colours running into one another without frontiers. [...] It was like yawning. [...], ‘I moved within colours and music as inside a sea-diamond[...].”

The beat of Nin’s voice merges with the pulse of the music and the rhythmic ebb and flow of the waves accentuated through gradually changing colours from scarlet red to purple. Hugo evoked the rhythm of waves through various filmic strategies like swaying camera movements and inter-cutting.<sup>143</sup>

Nin created the rhythmic movement of waves in language through repetitions, alliterations, and stringing together long sentences. Together with Lye’s circles which move rhythmically across the screen like a pendulum, the film creates a hypnotic effect. Surprisingly, Nin rejected Lye’s contribution and urged Hugo to ‘restore’ the film to its pre-Lye condition.<sup>144</sup> We can still see Lye’s impact on the film, though, which despite Nin’s rejection, adds to the overall hallucinogenic effect and helped to create musicality through colour and geometric forms in motion. Subtle blues and greens represent the watery depth of Atlantis. As the narrative progresses, red and purple begin to dominate the colour scheme and slowly blend like the “colours running into each other without frontiers” Nin described in her prologue.<sup>145</sup> Liebman describes Hugo as “One of the great colourists of the independent cinema”, although he was assisted by Lye. He explains that to create his “veils of colour flow of hypnagogic imagery (evanescent images preceding sleep)”, Hugo shot highly contrasted reflections off water and intensified the colours through

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<sup>143</sup> Liebman 1976, p.89.

<sup>144</sup> See Sitney 2008, pp.60-61.

<sup>145</sup> Liebman 1976, pp.89-91.

various printing techniques including masking and combined negative and positive imagery.<sup>146</sup> This realm, he argues, becomes “the matrix for the presentation of the inner self.”<sup>147</sup>

A close relationship between colour and music was the main concern of experimental films that dealt with abstraction in motion and aimed to create musical associations through synaesthesia.<sup>148</sup> Jeremy Strick explains that colour is organised according to a relative scale similar to that of music.<sup>149</sup> And like music, it is central to sensory perception, because it can be “immediately apprehended”, “requires no interpretation or decoding”, and “can act directly upon the emotion, like a musical note”.<sup>150</sup>

The innovative use of an electronic score in combination with colour and motion contributed strongly to the affinity of *Bells of Atlantis* to visual music. Synthetic sound, which could be shaped and directed more easily than orchestral music, had also been used by a number of composers and artists engaged with visual music on film. Jordan Belson, for instance, composed electronic sound for his cosmic films to create a closer relationship between sound and motion.<sup>151</sup> The eerie electronic noises that formed the backdrop to Hugo’s otherworldly scenario must have seemed fairly strange to a listener of the 1950s. They certainly fulfilled Nin’s interest in music which extended “beyond familiar sounds and free itself of past structures.”<sup>152</sup> The sound was machine-generated without instruments or musicians. Composer-couple Louis and Bebe Barron were known in American avant-garde circles for their

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<sup>146</sup> Liebman 1976, p.89.

<sup>147</sup> Liebman 1976, pp.89-91.

<sup>148</sup> Strick in Brougher et al 2005, p.18.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p.18. The relationship between music and the emotions is a contested field and has been explored extensively by musicologists – a subject I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 3.

<sup>151</sup> Brougher 2005, p.155

<sup>152</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.137.

experiments with tape recordings and electronic sound.<sup>153</sup> Later, they gained international fame with their soundtrack for the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet*.<sup>154</sup> Nin first heard their music during a performance of the play *Maya* in the 1930s for which they had composed the background sounds.<sup>155</sup> She met the couple in winter 1949, when they came to her reading at an art gallery in San Francisco.<sup>156</sup> At that time, they were working on a series of *Sound Portraits* of writers and poets. They had already recorded the voices of Henry Miller and Aldous Huxley, and were planning to make a recording of Nin read from her novel.<sup>157</sup> In autumn 1952, they moved to New York and set up a sound studio where they also created film soundtracks for underground artists and filmmakers like Ian Hugo.<sup>158</sup>

They had created a pioneering composition strategy based on cybernetics and directed automatism that used electronic circuits like intelligent entities that could respond to and learn from feedback. Their approach drew on Norbert Wiener's book *Cybernetics: Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948). During the 1950s and 60s, cybernetics was becoming an increasingly popular strategy, not only in the fields of science, but also in the arts, philosophy and

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<sup>153</sup> The Barron's *Heavenly Menagerie* (1950) is supposed to be the first piece of electronic music for magnetic tape in America. See, for instance: Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Jane Brockman, 'The First Electronic Filmscore – *Forbidden Planet: A Conversation with Bebe Barron*', *The Score: The Society of Composers & Lyricists*, vol.VII, No.3, Fall/Winter 1992.

<sup>154</sup> See Frederick S. Clarke and Steven Rubin, 'The Making of *Forbidden Planet*', *Cinefantastique* Vol. 8, #2/3 (1979). Also James Wierzbicki, *Louis and Bebe Barron's Forbidden Planet: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham Md. And Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2005).

<sup>155</sup> Jean-Louis Barrault hired the Barrons to create sounds for his play *Columbus*. Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.99.

<sup>156</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 5, 1979, p.53.

<sup>157</sup> The Barrons' later produced a recording of Nin reading the entire *House of Incest* for the series. The record was released in 1952, but because the Barrons did not have the financial means to press a vast amount of copies, and did not have a distributor, the record remained an obscurity. It was re-released in 2012 by their son Adam Barron.

<sup>158</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, p.98.

sociology.<sup>159</sup> It reflects a growing concern of certain artists with the temporal aspect of art. Art began to be seen in relation to cosmic forces. In the 1960s, Fluxus artists like Nam Jun Paik would create inter-active performances based on feedback, which also shows a growing interest in the reception of art works and audience participation. The philosophy behind cybernetics has been linked to Henri Bergson's writing on 'nature as flux in duration' and process, which Nin was interested in and partly drew on in her emphasis on integrating experience, mobility and flow in her writing.<sup>160</sup>

Louis and Bebe Barron each had their separate tasks in the composition process, which can be compared to the assemblage of separate elements in collage [fig 2.5]. Louis built the electronic circuits, overloaded them until they burned out and tape-recorded the sounds they generated during the process. They explained in an interview:

“When our circuits reached the end of their existence (an overload point) they would climax in an orgasm of power, and die. In the film, many of the sounds seem like the last paroxysm of a living creature.”<sup>161</sup>

Bebe then listened back to the recorded material, cut out the most interesting sounds and collaged them together into new compositions. It was a manual editing process, which involved physically cutting and pasting together bits of tape. They then manipulated the material by adding effects such as reverb and tape delay; they reversed and changed the speed of certain sounds, and created tape loops to add

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<sup>159</sup> See, for instance, Edward A. Shanken, 'Cybernetics and Art: Cultural Convergence in the 1960s', in *From Energy to Information*, eds. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 155-77.

<sup>160</sup> Nin became the subject of a course at Stanford University titled 'Anais Nin: Integrated Circuits and the Poetics of Science'.

<sup>161</sup> Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1985), p.268.

rhythm. This was a radically new process for sound-creation which was not based on the conventional notation system used in traditional composition, which caused them problems with the Musicians' Union that did not consider their machine-generated sounds as music. Subsequently, the Barrons' score for *Forbidden Planet* had to be referred to as "electronic tonalities".<sup>162</sup>

Nin was intrigued by the Barron's use of technology and followed their progress in the press.<sup>163</sup> She was also aware of their musical heritage which grouped them together with Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrete* and Edgar Varèse's 'organised sound' – a subject I will explore in the following chapter. In her diary she portrayed the Barrons as modern Americans equivalent to the French composer who was also a member of her circle.<sup>164</sup> Almost a decade after the release of *Bells of Atlantis*, Varèse composed a piece called *Nocturnal I* (1961), based on excerpts from *House of Incest*. But as we shall see, the result was quite different from the Barrons' contribution.

The Barrons also linked their sound-production to unconscious processes. Louis Barron explained in an interview: "From the beginning, we discovered that people compared [the tonalities in *Forbidden Planet*] with sounds they heard in their dreams."<sup>165</sup> Nin believed that the sounds perfectly matched Hugo's film's "fluid images and narration".<sup>166</sup> Their soundtrack for *Bells of Atlantis* is regarded as one of the first orchestrated all-electronic scores ever composed for film using no instruments or musicians. It can be described as disembodied, which may seem at odds with Nin's emphasis on sensuality. In music theory, however, electronic music

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<sup>162</sup> Larson 1985, p.268

<sup>163</sup> Hugo later commissioned them to score two more films and they assisted in the studio production of the soundtrack for *The Very Eye of Night* (1959) featuring music by Teiji Ito. In a diary entry from spring 1956, Nin copied a lengthy excerpt from an interview with the Barrons from the *LA Times* which contained their definition of Cybernetics. See Nin, *Journals*, vol.6, spring 1956, pp.50-51

<sup>164</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.99.

<sup>165</sup> Larson 1985, p.268.

<sup>166</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.98.

is described as placing a strong emphasis on the body – not that of the performer, but the listener. This de-emphasis of the body of the performer makes the listener focus on their own bodies. This elimination of ‘other bodies’ in the soundtrack may be read as helping to enable a better fusion of music, sound and images. On the other hand, the vibrational quality and pulse of the circuits gave the sound an odd ‘aliveness’ emphasised by the anthropomorphism of their circuits. For *Forbidden Planet* the Barrons manipulated sounds to create a sonic equivalent to the actions on screen or personality of a certain character in the film. On the album sleeve notes of the soundtrack they explained:

“We design and construct electronic circuits which function electronically in a manner remarkably similar to the way that lower life-forms function psychologically. [. . .] we created individual cybernetics circuits for particular themes and leitmotifs, [...]. Actually, each circuit has a characteristic activity pattern as well as a "voice".”

Their soundtrack for *Bells of Atlantis* was dominated by the eerie wailing of the electronic circuits as they overloaded and died, their final cries cutting through the warbling sound waves at regular intervals like a pulsating heart-beat or electronic hick-up. It could be read as referring to the heartbeat of the mother heard by the unborn in the womb, or the rhythmic ebb and flow of waves. Nin was pleased with the result, especially with the fluidity of the music.<sup>167</sup>

Because of this strong focus on colour and music, particularly in his subsequent film *Melodic Inversions*, some film scholars have linked Ian Hugo to Stan Brakhage who tried to create a cosmic experience with his films.<sup>168</sup> Brakhage’s synaesthesia was rooted in neurological reactions in the brain and optical vision. For Brakhage, Sitney

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<sup>167</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.98.

<sup>168</sup> Liebman 1976, p.91.

writes, “Seeing includes what the open eyes view, [...], what the mind’s eye sees in visual memory and in dreams (he calls them ‘brain movies’) and the perpetual play of shapes and colours on the closed eyelid and occasionally on the eye surface (‘closed-eye vision’).”<sup>169</sup> He created films that would expand perception, although with basic means in comparison to filmmakers like John and James Whitney who used new technologies to create a new cosmic film experience.<sup>170</sup> These film-makers of the 1950s and 60s like Brakhage were involved in creating an expanded consciousness, “a heightened synaesthetic moment in which the viewer confronts the process of perception”.<sup>171</sup> As opposed to early experiments with abstraction in motion, these films aimed to affect the body and mind directly, and close the distance between viewers and art.<sup>172</sup> They paved the way for psychedelic film which emphasised new modes of image formation. Liebman writes that different modes of perception were created through heightened editing speeds and complex rhythmic relationships, experiments with colour, and techniques including superimposition, optical printing and anamorphosis.<sup>173</sup>

But film, as Ari Wiseman points out, soon became limiting for these filmmakers as it could only be projected on a flat screen and viewed from a single vantage point. In response, filmmakers began projecting films in planetariums and other alternative spaces, which anticipated psychedelic light shows and a move towards mass culture.<sup>174</sup> Brougher explains, “light shows blended the cool carefree attitude of the

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<sup>169</sup> Sitney in Singer 1976, p.15.

<sup>170</sup> John Whitney produced an eight-millimetre optical printer and created a system of creating sound from the motion of a pendulum. See Brougher 2005, p.125.

<sup>171</sup> Ari Wiseman, ‘Expanding the Synaesthetic Paradigm’, in Brougher et al 2005, p.181.

<sup>172</sup> Brougher 2005, p.158 .

<sup>173</sup> Liebman 1976, p.85.

<sup>174</sup> Wiseman in Brougher et al 2005, p.181.

pop arena with the seriousness and mysteries of high art, uniting both with the new media theories of Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller.”<sup>175</sup>

Already in the 1930s, Nin had proclaimed that film was the ultimate medium to recreate the synaesthetic language of the dream. But this was far removed from the fusion of high and low art that was part of this psychedelic project. Nin’s idea of synaesthesia was too rooted in romantic ideas; she would never have supported the creation of ecstasy for the masses, which would have discredited the exclusiveness of artistic inspiration. The same attitude also separated her from Hugo’s ambitions with his film. Nin and Hugo may have shared similar ideas about art, but Hugo was also interested in the medium of film itself, whereas Nin mainly saw film as a vehicle to channel the artist’s imagination. This became visible in Nin’s feud with Maya Deren. Initially, Nin was fascinated by Deren’s films *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and *At Land* (1944). In 1946, Deren invited her to act in her *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1947), which marked the end of their short-lived friendship. Nin was notorious for surrounding herself with people who shared her own vision, and dropping them when they didn’t – something Maya Deren experienced first-hand when they fell out over Deren’s structural approach to film-making and rejection of surrealism.<sup>176</sup> Instead of supporting each other as under-represented female artists in the New York avant-garde, they became bitter enemies.<sup>177</sup>

In the 1940s Nin had praised Maya Deren’s films as “better in some ways than the early surrealist movies because there are no artificial effects, just a simple flowing of

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<sup>175</sup> Brougher 2005, p.159

<sup>176</sup> Annette Michelson, ‘Poetics and Savage Thought: About “Anagram”’, in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, Calif. And London: University of California Press, 2001), p.29.

<sup>177</sup> See for instance Kane’s account of the 1953 ‘Poetry and Film’ Symposium in which Maya Deren was attacked by Dylan Thomas and Arthur Miller. Kane 2009, pp.13-28.



the threads of fantasy.”<sup>178</sup> Later they fell out over Deren’s depiction of the party-scene in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, which featured Nin and many of their friends. Nin alleged that the scene was static and unnatural. But Deren was never interested in portraying people and emotions; the scene served to explore the possibilities of the medium of film and the interaction between space, time and movement on screen.<sup>179</sup> Ute Holl argues that, for Deren, “the task of cinema or any other art form is not to translate hidden messages of the unconscious soul into art, but to experiment with the effects contemporary technical devices have on nerves, minds or souls.”<sup>180</sup> Deren wanted to explore and simulate “the conditions that produce historical subjects and their possible emancipation” through technical inventions.<sup>181</sup> While Nin believed that the “expression of the unconscious self in art was the strongest drive of her productivity”, Deren argued that the “source that affects the mind, the techniques that construct identity, are to be found outside the individual.”<sup>182</sup> Holl argues that Deren’s interest in “objectively engendered emotion – as opposed to subjective feeling – was the reason for Anais Nin’s disappointed reaction at the screening: her idea of an artist was to be the source, not the instrument of emotion.”<sup>183</sup> Nin was never really interested in the materiality of the film medium as an art-form in itself; film was just another vehicle to communicate the messages of the unconscious.

We can see a similar attitude in Nin’s rejection of any special effects that would distract from the dream-theme of *Bells of Atlantis*, especially Len Lye’s abstract colour effects. While her theoretical writing displays a keen interest in new developments in the arts – in *The Novel of the Future*, for instance, she discussed

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<sup>178</sup> Seed 2009, p.244.

<sup>179</sup> Ute Holl discusses the friendship and fall-out between Nin and Deren in her essay ‘Moving the Dancers Soul’, in Nichols 2001, p.167.

<sup>180</sup> Holl in Nichols 2001, p.164.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p.167.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p.167.

Marshall McLuhan's ideas of multimedia – she was still very much holding on to the values and aesthetic of the Parisian avant-garde of the 1920s. Another factor which motivated her rejection of Lye's effects may have been his involvement in advertisements for the Royal Post, which blurred the lines between high and low culture similar to Andy Warhol's Pop Art in the 1960s, which Nin openly attacked in her diaries and *The Novel of the Future*.<sup>184</sup>

This recalls Nin's emphasis on the exclusiveness of the artist/poet in her ambiguous relationship to psychedelic art. In fact, she compared Deren's 'literal' approach to depicting dream states to artists' attempts at describing LSD hallucinations. She wrote, Maya Deren

“argued that the atmosphere of the dream was exactly similar to reality, that dreams should be reproduced with utmost literalness and simplicity. I maintained that there was no resemblance at all, that the dream was incomplete, abstract, suggestive, atmospheric and could only be rendered by metamorphosis, by magic alchemy of poetic images. This literalness may be the cause today of so many failures in describing the LSD experiences. They need to be handled by a poet, painter, or filmmaker who is capable of metamorphosis and alchemy to convey magic and visions and sensations.”<sup>185</sup>

Nin would emphasise the hallucinogenic power of her language in *House of Incest* as prime example that such visions could be reached without drugs – that this is only part of the truth will be revealed if we look closer at the psychedelic appeal of Nin's and Hugo's work.

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<sup>184</sup> See, for instance, Nin, *Novel*, pp.85 and 174.

<sup>185</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.119.

### **Bells of Atlantis – *The ultimate trip***

The esoteric and transcendentalist ideas Nin fashioned in her work and her emphasis on synaesthetic experiences, which Hugo promoted in *Bells of Atlantis* would eventually merge with the concerns of the counterculture of the 1960s. In fact, the film would become the ‘ultimate trip’. In the 1960s, *Bells of Atlantis* was screened in an American prison to a group of inmates convicted for drug-related crimes. The film proved suspiciously popular with these men who were all too familiar with the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. Later they sent Hugo letters telling him that watching the film created an almost psychedelic experience similar to the consciousness-altering effect LSD has on the mind, which leads to a heightened sensory awareness.

Hugo recounted this anecdote during a lecture on the making of *Bells of Atlantis* which echoes a similar incident involving Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*, a flop when it first came out in 1940. But after its re-release in the sixties under the headline ‘The Ultimate Trip’, it became a box office hit mostly with students who saw its proto-psychedelic appeal. If we look at descriptions of visual experiences during an LSD trip and Hugo’s film, it is not surprising that *Bells of Atlantis* became so popular. Psychedelic has been defined as an “altered state of consciousness – usually drug-induced – that results in a heightened sensory and/or cognitive awareness” and may include deeply spiritual and emotional experiences.<sup>186</sup> Many of the effects used in the film were very similar to occurrences during psychedelic hallucinations, including superimposition, one of the film’s major stylistic features. Superimposition was a term used to describe the occurrences of patterns superimposed on everything

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<sup>186</sup> Robert C. Morgan, ‘Eternal Moments: Artists Who Explore the Prospect for Happiness’, in *Psychedelic, Optical and Visionary Art Since the 1960s*, ed. David S. Rubin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2010), p.41.

in the drug user's field of vision or images from their memory.<sup>187</sup> These superimposed patterns referred mostly to circular shapes similar to those Lye painted onto the film strips. These may be the geometrical structure of the eye's retina which is not perceived during normal vision.<sup>188</sup>

Richard Alpert, one of the main proponents of the psychedelic scene besides Timothy Leary, described the stages of the psychedelic experience, which display a close relationship to synaesthesia. He explained:

“The first notable component of the experience is increased sensory awareness in all your senses. Colours are like you have never seen them before. Sound: if you are listening to Miles Davis's trumpet, it's like you are inside each note. Kinesthesia is sharpened in some way or other, at least the hallucination of it is, so that you feel, if you were to run your hand over a table, as though you were running your hand across a mountain.”<sup>189</sup>

We can also see the similarities between this description and Nin's portrayal of synaesthetic sensations experienced in the dream realm Atlantis. David Seed described Nin's narrator's description of the sensation of vision in the opening line of her prose-poem “as one of heightened, even hallucinatory vividness.”<sup>190</sup> Nin herself described *House of Incest* as resembling an LSD-induced hallucination or ‘a bad trip’ and compared her conscious “going in and out of dreams” to the stages of a trip.<sup>191</sup>

“I state: ‘this Atlantis could be found again only at night, by the route of the dream’. That is a conscious statement, as a traveller will make note along his explorations: this is the way I came, then I made a turn to the left, etc. the people who turned to LSD for such experiences recorded these waking moments of consciousness, reported “going in

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<sup>187</sup> William Marshall and Gilbert W. Taylor, *The Art of Ecstasy – An Investigation of the Psychedelic Revolution* (Hollywood, Calif.: Wilshire Book Co, 1968), p.73.

<sup>188</sup> Marshall and Taylor 1968, p.73.

<sup>189</sup> Richard Alpert cited from Marshall and Taylor 1968, p.65-66.

<sup>190</sup> Seed 2009, p.248.

<sup>191</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.34ff.

and out” of the dreams, visions, hallucinations. The poet will do this when he seeks to fuse the unconscious with the conscious’.”<sup>192</sup>

Nin openly aligned herself with psychedelic culture. In her manifesto, *The Novel of the Future*, written in 1968, Nin recognises the links between the concerns of writers from the past, mainly symbolists and surrealists, and those of young American writers of the 1960s. She called them “trends now acceptable and recognised under other names, ‘expanded consciousness’, or if you prefer, ‘psychedelic’, with emphasis on *psyche*.”<sup>193</sup> This reflects what Tookey rightly regards as Nin’s attempt to “update her own aesthetic preoccupations and models to fit the context she is now writing for: America in 1968.”<sup>194</sup> She points out: “while she cites Symbolism, Surrealism, and psychoanalysis as the chief contexts of and influences on her development as a writer, and sets her writing firmly in the predominantly French tradition of ‘poetic prose’, the cultural shift of the 1960s has brought a closer parallel to the original concerns of the modernists.”<sup>195</sup> With Nin’s expressions such as “the language of the poet is like a hexagon or kaleidoscope. It can fuse together many dimensions and aspects without discarding the symbolic and mythical quality of the image or sensation”, it is not difficult to see Nin’s link to the concerns of psychedelic culture.<sup>196</sup>

Gene Youngblood applied similar ideas to the arts in his seminal book *Expanded Cinema* (1970), however in a more sophisticated way than Nin. Youngblood predicted a new ‘synaesthetic cinema’ as a reaction to changes in art and technology. This new form of cinema was not driven by conventional narrative, but fused digital, holographic, video and laser technologies to create a mind-expanding experience by

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p.122.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 1969, p.4.

<sup>194</sup> Tookey 2003, p.138.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.96.

operating on all the senses.<sup>197</sup> He emphasises the close link between synaesthesia and the psychedelic experience:

“Synaesthetic and psychedelic mean approximately the same thing. Synaesthesia is the harmony of different or opposing impulses produced by a work of art. It means the simultaneous perception of harmonic opposites. Its sensorial effect is known as synaesthesia, and it’s as old as the ancient Greeks who coined the term. Under the influence of mind-manifesting hallucinogens one experiences synaesthesia.”<sup>198</sup>

However, while American artists and writers experimented with drugs to reach another dimension, Nin wanted art to become the drug, a sensual experience of colour, sound, image that should induce ecstasy. Nin writes “Images and sensations have to become a work of art, or else we cannot share them with others or create our world according to our own plans and desires.”<sup>199</sup> In opposition to Timothy Leary who said that there was no language to describe the experience of LSD, for Nin, the only language compatible was the ‘language of the poet’.<sup>200</sup> Leary, however, acknowledged the roots of psychedelic culture in previous artistic traditions in his famous ‘speech that never was’:

“Today in the United States, and more recently in Toronto, we’ve all witnessed the resurgence of something called Psychedelic art. Psychedelic art, although it is the most popular form of art today, is nothing new. It’s not an avant-garde fad in the art world. Psychedelic art is the most ancient form of art work known to man. Indeed we feel all music, all dance, all theatre, all painting, all poetry, started with a somewhat psychedelic or visionary experience.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Brougher 2005, p.120

<sup>198</sup> Gene Youngblood cited from Brougher 2005, p.120.

<sup>199</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.14.

<sup>200</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.95.

<sup>201</sup> Timothy Leary in Marshall and Taylor 1968, p.89.

Gary Lachman has argued that Nin's refusal of drugs to reach higher states reflects her artistic elitism.<sup>202</sup> He points out,

“Nin believed that such chemical short cuts to the Other World were self-defeating. There was a reason why, in the past, access to higher consciousness had been the prerogative of an elite, esoteric few. Mass produced mysticism would cheapen it, devaluing what had hitherto been the reward of years of effort and study. She voiced these concerns to Huxley. He disagreed, arguing that not everyone was as au fait with their unconscious as Anais.”<sup>203</sup>

Only Zen mystic Alan Watts had her approval as “best writer on psychic states, ecstasies and mystical experience”, because he wrote about religions long before LSD.<sup>204</sup> Nin's war on consciousness-expanding drugs also included psychedelic art like the 1967 cult movie *The Trip*, which she described as ‘garish’, exclaiming: “Only poetic writers or film makers who are able to handle rhythm, music, cadence tones, textures, colour, atmosphere, superimpositions could have succeeded in making such a film – like Fellini, Antonioni, Cocteau.”<sup>205</sup>

Nin may have objected to drugs, but she herself described her prose-poem *House of Incest* as resembling LSD hallucinations, while many of her critics, however, took it for the *manifestation* of a drug-induced hallucination. Little did she know that they were partly right. In the latest biography of Nin, Deirdre Bair uncovers that Nin wrote part of her prose poem under the influence of a substance called ‘Chanvre indien’, which was prescribed to her by her analyst Richard Allendy against period pains. What she did not know was that it mainly consisted of hashish. Bair writes, ‘The drug made her “see everything enormous, ominous, tragic” [...]. It induced

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<sup>202</sup> Lachman, *The Dedalus Book of the 1960s*, 2010, pp.160-161.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., pp.160-61.

<sup>204</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.69.

<sup>205</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.97.

heightened creativity, which she credited with giving her “my book on my father” and the “Jeanne” section of *House of Incest*, which, in this drug-induced haze, she finally finished writing.<sup>206</sup> In her Diary, Nin wrote of a ‘hammock suspended in space swarming with hallucinations’.<sup>207</sup> Whether this was the hammock that appeared in Hugo’s film is unclear, but the psychedelic subtext permits such a reading.

Nin was familiar with the effects of LSD, despite her strong opposition to the drug. In autumn 1955, she took part in Oscar Janinger’s LSD experiment.<sup>208</sup> Nin and other poets and writers were invited by scientists studying the effects of LSD on the mind to document the experience. Writers were believed to be familiar with expressing such states.<sup>209</sup> Afterwards she would argue that the images we see during dreams or in LSD highs “come from the same source”, namely the unconscious or memory. The only difference was that the poet evokes these images by bridging the gap between conscious and unconscious through their art, while the drug-taker evoked them through chemicals.<sup>210</sup> What some call hallucinations were for Nin images from the unconscious or collective memory. She writes, “we banished the arts from our civilisation which have the power to move our senses, emotions and heightened our sense of life” and this is why we are fascinated with drugs.<sup>211</sup> Again one is reminded of Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* and the ‘Houses of Deceit’ Bacon describes, which echo Nin’s objections against drugs as deceiving the senses. Bacon writes:

“We have also houses of deceits of the senses; where we represent all manner of feats of juggling, false apparitions,

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<sup>206</sup> Bair 1995, p.216.

<sup>207</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, p.196. In letter to Artaud in response to reading his *L’Art et Le Mort*.

<sup>208</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, pp.255-6.

<sup>209</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.95.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.



impostures, and illusions; and their fallacies. And surely you will easily believe that we that have so many things truly natural which induce admiration, could in a world of particulars deceive the senses, if we would disguise those things and labour to make them seem more miraculous. But we do hate all impostures, and lies [...]”.<sup>212</sup>

Instead of hallucinogenic drugs, it was a good communication to the unconscious which was to lead the way to artistic inspiration. It is worth noting, that Nin drew on an artistic heritage, which was populated by artists and poets who used opium, mescaline and other drugs to induce altered states. This included the famous poet-drug-addicts Arthur Rimbaud, Antonin Artaud and the Belgian poet Henri Michaux whose work Nin admired. But their drug use promoted a personal vision, which differed from the shared group experience of LSD which was promoted by Leary and his hippie-following in the 1960s.<sup>213</sup> We will see in chapter four that collectivity, also in the context of second-wave Feminism, was never something Nin was interested in. Her artistic vision was exclusive and personal.

Hugo had a similar understanding of ‘pure’ artistic inspiration, and he was pleased with the popularity of his film with the counterculture, which is expressed in his lecture where he proudly reported of the hallucinogenic effect it had on the audience. We can see how the Atlantis-metaphor emphasised in the film must have taken on a new significance for the audience in the 1960s. In Hugo’s film, the Atlantis myth becomes a utopian, proto-psychedelic, erotically charged, science-fiction scenario. The volcanic landscape of Mexico, the film’s setting, serves as the ideal backdrop with its strong resemblance to the rocky landscape of the Azores, one of the places believed to have been the location of Atlantis. Like many artists and writers of that

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<sup>212</sup> Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in *The English Works of Francis Bacon*, vol.1, (London: Methuen, 1905).

<sup>213</sup> See Pawlik 2008, p.188.

time – including surrealists Salvador Dali and Louis Buñuel, writers like D.H. Lawrence and Antonin Artaud, as well as many Beats – Hugo and Nin had a romanticised notion of Mexico as a mystical place which could evoke dreams and visions.<sup>214</sup> He wrote: “in that primitive Mexican environment, and inspired by the poem, with the feeling that I was about to descend into mysterious yet strangely familiar deep sea caverns – I waited for the dream to lead me where it would. And this actually happened!”<sup>215</sup>

Richard Alpert points out that the changing states of consciousness during an LSD trip evoke a feeling of losing and finding oneself, which “led to the idea that the psychedelic experience was the death-rebirth experience.”<sup>216</sup> In the film, this is evoked most obviously in the end by the crucifixion scene in which we see Nin leaning against an upraised plank on the ship with outstretched arms like Jesus on the cross. In this context, the Christ-figure in the film may even evoke the ‘Christ of Atlantis’ described by mystic writer Miguel Serrano who was popular in the 1950s and 60s. Gary Lachman explains, “He speaks of the ‘Christ of Atlantis’, who is now ‘submerged’ beneath the ‘deep waters of our present civilisation’. Like Abraxas, this Christ would be God and Devil at once.”<sup>217</sup> In Hugo’s film, the evocation of Christ within a warbling sea of red and purple waves and voice-overs speaking of monsters and murder certainly bares more resemblance to Serrano’s devilish ‘Christ of Atlantis’ than that of the prose-poem. Here one could also draw parallels to Kenneth Anger’s films like *Lucifer Rising* or *Pleasure Dome* which engaged with the occult. Nin and Hugo were friends with Anger and Nin acted in his *Ritual in Transfigured Time*.

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<sup>214</sup> See Sawin 1997 for a discussion of the importance of Mexico for the Surrealists in America.

<sup>215</sup> Hugo 1978, p.

<sup>216</sup> Alpert in Marshall and Taylor 1968, p.68.

<sup>217</sup> Lachman 2010, p.141.

Susan Landauer argues that many artists turned inward and to mysticism after the experience of WWII, against an understanding of what technological progress championed by modernism is capable of doing to humanity.<sup>218</sup> At the same time there was a romantic interest in futuristic utopias and space. The Barron's futuristic electronic sound turned *Bells of Atlantis* into an almost science-fiction-like scenario describing the birth of an alien life-form onto a strange and hostile planet. This quality of their music was recognised by the directors behind *Forbidden Planet*. A similarly distinctly metallic sound could later be heard frequently in science fiction films of the 1950s and 1960s, and echoed the work of the Radiophonic Workshop and the electronic compositions of Daphne Oram in England. This fascination with futuristic utopias also determined works of other artists and writers of the first half of the twentieth century. In his essay *From Atlantis to Mars*, Ken Hollings describes the fascination with utopias and all things futuristic in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. In Leo Tolstoy's novel *Aelita: Atlanteans escaped to Mars* (1922) the Atlanteans are described as fleeing Atlantis and flying to Mars. Hugo's focus on Atlantis for his film scored by an electronic soundtrack corresponded to this fascination with science fiction utopias which was also reflected in the huge amount of sci-fi movies produced in the 1950s.

In 1969, filmmaker Stanley Kubrick would use not the hidden depth of Atlantis, but the infinity of space to deal with similar issues as *Bells of Atlantis*: spiritualism, futuristic golden-ageism, synaesthesia and the theme of birth/rebirth in his film *2001 – A Space Odyssey*. Youngblood wrote that in Kubrick's film "rockets are ejaculated from a central slit in Hilton Space Station No. 5, and a sperm-shaped spacecraft

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<sup>218</sup> Susan Landauer, 'Painting under the shadow: California Modernism and the Second World War', in Paul J. Karlstrom ed., *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900 – 1950* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996), p.43

named Discovery (i.e., birth) emits a pod that carries its human seed through a Stargate womb to eventual death and rebirth as the Starchild Embryo.”<sup>219</sup>

Youngblood uses this highly gendered description as an example of a shift towards what he describes as ‘cosmic consciousness’. He writes,

“Man no longer is earthbound. We move now in sidereal time. We must expand our horizons beyond the point of infinity. We must move from oceanic consciousness to cosmic consciousness.”<sup>220</sup>

With regard to Youngblood’s call for a ‘move’ to ‘cosmic consciousness’ which he detects in certain films of the 1960s that dealt with space and the cycle of life, *Bells of Atlantis*, with its poetic symbolism and personal vision, was still very much a film of the early 1950s. While the generation Youngblood described was looking up to the stars to gain greater self-knowledge and expand consciousness, Nin and Hugo still focused on the hidden depths of the ‘oceanic unconscious’, like members of the historical avant-garde who drew on Freud’s writing in the 1930s. Nevertheless, as I tried to illustrate in this chapter, it was exactly this dualism of Nin’s and Hugo’s poetic film that can be described as outmoded and at the same time innovative, which gives it a great richness. The symbiosis between the synaesthetic language and mystical symbolism of Anaïs Nin’s novel and Ian Hugo’s curiosity and innovativeness as a film-maker opened up rich discourses around synaesthesia, the fascination with different states of consciousness and perception in mid-century art and writing, and how it changed and developed over time. Their collaboration creates a lineage from Nin’s hallucinogenic writing of the 1930s, which drew on Symbolism and Surrealism, to artists’ experiments with synaesthetic effects in the

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<sup>219</sup> Gene Youngblood, ‘Towards Cosmic Consciousness’, in *Expanded Cinema* (London: Studio Vista, 1970).

<sup>220</sup> Youngblood cited in Brougher et al 2005, p.120.

1960s, and makes *Bells of Atlantis* a forerunner of films associated with 'expanded cinema' in the 1960s.

### Chapter Three: ‘Screams, Noises and Sonorous Tornadoes’ – Edgard Varèse’s *Nocturnal I* (1961)<sup>1</sup>

A piercing, high-pitched drone slowly slices through the silence at the opening of Edgard Varèse’s *Nocturnal I* (1961), his dark musical rendering of Anaïs Nin’s *House of Incest*. The air of anticipation created by this unnerving buzzing almost compares to the shrieking violins in horror movie soundtracks: it makes us believe that something unexpected, possibly bad, could happen at any moment and keeps us at the edge of our seats. Tension rises as the vibrating drone slowly gathers force, grows into a crescendo and erupts in a shrill cry before it dies. A cacophony of unsettling guttural groans and agonised moans now rises. Barely recognisable as human voices, they suggest the presence of something archaic, even unearthly. As if this wasn’t enough, a metallic thunderstorm of trumpets and booming horns now releases its force; it drowns out the bestial noises and catapults us into a state of high alertness which is sustained as the piece continues. Eventually, a soprano begins to sing with the shrill voice of a woman at the verge of a nervous break-down.

One can only speculate what effect Varèse’s music must have had on the audience when it premiered in New York in 1961. But even as a recording it can only be described as a powerful experience. Only 10 minutes long, it is a roller-coaster ride of tension and release, pulling us back and forth between violent noise and unsettling silence, the shrillest high and darkest low registers. It is an aural assault that creates strong emotional and at times even physical reactions – thinking of the vibrations of the brass instruments resonating through the body. It is music from a dark place,

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<sup>1</sup> The heading refers to a quote by Artaud about his libretto ‘There is no more sky’ that he wrote for Edgard Varèse’s *The Astronomer*. He explained: “All these texts are to be cut with passages of screams, of noises, of sonorous tornadoes which drown everything”. Cited from Stephen Barber, *Artaud: Blows and Bombs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p.56.

evoking feelings of terror, anguish and anxiety. Nin poignantly called it “a strange wail, from a sorrow never described before in music”.<sup>2</sup>

Nin had been a great admirer of Varèse’s music already before they first met in New York in 1940.<sup>3</sup> But when Varèse asked Nin for her permission to use *House of Incest* for a new project in the 1950s, Nin appears to have been baffled. She regarded her prose poem as a strange choice for the libretto, because she believed that Varèse had only contempt for Freud, psychoanalysis and the notion of the unconscious – the very foundation Nin’s writing was built upon. Time and again she goes over it in her diary. In summer 1965 she notes in retrospect: “So mystifying that he who made fun of any talk about the unconscious, did enter this realm by way of *House of Incest*.”<sup>4</sup>

But *House of Incest* was perhaps not such a strange choice when considered in relation to Varèse’s ideas about music and language. The esoteric writer and the composer described as a “man of explosive moods and strong passions” had much in common.<sup>5</sup> They both tried to develop modern forms of expression which had a physical effect on the audience by challenging the limits of their medium.<sup>6</sup> While Nin tried to modernise language through a musicalisation of her prose, among other strategies, Varèse wanted to liberate sound from the restrictions of an “outmoded musical language” by including multimedia effects and experimental language.<sup>7</sup> This may not have been motivated by an ambition to communicate with the unconscious, but displayed a similar concern with unleashing instincts and emotions. I want to take this a step further and suggest that what may have attracted Varèse to Nin’s

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<sup>2</sup> Anais Nin, *Journals 1955-1966*, vol. 6, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (London: Quartet, 1979), p.383.

<sup>3</sup> This was the year when Varèse first appeared in Nin’s diary.

<sup>4</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 6, 1979, p.383.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm MacDonald, *Varèse: Astronomer in Sound* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2003), xvii.

<sup>6</sup> See Helen Tookey, *Anais Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2003

<sup>7</sup> Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmerman (eds.), *Edgard Varèse: composer, sound sculptor, visionary* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p.290.

writing may have been something even more specific: a certain aesthetic that can be linked to Antonin Artaud's concept of the cruelty in performance.

Antonin Artaud's theories on language and the body had a great impact on the work of certain artists and writers working in America at mid-century, especially on those working across different disciplines to challenge preconceived notions of art.<sup>8</sup> In California, he was celebrated as a hero – a subject discussed in the PhD theses of Joanna Pawlik and Lucy Bradnock.<sup>9</sup> Varèse-scholars have suggested that the composer's emphasis on waking the senses of the listener during performances through violent audio-visual effects may have been informed at least partly by Artaud's seminal *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), a collection of essays which describe his idea of the theatre of cruelty.<sup>10</sup> Varèse had first met Artaud in Paris in May 1933 when he attended his lecture in Paris, and became strongly interested in his ideas. Artaud affirmed that "an element of cruelty" was necessary in theatre performance, because "[i]n our present degenerative state, metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body."<sup>11</sup> Sonorous sounds, an onomatopoeic language, violent light effects and the rejection of traditional *mise en scene* were an integral part of his ideal theatre which should shock the audience into awareness and make them feel their bodies. Transgressional subject matter was another important part of the project. The incest taboo became Artaud's ideal vehicle for the purgatorial mechanism of the theatre of cruelty. It was the subject of his only performance of the

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<sup>8</sup> The recent exhibition *Spectres of Artaud: Language and the Arts in the 1950s* at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid (winter 2012) focused on Artaud's impact on artists working in the mid-twentieth-century.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Pawlik, *Negotiating Surrealism: Post-war American avant-gardes after Breton*, PhD Thesis, University of Sussex 2008. Lucy Bradnock *After Artaud: Art in America, 1949-1965*, PhD Thesis, The University of Essex 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'The Theatre and Its Double', in: *Collected Works of Antonin Artaud*, vol.4, translated by Victor Corti (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> Edward Scheer (ed.), *100 Years of Cruelty: Essays on Artaud* (Sydney: Power Publications and Artspace, 2002), p.323.



theatre of cruelty on stage: the play *Les Cenci* based on P.B. Shelley's verse drama *The Cenci* (1819) about a man who rapes his daughter and is later killed by men hired by her. A first-hand account of the premier of the play on 6 May 1935 at the Theatre des Folies-Wagram in Paris bares striking resemblance to the effect *Nocturnal I* has on the listener. Artaud stunned the audience with scenes of extreme cruelty on stage, and dissonant noises which blasted out of a surround-system of speakers in addition to light effects. Gerald D'Houville described the experience in *Le petit Parisien*:

“Our ears tortured by deafening music produced by loudspeakers [...], we were in a state of alert as if we were hearing the wail of sirens during an evening of 'air raids'. Without doubt, we were warned in this manner that this was an evening of massacres. But we resigned ourselves to it.”<sup>12</sup>

My suggestion of Varèse's Artaudean motivation is supported if we consider the parallels between Nin's and Artaud's frustration with verbal language, their emphasis on the body and senses, and concern with the taboo-topic incest. Nin's close link to Artaud is well-known, although the extent to which his writing impacted her work is underexposed. She first met him in 1933, through her analyst René Allendy who was a friend of the playwright. They had a brief affair and exchanged ideas about art and writing in letters. Deirdre Bair pointed out that parts of *House of Incest* were based on Nin's diary entries about Artaud.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Podnieks detected Artaudian elements specifically in the staging of incest in Nin's fiction and non-fiction writing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cited by Adrian Curtin from Roger Blin et al 'Antonin Artaud in *Les Cenci*', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 16 (no. 2 1972), pp. 136, in Curtin, 'Cruel Vibrations: Sounding Out Artaud's Production of *Les Cenci*', *Theatre Research International*, vol.35, No 3 (Cambridge UP, 2010), p.244.

<sup>13</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Anais Nin: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p.182.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Podnieks, *Daily Modernism: the literary diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart and Anais Nin* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

I suggest that Varèse singled out the Artaudian elements in Nin's writing – her sonorous language, incest and dangerous eroticism – and turned it into his version of Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*. In the following, then, I want to use Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* as a filter through which to look at Varèse's and Nin's ways of fusing music, language and transgressional subject matter to affect the bodies of the audience physically. I will illustrate that despite a shared aesthetic, their motivations were quite different. In Nin's writing a sonorous, musical language soon became connected to a particularly female aesthetic – a tool that connected women's bodies with women's experiences. Sharon Spencer called it “music from the womb” based on Nin's description of her writing as “writing from the womb”.<sup>15</sup> This idea has been associated with *l'écriture féminine* or ‘women's writing’, a term coined by Hélène Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). According to Elaine Showalter, it refers to “the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text” – a topic which engaged French feminist theorists of the 1970s including Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.<sup>16</sup> Musicality, rhythm and fluidity were integral parts of their description of a pre-symbolic, maternal language. But what about Varèse's musical rendering of Nin's text?

This question becomes even more urgent if we consider the soprano voice which sings lines from Nin's poem with the voice of a hysteric. The scream was an essential part of Artaud's project to shock the audience and expose them to extreme cruelty. But this ubiquitous ‘mad scene’ acted out by the female soprano has also been a firm, but troublesome fixture in the tradition of opera and drama, which has

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<sup>15</sup> Sharon Spencer, ‘The Music of the Womb: Anais Nin's “Feminine” Writing’, in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp.161-176.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’, *The New Feminist Criticism: essays on women, literature, and theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), p. 249.

become the focus of scholars concerned with issues of gender in these fields.<sup>17</sup> Did Nin's *House of Incest* merely serve Varèse as a vehicle to shock the audience drawing on a set of stereotypical signifiers which portray the woman who dares to speak the unspeakable as hysteric?

On the other hand, the hysterical discourse has been claimed by essentialist feminists like Cixous as a characteristic of feminine language. Artaud's haunting of *Nocturnal* adds an interesting layer to the gender discourse around Nin's 'feminine writing' and Varese's musical rendering. For French feminists, *l'écriture féminine* is not necessarily writing by women, as Elaine Showalter has pointed out, but is "an avant-garde writing style" like that of James Joyce, André Breton, Arthur Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud.<sup>18</sup> In Kristeva's writing, 'feminine language' or 'semiotic discourse' describes the "gestural, rhythmic, pre-referential language" used by exceptionally male avant-garde writers.<sup>19</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones describes this as an "incestuous challenge to the symbolic order, asserting as it does the writer's return to the pleasures of this preverbal identification with his mother and his refusal to identify with his father and the logic of paternal discourse."<sup>20</sup> If we consider that Varèse may have drawn on Artaud, described by Kristeva as a protagonist of *l'écriture féminine*, to adapt Nin's 'feminine writing', can *Nocturnal I* perhaps be described as musical equivalent to *l'écriture féminine*?

Kristeva's theory is, however, controversial and has been challenged by many feminists. Judith Butler, for instance, has criticised Kristeva's "strategy of

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<sup>17</sup> See Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Duke University Press 1996); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Showalter 1986, p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of L'Écriture Feminine', in *The New Feminist Criticism: essays on women, literature, and theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), p.9.

<sup>20</sup> Jones in Showalter 1986, p.9.

subversion” as doubtful, because her theory “appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she sought to displace.”<sup>21</sup> As we have already seen, Nin’s position within feminism was just as ambiguous, as was the message of her female consciousness-raising narratives. The *feminist vs. misogynist* discourse one could so easily weave around this collaboration is once again made more problematic by Nin’s own self-fashioning as ‘insane woman’ in *House of Incest* in connection with other stereotypes from male narratives such as the ‘femme fatale’, so making it difficult to place her text within a feminist discourse. As a first step to solve this conundrum, I want to draw attention to Nin’s reaction to *Nocturnal I*. After attending the premier, Nin was no less confused than when Varèse first approached her. It was the violence of the music which puzzled her, especially the shrill cries of the soprano which expressed deep agony. The relationship between music and text, as I will illustrate, were just as ambiguous as Nin’s writing.

Musicologists Olivia Mattis, Adrian Curtin, Frances Dyson and Malcolm MacDonald have discussed parallels between Varèse’s utopian ideas and Artaud’s theatre of cruelty in their writing, but *Nocturnal I* has never been discussed in this context, although it was based on a poem that seemed infused, at least in part, by similar ideas to those discussed by Artaud.<sup>22</sup> On the side of literary studies, there are very few texts on Nin’s creative exchange with Artaud. And neither of them makes a connection to Varèse or *écriture féminine*. In fact, *Nocturnal I* has not been the subject of many critical studies, which may be connected to problems of authenticity.

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, ‘The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva’, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp. 107-127 (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p.107.

<sup>22</sup> See Podnieks, 2000. For discussions of Varèse’s music in relationship to Artaud’s ideas see Olivia Mattis, ‘Varèse’s Multimedia Conception of “Déserts”’, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 557-583 (Oxford: Oxford UP). Olivia Mattis, ‘From bebop to poo-wip: Jazz influences in Varèse’s Poème électronique’, in *Edgard Varèse: composer, sound sculptor, visionary*, eds. Felix Meyer and Heidi Zimmerman, pp.309-317 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006). Frances Dyson ‘The Last Pulse: Artaud, Varèse and the Exhaustion of Matter’, pp.83-102, in Scheer 2002. MacDonald 2006; Curtin 2010.

*Nocturnal I* was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation for a Composers' Showcase concert in his honour, and premiered as a preliminary version at the Town Hall in New York on May 1, 1961.<sup>23</sup> As the title implies, *Nocturnal I* was never completed by Varèse who died in 1965. It was later edited and completed by his former student, Chou Wen-Chung based on notes and sketches Varèse had left behind and posthumously published as *Nocturnal II*.<sup>24</sup> For my discussion, I will focus on the first version performed in 1961 as it was the version that Nin had heard and commented on in her diary.

### ***Anaïs Nin's musical unconscious***

The musicalisation of her prose – the use of musical structure and metaphor in writing – was a main strategy for Nin to create a new language that connected to the unconscious and affected the senses more immediately.<sup>25</sup> The latter has been, of course, a standard argument in the debate about the relationship between music and language, especially in Modernism.<sup>26</sup> Nin's idea of music was symptomatic of the time which is well documented. It has mostly been linked to Romanticism and the writing of Symbolist poets like Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Valéry

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<sup>23</sup> John Keillor, <http://www.allmusic.com/composition/nocturnal-for-soprano-chorus-of-basses-chamber-orchestra-edited-by-chou-wen-chung-mc0002362028>.

<sup>24</sup> The version of the piece performed in 1961 only contained 93 measures of the score finished by Chou Wen-Chung in 1969. Peter Evans, 'Nocturnal: The Sound Universes of Edgard Varèse and Anaïs Nin', *Sonus* 24, no. 2 (2004), p.52.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed discussion of musical analogies in Nin's fiction see Sharon Spencer, 'Symphonic Writing', *Collage of Dreams: The Writings of Anaïs Nin*, pp.19-43 (Chicago: Swallow Press 1977). Also Maiko Kato, 'Music as Metaphor: Its Influence and Application in Anaïs Nin's writings', *Anaïs: An International Journal*, volume 15, 1997, pp.108-113.

<sup>26</sup> The notion of musical meaning and expression is a strongly contested field in musicology and philosophy as disputes between musicologists such as Peter Kivy and Stephen Davies have illustrated. See for instance: Peter Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition – And Other Essays in the Aesthetics of Music*, Oxford, 2007; Kivy, *Sound and Semblance* (Princeton and Guildford: Princeton UP 1984); Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, transl. Richard Howard, New York 1985. Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

and Mallarmé.<sup>27</sup> Baudelaire, for instance, made music the subject of his synaesthetic poem *Music (La Musique)* and Verlaine placed “music before all else” in his poem *Formerly and Not Long Ago*.<sup>28</sup> Evelyn J. Hinz also pointed out Richard Wagner’s belief in the supremacy of music which, as a “non-cognitive art-form”, could create a connection to the “world beyond”.<sup>29</sup> The discussion about the limits of language and its enrichment through music in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been regarded as a reaction to Kant’s early romantic *Vernunftkritik* and the implied emphasis on a sensual experience of the world. Verbal language was considered incapable of expressing the unspeakable mysteries of life and human experience. This initiated a utopian longing for an improvement of language through its musicalisation. This move towards the invisible, spiritual and immaterial was a common modernist reaction against the materialist society of the modern machine age determined by mechanisation, consumerism and an increasing emphasis on rationalism. The symbolists and Romantics regarded music as an antidote, something that did not have to be interpreted in an intellectual way.

Drawing on similar ideas, Nin elevated music to a spiritual force which she placed above writing. A passage from *The Novel of the Future* reads like a thinly disguised paraphrase of Walter Pater’s famous assertion that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music”, which implied the fusion of subject matter and form in music.<sup>30</sup> Nin explained, “I have had only the desire that writing should

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<sup>27</sup> Spencer, Sharon, ‘“Musique Ancienne”’ - The Ultimate Seduction in “Winter of Artifice”, in *Anaïs Nin’s Narratives*, ed. Anne T. Salvatore (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2001), p.114.

<sup>28</sup> Bettina Knapp, *Music, Archetype and the Writer: A Jungian View* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), p.8.

<sup>29</sup> Evelyn J. Hinz, *The Mirror and the Garden: Realism and Reality in the Writings of Anaïs Nin* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 23. Nin based numerous minor characters on Wagnerian figures such as Siegfried.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Pater, ‘The School of Giorgione’, published in *Fortnightly Review* in 1877.

become music and penetrate the senses directly.”<sup>31</sup> In a diary entry of December 1927, Nin airs her frustration about the limitation of verbal language in comparison to music:

“Music holds ... the very mysteries which words never solve, the images which words never grasp. Music is above literature in that it says what can never be said, and it contains all the moods and aspects of life, sometimes in one note. But because I worship music, and yet I am a slave to words, I follow with words the meanings of music, I seek words to re-create the sensations which exalt and unhinge me.”<sup>32</sup>

Nin was interested in the immediacy of music and its ability to penetrate the senses directly – something she wanted to achieve in writing. Listening to music was described by Nin as an intense bodily experience whereby the sound entered the body through the senses. “The minute you hear” she wrote, “it is inside your body.”<sup>33</sup> Nin explained that she aimed to create a new ‘inspirational’ language that “penetrates our unconscious directly and doesn’t need to be analysed or interpreted in a cerebral way” like music.<sup>34</sup> Nin initially called her application of musical rhythm and structure to language “symphonic writing”.<sup>35</sup> She believed that “obsessions in human beings are recurrent like motifs in a symphony”.<sup>36</sup> Spencer has used this as umbrella term for her literary synaesthesia as a whole, which corresponds to the general definition of symphonic as describing synthesis. Spencer explains, “in Nin’s writing music is associated with a heightened sense of life, with moods of extreme intensity, emotional delicacy, or sensuous excitement.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.31

<sup>32</sup> Nin, *Early Diary IV*, December 1927.

<sup>33</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, pp.417-18.

<sup>34</sup> Anais Nin, ‘Proceed from the Dream’, in *A Woman Speaks*, 1975, p.129.

<sup>35</sup> See Nin, *Novel* p.30.

<sup>36</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.188.

<sup>37</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p. 173. Also Spencer 1977, p.38.

Like the symbolist poets, Nin regarded poetry as the only suitable form to recreate musical structure and reach the senses directly, because the “unconscious speaks only the language of symbol” which she claimed as “my language”.<sup>38</sup> Nin declared that “We would need to read the novel as a poem, for its rhythm, its images, its sensory effects.”<sup>39</sup> Poetry has been closely linked to music as both forms of expression pertain to time. Nin chose the intermediate form of the prose poem for her fiction. In its visual appearance the prose poem differs from traditional poetry in its lack of line breaks, but like a poem it relies on fragmentation, condensation, symbolism, imagism and rhythm.<sup>40</sup> The prose poem originated in nineteenth-century French symbolist poetry and was a reaction against traditional verse forms such as the Alexandrine, which was the most prominent form at that time. Deemed subversive, it was used by writers including Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud; in the 1950s and 60s it became a popular form with many beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg.

But for Nin, the ‘world beyond’ was not the mystic realm of the spirit world as for the Romantic and Symbolist poets, but the unconscious, although her unscientific notion of the unconscious had much in common with it. It was a pre-linguistic realm where emotions were expressed through abstract music and images. In *Children of the Albatross* Nin’s protagonist Djuna walks into “the labyrinthian cities of the interior. Where music bears no titles, flowing like a subterranean river carrying all the moods, sensations and impressions into dissolutions forming and reforming a world in terms of flow [...]”.<sup>41</sup> Nin’s praise of music referred to *absolute music* as opposed to the descriptive genre of *program music*. She described music as non-

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<sup>38</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.31.

<sup>39</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.175.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5787>.

<sup>41</sup> Anais Nin, ‘Children of the Albatross’, in *Cities of the Interior* (London: Owen, 1978).



representational and immediate – a form that does not have to be de-coded with the help of the intellect unlike writing which is a linguistic system composed of arbitrary signs. In her diary Nin explained:

“Music can do without a concrete image – even the names on the programs are not necessary – but writing appeals to the image-making mind, and so to give a sensation you must produce an image, and the image must be drawn with the forms we know, or remain an abstraction. Music has the right to be abstract. It goes directly through our senses, whereas only a certain kind of writing will go through our senses, and it is this penetration I seek; [...].”<sup>42</sup>

Nin’s use of music as means to reach unconscious material did not relate to any school of psychoanalysis. While Jung’s writing has been used to describe the effect of music, Byron Almén points out that there is little evidence that Jung engaged more than superficially with music, even suggesting that Jung “experienced a lifelong ambivalence towards music – both as a therapeutic modality and as an artistic medium.”<sup>43</sup> According to music therapist and pianist Margaret Tilly who met with Jung in 1956, he did not listen to music anymore, because he explained that “music is dealing with such deep archetypal material [...].”<sup>44</sup> As the story goes, after Tilly played the piano for him to demonstrate the positive effect of music for therapy, Jung apparently announced that music “should be an essential part of every analysis” as it “reaches deep archetypal material that we can only sometimes reach in our analytical work with patients.”<sup>45</sup> Almén draws the conclusion from these few accounts of Jung’s comments on music that his approach to music “tended to

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<sup>42</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, pp.417-18.

<sup>43</sup> Byron Almén, ‘Jung’s function-attitudes in music composition and discourse’, in *Psyche and the Arts: Jungian Approaches to Music, Architecture, Literature, Painting and Film*, ed. Susan Rowland (Hove and New York, 2008), p.117.

<sup>44</sup> Jung cited in Margaret Tilly in ‘The Therapy of Music’, in *C.G. Jung Speaking: Interviews and Encounters*, eds. William McGuire and R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p.274. Cited by Almén, p.117.

<sup>45</sup> Jung cited from Tilly, p.275; Also quoted by Knapp, but she fails to include the year in which Jung said this to Tilly, whereby she omits that music was a very late addition of his interest in the arts.

emphasize the roles it played within the personal, cultural, and collective *unconscious* – as a compensation of the feeling function, as reflecting or reacting against a social *Zeitgeist*, or as a mirror of unconscious processes.”<sup>46</sup>

Bettina Knapp who has also written extensively on Nin ignores the fact that Jung remained sceptical of music for most of his life, and coins the term ‘musical archetypes’ based on Jung’s writing on archetypal material in the collective unconscious. She argues that for Jung, music was similarly embedded in the unconscious and the dream.<sup>47</sup> Her subjective criticism is symptomatic of criticism of the 1970s and 80s, which bases arguments on vague concepts like artistic ‘inspiration’ and greatness. She writes:

“Archetypal music arises from the collective unconscious [...]. In this suprapersonal sphere, where the great artist descends for inspiration, he is exposed to “a living system of reactions and aptitudes” that determine the path his work will take. Tonal sequences, pitches, amplitudes, and movement catalyse him, begetting moods and arousing unsuspected contents within the folds of his unconscious.”<sup>48</sup>

She suggests that it was this ‘archetypal music’ that the symbolist poets referred to in their poetry.<sup>49</sup> While Jung’s impact on Nin’s musical writing remains ambiguous, his ideas may resonate in Nin’s concept of ‘symphonic writing’. Jung compared the “musical movement of the unconscious” to “a sort of symphony”.<sup>50</sup> Nin’s use of the

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<sup>46</sup> Almén in Rowland 2008, p.117.

<sup>47</sup> Knapp 1988, p.9. Although she has written extensively about Anaïs Nin, she does not include her writing in this book on Jung and music. Writers analysed include Proust, Kandinsky, Honoré de Balzac, Jean-Paul Satre and E.T.A. Hoffmann, p.9.

<sup>48</sup> Knapp 1988, p.1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>50</sup> C.G. Jung, *C.G. Jung, Seminar on Dream Analysis*, ed. William McGuire (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984). Cited from Knapp 1988, p.1.

term, however, may have also derived from Leon Edel who described the symphonic structure as the typical form for the modern psychological novel.<sup>51</sup>

Twentieth century Modernism saw a renewed interest in the musicalisation of the arts and writing which is overshadowed by that of critical thinkers Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, who discussed language and music in the context of interpersonal relations and inner processes, although they came to very different conclusions.<sup>52</sup> Although, as is well-known, Clement Greenberg strongly opposed any form of imitation or contamination of one art form by another, and dismissed those poets and writers who wanted to synthesise the arts in writing, he observed in his 1940 essay *Toward a Newer Laocoon*:

“[M]usic as an art in itself began to occupy a very important position in relation to the other arts. Because of its ‘absolute’ nature, its remoteness from imitation, its almost complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium, as well as because of its resources of suggestion, music had come to replace poetry as the paragon art. It was the art which the other avant-garde arts envied most, and whose effects they tried hardest to imitate.”<sup>53</sup>

Walter Sokel described the musicalisation of the arts as the most dominant characteristic of modernism in his book *The Writer in Extremis* (1959) which discusses the relationship between literature and music in the context of Abstract Expressionism. In itself it is, of course, also symptomatic of the time it was written. Sokel believed that “the abstract model provided by music means that “the

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<sup>51</sup> Leon Edel, *The Modern Psychological Novel* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

<sup>52</sup> See Sabine Bayerl’s discussion of Kristeva’s, Adorno’s and Barthes’s understanding of language and music. Bayerl, *Von der Sprache zur Musik der Sprache: Konzepte zur Spracherweiterung bei Adorno, Kristeva und Barthes* (Würzburg 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Clement Greenberg, ‘Toward a Newer Laocoon’, 1940, reprinted in *Abstract Expressionism, A Critical Reader*. Cited by Olivia Mattis, ‘The Physical and the Abstract: Varèse and the New York School’, in *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem De Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p.59.

framework of a poem, drama, or narrative would no longer have to be consistent with any external standard". By adopting the language of music writers gained freedom from conventional realism.

This appealed to Nin who strongly opposed realistic depictions of life in art, which she outlined in her pamphlet *Realism and Reality*. To her, reality encompassed more than just the visible world. But Nin's interest in musical writing was not simply an escape from the machine age, but also an embrace of the modern – a dualism we have already encountered in her work and that of many other modernist writers, composers and visual artists. As a reader of the mouth-piece of modernism, *transition*, Nin was also well aware of other writers like James Joyce, Ezra Pound and HD who experimented with similar strategies to modernise language. Nin acknowledged in her diary that "Joyce probably meant to achieve [the musicalisation of his prose] by demanding to be read aloud, hoping to attain the senses directly."<sup>54</sup>

When Nin praised music, she had very specific types of music in mind. She admired avant-garde composers who, like herself, tried to break with the tradition of their genre. We can also detect a gradual move towards musical forms that emphasised sonority, i.e. vibration, and rhythm, and were determined by a certain improvisational or fragmentary structure. In her early life it was mainly European music which interested her: classical composers like Debussy and Stravinsky who shook the traditionalist music world. In an entry from April 1931, Nin noted that she "didn't care for Beethoven's *Pastoral* or Berlioz's *Fantastique*" as they were "too literal and descriptive", but preferred "suggestive music like Debussy's and Falla's – something more subtle, more indirect" and without the "impersonality" of classical music. Here she referred to the strong emphasis on emotions, passions and moods

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<sup>54</sup> Nin, *The Early Diary 1927-1931*, vol.4, ed. Rupert Pole (London: Peter Owen 1994), pp.418.

detected in Debussy's and Stravinsky's music which helped to catapult classical music into the modern age.<sup>55</sup> She soon exclaimed,

“I would give twenty years of my precious life to be able to write as Debussy composed, to be able to give that profound, intangible, wordless sensation. I suppose Lawrence achieved that. It is so penetrating, [...]. In all this, realism is left far behind – but what a problem in writing.”<sup>56</sup>

The experience of hearing Javanese gamelan music at the Paris exposition in 1889 had triggered Debussy's interest in creating more sensuous music. Gamelan would also occupy Nin's writing of the 1950s and become a close link to ideas on music, vibration and the body formulated by Artaud and Varèse. In the 1930s and 40s Nin became interested in Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*, the electronic music of Louis and Bebe Barron, the ZEN inspired minimalism of John Cage and the 'organised sound' of Varèse. This may seem ironic given that electronic music is 'impersonal' and disembodied as no actual musicians are needed to perform it. However, as we have seen, the Barons' use of cybernetics displays an almost anthropomorphic treatment of sound as living entities. Similarly, Varèse, who had a science degree, understood music as 'organised sound' which drew on the writing of Hoëne Wronski – a physicist, mathematician and philosopher who defined music as “the corporealisation of the intelligence that is in sounds.”<sup>57</sup> From this, Varèse developed his famous notion of “music as spatial – as bodies of intelligent sounds freely floating in space.”<sup>58</sup> While electronic music may have done away with the

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<sup>55</sup> Kato 1997, pp. 109-110.

<sup>56</sup> Nin, *Early Diary*, pp.417-18.

<sup>57</sup> Varèse wrote: “When I was about 20, my own attitude towards music – at least towards what I wanted my music to be – became suddenly crystallized by Hoëne-Wronsky's definition of music. It was probably what first started me thinking of music as spatial – as bodies of intelligent sounds moving freely in space, a concept I gradually developed and made my own”. Varèse cited in MacDonald 2003, p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> Edgard Varèse, 'The Liberation of Sound', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn - Winter, 1966), pp. 11-19. Cited in Klaus Kropfinger, ““You never took the simple path”: Varèse's

actual bodies of musicians, it was often determined by a strong vibrational force, which could affect the body of the listener physically – an important quality, which Artaud and Varèse made use of as we shall see when looking at Varèse’s music.

In the late 1940s and 50s, when Nin lived in the United States, she also turned her attention to the improvisational patterns of jazz, especially Duke Ellington. She developed a kind of jazz writing anticipating the rhythmic language of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Again, she created links to the ‘unconscious’. In the *Novel of the Future*, Nin compared the workings of the ‘unconscious’ with the free improvisation of jazz.<sup>59</sup> She wrote that the ideal novel of the future would be like jazz; it would not end on a climax, but on variations.<sup>60</sup> The character Lillian in *Seduction of the Minotaur*, for instance is described in terms of jazz: “Classical music could not contain her improvisations, her tempo, her vehemence”. But “jazz was the music of the body ... It was the body’s vibrations which rippled from the fingers. [...]”<sup>61</sup> From the 1960s, American composer Harry Partch made frequent appearances in her Diary.<sup>62</sup> His emphasis on the body of the performer, however, was antithetical to Varèse’s aesthetic, although both emphasised the body; Partch’s approach was built on the idea of organicism and corporeality. To accommodate this idea he built his own instruments out of organic material such as wood and bamboo, and also invented his own system of notation. For Partch, the body of the musician was not just a vehicle to play the instrument and make music heard, but an integral

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liberation of sound and the delimitation of the arts’, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.155. Varèse’s idea of music as spatial is discussed in Marc Treib, *Space Calculated in Seconds: The Philips Pavillion, Le Corbusier, Edgard Varèse* (Princeton, N.J. and Chichester: Princeton UP, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> See Benjamin Joplin, ‘The Melodic Memory: Anaïs Nin as a transatlantic jazz soloist’, *Anaïs: An International Journal*, vol.18, 2000, pp.26-31.

<sup>60</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.28. Sharon Spencer has argued that “patterns of improvisations and bold rhythms” can be ‘heard’ in Nin’s *Seduction of the Minotaur*. Spencer 1977, p.38.

<sup>61</sup> Nin cited by Spencer in Friedman and Fuchs 1989, p.167.

<sup>62</sup> Varèse features as one of Nin’s most important ‘influences’ in Robert Snyder’s documentary *Anaïs Nin Observed* (1973) alongside Jean Varda and Henry Miller.

part of the piece performed on stage – a position which ran counter to Varèse who wanted to do away with the body of the performer on stage.

As we have already seen, *House of Incest* employs musical structure and metaphors throughout, especially in the prologue, which displays a fluid rhythm, and sonority. This may be associated with Debussy's visual music, which resonates in Nin's metaphor of the physical experience of 'feeling' the bells of Atlantis. While Nin described the dream-realm as soundless, she implied that sound existed as sensation or visual image resonating in the movement of waves. She wrote: "Ejected from a paradise of soundlessness, cathedrals wavering at the passage of a body, like soundless music." The image of a sunken cathedral may have been modelled on a quote by Claude Debussy which Nin referred to in the *Novel of the Future*. She writes that the "concept of a sunken cathedral inspired Debussy to experiment with different sounds than those from real Cathedrals of France."<sup>63</sup> It also corresponded with her idea that music "has to extend beyond familiar sounds and free itself of past structures, has to seek sounds which match our contemporary moods and sensations."<sup>64</sup> As we shall see, this was the main credo of Edgard Varèse.

Nin used references to musical instruments and sounds, and created rhythm and melody in language through alliteration, repetition, and sequences of flux and stasis.<sup>65</sup> This was also singled out by members of her circle, who showed a similarly romantic notion of music in relation to feeling. In 1936, literary scholar Stuart Gilbert compared *House of Incest* to a symphony with a "unique use of language" like the music of Scriabin.<sup>66</sup> Scriabin's approach to composing was based on colour-

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<sup>63</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.121.

<sup>64</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.137.

<sup>65</sup> See Salvatore 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, 1979, p.

hearing and corresponded with the synaesthetic appeal of Nin's language; this comparison also placed her within the tradition of early European modernism.<sup>67</sup> In the 1940s, American composer Carter Harman attempted to turn *House of Incest* into a musical drama, although the project was never realised. He exclaimed enthusiastically that Nin's prose poem "set off music in [him], stirred all [his] desire to orchestrate."<sup>68</sup> Varèse also saw potential in Nin's prose poem, but I regard his motives for choosing Nin's text as far more complex and motivated less by such Romantic motives.

***Edgard Varèse: Searching for the "bomb that would make the musical world explode"***

The creation of a new musical form which affected emotions and instincts rather than the intellect was the driving force behind Varèse's work as a composer, although the unconscious was of no direct concern to him. Varèse explained that he was searching for "entirely new combinations of sounds" with the objective of "creating new emotions" and "awakening dulled sensibilities".<sup>69</sup> He approached this goal with an uncompromising attitude which contributed to his public image as an intimidating character with a fiery temperament.

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<sup>67</sup> Nin was aware of Scriabin's synaesthetic music and mentioned Scriabin's *Poème de L'Extase* in the second volume of her diary, in May 1936. Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, 1979, p.89.

<sup>68</sup> Carter Harman quoted in Nin, *Journals*, vol.4, 1979, p.201. Harman first appears in Nin's diary in January 1947, as a guest at a party at Nin's apartment. In April 1947, Nin describes Harman visiting her to work on the music for *House of Incest*. She wrote: "We worked well, understood each other. He wants to make a dreamlike musical drama of the book. It fills him with music. / [...] I write down what we agree on. He is writing the music. [...] Carter is completely emotional, all music". Nin, *Journals*, vol.4, 1979, pp.214-5.

<sup>69</sup> Edgard Varèse, cited from Jonathan W. Bernard, *The Music of Edgard Varèse* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1987), p.23-24, cited by Ernst Lichtenhahn, "'A New Primitiveness': Varèse's *Ecuatorial* in its Parisian Surroundings", pp.193-201, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.196.



When Varèse came to New York in 1915, he found a music scene that was resistant to change and hostile to modern music.<sup>70</sup> Varèse believed that while contemporary visual artists responded to the modern world by creating works that went beyond pure representation, music was still “following obsolete rules”.<sup>71</sup> The French composer declared war on the American music scene which he perceived as lifeless and traditionalist. In an interview he described himself as “a sort of diabolic Parsifal, searching not for the Holy Grail but the bomb that would make the musical world explode and thereby let in all sounds, sounds which up to now—and even today—have been called noises.”<sup>72</sup> While Varèse was searching for a new language, he was continuously searching for new musical instruments to produce these radical new sounds.<sup>73</sup> He remarked in 1939 that he was looking for a musical instrument that “will reach the listener unadulterated by interpretation”.<sup>74</sup> In an early interview given not long after his arrival in New York, Varèse declared:

“Our musical alphabet must be enriched. We also need new instruments very badly. [...] Musicians should take up that question in deep earnest with the help of machinery specialists. [...] I refuse to submit myself to sounds that have already been heard. What I am looking for are new technical mediums which can lend themselves to every expression of thought and keep in touch with thought.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See Felix Meyer, “‘The Exhilarating Atmosphere of Struggle’”: Varèse as a Communicator of Modern Music in the 1920s’, pp. 82-91, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.82.

<sup>71</sup> See Heinz Stahlhut, ‘The Art Collection of Louise and Edgard Varèse’, pp.101-109, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.109.

<sup>72</sup> Edgard Varèse cited from Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), p.148.

<sup>73</sup> Dieter A. Nanz, ‘A Student in Paris: Varèse from 1904 – 1907’, pp.25-24, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.25.

<sup>74</sup> Edgard Varèse, cited from Olivia Mattis, ‘Edgard Varèse and the Visual Arts’, PhD Thesis, Stanford University, 1992, p.128, cited by Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.94

<sup>75</sup> Varèse cited in, ‘Composer Varèse to Give New York Abundance of Futuristic Music’, *The New York Review* (11 March 1916), p.6. Cited in Sylvia Kahan, ‘The Whitney Connection: Edgard Varèse and His New York Patrons’, pp.92-100, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.92.

Not surprisingly, Varèse was frequently linked to Marinetti and the Futurists, although he disagreed with their ‘realistic’ imitation of urban noises. Ernst Lichtenhan explains that he criticised them for merely shocking the audience with sounds which he regarded as slavishly reproducing “what is commonplace and boring in the bustle of our daily lives”.<sup>76</sup> In the beginning, he had to make do with shrill sirens, booming horns, and percussive instruments to shake the audience out of the comfort of their plush seats. Once the technological developments had caught up with Varèse’s demands, he began using manipulated taped sounds played back through loudspeakers, in conjunction with light effects and projections in performances. His best known piece of tape music is *Poème électronique* composed for the Dutch Pavilion designed by Le Corbusier for the Brussels World Fair of 1958. It involved pre-recorded sound which was played back through an estimated number of 350 speakers which were embedded in the interior walls of the cavernous space of the pavilion, and were “synchronized to a film of black and white photographs selected by Corbusier”.<sup>77</sup> His experiments with what he called “organised sound” sent shock-waves through the traditionalist music world of the 1940s and 50s. Performances of most of Varèse’s compositions in the traditional environment of the concert hall were not well received.

Nin acknowledged modern composers’ need for new instruments. Referring to Pierre Shaeffer, she explains in her diary:

“We can no longer use or work with violin, piano, cello, which are always the same. We must break them down to obtain new sounds (Varèse, cage), new combinations. As in painting, a distortion of a commonplace image creates a new image. So we distort a violin note, a bell note, with tape and scissors, like

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<sup>76</sup> Lichtenhahn in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.196.

<sup>77</sup> See Treib 1996.

cutting a film, and we create new effects more like our own life.”<sup>78</sup>

She admired Varèse’s vision which corresponded with her self-conscious modernist ambition to ‘make it new’. She wrote in December 1940 that Varese’s “power suits the scale of the modern world. He alone can plan a music heard above the sound of traffic, machinery, factories etc.”<sup>79</sup>

She also empathised with the alienation he felt in America and his struggle to be accepted not only by the American audience but by the traditionalist music world. Nin felt that America did not want their work.<sup>80</sup> She wrote in a letter to Louise Varèse in 1958:

“For 20 years I have been vilified and excluded, and for the first time this summer felt appreciated. I have a feeling that Varèse is experiencing the same justice – so many years when his imitators were given what he alone deserved.”<sup>81</sup>

Her literary portrait of the composer in the same volume described him as a ‘revolutionary’ in sound, a brilliant but intimidating scientist who creates unheard of cosmic sounds in his ‘laboratory’:

“He is fierce, revolutionary, and impressive with his intransigence, his wit, his cutting remarks on old-fashioned composers. [...] His evaluations are what the surrealists called *une enterprise de demolition*. The demolition squad. [...] He makes room for new music in no vague terms. He seeks new tones, new timbres. He does not believe in the traditional orchestra. He has created new sonorities. The sounds that issue from his laboratory are new. They seem to come from other planets.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vo.6, 1979, p.234,

<sup>79</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, 1979, p.65

<sup>80</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 3, 1979, p.115.

<sup>81</sup> Anais Nin, letter to Louise Varèse, 1958, cited from Evans 2004, p.52.

<sup>82</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, 1979, p.64.

This entry illustrates their shared sense of what has been described as ‘romantic futurity’ by Malcolm MacDonald, a common modernist phenomenon as we already encountered. In both their work we can see a dualism which juxtaposes a fascination with science, astronomy and technology with a romantic longing for an archaic past and mysticism. In Varèse’s case it was an interest in ancient non-Western civilisations and their mystic rituals.<sup>83</sup> These were cultures associated with magic and a powerful emphasis on primal instincts.<sup>84</sup> With his new sound he wanted to stir these primal instincts and archaic memories.<sup>85</sup> The idea of awakening primal instincts and archaic memories echoes the Jungian concepts of collective unconscious and archetypal material embedded within, although Varèse never expressed any strong views about Jung. The interest in the archaic and primitive was canonical for the European and American avant-garde. Heinz Stahlhut explains,

“positivism and rationalism were abandoned in favour of the intuitive, the emotional, and the sub- and unconscious, all of which were thought to be still alive in non-European and traditional European societies. [...]. The quest for lost or hidden signs – for what Derrida called a “primordial language” legible and comprehensible to all people at all times – is a key feature of modernity. [...]. The archetypal was thought to form a bridge spanning the gap that had emerged between art and the public with the increasing sophistication of modern industrial society: [...].”<sup>86</sup>

Varèse was aware that this may be viewed as contradictory. He explained, “I want to encompass everything that is human ... from the primitive to the farthest reaches of

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<sup>83</sup> Varèse visited New Mexico in the late 1930’s. See Lichtenhahn in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.196.

<sup>84</sup> See Lichtenhan in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006. Also Mattis, 1992, pp. 557-583 (Oxford: Oxford UP).

<sup>85</sup> See Mattis 1992. Varèse’s art collection reflects this interest. It contained non-European crafts and European folk art, including a Balinese puppet. See Stahlhut in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006.

<sup>86</sup> Stahlhut in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.29.

science.”<sup>87</sup> MacDonald traces this dualism back to European Romanticism and argues that Varèse embodied the “ideal of Romantic futurity” by combining “the scientific and the shamanic realities of the New World”.<sup>88</sup> Nin’s descriptions of Varèse’s music contained copious references to astronomical terminology as did *House of Incest*. She described Varèse’s *Ionisation* (1930) as coming “from other planets, [...] ‘fragments whistling through cyclones, tearing space. Vibrations from places we have not yet seen.’”<sup>89</sup> Nin here captured an important aspect of Varèse’s work: the emphasis on sound as spatial and the exploration of sonority through timbre. This emphasis on vibrations, both, in Nin’s writing and Varèse’s music, will be of great importance for the analysis of *Nocturnal I* unpacked in the following sections.

There was, however, also another side to Varèse’s ambition to find new instruments or forms of musical expression. In 1917, Varèse dreamed of “instruments obedient to my thought and which with their contribution of a whole new world of unsuspected sounds, will lend themselves to the exigencies of my inner rhythm.”<sup>90</sup> These ‘inner rhythms’ had nothing to do with the introspections of the Romantics; and they were not to be mistaken for Nin’s ‘unconscious life’, although it shows a certain resemblance with Jungian ideas of the collective unconscious. Varèse favoured electronic sound, because it was like a telepathic transmission which gave him ultimate control by cutting out the middle men, i.e. the musicians and conductor. Performers and conductor, he believed, “used music simply as a means of self-glorification”, decided “what to play and how to play it”, “regardless of the intention

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<sup>87</sup> Varèse cited in Mattis in 1992, p.576.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 3, 1979, p.89.

<sup>90</sup> Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music: Technology, Music, and Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p.3.

of the music”, which ignored the fact that “the best judge of a piece of music is its composer.”<sup>91</sup> Taped sound was also easier to direct in the performance space and more effective in reaching the audience than orchestral music. It could be pre-recorded and played back through a system of surround speakers to enclose the audience from all sides.

Olivia Mattis explains, “Violence and control over the audience were both inextricable parts of Varèse’s artistic conception.”<sup>92</sup> He wanted to “excite the imagination” and “simulate the emotions” to engage the audience. He explained in 1954 that he wanted to “[e]liminate all repose from the spectator” and make them engage with the pieces to establish “contact [...] between the man who creates and the man who listens or sees.”<sup>93</sup> Varèse not only focused on taped sounds to achieve this aim, but tried to combine different art forms. From the 1930s, Varèse abandoned conventional concepts of composition and began employing multimedia effects to awaken emotions and primal instincts, especially with the unfinished pieces *The Astronomer* (also known under the working titles: *The-One-All-Alone*, *Sirius*, *Espace*, and *L'Astronome*) and *Déserts*.<sup>94</sup> Mattis describes them as “space-age theatrical production, combining text, music, colour, movement and projected lights or film.”<sup>95</sup> Not surprisingly, he was also interested in visual music, especially the films of Oskar Fischinger. He even approached Walt Disney after seeing *Fantasia*, suggesting a collaboration on a piece of animated music.<sup>96</sup> *The Astronomer* dealt with a “destructive star which both exhilarates and threatens the world’s

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<sup>91</sup> Varèse in Michael Sperling, ‘Varèse and Contemporary Music’, *Trend* 2/3 (May-June 1934), pp. 124-28, cited from Felix Meyer, in Meyer and Zimmermann 2006, p.82.

<sup>92</sup> Mattis 1992, p.572.

<sup>93</sup> Varèse cited from Mattis in Meyer and Zimmermann 2006, p.563.

<sup>94</sup> *Poème électronique* was his only realised multimedia piece. See for instance MacDonald 2003 or Mattis 1992 for discussions of the genesis of *The One All Alone*.

<sup>95</sup> Mattis 1992, p.570.

<sup>96</sup> See Mattis 1992.

population.”<sup>97</sup> His wife, the translator Louise Varèse described the plot as “an apocalyptic drama of hate and terror ending in an apotheosis of light.”<sup>98</sup> Her husband’s goal was to “make an audience feel the ‘powerful joy’ of an intense, terrifying, salutary emotion that would annihilate, at least momentarily, the personal ego.”<sup>99</sup> He wanted to create “exaltation, ecstasy, terror, everything, except a morbid or decadent feeling”.<sup>100</sup> In a letter to his wife he wrote: “Don't forget the aspect of returning to the primitive: pounding dance of fear, almost voodooistic prophetic cries, shaking, twitching, and the ending as grand as the heavens. Apocalypse. Apocalypse”.<sup>101</sup> The piece would end with the sound of factory sirens and airplane propellers which created an unbearable noise to terrify the audience and render it groggy.<sup>102</sup> Powerful spotlights “would be turned abruptly down into the auditorium blinding the audience and filling them with such panic that they would not even be able to run away.”<sup>103</sup> We can see a shared interest in the nurturing effect different art forms could have on each other in order to create a new art form that stirred all the senses. But Varèse’s idea was performed with much greater violence.

Narrative became increasingly moved to the background in Varèse’s work. In 1954, when asked whether the succession of images he had planned to project during the performance of *Déserts* were supposed to tell a story, Varèse answered: “No. No. To tell nothing. Simply to suggest. Awaken the imagination.”<sup>104</sup> Words were important

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<sup>97</sup> Barber 1993. See also Barber, *Artaud: The Screaming Body*, (London: Creation, 2001).

<sup>98</sup> Louise Varèse, from ‘Statements by Edgard Varèse’, assembled by Louise Varèse, in *Soundings*, #10, ed. Peter Garland, Berkeley, 1976. Cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.91.

<sup>99</sup> According to Louise Varèse’s account in the *Varèse: A Looking Glass Diary. Vol. 1, 1883-1928* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1973). See MacDonald 2003, p.218.

<sup>100</sup> Letter sent on 15 July 1930, Mattis 1992, p.571.

<sup>101</sup> Edgard Varèse cited by Mattis 1992, p.571.

<sup>102</sup> See Mattis 1992.

<sup>103</sup> Brassai, ‘Edgard Varèse où la musique sidérale’, article in the Paris weekly *Arts-Spectacles*, issue of 8-14 December 1954, cited in MacDonald 2003, p.231. Louise Varèse cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.91.

<sup>104</sup> Varèse cited from Mattis 1992, p.563.

aspects of his compositions, although the extent to which he used them in librettos changed significantly throughout his career. Varèse's early compositions were based on poetry by Paul Verlaine, Wolfgang Goethe and Alfred Tennyson. He also composed the opera *Martin Paz* after a novella by Jules Verne.<sup>105</sup> While his early work owed much to the symphonic poem of nineteenth-century program music, his music became increasingly more abstract. This is also reflected in the illustrious list of avant-garde writers he wanted to collaborate with, including Anais Nin, Antonin Artaud, Henry Miller and Henri Michaux.

Mattis, like various other Varèse-scholars, has compared his epic productions to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>106</sup> Berthold Brecht famously rejected Wagner's total work of art for its totalitarian potential lulling the audience into obedience instead of waking their awareness.<sup>107</sup> With his emphasis on overwhelming the audience and rendering them 'groggy', Varèse has been accused of the same crime.<sup>108</sup> In the Wagnerian concept of multimedia the sister arts were more or less synchronised.<sup>109</sup> But according to this definition, Varèse's multimedia conception differed from Wagner's, despite a shared aesthetic. In Varèse's projects the individual elements were consciously juxtaposed to create an estrangement effect; they only achieved

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<sup>105</sup> Nanz in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.27.

<sup>106</sup> Mattis 1992. Alejo Carpentier linked Varèse's *The One All Alone/Astronomer* to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He wrote, "for this monster opera ... Varèse had substituted for the temple of Bayreuth heaven knows how many wagons criss-crossing an entire continent". Cited in MacDonald 2003, p.233-4. Anne Jostkleigrewe argues, "theatre, pantomime, dance, literature, and electronic equipment were to be united with music to create a multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk*". Anne Jostkleigrewe, 'Reaching for the Stars: From The One-All-Along to Espace', pp.211-237, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.211. Klaus Kropfinger argues that Varese "inherited Beethoven and Wagner as a mandatory historical legacy and assimilated them into his own identity". Kropfinger in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.163.

<sup>107</sup> See for instance Simon Shaw-Miller's discussion of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in *Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage* (Yale 2002).

<sup>108</sup> See Adrian Curtin 2010, pp.250-262.

<sup>109</sup> See Shaw-Miller 2002.



synthesis temporarily “for dramatic effect” as Varese explained.<sup>110</sup> He argued that “[s]uch contrasts achieved through the synchronization of simultaneous, unrelated elements would create a dissociation of ideas which would excite the imagination and simulate the emotions.”<sup>111</sup>

Mattis described Varèse’s juxtaposition of visual and auditory elements as an extension of his concept of ‘zones of intensities’ that Varèse had explained first in a lecture given in 1936.<sup>112</sup> Zones of intensities are ‘acoustical arrangements’ which are differentiated by various timbres and loudness. *Timbre* describes the difference in sound when different instruments play the same note at the same loudness. The traditional role of timbre was changed “from being incidental, anecdotal, sensual or picturesque” to becoming “an agent of delineation” which causes “non-blending”.<sup>113</sup> Jonathan W. Bernard points out that “Varèse shunned the homogeneity of sound, the blending of the various instrumental choirs that is instantly recognizable as a hallmark of nineteenth-century style.”<sup>114</sup> He used timbre to “enlarge the listener’s sense of musical space by emphasising the differences between instrumental groups.”<sup>115</sup> This method resembled an audio-visual collage and was reflected in his approach to composition. In her diary, Nin described Varèse’s musical notations as “composed of fragments of music, cut and re-pasted like a collage.”<sup>116</sup> She wrote:

“They are in a state of revision, resembling a collage: all fragments, which he arranges, rearranges, displaces, cuts, glues, re-glues, pins, and clips until they achieve a towering

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<sup>110</sup> Varèse cited in Abraham Skulsky, “Varèse Set to Launch Electronic Music Age,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 Jan. 1954, sec. 4, p. 5, cited in Mattis 1992, p.562.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Mattis 1992, p.562.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Jonathan W. Bernard, ‘Varèse’s Space, Varèse’s Time’, pp.149-155, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.150.

<sup>115</sup> Bernard in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.150.

<sup>116</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 3, p.65.

construction. [...] They are in a state of flux, mobility, flexibility, always ready to fly into a new metamorphosis, free, obeying no monotonous sequence or order, except his own.”<sup>117</sup>

Once again, Nin highlights aspects in Varèse’s work which correspond to her own quasi post-modernist notion of the ideal art form (and self) determined by multiplicity and flux, and her modernist idea of the artist as alchemist and creator-genius.<sup>118</sup> Varèse is portrayed like a futuristic alchemist who transforms these fragments into art in his laboratory. We will see in the following chapter how Nin would negotiate these ideas many years later, in her novel *Collages* and *The Novel of the Future*. But the motivation behind Nin’s idea of a juxtaposition of fragments was far removed from Varèse’s aim to overwhelm the audience. Varèse was not an alchemist who turned worthless matter into objects of beauty, but an arsonist who combined different chemicals to create a bomb.

At this point I want to introduce another avant-garde *enfant terrible*: Antonin Artaud. Scholars of music have pointed out the parallels between Varèse and Artaud’s ideas, although they disagree as to who influenced whom. The composer who was searching for ‘the bomb that would make the musical world explode’ found he had lots in common with the playwright who wanted to throw bombs in the faces of his audience.<sup>119</sup> Both sought to shake what MacDonald described as the “stultifying mediocrity of reactionary bourgeois culture, with its formalized canons of good taste.”<sup>120</sup> Like Nin and Varèse, Artaud believed that a neglect of the body and instinct over the intellect had deadened people. His theatre of cruelty aimed to shock

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<sup>117</sup> Nin, Journals, vol.3, 1979, p.157.

<sup>118</sup> Lucy Bradnock detected a similar dualism between the postmodern theme of fragmentation and the modernist notion of the artist-genius in Artaud’s aesthetic. Bradnock 2010.

<sup>119</sup> Artaud wrote: “I realised that the only language I could use on an audience was to take bombs out of my pockets and throw them in their faces in a gesture of unmistakable aggression”. Artaud, letter to André Breton, 1947. Lee Jamieson, p.xv, *Artaud on Theatre*, ed. Claude Schumacher (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), p.205.

<sup>120</sup> MacDonald 2003, xvi-xvii.

the audience into awareness, liberate their repressed emotions and awaken suppressed primitive instincts numbed by civilization.<sup>121</sup> In Nin's account of seeing Artaud lecture in 1933, she explained that he wanted to give the audience 'the experience itself, the plague itself, so they will be terrified, and awaken'. He exclaimed, "They do not realise they are dead."<sup>122</sup>

Artaud was frustrated that conventional language was unable to express his thoughts, which corresponded with Varèse's search for new instruments that connected to his 'inner rhythms', as well as Nin's experiments with language. For Artaud, writing was "about acting upon not about capturing or representing the world."<sup>123</sup> As opposed to Nin, dreams for Artaud were only important in that they were "beyond the jurisdiction of rational thought and its manipulations", unfiltered expressions.<sup>124</sup> He wanted to separate image from representation and create a pure image like the ones we see in dreams. Nin shared Artaud's mistrust of language in its capability of expressing outer and inner reality. Both focused on the body and senses, dreams and instincts. But as I will explain shortly, Artaud's violent vision was antithetical to Nin's aesthetic based on harmony and fusion.

Artaud distanced himself from psychoanalysis and the surrealist aim to tap the unconscious through dreams and automatism. He wanted to 'push aside the mind entirely, to plunge deeper into the human psyche and to destroy the dualism of the

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<sup>121</sup> Podnieks 2000, pp.322–323.

<sup>122</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.200.

<sup>123</sup> Lesley Stern, 'All Writing is Pigshit', pp.75-82, in Scheer 2000, p.75.

<sup>124</sup> Sara Poole, *'The Utmost Response': A Comparison of the Writing and Thought of D.H. Lawrence and Antonin Artaud*, (unpublished) PhD thesis, The University of Reading, 1989, p.198.

conscious and unconscious'.<sup>125</sup> For Artaud the form of theatre had the greatest potential to achieve his aims.<sup>126</sup> Susan Sontag writes,

“Unlike poetry, an art made out of one material (words), theatre uses a plurality of materials: words, light, music, bodies, furniture, clothes. Unlike cinema, an art using only a plurality of languages (images, words, music), theatre is carnal, corporeal. Theatre brings together the most diverse means – gesture and verbal language, static objects and movement in three-dimensional space.”<sup>127</sup>

It is well documented that Artaud's experience of seeing Balinese dances presented at the Paris Colonial Exposition in August 1931 had a great impact on his idea of theatre expressed in *Theatre of Cruelty*.<sup>128</sup> Dance critic and historian André Levinson emphasised the multimedia aesthetic of the Balinese theatre which he described as a “performance being born from the very soul of the music”.<sup>129</sup> He notes the importance of the gamelan orchestra which becomes part of the performance. Music and performance are linked by a dancer who re-produces “the gestures made by the instruments” and becomes “a visual, plastic, translation of the enchantment of the ear, which has been lulled by the uniformity of the rhythm.”<sup>130</sup> Like Varèse and other modernists, he was fascinated by non-Western cultures and ancient civilisations.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas J. Donahue, ‘Artaud and Arrabal: The Aesthetic of the Erotic’, in *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theatre*, ed. Gene A. Plunka (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), p.224.

<sup>126</sup> Artaud was arguing for “the fullest use of spectacle and theatrical devices including sounds, lights, colours and rhythmic movement”. MacDonald 2003, p.235-6.

<sup>127</sup> Susan Sontag, Introduction to *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988), p.xxxi. Sontag discusses links between the ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ and the Gesamtkunstwerk in *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, ed. Edward Scheer (London: Routledge 2004), p.88.

<sup>128</sup> Artaud described his impressions in his chapter ‘On the Balinese Theatre’ from *The Theatre and Its Double*. See also Nicola Savarèse, ‘Antonin Artaud sees Balinese Theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition’ for a detailed analysis of the impact of the Balinese Theatre on Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, in *TDR*, volume 45, issue 3, 2001, pp.51-77.

<sup>129</sup> André Levinson quoted by Savarèse, p.67.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> He lectured in Mexico in 1936 and spent time with the Indians living in the Tarahumara region. See for instance Uri Hertz, ‘Artaud in Mexico’, in “*Fragmentos*”, 25, p. 011/017, Florianópolis, July - December 2003. Bettina Knapp, *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision* (New York: Davis Lewis, 1969).

Echoing the performances he saw at the exposition as well as the ancient rituals of non-western civilisations, Artaud described his ideal theatre as a place where

“[...] physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator [...] A theatre which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, .... induces trance, as the dances of Dervishes induced trance, and that addresses itself to the organism by precise instruments, by the same means as those of certain tribal music cures [...].”<sup>132</sup>

Artaud believed that making the audience sit through his cruel spectacles would lead to a catharsis or purging of destructive and potentially harmful ‘repressed impulses’ which he compared to the effect of the plague and would make them “less likely to harbour criminal desires”.<sup>133</sup> MacDonald suggests that there may have been a cross-fertilisation of ideas between Artaud and Varèse.<sup>134</sup> He writes,

“It is in fact a moot point to what extent Artaud might have derived some of his own theatrical ideas of the Thirties from his consequent discussions with Varèse about music. (Or, indeed, whether Varèse had seen and been influenced by any of Artaud’s productions for the Alfred Jarry Theatre in its 1928-1930 seasons.).”<sup>135</sup>

MacDonald suggests that Artaud’s 1935 production of Shelly’s *The Cenci*, which used loudspeakers to subject the audience to sonic attacks, “seems to have picked up resonances of the Varèsian aesthetic.”<sup>136</sup> In his spectacles, the spoken word would be

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Odette and Alain Virmaux, *Artaud Vivant* (Paris : Nouvelles éditions Oswald, 1980). Robert Piencikowski suggests that Artaud and Henry Michaux ignited Varèse’s interest in non-western civilisations. Piencikowski, ‘Between the text and the margin : Varèse and Pierre Boulez, 1952-1965’, in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.388. But MacDonald argues, drawing on Louise Varèse’s *Looking Glass Diary*, that Varèse had a longstanding interest in the ancient cultures of the Amerindians that reached back to his early career. See MacDonald, p.213ff.

<sup>132</sup> Antonin Artaud, ‘No More Masterpieces’, *The Theatre and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

<sup>133</sup> See Curtin 2010.

<sup>134</sup> MacDonald 2003 and Curtin 2010.

<sup>135</sup> MacDonald 2003, p.235-6.

<sup>136</sup> MacDonald 2003, p.235-6.

consigned to the background in favour of other effects.<sup>137</sup> In reverse, Stephen Barber describes Varèse's music as "a sonic parallel to Artaud's theatre, with its sudden percussive movements and fragmentations, and its explorations of space."<sup>138</sup>

Both Artaud and Varèse treated sound like a 'material substance' which should act upon the audience and control them. Sara Poole explained that for Artaud, sound "was directly to affect the spectator's entire organism, acting upon him as music acts on snakes, via rhythmic vibration, or like acupuncture, pin-pointing from the outside, and healing, deep organic disorder."<sup>139</sup> It was far removed from conventional music and supposed to "wildly trample[s] rhythms underfoot", "pile-drive[s] sound", and 'seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility.'<sup>140</sup> Curtin explains that instead of using sound effects and music merely to promote the narrative as in conventional theatre, in Artaud's theatre "sound attained foreground status, and functioned as a dynamic, destabilizing agent."<sup>141</sup> It was to be used as "a physical, material and tactile force to affect the nervous systems" of the audience, "break down their constitutions, and to attune them to the stage spectacle and to one another."<sup>142</sup>

Varèse was fascinated especially by Artaud's ideas on language and considered him the ideal candidate to write a libretto for *The Astronomer*.<sup>143</sup> Artaud began writing a

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<sup>137</sup> Jostkleigrewe in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.219.

<sup>138</sup> Stephen Barber, *Blows and Bombs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p.57

<sup>139</sup> See Poole 1989.

<sup>140</sup> Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, transl. Mary C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), from now on quoted as *TD*, p.91, cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.84-5.

<sup>141</sup> Curtin 2010, p.256.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Jostkleigrewe in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.214; Authors he had approached before Artaud included Jean Giono, Robert Desnos, Alejo Carpentier, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and e.e. cummings. But neither of the aforementioned was able to fulfil the utopian ideas of the composer. MacDonald suggests: "The proposed stage work is called different things by different writers: most commonly *The One All Alone*, *L'Astronome* (or *Astronomer*), and especially *Espace* – and these three titles are frequently said to refer to one and the same project'. He suggests that they were 'two more or less parallel projects: a 'stage' work, [...], and a 'concert' work, [...]. They may well have been in

libretto which he called *There Is No More Sky*. Similar to Varèse's zones of intensity, Artaud envisaged a "layered spatial arrangement of light and colour to counterpoint Varèse's music" as Barber has put it.<sup>144</sup> Barber writes that his libretto described a "physically grotesque and terrified population" whose "continual shouts were to be driven to a level of hallucinatory exaggeration by the sudden addition of other elements".<sup>145</sup> Artaud explained: "All these texts are to be cut with passages of screams, of noises, of sonorous tornadoes which drown everything."<sup>146</sup> But Artaud abandoned the draft after four movements.<sup>147</sup> Varèse was reportedly disappointed with the script when he finally received it.<sup>148</sup> Mattis argues that one of the problems for him was apparently that the language did not seem radical enough.<sup>149</sup> Dyson on the other hand suggests that maybe "Artaud simply went too far in articulating the devastating but logical outcome his new mode of communication presupposed."<sup>150</sup>

While there was a long gap between abandoning *The Astronomer* and Varèse's preparations for *Nocturnal* in the mid-1950s, his selection of Nin's *House of Incest* for the libretto may suggest that he was still occupied with ideas similar to Artaud's. Artaud's ambition to create a "poetry of the senses" and a theatre in which a "violent, excessive *mise en scène* takes precedence over the literary text", resonates strongly in *Nocturnal I*.<sup>151</sup> Whether Artaud influenced Varèse or vice versa, or

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some respect different realizations of the same conception but, though neither was ever completed, [...]". MacDonald 2003, pp.217-18.

<sup>144</sup> Barber 1993, p.56.

<sup>145</sup> Barber 1993, p.56.

<sup>146</sup> The idea of the spoken word in collision with the scream would be explored again, much later, in Artaud's work with his 1947-8 radio recording *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*. Barber 2001, p.56.

<sup>147</sup> Barber 2001, p.56.

<sup>148</sup> He was known to be hard to please and his utopian ideas were unrealistic. For an account see writer Alejo Carpentier's recollections quoted by MacDonald 2003, p.233; Jostkleigrew explains that his "obstinacy and his demand to intervene in the writing of the text caused even the most promising of his collaborations [...] to come to grief". Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.

<sup>149</sup> See Mattis 1992, p.572. Jostkleigrew in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.214.

<sup>150</sup> Curtin 2010, p.96.

<sup>151</sup> Curtin 2010.

whether both arrived at similar ideas at the same time remains ambiguous. But I want to suggest that concerning his choice of transgressional subject matter, i.e. incest, and his experimental use of language, Varèse was certainly treading in Artaud's footsteps.

### ***Edgard Varèse's Nocturnal I (1961)***

Contrary to Nin's account, it was not reading *House of Incest* that gave Varèse the idea for *Nocturnal*. MacDonald suggests that the version premiered in 1961 was only a fragment of a larger project Varèse had been working on since the early 1950's, which means before he approached Nin.<sup>152</sup> This is important, because it demonstrates that from the beginning, Varèse had no intention of setting Nin's poem to music in a conventional style; it was to be merged within a larger framework of a pre-conceived concept.

In October 1954, Varèse had first told Odile Vivier about a concept for a new vocal piece with the temporary title *Nuits*, and mentioned that he was searching for "an appropriate text or group of texts" to work with. Vivier writes that he wanted "to create a synthesis with a very strong tension, at one and the same time erotic, mystic, spiritual and mysterious."<sup>153</sup> Varèse was looking for "strong texts, percussive words, the cries of the night considered in all their aspects."<sup>154</sup> His fascination for such a morbid theme may have sprung from his experience with severe depression which had stifled his creativity for more than a decade prior to his work on *Nocturnal I*. But there were other factors which may have affected his choice.

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<sup>152</sup> MacDonald 2003, p.384.

<sup>153</sup> Odile Vivier cited from MacDonald 2003, p.384.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.



It took Varèse a long time to find a suitable text, although the concept for his new composition was far less ambitious compared to *L'Astronome*. According to Vivier, Varèse had considered using a poem by Henri Michaux, writing by Novalis and even *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, before he settled for Nin's *House of Incest*. MacDonald suggests that Michaux must have been a firm runner up for *Nocturnal* as in January 1961 Varèse used the title of Michaux's poem *Dans la Nuit* as the working title for what would later be *Nocturnal*, although it already used text from Nin's *House of Incest*.<sup>155</sup> *Dans La Nuit* was a short poem which described night terrors. Like Nin and Artaud, Michaux was looking for new forms of expression. He regarded the word as limiting and exclaimed passionately, in the fiery manner in which Varèse proclaimed his attack on the American music world: "Down with our swaggering languages, with their rigid, enslaving syntax and grammar! Let's have no alphabet – no words."<sup>156</sup>

Part of Michaux's project to improve written language was to musicalise his prose. In an interview with poet John Ashbery, Michaux explained that both his paintings and his writing, "try to express music".<sup>157</sup> In the end, however, Varèse chose Nin's *House of Incest*. There are a number of factors which may have supported Varèse in making that decision. With their musical structure, both poems were an ideal foundation for a work aimed at achieving a synthesis of music and words; however, Nin's novella was far more musically orientated. Most importantly, Nin's dark scenario about a woman trapped in her own nightmares must have seemed a much

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<sup>155</sup> MacDonald 2003 p.385.

<sup>156</sup> Michaux cited by Catherine de Zegher, 'Adventures of Ink', in *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, ed. de Zegher (New York: The Drawing Center, 2000), p.168.

<sup>157</sup> John Ashbery, 'An Interview with Henri Michaux', in de Zegher 2000, p.164. His search for new forms of expression was linked with an esoteric quest for the inner life. See Caroline Douglas, 'Henri Michaux: The Distant Interior', in *Henri Michaux*, ed. Anthony Spira, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1999). He was not interested in the psychoanalytic notion of unconscious as place of the repressed, which linked him to Varèse. Nin also admired Michaux's writing and was trying to get his work published in the US together with Louise Varèse who translated his poetry into English.

stronger theme, not to mention the erotic undercurrents and Christian mysticism around crucifixion and resurrection. In short, the poem had all the necessary ingredients. A look at the actual composition, however, also suggests further motivations.

If we think of Varèse's high ambitions to break with musical traditions, the instrumentation for *Nocturnal* appears strangely conventional. It was written for one soprano solo, a chorus of bass voices and a small standard orchestra including eleven wind instruments (piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinets, bassoon, horn, trumpets, trombones), a piano, strings and a percussion section.<sup>158</sup> There were no light effects, recorded sounds or projections. Only a few years earlier, in 1952, Varèse had announced in a letter to André Jolivet that he no longer believed in "the sweat of conductors and the flying storms of virtuosos' dandruff", and that he was "only interested in recorded music".<sup>159</sup>

By the time he started work on *Nocturnal*, developments in electronic recording technology should have made it possible for him to compose a work which was, as MacDonald writes, "absolutely unfettered by the limitations of conventional instruments".<sup>160</sup> The late 1950s also saw the emergence of expanded cinema which Varèse was interested in. He could have turned Nin's poem into a multimedia spectacle even more advanced than his *Poème électronique*. Instead, *Nocturnal I* was conceived as a vocal work, although not in a traditional sense.

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<sup>158</sup> According to Chou Wen-Chung, sketches show that his original plan had been to use "a large wind and percussion ensemble, perhaps even with electronic sounds". Preface to the published study score of *Nocturnal* (New York: Colfranc Music Publishing Company, 1969), cited in MacDonald 2003, p.383.

<sup>159</sup> Varèse cited in Mattis 1992, p.558.

<sup>160</sup> MacDonald 2003, p.371.

Although Nin made it sound as though Varèse had adapted her entire prose poem, he only used fragments of the text and condensed them into a short poem. He only selected certain words and phrases which he then collaged together interspersed with nonsensical syllables, so-called glossolia. The words and phrases were sung by a soprano and were countered by the baritone of an all-male chorus who chanted glossolia and few words. Varèse had already toyed with the idea of using a choir howling ‘voodoo monosyllables mixed with *naniga* and Indian words and magic incantations’ for *The Astronomer* which pointed towards his aversion for using the human voice in a traditional way.<sup>161</sup> For *Espace*, an outgrowth of *The Astronomer* project which occupied Varèse from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s, Mattis writes that the “choral text was to consist of leftist political slogans in diverse languages, along with ‘laughing, humming, yelling, chanting, mumbling, hammered declamation’.”<sup>162</sup> This also added a shamanic tone which may be connected to his interest in the archaic and mysticism. Narrative was reduced to a minimum, forcing the audience to use their imagination and engage more deeply with the sound. The lines he chose for *Nocturnal* were:

“You belong to the night / I rise, I always rise after the crucifixion, / dark dark dark / bread and the wafer / Womb and seed and egg, / Wailing of the unborn, / Perfume and sperm / I have lost my brother. / (it) grow(s) again / Faces, (in) the windows / One window without light / dark dark dark / asleep asleep / Floating again / crucifixion / Shadow of death / I kissed his shadow“

Chou Wen-Chung who completed the piece after Varèse’s death describes *Nocturnal I* as a “phantasmagorical world” of sound phenomena – “a world of sounds remembered and imagined, conjuring up sights and moods now personal, now

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<sup>161</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Varèse Vivant*, 1931, cited in MacDonald 2003, p.230.

<sup>162</sup> Mattis 1992, p.573.

Dantesque, now enigmatic”. He writes that “one should not read too much into a composer's choice of words”, although he suggests that there may be autobiographical references relating to his outsider position in the music world:

“knowing Varèse's unique career, [how] could one resist wondering about the line, ‘I rise, I always rise after crucifixion’? What about the mocking, threatening, babbling emanations from the chorus, often directed to sound ‘as if from underground’ and ‘harsh’? Then there are the sounds remembered – the liquid beat on the wood block, the shrill whistling of the winds, the tenacious shimmering of the strings – the insistent sound of a mass of shuffling feet, the flourishes of drum beats, the sudden crashing outbursts.”<sup>163</sup>

Wen-Chung downgrades Nin’s poem to mere raw material to be shaped by the composer in the service of ‘pure music’. This treatment of language as music described by Wen-Chung points to his work of the 1940s, after he abandoned *The Astronomer*. Varèse stopped using electronic equipment and turned his back on monumental compositions.<sup>164</sup> But his use of words became more experimental. Instead of collaborating with authors, he started employing pre-existing texts and poems for his librettos, sometimes collaging together sentences from different authors interspersed with nonsensical sounds.<sup>165</sup> Language, she argues, was treated like “purely musical material” which went hand in hand with a “growing independence of the music”. His concept of a synthesis of the arts, she explains, “gradually reverted to pure music”.<sup>166</sup> She writes that glossolia gave him the “latitude” he needed to musicalise language without using an author. He also used disembodied voices instead of performers on stage which to her points in a similar

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<sup>163</sup> Wen-Chung cited on <http://www.maurograziani.org/wordpress/archives/tag/varese>.

<sup>164</sup> See Jostkleigrew in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006.

<sup>165</sup> According to Louise Varèse, he called words he coined for *Espace* “syllables of intensity”, Jostkleigrew in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006, p.217.

<sup>166</sup> Jostkleigrew in Meyer and Zimmerman 2006 , p.219.

direction: to focus the attention of the audience on the music.<sup>167</sup> She suggests that his search for a “seamless union of text and music” in collaborations with writers may have been modelled on Debussy whose work he had praised for its ‘perfect marriage of words and music’.<sup>168</sup> This suggestion is confirmed, when we look at *Nocturnal I*.

Peter Evans argues that there are “vivid connections” between Nin’s *House of Incest* and the “musical ideas” in *Nocturnal* which lie mainly in timbre. While this evokes Wen-Chou’s viewpoint, Peter Evans does not dismiss Nin’s libretto so radically.<sup>169</sup> Evans argues that the “language and symbolism of *House of Incest* relate well to the world of aural phenomena”.<sup>170</sup> As a musicologist, however, Evans only focuses on musical form in Nin’s writing and ignores the complex psychological subtext of the poem. He regards the poem’s line “sound within sound” as a key-symbol for timbre and argues that the poem “uses words so profoundly related to music (I hear, I sing, I whistle, sounds, bells, music itself, notes, guitars, resonance, [...], etc) that it is obvious Nin developed her short “novel” (72 pages) around timbral allusions.”<sup>171</sup> He explains convincingly that Varèse recreates these literary resonances through rich timbres, e.g. the piano played with ‘depressed’ sustain pedal accompanying the vocals and other instruments playing the same sound. Timbre was also central to the creation of ‘zones of intensity’, which determine the dynamic of *Nocturnal I*, just like Varèse’s previous works. The juxtaposition of different ‘sonic profiles’ creates the emotional rollercoaster ride effect described earlier. The soprano voice and chorus can also be regarded as part of this scheme. The high register of the soprano is juxtaposed by the dark baritone voices of the male chorus chanting mainly

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p.217. Also MacDonald 2003, p.41.

<sup>169</sup> Evans 2004, p.53.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p.54.

glossolia. Not surprisingly, Varèse called the glossolia ‘syllables of intensity’.<sup>172</sup>

Varèse singled out the sonorous quality of individual words in Nin’s text matched with glossolia to produce what Curtin described as “acousmatic sounds”. It is described by him as “numberless vibration” which is ruled by motion.<sup>173</sup>

This emphasis on sonority corresponded with Artaud’s idea of language and sound in theatrical performance, which, as Varèse-scholars pointed out, fascinated Varèse.<sup>174</sup> Artaud believed in the ability of sound to “fascinate and ensnare the organs”, and recognised that words were capable of “creating music in their own right” and “independent of their concrete meaning.”<sup>175</sup> In *The Theatre of Cruelty* he described a constant ‘sonorisation’ by which “sounds, noises, cries are chosen first for their vibratory quality, then for what they represent.”<sup>176</sup> Dyson explains that for Artaud sound is regarded as antidote to the “despised voice speaking language” which he sees as a manifestation of the arbitrariness or ‘rupture’ of representation in conventional verbal language.<sup>177</sup> In his preface to *Theatre and its Double*, Artaud writes that ‘the rupture between things and words, between things and ideas and the signs that are their representation’ is responsible for ‘the confusion of the times’.<sup>178</sup> He dreamed of a new language which was ‘intended for the senses and independent of speech’.<sup>179</sup> Dyson explained that this new language was “constituted by voice, music, gesture, volumes, objects movements and forces.”<sup>180</sup> It was to express

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<sup>172</sup> Carpentier in 1931, cited from MacDonald 2003, p.230.

<sup>173</sup> Curtin 2010, p.87.

<sup>174</sup> See for instance Stephen Barber’s chapter on Artaud’s radio play, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* in Barber 2001.

<sup>175</sup> Artaud, *TD*, p.91, cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.85.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. . Nin, *Novel*, pp.13 and 101.

<sup>177</sup> Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.84.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Artaud, *TD*, p.37, cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.84.

<sup>180</sup> Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.84.

thoughts which spoken language could not contain, which he defined as “subterranean current of impressions, correspondences, and analogies.”<sup>181</sup>

Artaud began juxtaposing sung words with screams and glossolia, in a similar way to Varèse.<sup>182</sup> Dyson explains that he regarded his language as an ‘incantation’, which means that there was never a complete rupture between signifier and signified. His “poetry in space” used the effect of onomatopoeia by which “the mechanisms of representation” may be disrupted, but “speech is still able to ‘manifest something’ through a non-arbitrary relationship between word and thing.”<sup>183</sup> She places this desire for ‘non-arbitrariness’ into the context of Western philosophy, especially Plato’s divine ur-language which would “phonetically correspond to the nature of the thing”. Behind Plato’s idea of language and sound is the thought that the voice evokes the ‘essence of things’, permanent forms which are not subject to change. But, she recalls, behind Artaud’s vibration lies nothing which he conceives of as “a unique sound, defining note”.<sup>184</sup>

Sonorous vibrations created in speech and sound became an important means to penetrate the body and nervous system of the audience like a plague-like contagion – an aesthetic arguably derived in part from Balinese gamelan music. For the sound design of Artaud’s 1935 production of *Les Cenci* at the Théâtre des Folies-Wagram in Paris, he used a ‘proto-surround-sound loudspeaker’ system to attack the audience from all sides with vibrational sounds.<sup>185</sup> These vibrations were produced by pre-recorded sound cues including short pieces of music and sound effects featuring “cathedral bells, metronomes ..., recorded voices and whispers, wind and thunder

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<sup>181</sup> Artaud, *TD*, p.38, cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.84.

<sup>182</sup> Barber 2001, p.56.

<sup>183</sup> Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.85.

<sup>184</sup> Artaud, *TD*, p.52, cited from Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.86.

<sup>185</sup> Curtin 2010, p.257.

effects, [...], percussive ‘factory’ sounds made by various metal objects [...].”<sup>186</sup> The sonic vibrations touched the bodies of the audience physically and manifested an “embodied perception of cruelty” which united the audience in a “process that privileges affect over cognition”, as Curtin has put it.<sup>187</sup> He argues that Artaud’s use of sonic technologies to affect the audience on a physiological level prefigured “the vibrational force and ultrasonic ambitions of modern sonic warfare”.<sup>188</sup> He argues that despite the cathartic intentions of Artaud’s approach, his “conception of a ‘cruel’ auditory event - sonic bombardment intended to provoke communal *ekstasis* - is uncomfortably close to the way in which the Nazi Party utilized music and sound in public spaces in Germany in the early 1930s.”<sup>189</sup> Dyson suggests that Varèse was similarly concerned with “the effect of sound on the audience, with its capacity for violence and control, and also with its object-like projection in space.”<sup>190</sup>

We can see similar concerns in Nin’s emphasis on rhythm, texture and flux in language, especially when we think of her metaphor of the bells of Atlantis for the vibrational, physical quality of sound as described in the prologue to *House of Incest*. Apart from their shared interest in Balinese gamelan, Nin was also interested in percussive sounds and their impact on the body. For a recording of *House of Incest* she used hypnotic drumming to accompany Josephine Premice reading from her novel. In *The Novel of the Future*, Nin draws a close link between drum beats and their military use. She explained that “From the early days when it was found that the drum beat affected soldiers because it paralleled the beating of the heart, rhythm has been a way to influence impetus. Rhythm in poetic prose has the same intent.”

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Dyson in Scheer 2002, p.91.



She wrote about the trance-inducing ancient rituals of Mexico and Indian fiestas where colours, rhythm and music affected the listener physically.<sup>191</sup>

Varèse placed a strong emphasis on sonority in his treatment of Nin's novella, in his choice of phrases and his use of onomatopoeic glossolia. But these are not the only aspects in which he resembled Artaud. His libretto still retained signifying properties, something which has been downplayed by the aforementioned scholars and composers. We have to remember Varèse's emphasis on creating a synthesis with strong tensions. The effort he put into finding a suitable text for his last project suggests that he must have been looking for more than just a text with sonorous language. Many poems would have fulfilled this category, and it would have been much easier to compose a text himself. I suggest that it was the transgressive content of Nin's poem, which may have attracted him just as much as her sonorous language.

Varèse cut Nin's fluid, stream-of-consciousness writing down to a string of powerful phrases and words; together, these lines create a tense micro-drama focusing on sin – the illicit desire between brother and sister – and absolution. The setting is the nocturnal realm of the dream established by the words 'dark' and 'asleep', the former being repeated several times in staccato. In connection with the phrase 'shadow of death', however, darkness becomes something threatening, like the stifling atmosphere of the house described in Nin's novella. The phrase 'floating again' refers to the fluidity and flux with which Nin portrayed the unconscious. But the violent eruptions of sounds and cut-up words seems to state the opposite of flow; it is far removed from the gentle, trance-inducing ebb and flow of the Barron's electronic sound in *Bells of Atlantis*.

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<sup>191</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.90.

Nin's 'birth' metaphor is evoked in the phrases 'Womb and seed and egg' and 'Wailing of the unborn', although in connection with the phrase 'perfume and sperm' it is turned into something more 'seedy'. The line suggests sexual union whereby 'sperm' acts as a masculine and 'perfume' as feminine signifier. The following line, 'I lost my brother' refers to Jeanne's illicit desire for her brother. The 'window without light' located the scene of crime where incest takes place. One is prompted to read the birth-reference literally, as childbirth resulting from brother-sister incest.

The juxtaposition of the erotic with the sacred in Nin's novel through the appearance of the figure of the 'modern Christ' and the portrayal of eroticism and sexual desire is singled out and strengthened by Varèse's condensed libretto. This echoes Bataille's challenge to the traditional sacred/profane dichotomy promoted in Christian cultures in which sexuality without the purpose of procreation is placed within the realm of the profane.<sup>192</sup> Bataille conflated these realms with his 'blasphemous' statement that *because* the erotic is excessive and transgressive, it is sacred.<sup>193</sup> By emphasising such a statement through Nin's text, Varèse certainly created strong tensions, at least for the more traditionalist audience. The emphasis on religious symbolism in conjunction with the erotic subtext also creates a morbid atmosphere. John Keillor observes a religious connotation also in the relationship between soprano and chorus which draws on musical conventions from the Medieval Catholic church. He argues that the

“Responsorial chant, the practice of alternating between a soloist and choir, is utilized to generate a perversely holy scenario. The evening union between brother and sister is clear, and the

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<sup>192</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco 1986).

<sup>193</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York 1986).

soprano clearly sings in first person while the male choir is ambiguous; its role is that of a standard chorus, commenting on the proceedings half in syllables and half in textual declarations of the dramatic impact the moment is generating.”<sup>194</sup>

I agree with MacDonald who suggests that the incest theme of *House of Incest* was the main attraction for Varèse. But he argues that he may have connected it with the Oedipus myth of the son who kills his father to marry the mother. He suggests that Varèse may have identified with Oedipus, not for the love for his mother, but the desire to kill the father. Varèse was always very outspoken about his hatred for his father. As a young man, he had thrashed his father and later allegedly declared he should have killed him.<sup>195</sup> In 1908 Varèse had already turned Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Oedipus und die Sphinx* into an opera. MacDonald argues that his engagement with the Oedipus myth served to act out his anger against his father.<sup>196</sup> According to this interpretation, Nin’s poem is used as a springboard for the raucous expression of a man’s anger at his father. But the libretto he adapted from Nin’s poem did not focus on father-daughter incest which was, for instance, referenced in Nin’s use of the story of Lot. Varèse turned Nin’s novel into a drama around brother-sister incest.

I suggest that the incest theme may have appealed to Varèse, because it was a taboo topic which had more potential to shock the audience than a simple dream theme. Again, I want to draw out parallels to Artaud who believed that transgressive subject matter in combination with powerful acting and sonic elements was desirable to shock audience members and create a cathartic reaction. Artaud was particularly fascinated with the incest theme. He had used references to incest in western painting

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<sup>194</sup> Keillor on [www.allmusic.com](http://www.allmusic.com).

<sup>195</sup> MacDonald 2003, p.65.

<sup>196</sup> MacDonald 2003, p.66.

and literature to demonstrate the purgatorial potential of the ideal theatre which was to subvert existing moral codes. He referred to two examples to illustrate his point: Lucas van Leyden's Biblical painting *Lot and his Daughters* and John Ford's tragedy *Annabella* (1633; *'Tis Pity She's A Whore'*).<sup>197</sup> The play tells the story of the incestuous relationship between two siblings, Annabella and Giovanni. Annabella is forced to marry another man, although she is already carrying her brother's child. When her brother hears of the wedding, he kills his sister. In *The Theatre of Cruelty*, Artaud described *Annabella* as an example of a "real stage play" that "disturbs our peace of mind, releases our repressed subconscious".<sup>198</sup> Sister-brother incest appears in his surreal 1925 play *Spurt of Blood or the Glass Globe* which was never produced, and in *Heliogabalus* who has an incestuous relationship with his mother. Artaud juxtaposes the sacred and the erotic, i.e. the family unit and the taboo of incest, most famously in his incest-drama *Les Cenci*.<sup>199</sup> The plot was based on the sixteenth-century Italian nobleman Count Francesco Cenci who beats and rapes his daughter, Beatrice who later hires men to kill the father.<sup>200</sup> *Les Cenci* drew on P. B. Shelley's 1819 verse drama *The Cenci* and Stendhal's 1837 novella dealing with the same story. Gerard Sharpling argues, drawing on Freud's *'Totem and Taboo'* (1913) and his paradigm of the family romance, that Artaud's ironic characterisation of the dysfunctional family unit aims to "challenge the values of the spectators by confronting them directly with taboos surrounding family values".<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Artaud discussed Lukas van Leyden's Lot painting in his essay 'Metaphysics and the Mise-en-scene' from *The Theatre and Its Double*.

<sup>198</sup> Artaud cited in Podnieks 2000, p.328.

<sup>199</sup> For an analysis of Artaud and the erotic see Donahue in Plunka 1994, pp.222-236.

<sup>200</sup> Curtin 2010, pp. 250-263.

<sup>201</sup> See Gerard Sharpling, 'Women's Stage: Female Characters in Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty"', *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol.66, 2004, p.40 [check]; Jane Goodall, 'Artaud's Revision of Shelley's *The Cenci*: The Text and its Double', *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer, 1987, pp. 115-26.

These were themes also negotiated in Nin's *House of Incest*. And it was no coincidence that they corresponded so closely with Artaud's ideas. Nin had met Artaud through her analyst René Allendy at a dinner party at her house in March 1933. Artaud was a close friend of the analyst and his wife Yvonne Allendy. At that time Nin was having an affair with Henry Miller, and her diary writing displayed a desire for living out extreme emotions and exploring her sexuality. Nin was fascinated by Artaud's aura of the 'tortured artist'.<sup>202</sup> In her diary she acknowledged the destructive, potentially dangerous aspects of his personality. He is "the surrealist whom the surrealists disavowed", "the drugged, contracted being who walks always alone, who is seeking to produce plays which are like scenes of torture", and who's "eyes are blue with languor, black with pain."<sup>203</sup>

The following month, on 6 April 1933, Nin attended Artaud's reading of *The Theatre and the Plague* at the Sorbonne, which was part of a series of lectures organised by Allendy. It may have been the same event that Varèse attended, although Nin and Varèse did not know each other at that time. Nin included a vivid account of the performance in her diary:

"His face was contorted with anguish, [...]. His eyes dilated, his muscles became cramped, his fingers struggled to retain their flexibility. He made one feel the parched and burning throat, the pains, the fever, the fire in the guts. He was in agony. He was screaming. He was delirious...."<sup>204</sup>

Deirdre Bair points out that Nin's *House of Incest* may well have drawn on her encounter with Artaud as she reportedly gathered notes on Artaud for her draft of

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<sup>202</sup> Barber suggests that the attraction was mutual, and that Artaud 'fell in love' with Nin, although their friendship was only platonic Barber 1993, p.59. He writes: "Artaud's relationship with Anaïs Nin was not sexual, despite his desire for it to be so". Nin wrote: "To be kissed by Artaud was to be drawn towards death, towards insanity". Journals, vol. p.63.

<sup>203</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.195.

<sup>204</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.200.

*House of Incest*, but she does not go into further detail.<sup>205</sup> We can certainly see links in *House of Incest* to Artaud, especially also in its dark theme. Artaud explained that the ideal theatre had to contain the ‘truthful distillations of dreams where its taste for crime, its erotic obsessions, its savageness, its fantasies, its utopian sense of life and objects, even its cannibalism’ must “gush out” “on an inner level”.<sup>206</sup> Elizabeth Podnieks links Nin’s incest narrative to Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*, as well as to Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell*, and Octave Mirbeau’s novel *The Torture Garden* to which she ascribes a shared aesthetic of violence. She argues: “Just as *The Theatre of Cruelty* advocates the release of pain, cruelty, and violence and a confrontation with instinctual obsessions, so Rimbaud urges a dangerous voyage into the psyche, where these obsessions are hiding. Moreover, the dangers of which he warns are the psychic tortures associated with Mirbeau and Artaud [...]”<sup>207</sup> Podnieks argues that Nin enacted Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty* and created a ‘drama of incest’ by describing the sexual abuse she may have suffered as a child and her incestuous relationship with her father in her writing. She released “repressed memories of childhood abuse” which she “appropriated to empower herself.”<sup>208</sup> “In telling her own survival story”, Podnieks explains, “Nin drew on both the dream (via Freud, Jung and Breton) and the drama (Artaud).”<sup>209</sup> In June 1933 Nin noted in her diary that Artaud took her to the Louvre to show her Leyden’s painting; when she stood in front of it, she began to sob violently. Podnieks interprets Nin’s break-down as her enactment of the purgatorial aspect of the theatre of cruelty. It is caused by “the

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<sup>205</sup> Nin sent Artaud an early draft of *House of Incest*, but in response Nin received a letter in which the playwright admitted that he wasn’t able to read English. Many years after they lost touch, Nin also wrote a short story about Artaud titled *Je Suis le Plus Malade des Surréalistes* which was based on her journal and Artaud’s letters. See Nin, *Journals*, vol.1., 1979, p.196.

<sup>206</sup> Artaud cited in Podnieks 2000, p.327.

<sup>207</sup> Podnieks 2000, p.327.

<sup>208</sup> Podnieks 2000, p.325.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

shock of self-realisation of her own incest guilt” by which she had broken the Freudian taboo.<sup>210</sup>

I also see a possible reference to John Ford’s *Annabella* in Nin’s description of brother-sister love: Jeanne declares her desire for her brother while she is getting ready for her wedding with a man she doesn’t love. In the background, wedding bells are ringing which invoke her inescapable fate. If Artaud had talked to Nin about his fascination with the incest-taboo, it is likely that he may also have mentioned Ford’s play. Podnieks also highlights examples of sadism in Nin’s *House of Incest* which she links to Gustave Mirbeau’s novel *The Torture Garden*. The controversial novel contains graphic descriptions of sadomasochist scenarios which eventually culminate in cannibalism. Podnieks explains that Mirbeau’s work “confronts, like Artaud’s theatre, the boundaries between respectable social behaviour and instinctual sexual and spiritual depravity.”<sup>211</sup> Nin however disagreed with the extreme level of cruelty described in the novel and describes “being struck with the limitations of physical cruelty and pain”. But it made her realise that “obsessions and anxieties were just as cruel and painful, only no one had described them vividly”.<sup>212</sup> Nin declares that she “wanted to do, in *House of Incest*, the counterpart to physical torture in the psychic world, in the psychological realm.”<sup>213</sup> The references to sin, crucifixion and resurrection also echo the purgatorial function of Artaud’s ideal theatre he compared to the plague. Artaud wrote ‘Theatre and the Plague’ that “The plague is a superior disease because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification.”<sup>214</sup> Nin recognised this potential in her description of

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<sup>210</sup> Podnieks 2000, p.327.

<sup>211</sup> Podnieks 2000, p.328.

<sup>212</sup> Nin cited in Podnieks 2000, p.328.

<sup>213</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.275.

<sup>214</sup> Artaud, ‘Theatre and the Plague’, in *The Theatre and Its Double*, 1938.

Artaud's lecture in which he exclaimed that "I want to give them the experience itself, the plague itself, so they will be terrified, and awaken. I want to awaken them. They do not realise they are dead."<sup>215</sup> But we also may see Nin's interest in pain and cruelty as a reaction against the claim of her male writer-friends, in particular Henry Miller, that Nin or women in general were not capable of inflicting violence and cruelty. She writes in her diary in relation to her interest in Sacher-Masoch: "The figure of a cringing Masoch does not appeal to me. What appeals to me is this violent tasting of life's most fearful cruelties. No evasion of pain. [...] That this incapacity to destroy, which Henry accuses me of, may soon be reversed? That my cruelty wears a velvet mask and velvet gloves?"<sup>216</sup>

It is worth noting, that Artaud had much in common with Nin's early mentor D.H. Lawrence, although both were most likely not aware of each other's writing. Both promoted a whole vision, the resurrection of the body and saw the medium they worked in as a tool to fight complacency.<sup>217</sup> They were suspicious of psychoanalysis, although they drew on dreams, emphasised instincts over intellect and were interested in ancient Mexican civilizations. As Taylor Stoehr pointed out, Lawrence's title for his essay 'Surgery for the Novel - or a Bomb', shows, that he saw his writing as shock treatment to wake readers up in a similar vein to Artaud.<sup>218</sup> Rebirth or resurrection were strong themes in both their work, and also featured in *House of Incest*, even though scholars claim that this mainly derived from Otto Rank's *Trauma of Birth*. Sara Poole compares these themes to the Jungian concept of individuation - the process of becoming a whole individual. Artaud and Lawrence,

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<sup>215</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, p.200.

<sup>216</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, 1979, pp.267-8.

<sup>217</sup> See Poole 1989.

<sup>218</sup> Taylor Stoehr, 'Mentalized Sex in DH Lawrence', in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol.8, No.2 (Winter 1975), pp. 101-122, published by Duke University Press, p.109.



she writes, “were exploring the possibilities of a personal and general resurrection, a coming clean into life as they hadn’t at actual birth or in their experience to date”.<sup>219</sup> Joseph Campbell argues that the journeys of “the mythological hero, the shaman, the mystic and the schizophrenic are in principle the same”, they lead to “what is experienced as a re-birth.”<sup>220</sup> This also corresponded to Nin’s and Artaud’s interest in the alchemical process which, like the plague, was a cleansing process that leads to purity. The resurrection of the body is irrevocably connected to the overcoming of repression as in psychoanalysis and an anti-dualistic stance, especially with regards to the mind-body reconciliation, although scholarship on Artaud illustrates that his writing was highly ambiguous.<sup>221</sup> Poole argues that characteristic for all promoters of the need for a resurrected body is “the drive to heal divisions”, especially those related to body and mind. She explains, “[t]hey are aware of a general neurosis, but have ‘grasped the potential of a new, post-neurotic, post-schizophrenic and post-divided man, alive in and through the long-derided body which alone can ‘reunite’ him with the rest of the living cosmos.”<sup>222</sup> Poole however also makes an important distinction between Lawrence and Artaud, which provides reasons why Nin’s rejected Artaud in the end. “If Lawrence is for many the embodiment of health, intelligence, sanity, Artaud is the poet of destruction, hatred and madness.”<sup>223</sup>

As much as Nin was attracted to the ‘tortured artist’, she was also repelled by his morbidity. She would later criticise the Beats for fetishising the by then deceased Artaud, who had become a celebrated outlaw among certain American artists and

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<sup>219</sup> Poole 1989, p.11.

<sup>220</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (London: Palladin, 1985), cited from Poole, p.138.

<sup>221</sup> See for instance Susan Sontag’s forward to *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979). Also Jacques Derrida’s reading of Artaud ‘La Parole Soufflée’, in *Writing and difference*, ed. and trans. by Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press 1978).

<sup>222</sup> Poole 1989, p.141.

<sup>223</sup> Poole 1989, p.12.

poets.<sup>224</sup> Artaud declared he wanted “to write a Book which would drive men mad, which would be like an open door leading them where they would never have consented to go”.<sup>225</sup> Nin wanted to portray and explore ‘psychic torture’ and neurosis in *House of Incest*, but not achieve it. She broke taboos on a far more subtle, but equally potent level. Spencer pointed out convincingly that Nin wrote about taboo subjects most women writers – and male writers – at the time did not dare touch: “love affairs between older women and younger men”, “women’s friendships with homosexual men”, “white women’s attraction to black men”, female auto-eroticism and lesbianism.<sup>226</sup>

Despite a necessary dive into the dark corners of the self, Nin highlighted the value of “sensitivity, empathy, compassion, eroticism, sensual pleasure and love of all kinds” – all qualities, as Spencer points out, Nin “believed had been numbed by the ‘cerebral’ approach to fiction of male writers.”<sup>227</sup> Nin’s main ambition was to create a book as “light and colourful as Klee’s paintings”, to “write as the birds sing”. Spreading love and happiness could not have been further removed from Artaud’s and Varèse’s agendas: Artaud was a self-destructive, diagnosed schizophrenic and Varèse a tempestuous depressive.

When Nin described neurosis and anxiety, it was to express her own experience, i.e. a woman’s struggle to find identity from a fragmented self. The prose poem was her expression of what she described in 1937 as woman’s “struggle with her own cycles, storms, terrors which man does not understand”. During that year, Nin first expressed her ambition of writing exceptionally of female experiences:

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<sup>224</sup> See Bradnock.

<sup>225</sup> Artaud cited from *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (1988) p.59.

<sup>226</sup> Spencer in Friedman and Fuchs 1989, p.162.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

“The woman artist has to fuse creation and life in her own way, or in her own womb if you prefer. She has to create something different from man. Man created a world cut off from nature. Woman has to create within the mystery, storms, terrors, the infernos of sex, the battle against abstractions and art. She has to sever herself from the myth man creates, from being created by him [...] The art of woman must be born in the womb-cells of the mind.”<sup>228</sup>

Not surprisingly, Nin has been linked to French feminists of the 1970s like Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray who argued that patriarchal power structures are rooted in language.<sup>229</sup> Nin’s statement particularly anticipates Cixous’s much-contested, essentialist statement that the ‘essence of femininity’ is located in the womb.<sup>230</sup> Nin’s emphasis on creating a new language that brought the body and unconscious into language to express female experiences and use a fluid and musical structure seemed to mirror many of their main concerns – a topic discussed at length in Nin-scholarship.<sup>231</sup> Tookey links Nin’s physical language to the ideology of Julia Kristeva, but points out that the roots of Nin’s thinking about language lie in D.H. Lawrence’s writing. She writes, Nin’s “admiration for Lawrence’s radical attempt to ‘see with the soul and the body’ was also a starting-point for her own attempts to define and practise a poetic prose that ‘writes the body’ – that brings into language the bodily forces of rhythm, movement, and desire, what Julia Kristeva theorizes as

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<sup>228</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, 1934-1939, 1979, p.234. See Friedman, ‘Anaïs Nin’, in *Modern American Women Writers*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Scribner’s, 1991), p. 347. Margret Andersen, ‘Critical Approaches to Anaïs Nin’, *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, 10, No. 2 (1979), p.263; Spencer in Friedman and Miriam Fuchs 1989, pp. 165, 171. Also Tookey 2003 and Felber 1995.

<sup>229</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (North Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1989). Luce Irigaray, ‘Plato’s Hysteria’, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>230</sup> See Hélèn Cixous, *Ille* (Paris : Des Femmes, 1980), pp.122, 204. Domna C. Stanton discussed the problem with hailing the maternal in her essay ‘Difference on Trial; A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva’, in Nancy K. Miller ed., *The Poetics of Gender* (New York and Guildford : Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>231</sup> Nin described her language as ‘unconscious’ and as an ‘underwater language’. Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, cited by Felber 1995, p.313. See also Spencer in Friedman and Fuchs 1989.

the *semiotic* modality.”<sup>232</sup> She emphasises that Nin’s description of Lawrence “twisting” and “tormenting”, and “shattering” language “anticipated Kristeva’s emphasis on the violence with which the semiotic ‘irrupts’ within the symbolic, ‘pulverising’ and ‘tearing [it] open’.”<sup>233</sup>

Echoing the strand of essentialist feminism with which Nin has been associated, Sharon Spencer proclaims that Nin showed that woman’s writing “must trace expeditions into dangerous terrain”, “must explore tabooed topics and forbidden relationships” and “it ‘must be honest, even if the search for truth causes pain.’”<sup>234</sup> According to this formulation, then, dealing with cruel and violent emotions is a necessary element of ‘feminine language’, but as a form of gaining self-knowledge and not, in an Artaudian sense, as mere shock effect. In this context, Nin’s interest in primitive instincts which at first seemed to parallel Artaud’s and Varèse’s becomes regarded as something essentially feminine. Lillian, the protagonist of *Seduction of the Minotaur*, for instance, has to rediscover the “primitive” and “learn to dance to ‘the music of the body’” to gain her freedom.<sup>235</sup> Here the primitive does not merely stand for ancient instincts, but for an archetypal femininity – maybe that of a female goddess/mother-nature.

Nin certainly believed in the cathartic potential of certain kinds of modern music. In the story ‘Stella’ from *Winter of Artifice*, Nin used Stravinsky’s music to trigger a healing shock in the narrator Stella designed to lead to self-reflection as Spencer pointed out.<sup>236</sup> With this description, Nin also challenged Theodor Adorno’s criticism of Stravinsky’s music which to him only mimicked sensations and turned

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<sup>232</sup> Tookey 2003, p.135.

<sup>233</sup> Tookey 2003, footnote on p.137.

<sup>234</sup> Spencer in Friedman and Fuchs 1989, p. 165.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

the audience into robots who only react to stimuli created by the composer. Stravinsky was one of Varèse's role-models as a composer, and not surprisingly, Adorno was not convinced by Varèse and *musique concrete* either.<sup>237</sup> Nin however differentiated between Varèse and Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrete*. She recognised their common goal to create new sounds through new instruments. But she emphasised that their individual execution of this idea may not result in affecting the audience emotionally. After attending a concert by Schaeffer, she admitted that the "intellectual explanation sounds more interesting than the effects."<sup>238</sup>

But we can see a similar rejection of exaggerated emotions used for shock effect in Artaud's work in Nin's reaction to *Nocturnal I*. In 1965, shortly after Varèse's death, Nin mused about his musical adaptation of her novel, now left unfinished. "Strange that his last project was *House of Incest*", she wrote. "He was sensitive to the cry of anguish. He wanted voices which screamed the lines". She wondered, "Was his vision of hell like mine? Anxiety, the nightmare."<sup>239</sup> Varèse used violent sounds, a fragmentary language and Artaudian screams to create his vision of Nin's nightmare. But this nightmare, I argue, was far removed from Nin's.

Keillor has argued that in Varèse's rendering of incest in *Nocturnal*, "No blame is assigned and no coercion is implied". We may think of Bataille again, for whom incest stands "beyond all value judgement."<sup>240</sup> But did Varèse's piece really not contain judgement? If we look at the line 'perfume and sperm' we are led to a different conclusion. The word perfume acts as a stand-in for a female presence. Traditionally, perfume is not only associated with femininity but also with

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<sup>237</sup> See Theodor Adorno, 'The Aging of the New Music' (1955), in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>238</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.6, 1979, p.234.

<sup>239</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 7, 1979, p.44.

<sup>240</sup> Sharpling 2004, p.46

seductiveness or seduction. To collapse femininity with seduction, however, adds an aspect of sin to the apparent coercion-free incestuous union. While these were themes negotiated in Nin's novel, in Varèse's libretto they were presented out of context. Emphasised by the phrase 'you belong to the night', sung with the shrill soprano voice, these lines suggest a threatening female nocturnal presence, a destructive *femme fatale* like the 'Queen of the Night' of Mozart's *Zauberflöte*. This gender-stereotype is reinforced by the voice of the soprano who screams like a hysteric – a figure which was a firm fixture in the history of opera and song. Interestingly, the few comments about the piece Nin made in her diary seem to question mainly the aggressive soprano voice. Slavoj Žižek pointed out:

“If there is a feature that serves as the clear index of modernism – from Strindberg to Kafka, from Munch to Schoenberg's *Erwartung* – it is the emergence of the figure of the hysterical woman, which stands for the radical disharmony in the relationship between the two sexes.”<sup>241</sup>

In her article '*The Gender of Sound*', Anne Carson explains that throughout literary history, there has been an “ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death’, with uncontrollable ‘shrieking, wailing, sobbing, shrill lament, loud laughter, screams of pain or of pleasure and eruptions of raw emotions.”<sup>242</sup> Aristotle regarded the high-pitched female voice as “evidence of her evil disposition”, because “creatures who are brave or just (like lions, bulls, roosters and the human male) have large deep voices.”<sup>243</sup> Women use their voice, so it goes, “to say what should not be said”, therefore it needs to be controlled or shut out which has been a “main feature of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day”.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Žižek, 'There is No Sexual Relationship', in Salecl and Žižek 1996, p.215.

<sup>242</sup> Anne Carson, 'The Gender of Sound', *Thamyris* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 18.

<sup>243</sup> Carson 1994, p.10.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

The controlling of the female voice is also deeply embedded in the tradition of opera and song. In her influential book *Opera or the Undoing of Women* first published in 1988, musicologist Catherine Clément argued that the opera tradition perpetuated traditional gender roles which prescribe women the roles of the hysteric, the seductress, *femme fatale* and evil witch.<sup>245</sup> The biblical figure of Salome, for instance, became the “quintessential representation of the *femme fatale*” and a popular symbol of the evil, unruly female in fin-de-siècle art and literature such as Richard Strauss’s opera based on Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome*.<sup>246</sup> Women are portrayed as victims in such scenarios, “Humiliated, hunted, driven mad, burnt alive, buried alive, stabbed, committing suicide.”<sup>247</sup> Desmond Hosford explains that women’s victimization in opera often results “from transgressing societal norms and publicly reinforces performative aspects of gender”. This is the reason why “leading women’s roles are almost always for sopranos, ensuring that the virtuosic enactment of women’s victimization will be musically spectacular dazzling performances of constructed gender norms, a procedure that was cemented through mad scenes in the nineteenth-century.”<sup>248</sup>

Peter Brooks calls this the “hystericization of voice” and points out the paradox it implies.<sup>249</sup> Drawing on Freud’s famous case of Dora, a young woman diagnosed

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<sup>245</sup> See for instance: Susan McClary, ‘Excess and Frame: The Musical representation of Madwomen’, in McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota and Oxford 1991), pp.80-111; Carolyn Abbate, ‘Opera; or the Envoicing of Women’, in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1993), pp.225-258; Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women* (London and New York 1997); Mary Ann Smart ed., *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton and Oxford, 2000); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988); Salecl and Zizek 1996.

<sup>246</sup> See Abbate in Solie 1993. Also Toni Bentley, *Sisters of Salome* (New Haven and London, 2002).

<sup>247</sup> Catherine Clément, ‘Through Voices, History’ in Smart 2000, p.22.

<sup>248</sup> These include irrational behaviour like “sleepwalk, hallucinate, or otherwise lose control, affording the opportunity for histrionics and excessive coloratura”. Desmond Hosford, *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender. Volume 3* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007).

<sup>249</sup> Peter Brooks, ‘Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera’, in Smart 2000.

with symptoms of hysteria, he explains that the ‘hysterical body’ of psychoanalysis is a speechless, “pantomime body”. Repression “has denied it the possibility of speaking its desire directly.”<sup>250</sup> Operatic arias and melodramatic monologues in theatre, however, express desire directly, which make them “the most unrepressed speech of desire that art allows.”<sup>251</sup> The hystericized voice, he explains, “doubles the hysterical symptoms with their cure.”<sup>252</sup> In Freudian psychoanalysis the only way to cure hysterics like Dora is to unleash the repressed, which Carson described as the “cathartic practice of draining off the bad sound of unspeakable things”.<sup>253</sup> Brooks regards the aria as offering both, “the symptoms of the hysterical impasse and the working-through of the impasse. Voice unleashes passion, and thereby brings [...] the solution, in the lyrical assumption of self and situation.”<sup>254</sup>

Desmond Hosford, however, points out that “even the most vocal hysterical women in opera suffer from a symbolic aphonia through their entrapment in the performance of stereotyped gender.”<sup>255</sup> Susan McClary agrees that opera gives woman a place to raise her voice, but that this is far from liberating as this voice is always what she calls ‘framed’.<sup>256</sup> This refers to normalising components in the piece composed by a male composer which render the madwoman as ‘Other’ to prevent contagion and keep her outside of dominant, patriarchal culture. Mary Ann Doane writes that the “power accorded to the *femme fatale* is a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity, and the loss of conscious

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<sup>250</sup> Brooks in Smart 2000, p.122.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.2.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>253</sup> Carson 1994.

<sup>254</sup> Brooks in Smart 2000, p.125.

<sup>255</sup> Hosford in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender. Volume 3* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007).

<sup>256</sup> McClary 1991, p.85. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).



agency.”<sup>257</sup> She becomes the incarnation of castration anxiety.<sup>258</sup> Cixous argued that men display women as femme fatales or sphinxes to “keep woman in the place of mystery, consign her to mystery, as they say ‘keep her in her place’, keep her at a distance: she’s always not quite there . . . but no one knows exactly where she is.”<sup>259</sup>

If we consider the libretto of *Nocturnal*, we can see a very similar strategy: a hystericisation and thereby ‘framing’ of the female voice constructing Nin’s protagonist as an insane *femme fatale* who transgressed from societal norms by revelling in excessive and illicit sexual desire. Elaine Showalter writes in *The Female Malady*, madness in women was connected by psychiatrists of the nineteenth century to an excess of female sexuality. Nin’s narrator is allowed to voice her desire, but only with a hysteric voice which denies her any credibility. Her insatiable sexual appetite is a sign of her madness, which is expressed by her high-pitched screams and the fractured language of Varèse’s collaged libretto. Thereby, her potentially dangerous sexuality is ‘framed’ as illness and a cure is offered in the act of unleashing the repressed by ‘draining off the bad sound’. A sign of cure may also be read into the calming of the music in the final twelve measures, which Evans described as “a balancing of zones and transmutations.”<sup>260</sup> This could be interpreted as the absolution of sins after their confession, if we go along with the Christian symbolism of the libretto.

To strengthen my argument, I want to draw attention to Varèse’s admiration for Richard Strauss’s music, including his opera *Elektra* (1909) based on Hugo von Hofmannsthal 1903 drama of the same title, which focuses on father-daughter incest.

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<sup>257</sup> Mary Ann Doane cited in Felber 1995, p.312.

<sup>258</sup> Felber 1995, 312.

<sup>259</sup> Felber 1995, p.312.

<sup>260</sup> Evans 2004, p.66.

MacDonald has suggested that Varèse was trying to create a similar scenario around a scandalous female with his adaptation of *House of Incest*. Nin's narrator is certainly constructed (and judged) as a cross between Salome and Elektra – a scandalous female and erotic seductress. Varèse's title *Nocturnal* also aligns the female protagonist with the evil powers of darkness and destruction. In the literature of the beginning of the twentieth century women were constructed as “nocturnal, dangerous and fragile”, which we can see reflected in modernist literature and the Surrealist imagination.<sup>261</sup>

These were, of course, themes that appeared in *House of Incest*: a neurotic female narrator who finds it difficult to contain her sexual attraction to two seductive and potentially threatening *femme fatales*, and speaks in the hallucinogenic language of the hysteric. Tookey explained that Nin drew on images of Orientalism and veiling to describe Sabina, which were classic characteristics of the figure of Salome. The veil became a symbol of her trickery and aim to seduce. I already pointed out links to Bréton's novella *Nadja* (1924). *Nadja* is described as a seductive child-woman who ends up in an insane asylum. *Nadja* was re-incarnated in Nin's protagonist Sabina, who was partly based on June Miller, described as eccentric *femme fatale* who spent years of her later life in a mental institution. The character Sabina already appeared in other stories by Nin. There she speaks the fragmented monologue of the hysteric. She is described as talking “profusely and continuously”, but what she says is “chaotic, unfinished, fragmentary”, and “filled with ‘indistinct incidents’, ‘hazy scenes’.”<sup>262</sup> Tookey calls this verbal blurring a form of linguistic veiling. In her diary, Nin described her prose poem as an illustration of a “descent into the irrational

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<sup>261</sup> See Elizabeth Roudinesco, *La Bataille de Cent Ans* (Paris: Seuil 1986)

<sup>262</sup> Tookey 2003, p.111

level of existence, where the instincts and blind emotions are loose, where one lives by pure impulse, pure fantasy, and therefore pure madness.”<sup>263</sup> Nin wrote:

“[...] I am an insane woman for whom houses wink and open their bellies. I often describe *House of Incest* as a woman's Season in Hell. I may have been under the influence of Rimbaud. As the book was based on actual dreams and nightmares, I may have selected the nightmares as more dramatic.”<sup>264</sup>

Nineteenth-century clinical psychology regarded the womb as the source of hysteria in women. Nin's description of her language as 'writing from the womb', which was to incorporate the female body and material from the unconscious through a fluid, musical stream-of-consciousness style, then aligned itself with the traditional hysteric discourse.<sup>265</sup> Kaja Silverman argued that the hysteric voice speaks the language of the unconscious.<sup>266</sup> Nin's narrative conflates neurosis with uncontrollable desire and excess of sexuality as in dominant male discourse.<sup>267</sup> This portrayal of the narrator as hysteric may be read as perpetuating gender-stereotypes, especially if we consider the ambiguous message that comes with all of Nin's writing. But we have already seen that these stereotypical themes also served to negotiate female identity on a much deeper level, and in direct relation to authoritarian male figures including her psychoanalysts. Nin's prose poem has been seen as a place to act out and work through repressed memories through language and rebel against patriarchal structures as Richard-Allerdyce and Friedman argued.

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<sup>263</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p. 36.

<sup>264</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.34.

<sup>265</sup> Nin described her language as “unconscious” and as an “underwater language”. Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, cited in Felber 1995, p. 313. On the subject of hysteria and feminism see also Juliett Mitchell, *Women, the Longest Revolution: Essays on feminism, literature and psychoanalysis* (London: Virago 1984).

<sup>266</sup> Silverman 1988, p.71.

<sup>267</sup> See Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature and Thought*, (Harvard 1994).

Madness was also a central method of subversion in Artaud's theory of theatre, but whereas in Artaud's world, madness related to the liberation from bourgeois norms, in Nin's narrative it has been interpreted as liberation from patriarchal oppression. Nin's hysteria becomes a form of what French feminists have called 'jouissance' after Lacan's *Pleasure Principle*. Nin does not simply construct the narrator as victim of neurosis. The text also expresses an embrace and seeking of woman's insanity, sexuality and multiplicity. *House of Incest* ends with the ecstatic dance of the woman without arms – a perfect image of the out-of-control hysteric liberating her paralysed body. As Spencer argued, dance and dancing in Nin's fiction writing is a symbol for movement, living, freedom and independence. Neurosis is linked with stasis and a fear of life.<sup>268</sup> The 'insane woman' in Nin's novel does not only suffer, but revels in her hysteric ecstasy, which is why she has to be framed in *Nocturnal I*. The figure of Nin's dancer may symbolise a 'cure' from neurosis, but liberation does not imply an adaptation of societal and hence patriarchal norms. In this sense, Nin's essentialist construction of the narrator as hysteric *femme fatale* can be compared to what Dianne Chisholm called Luce Irigaray's "use (and possible abuse) of hysterical mimicry as a strategy of cultural subversion and counter-production."<sup>269</sup>

Nin's writing, especially in the prologue to *House of Incest* which deals with the pre-conscious and maternal space of the womb and uses a highly synaesthetic, stream-of-consciousness language, has been described as the boundless babble of the hysteric celebrated by French Feminists of the 1970s. Emma Wilson writes, "The desire to approach the interior in textuality is linked specifically in Cixous, too, to textual innovation and to the desire to find in her texts an encounter with the unconscious,

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<sup>268</sup> Spencer in Friedman and Fuchs 1989, pp.28-9.

<sup>269</sup> Dianne Chisholm, 'Irigaray's Hysteria', in *French Feminists: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume III, Luce Irigaray*, ed. Ann J. Cahill and Jennifer L. Hansen (Routledge, London and New York 2008), p.295-6.

with dream, memory and the imagination.”<sup>270</sup> Spencer regards Nin’s emphasis on musicality in writing as an integral part of her female language and coins the term ‘music of the womb’.<sup>271</sup>

Ann Rosalind Jones explains that for Julia Kristeva, women “speak and write as ‘hysterics’, as outsiders to male-dominated discourse.”<sup>272</sup> Kristeva makes a psycholinguistic distinction between the symbolic (conscious, rational) and the semiotic (libidinal, pleasurable).<sup>273</sup> Kristeva connects feminine language to the semiotic or *chora*, a concept she derived from Plato via Lacan. For Kristeva the semiotic precedes the symbolic; it describes the pre-Oedipal phase before the child has acquired formal language and still communicates in echolalia, nonsensical sounds which have a musical, rhythmic sound and lack meaning and structure.<sup>274</sup>

Birgit Schippers points out that her emphasis on the semiotic as language of the maternal and pre-symbolic has been read as her “critique of the dominance that Lacan ascribes to the paternal-symbolic function and to masculinity”, although, as Schippers, notes, she contradicted herself in terms of her description of the fluidity of subjectivity and her emphasis on the maternal, which partly accounts for the negative reception of her writing, similar to Nin.<sup>275</sup> Diverting from Lacan’s theory she stresses that the semiotic persists as a subversive force within the symbolic.<sup>276</sup> It manifests itself in glossolia, psychological discourse, music and poetic language – expressions which transcend “formal, coherent communication”.<sup>277</sup> But what does this mean in relation to *Nocturnal I*? Is it a place where the female voice gets heard

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<sup>270</sup> Emma Wilson, ‘Identification and Melancholia: The inner cinema of Helen Cixous’, Cahill and Hansen 2008, p.308.

<sup>271</sup> Spencer in Friedman and Fuchs 1989, p.165.

<sup>272</sup> Jones in Showalter 1986, p.9.

<sup>273</sup> John T. Hamilton, *Music, Madness and the Unworking of Language* (New York 2008).

<sup>274</sup> Birgit Schippers, *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought* (Edinburgh UP, 2011).

<sup>275</sup> Schippers 2011, p.29.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p.26.

or framed? Or was it just a vehicle to shock as part of the Artaudean project, which included a search for the primal scream of theatre.

For Kristeva all protagonists of *écriture féminine* were male avant-garde writers. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that the language of Artaud and others ‘vocalises, like the echolalia of the baby, the materiality and sound of language; it is rhythmic and musical (see also Todorov 1988), and it points to the heterogeneity of language and to the existence of a form of language in the margins of the symbolic’.<sup>278</sup> Kristeva reads a transgressive capacity into poetic language, which as the semiotic can subvert from within the symbolic and initiate change.<sup>279</sup> Jones adds, “rather than giving up their blissful infantile fusion with their mothers, their orality, and anality, [they] re-experience such *jouissances* subconsciously and set them into play by constructing texts against the rules and regularities of conventional language.”<sup>280</sup>

Can Varèse’s glossolia, grunts and screams be read as constituting a subversive discourse in the sense of Kristeva’s semiotic? After all, he adapted Nin’s apparently feminine language and gave it an “Artaudean treatment”. Varèse certainly subverted normative structures with his violent music, but whether this included gender structures is doubtful. There is a multiplicity of responses to the construction of gender in vocal works and opera. Some critics have seen opera as the place where women can make their voice heard and subvert patriarchal oppression, such as Wayne Koestenbaum who argued against Catherine Clément’s opinion that opera’s aim is to silence the diva, but argues for the “transgressive vocal interpolations and

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<sup>278</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.65.

<sup>279</sup> Schippers 2011, p.27.

<sup>280</sup> Jones in Showalter 1986, p.8.

‘will to be heard’ of Maria Callas from the perspective of a gay male opera fan.”<sup>281</sup>

Carolyn Abbate also emphasises the importance of the printed or sung text in opera.<sup>282</sup> She argues that the control of the (male) composer may be challenged by the multiple voices of the (female) singers. Abbate suggests that opera could be seen as “a genre that so displaces the authorial musical voice onto female characters and female singers that it largely reverses the conventional opposition of male (speaking) subject and female (observed) subject.”<sup>283</sup>

Once again, I want to draw on Artaud’s theatre. Gerard Sharpling argues in his discussion of the female characters in Artaud’s *Les Cenci* that as the “mise en scène of sexuality” in Artaud’s theatre is directed by the male, it “involves the primarily male construction of women as a triply marginalised symbol of the maternal, the erotic and the hysteric figures.”<sup>284</sup> He emphasises that language is an “important aspect within this construction” and “continues to be male property”.<sup>285</sup> He describes how Béatrice is portrayed as a hysteric through language after her rape and victimisation. Her language becomes more unstructured,

“representing in verbal terms the horrifying ordeal she has suffered. Her discourse begins to destabilise the referential dimension of language, placing emphasis rather on the outworkings of an apparently confused, unconscious psyche attributed to women by male preconceptions.”<sup>286</sup>

And after the failed murder-attempt on her father, her language shifts to the dream.

“She likens herself to a sleepwalker, lost within nightmarish dreams which surpass

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<sup>281</sup> Dunn and Jones, p.6; Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘Callas and her Fans’, *Yale Review* 79, No.1 (autumn 1989), p.1-20.

<sup>282</sup> Abbate in Solie 1993. See also Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP 1991).

<sup>283</sup> Abbate in Solie 1993, p.228.

<sup>284</sup> Sharpling 2004, p.46.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

the horrors of death itself.”<sup>287</sup> But Sharpling argues, that Artaud’s “vague directives” and the “sense of performative flexibility” in his writing gives the play potential for the female performer to subvert the gendered construction.<sup>288</sup> He quotes Brian Singleton who explains that an Artaudian theatrical performance “should be realised not on the page but on the stage”.<sup>289</sup> He argues that “Artaud’s prescriptions for the theatre can begin to subvert the play text itself, and create a new, non-verbal theatrical language that allows relative freedom to the director and female actor”, which “repositions women at the centre of Artaud’s stage.”<sup>290</sup> He argues that one should not see Béatrice’s hystericization in the play simply as part of a literary tradition described by Roudinesco. Drawing on Cixous’s revision of Freud’s Dora, in which Dora resists patriarchal oppression by rejecting conventional language and behaviour, Sharpling argues that Béatrice “may be seen to resemble Freud’s Dora in her resistance to any reductive or simplistic reading of her character.”<sup>291</sup> Sharpling however admits that “Regardless of any parallels with Cixous’s Dora, it should be recalled that the sexual politics of Artaud’s play are defined by the male artist, and thus Béatrice still conforms in part to expectations innately held by a patriarchal way of thinking.”<sup>292</sup>

This was even more pronounced in Varèse’s staging of incest. In his sound universe he was the central creative force. Unlike Artaud, Varèse tried to eliminate any interpretative flexibility, even wanted to use disembodied voices instead of vocalists on stage. There was to be no “dispersion of authorial voices” in live performances of

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., pp.39, 42.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p.69.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p.47.



his music.<sup>293</sup> *Nocturnal I* was never meant as a platform to showcase Nin's work. Varèse used it as a vehicle for his own agenda. Nin's incest narrative and occupation with language as sonorous, may be perceived as reasons why Varèse chose her prose poem. But he ignored the metaphorical use of father/daughter incest in Nin's novella and staged it literally as brother-sister incest scenario to create a potentially shocking vocal piece. This may have drawn on Artaud's fascination with the incest theme, which was central to his idea of the theatre of cruelty and used to transgress the boundaries of societal norms. But as I have tried to show, societal norms, for Varese, did not include patriarchal norms. Varèse was too much of a patriarchal and authoritarian figure himself to question these.

Varèse's piece, like Artaud's dramas, depended on the gender politics of traditional theatre and opera, and its distorted construction of femininity. Although both considered themselves great innovators, they summoned stereotypical nineteenth-century images of femininity – the hysteric and the femme fatale – which were stock-in-trade characters in the history of opera and theatre. The complex issues around female identity and sexuality in Nin's novel are silenced in *Nocturnal I*. Varèse transfers Nin's complex narrative into a patriarchal framework. Far from subverting traditional norms, he perpetuates them. Here we see an illustration of the problematic nature of Kristeva's position, which has been criticised by a number of feminist critics, most notably Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, who opposed her belief in the semiotic as a subversive force, "because it is embedded in a symbolic law which inherently tames any challenge to its prohibitions (1990, p.80)."<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> MacDonald, p.236???

<sup>294</sup> See also Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetic: feminist literature and social change* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989), and Lisa Rado, *Rereading Modernism: new directions in feminist criticism* (New York and London: Garland, 1994), for arguments brought forward *against* the idea that there is such a thing as 'feminine writing'. Both women call for a re-contextualisation and want feminist

Even Artaud is dismantled as conventional when confronted with ‘real’ female sexual desire. He was reportedly appalled when he heard of Nin’s all too real incestuous relationship with her father. According to Stephen Barber,

“[...] Artaud grew increasingly dubious about the literary life led by Anaïs Nin, and unsettled by her intimacy with her father and with Allendy [with whom she also had a short affair]. He began to feel that she was manipulating him, as just one more writer in her circle. His feelings became dangerously intense: Artaud said, ‘What a divine joy it would be to crucify a being like you, who are so evanescent, so elusive.’ [...]”<sup>295</sup>

I want to suggest that this can be read as illustration of Artaud’s hypocrisy concerning his celebration of incest as transgressional subject which only serves to subvert bourgeois norms in general, but did not encompass gender norms. Nin’s open celebration of sexuality which challenged male authority certainly did not fit into Artaud’s idea of femininity. I believe that it was less the amorality which bothered Artaud, than Nin’s obvious agency as desiring female subject. Similarly, Varèse is attracted by the incest theme as a vehicle for transgression, but frames female desire through the traditional soprano-mad scene.

That this collaboration did nothing for Nin’s reputation as a serious author is reflected in the writing about the piece in the music press. Not only Nin’s female narrator, but Nin herself becomes perceived as Salome, the ‘goddess of Hysteria’.<sup>296</sup> Her containment is re-iterated in the reviews and synopses of *Nocturnal*. John Keillor, for instance, focuses on Nin’s apparently scandalous sex-life turning her into a dangerous seductress. His synopsis also shows that *Nocturnal* has nothing to do

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criticism to focus on ‘the relationship between gender and poetic production for a given author at a given historical moment’, no matter whether male or female’. See also Helen Tookey’s critical analysis of Nin’s so-called female language in the context of feminist criticism. Tookey 2003.

<sup>295</sup> Barber 2001, p.64.

<sup>296</sup> See Abbate. Also Sander Gilman ‘Strauss and the pervert’ in *Reading Opera*, eds. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton 1988).

with Nin's novel. He writes, that *Nocturnal I* "implies a tryst among siblings that captures the French novelist's alarming, mixed feelings towards unconventional and potentially damaging erotic scenarios."<sup>297</sup> He continues,

"Nin's ability to make even horrifying sexual situations seem adventurous for the subject (herself) is coupled with a tone of sacrifice. This sort of writing works admirably with Varèse's understanding of nature as an uncontrollable force; both siblings are in the grip of improper desires, but the power of youthful, erotic energy is illustrated here with a largeness of emotional scope that is a testament to human vitality's propensity for spinning out of morality's orbit. Nothing is condoned in the music."<sup>298</sup>

More recently, contemporary composer Louis Andriessen showed a similar fascination with the incest story in Nin's writing. In his composition *Anaïs Nin* which premiered at the Teatro dei Rocco in Siena, Italy, in 2010, he created a stereotypical image of Nin as monstrous female with a sexual appetite which no man could satisfy.<sup>299</sup> The subtext of sexual abuse by the father is downplayed as just one episode in a string of Nin's many seductions of famous literary figures, including Artaud, who are summoned through film-footage and interview fragments.<sup>300</sup>

Peter Evans concluded his analysis of *Nocturnal* with the assertion that "Edgard Varèse and Anaïs Nin created within their own arenas sound universes which in the end become one and the same."<sup>301</sup> While this may apply to their use of sonority to affect the body physically, their motivations could not have been further removed from one another. Nin, Varèse and Artaud shared a modernist ambition to revolutionise conventional language, but there were grave discrepancies concerning

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<sup>297</sup> <http://www.allmusic.com/composition/nocturnal-for-soprano-chorus-of-basses-amp-chamber-orchestra-edited-by-chou-wen-chung-mc0002362028>.

<sup>298</sup> Keillor.

<sup>299</sup> commissioned by Accademia Musicale Chigiana of Siena and the London Sinfonietta.

<sup>300</sup> <http://louisandriessen.blogspot.co.uk/2010/07/Anaïs-nin-synopsis.html>

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.

how far they were willing to go and what motivated them. Artaud wanted to do away with written language completely. He demanded: “We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of texts and *written* poetry. . . Written poetry is worth reading once, and then should be destroyed.”<sup>302</sup> For Varèse, words were only really valuable as musical material, although, as I illustrated, he never completely stripped words of their meaning. Nin, I believe, could not afford to go that far, nor was it her intention. She explained that “because I worship music, and yet I am a slave to words, I follow with words the meanings of music.” Verbal language played a much too important role in her ambition to establish herself as a female writer in male-dominated avant-garde circles. She depended on written words to make her voice heard, even if they had to be moulded to suit her needs. Just like the feminist critics who attacked Roland Barthes’ declaration of the ‘death of the author’ which he announced in his seminal essay of 1967: one can only do away with the authorial voice if one is privileged enough to have one.

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<sup>302</sup> Artaud *The Theatre and its Double*, p.78.

## Chapter Four: Reassembling the Fragments – Anaïs Nin’s *Collages* (1964) and California Assemblage

In January 1944, Anaïs Nin received a large square package sent to her New York apartment. When she opened it, she found a colourful collage depicting a group of five women composed from cut-out bits of fabric. The package also contained a glowing fan letter from the artist, Jean Varda, in which he declared that the collage with the title ‘*Women Reconstructing the World*’ was a homage to Nin [Fig. 4.1]. It was Henry Miller who had encouraged the Greco-French artist to send Nin the collage shortly after they first met in California where Varda had settled in the early 1940s, after leaving Europe at the outbreak of WWII.<sup>1</sup> After Miller’s public appeal for help in winter 1943, during a period of financial hardship, Varda had invited Miller to stay with him in his converted barn in the artist colony of Big Sur where he had established a vibrant salon for artists and writers.<sup>2</sup> In January 1944, just after moving to Big Sur, Miller had sent Nin a first enthusiastic letter about his host in which he emphasised that Varda was one of Nin’s “greatest admirers” who resembled her in many ways.<sup>3</sup>

Nin and Varda finally met in summer 1947, when she visited him in Monterey. From this moment, he started making frequent appearances in her diary. Like Miller, she stylised him as an alchemist, mentor and spiritual guide. Gradually not only Varda as

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Miller wrote in a letter to Anaïs Nin in April 1944 that Jean Varda “seems to have divined your whole being. I know very well the collage he sent you, because I slept with that collage several weeks. Immediately, I knew the title of it. I knew you must have it”. Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1944-1947*, vol.4, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (London, Melbourne and New York: Quartet, 1979), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Anaïs Nin, *A Literate Passion: The Letters of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller 1932 – 1953*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (London: W.H. Allen, 1987), p.407.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Miller in Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1939-1944*, vol.3, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (London, Melbourne and New York: Quartet, 1979), p.300.

‘kindred spirit’, but collage as combinatory technique began to preoccupy Nin. In 1964 she published *Collages*, her last novel before giving up fiction writing. In an interview from 1973 Nin claimed that its “pattern and theme” was a collage, which was inspired by Varda’s work and he also featured the artist as one of the characters.<sup>4</sup>

*Collages* was composed of a series of nineteen loosely connected episodes from the life of the artist Renate – also based on one of Nin’s real-life friend: the Austrian painter Renate Druks who is represented as re-building her life and her confidence as an artist after a difficult relationship with a poet called Bruce. The novel has a circular structure and opens and closes with the identical paragraph.<sup>5</sup> The narrator follows Renate on a circular journey of self-discovery that takes her from Vienna where she first meets Bruce and back to Vienna via California, trips to Europe, Mexico, and New York. On her journey, Renate meets eccentric characters including the collage artist ‘Varda’ and the writer Judith Sands who was modelled on Djuna Barnes. As the story progresses, more characters are introduced, often by means of story-telling.

*Collages* has sometimes been labelled a ‘collage novel’, although, strictly speaking, it is not. Traditionally, the term has been used to describe artist books like Max Ernst’s *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929), which was composed of a series of visual collages and came close to the graphic novel. His collages were composed from sections of wood engravings taken from nineteenth-century magazines, and cut-outs from encyclopaedias and trivial novels. Ernst combined these fragments into surreal compositions intended to tap the unconscious in a similar way to free association. He

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<sup>4</sup> Anaïs Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, ed. Evelyn J. Hinz (Chicago 1975), p.215.

<sup>5</sup> Marie-Rose Logan, ‘Renate’s Illusions and Delusions in *Collages*’, in *Anaïs Nin: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Nalbantian (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.79.

believed that the juxtaposition of such unrelated elements could stimulate the imagination of the artist and be used to create a flow of images as in dreams or visions.<sup>6</sup> As a combinatory technique similar to automatism, collage also became an important medium for surrealist poets Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, and André Breton who, like Ernst, wrote extensively about collage as both literary and visual art practice.<sup>7</sup> It became a tool to critique realism, to break away from traditional notions of narrative coherence and explore the language of the irrational.<sup>8</sup>

We have already encountered Nin's interest in a form of guided free association and the related strategy of montage in film and photography to imitate the non-chronological and imagistic language of dreams. But despite the programmatic title of Nin's novel and her interest in unconscious processes, a collage approach cannot be initially detected. Her novel was not accompanied by images, apart from the original book cover which featured a reproduction of an untitled collage by Varda depicting a group of male and female figures in a medieval-looking setting [fig 4.2].<sup>9</sup> There were no further illustrations inside the book, nor was collage evoked visually

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<sup>6</sup> Elza Adamowicz however also points out the apparent differences between automatism and collage: "while the material for the first is the linguistic code (langue) or the graphic impulse, collage for the material involves the recycling of ready-made messages, whether pre-formed linguistic entities (parole) or iconographic fragments. In addition, the material fluidity of automatic production contrasts with the dryness of the collage process". Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 23/p.7. See also Werner Spies, *Max Ernst: Collagen – Inventar und Widerspruch* (Köln: DuMont Schauberg, 1975) and Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Logan argues that Nin must have learned of collage technique from French Surrealism which she was exposed to during her time in Paris in the 1930s (Logan in Nalbantian 1997). Sharon Spencer draws links to Apollinaire, Breton and Aragon in *Collage of Dreams* 1977, p.4. See also Louis Aragon, *Les Collages* (Paris: Hermann, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Adamowicz explains: "Both Aragon and Breton [...] foreground the importance of strategies of selection and combination of pre-formed elements, [...] as a critique of realism; and both invoke magic and the marvellous when referring to the transformation of reality effected in collage". Adamowicz 1998, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> The original dust jacket of the first edition and the covers of the first two paperback printings by Swallow Press featured a reproduction of Varda's untitled collage. See Benjamin Franklin V and Duane Schneider, footnote 3 in 'Collages', in *Anaïs Nin: An Introduction* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), p. 298.

in any other way such as the physical appearance of the text upon the page.<sup>10</sup> If we think of the typographical experiments of Guillaume Apollinaire, F.T. Marinetti, Ezra Pound, Stéphane Mallarmé, or even James Joyce's appropriation of newspaper headlines and Gertrude Stein's verbal portraits, which all employed the collage mode to radically challenge the perception of the reader with their disruption of conventional syntactical structure, collage in Nin's novel was appropriated in a fairly general way.<sup>11</sup>

Nin's novel is better described as an experimental work of fiction which employs a general collage mode – a position held by many commentators on it. Sharon Spencer, for instance, has linked Nin to French Surrealism, but argues that “her work is not itself surreal, and it is easier to understand the application of the collage idea in terms of a broad definition.”<sup>12</sup> Nin-scholars have detected such a general collage-mode in the novel's non-chronological narrative structure based on storytelling and myth-making, the multiple consciousnesses of narrator and protagonists, and psychoanalytically, in the ‘fragmented selves’ of the female characters and therefore of Anaïs Nin herself, the living and breathing author.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes this leads to the

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew M. Clearfield, *These Fragments I Have Shored: collage and montage in early Modernist poetry* (Ann Arbor 1984), p.10.

<sup>11</sup> See Adamowicz 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Spencer discusses Nin's adaptation of collage in *Collage of Dreams* (1977). She argues that “collage as a concept underlies Anaïs Nin's sense of art, both in theory and in practice”. Spencer 1977, p.9.

<sup>13</sup> Rose-Marie Logan argues that: “Playfulness, along with magic, alchemy and imagination, is central to Nin's outlook on the world”. See Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.80. Stressing the plurality of the title, Franklin and Snyder regard each of the nineteen loosely connected chapters as a collage in itself. See Franklin V and Schneider 1979. Thomas M. March regards collage as narrative strategy in the novel that involves multiple realities and multiple worlds created by the characters. He argues that “The nineteen distinct episodes of narrated internal experience in *Collages* are the raw materials of the collage that is the text, and the narrator's narrative practice is the means by which the text comes to be constructed, [...]”. By calling the novel ‘Collages’, rather than ‘Collage’, Nin's narrator “deflects attention from her own role in composition and onto those compositions of experience” by the “represented consciousnesses”. He regards the “text's use of collage as a metaphor for the individual experience. Thomas M. March, ‘The Artist as Character (or the Character as Artist): Narrative and Consciousness in Anaïs Nin's Collages’, in *Anaïs Nin's Narratives* (University Press of Florida, 2001), pp. 162-172. Sharon Spencer argues that “collage as concept underlies Anaïs Nin's sense of art, both in theory and as process”. See Spencer, 1977, p.4.



assumption that collage is the underlying principle of Nin's entire life and oeuvre as Spencer suggested in her book with the similarly programmatic title *Collage of Dreams*.<sup>14</sup>

While Nin's approach to collage was certainly very general, this observation is often used as an excuse to ignore any deeper engagement with Nin's work in relation to Varda's collages and the modernist practice of collage in general, beyond the purely literary level. Literary scholars who look at Nin's use of art-analogies do not take into account the history and diversity of collage as art practice and the context in which Nin developed her interest in it. They often link it to her life in Paris and exposure to Surrealism, without justifying this claim – a position held by Marie-Rose Logan, for instance.<sup>15</sup> In her essay on *Collages*, Logan reduces collage to “a variety of material ranging from newspaper, wood or seashells [which] are glued on a piece of canvas or cardboard”.<sup>16</sup>

Collage has been described as a quintessentially modernist artistic medium, although it was not an invention of the twentieth century and goes back to the twelfth century. But it was in the early 1910s that the amateur practice of cutting and pasting unrelated items together entered the realm of fine art as artists began considering its radical potential for challenging traditional notions of art and for criticising political and social values.<sup>17</sup> Collage became used as a “semiotic practice of transforming pre-

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<sup>14</sup> Logan argues that Renate's journey unfolds through “episodes that turn the collage technique into a lifestyle”. Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.79.

<sup>15</sup> Logan argues that Nin “owed to the many years she had spent in France during the heyday of Surrealism her familiarity with the ‘collage’ technique used by many artists in the wake of Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst and E.L.T. Mesens.” Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.79.

<sup>16</sup> Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.79.

<sup>17</sup> See Clement Greenberg, ‘Collage’ (1959), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). Diane Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage and the Found Object* (London: Phaidon, 1992). Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Panting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Herta Wescher, *Collage* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1968).

formed iconic or verbal messages”.<sup>18</sup> It reflected a new understanding between art and life as objects from the ‘real’ world were incorporated into art in an anti-hierarchical, non-linear fashion. The results, however, were highly diverse, starting with Pablo Picasso’s and Georges Braque’s Cubist *papiers collés* from 1912 and 1913 in which the collaged fragments, mostly newspaper clippings, were included into relatively unified pictorial compositions.<sup>19</sup> Dada collage, on the other hand, often placed a stronger emphasis on the materials assembled which were not integrated neatly into the composition, as seen in Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbilder* composed from found, everyday items.<sup>20</sup> In many surrealist collages, on the other hand, cut-outs from magazines, book illustrations or other pictorial sources were often used to produce what Marjorie Perloff has described as “a fragmented narrative, rich in sexual puns and double entendre”, as seen in Max Ernst’s collage novels.<sup>21</sup>

I want to argue that Nin’s encounter with Varda can neither be discussed in relation to these earlier European models, nor be restricted to a purely literary framework. It is important to consider that collage did not occupy Nin when she was living in Paris in the 1920s and 30s, but only after she settled in California in the mid-1950s. It was not Ernst’s collage novels that had made such a strong impression in surrealist circles, which interested her, but apparently the poetic output of this California counterculture figure and self-fashioned proto-hippie.<sup>22</sup> As I will explain in the following pages, compared to Surrealist and Cubist collages, with their rupture of the

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<sup>18</sup> Adamowicz 1998, p.17.

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Perloff, ‘Collage and Poetry’, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford U Press, 1998), vol. 1, 384-87; Stein, vol. 4, 306-10. <http://marjorieperloff.com/stein- Duchamp-picasso/collage-poetry/>.

<sup>20</sup> Perloff 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Perloff 1998.

<sup>22</sup> See Krauss 1993.

pictorial plane and re-appropriation of pre-formed verbal or iconic messages, Varda's California collages were playful and decorative rather than subversive. We do not have to believe Nin, that it was solely seeing Varda's work which impacted her interest in collage. This does not mean that we have to dismiss Varda's collages purely as a springboard for Nin's ideas – a view held by most commentators on Nin's work, who read them merely as metaphors serving the narrative and not as objects with antecedents, thereby obliterating their own signification outside the text.<sup>23</sup> Varda's collages, just like Nin's novel are symptomatic of a turn in representation in California art production at mid-century, which has been connected to the rise of a certain 'collage aesthetic' and a 'junk' or bric-a-brac sensibility.<sup>24</sup> Their work also aligns itself with the concerns of the emerging counterculture on the West Coast including the California alternative craft movement, although, as we will see, Nin's and Varda's position within these movements was conflicted.

References to Varda emerge in Nin's diary as early as 1944, but collage as practice doesn't seem to occupy her until the late 1950s, when she lived in Los Angeles. Nin's late engagement with collage in California suggests that new influences began to impact her thinking. This becomes more pertinent if we consider the other pictorial elements Nin 'collaged' into her novel: in her literary portrait of 'Varda' she compared his work to two seminal examples of proto-assemblage: the Palais Ideal in France which featured in the work of French Surrealists of the 1920s and the Watts Towers in Los Angeles which fascinated many California assemblage artists and poets of the 1950s. Nin also seems to acknowledge Wallace Berman's 'assemblage magazine' *Semina* and concludes her novel with an episode featuring

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<sup>23</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), p.9.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance, Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris 2011).

Jean Tinguely's kinetic junk sculpture *Homage to New York* (1961). If we perceive these works iconographically, beyond their symbolic function within the narrative, we can find a subtext on collage – an approach supported by the fact that we are dealing with collage as underlying principle. Diane Waldman observes, collage “layers into a work of art several levels of meaning: the original identity of the fragment or object and all of the history it brings with it; the new meaning it gains in association with other objects or elements; and the meaning it acquires as the result of its metamorphosis into a new entity.”<sup>25</sup> In Nin's juxtaposition these art works can be read as an expression of the rise of a ‘collage aesthetic’ on the West Coast which led to the birth of assemblage art in the mid-1950s, and has been linked to other art forms such as experimental film, happenings and the New American Poetry movement.<sup>26</sup> In the catalogue accompanying the influential exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) its curator William Seitz described assemblage as the post-war innovation of collage into three-dimensions and happenings. He described assemblage as combination of the visual arts and poetry in an attempt to elevate the new art practice into the realm of ‘serious’ art production.<sup>27</sup>

This renewed interest in collage practice reflects a certain attitude towards social and political ‘reality’, artistic production and the historical avant-garde. Marjorie Perloff argues that at least in the first half of the twentieth century, “collage has been the most important mode for representing a ‘reality’ no longer quite believed in and therefore all the more challenging”.<sup>28</sup> Laurence Sillars has described the rise of a collage aesthetic in America at mid-century as a reaction to an evacuation of

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<sup>25</sup> Waldman 1992, p.11.

<sup>26</sup> This new movement in American poetry took its title from Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Fredman, *Contextual Practice: assemblage and the erotic in post-war poetry and art* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2010), p.14.

<sup>28</sup> Perloff 1998.

meaning, a result of the traumatic experiences of the Great Depression and WWII. He argues that drawing together discarded fragments from daily life, whether from a visual or verbal context, served to reveal ‘secret’ meanings and to insist on the regenerative potential of everyday experience”.<sup>29</sup> Artists and poets who applied a collage approach, he argues, often rejected grand gestures in favour of a vernacular using what was readily available to them.<sup>30</sup>

But the history of California collage and assemblage is also a highly conflicted subject, which partly relates to the diverse intentions of its practitioners.<sup>31</sup> Critics have debated the degree to which certain works of ‘junk art’ can be seen as direct attack of mass culture, the commodification of art by the New York art market and socio-political conditions, or as apolitical escapism along the same line as the art practices of the emerging counterculture of the 1960s. Certain Beat artists and poets of the 1950s, for instance, used a collage technique to create fantasy worlds that often drew on Dada, Surrealism and Romantic visions of the past. This has been regarded as an escape from society dominated by capitalism and McCarthyism where anything deemed too radical and ‘suspicious’ could result in detention. Their work has not been seen as an open attack of socio-political conditions, but an alternative from external ‘reality’.

This may also account for why Varda’s work has been marginalised in scholarly writing. Once again, Nin did not align herself with an artist who openly challenged

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<sup>29</sup> Laurence Sillars, ‘Failing to Fail: Michael Landy and Jean Tinguely’, in *Joyous Machines : Michael Landy and Jean Tinguely*, ed. Laurence Sillars (London: Tate Liverpool 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Sillars 2009, preface xi.

<sup>31</sup> See Whiteley 2011. Also Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse* (Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970) (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999). Sandra Starr, *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, exh. cat. (Santa Monica, Calif.: Corcoran Gallery, 1988). A. Ayres, *Forty Years of California Assemblage*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1998-90). Lisa Phillips, *Beat Culture and the New America 1950-1965*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995). Rebecca Solnit, *Secret Exhibition, Six Californian Artist of the Cold War Era* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990).

social and political structures, but who seemed to ‘escape’ into dreams and fairytales. The apparent lack of radical or subversive potential which we will encounter in Varda’s work is also visible in Nin’s engagement with collage in her novel and her writing on Varda’s collages in her diary of the 1960s. This also has to be viewed in the context of counterculture art production of the 1960s and the similar question whether the creative output of hippie communes like Drop City or Pond Farm (where Varda also taught craft techniques) was nothing but self-indulgent ‘naval gazing’ – a popular position held by most critics – or whether they can perhaps be described as ‘radical’ in a different way. The latter position is argued by the recent exhibition *West of Center* (2012) and the scholars who contributed essays to the accompanying exhibition catalogue which included Lucy R. Lippard and Julia Bryan-Wilson.<sup>32</sup> The editors Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner have argued that “the unfortunate fate of the counterculture is that its story doesn’t blend well with either the narrative of the New York avant-garde or the political histories of the 1960s. While its commitment to social transformation divorced it from the histories of the avant-garde, its emphasis on culture and lifestyle alienated it from political histories of 1960s radicalism.”<sup>33</sup> The New Left ignored the political potential of projects like the Pond Farm regarding “cultural radicalism” as nothing more than “a form of artistic lunacy”.<sup>34</sup> Scholars of the sixties also dismissed the visual and performative practices of the counterculture as apolitical ‘non-art’. Both factions, Auther and Lerner emphasise failed to see the importance of the counterculture as the “source for new forms of art, political

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<sup>32</sup> Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (eds.), *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Auther and Lerner, Introduction to *West of Center*, 2012, p.xviii.

<sup>34</sup> Auther and Lerner 2012, p.xviii.

expression, and the intertwining of the two, a formation with significant legacies in contemporary art and culture.”<sup>35</sup>

As a female artist Nin’s agenda also differed in certain aspects from that of the male artists around her, specifically in relation to notions of the fragmented modern self, which collage has been seen to express. As Nin’s final work of fiction, *Collages* stands at the end of a long line of experiments with different forms of ‘syntheses’ in art and writing. It was written at a time when Nin strongly engaged with certain texts by Otto Rank in relation to her conflicted views on female identity which alternated between a struggle with fragmentation and a celebration of multiplicity.<sup>36</sup> This is important, as Nin saw art as irrevocably tied to the inner self of the artist. Towards the 1960s, Nin moved away from a negative view of the self as tormented by fragmentation, which she first expressed through her protagonist in *House of Incest*, and began celebrating its fluidity and multiplicity. This, in turn, called for a ‘new synthesis’ in art to integrate this new multiple self. Like other, mostly male artists working at that time, who saw collage and assemblage as more suitable art form to express their notion of a fragmented modern self, Nin used collage for a problematic reflection on the modern *female* self and the female artist, which she developed further in *The Novel of the Future* (1968) and her lectures from the 1970s. Nin’s literary ‘imitation’ of Varda’s fabric collages, traditionally a feminine craft medium, to construct a female consciousness-raising narrative based partly on her diary raises questions relating to Nin’s position in relation to feminist artists working in California of the 1970s. They would introduce autobiographical subject matter and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See Rozsica Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1983). Also Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), *Feminism and Art History: questioning the litany* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1982). See also Helen Tookey’s chapter “‘As Fluid as Mercury’: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Questions of Identity’, in Tookey, *Anais Nin, Fictionality and Femininity: Playing a Thousand Roles* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp.51-90.

craft media into the realm of high art to challenge dominant discourses of white, male, privileged classes.<sup>37</sup> I will illustrate that whether Nin was one of these ‘women who reconstruct the world’ as Varda’s collage gift suggested remains questionable. As in previous collaborations, her alliance with a male artist to negotiated issues around female identity and creativity causes points of friction which cannot be easily resolved.

I will argue that Nin’s *Collages* may not be an attempt to use the radical potential of collage to openly challenge social, aesthetic and political norms, but that it contains an implicit discourse *on* collage whereby also the narrative’s *lack* of radical rupture becomes symptomatic of the context in which Nin was writing. Nin’s preoccupation with Varda’s collages and issues of synthesis and fragmentation within the American context then calls for different points of reference. It mobilises complex issues that reflect a very particular moment in American modernism, when male and female artists in California began searching for different ways of making art that expressed a self shaped by the experience of life in America after WWII. The focus of this chapter, then, is not another literary exploration of Nin’s novel *Collages*, but a focus on the visual elements in Nin’s writing and her experiments with collage which places these in a specific art historical context: a turn in visual representation and perception of self in post-war America.<sup>38</sup> My interdisciplinary investigation goes beyond the narrative level of a hermeneutic analysis and reads such art references symbolically, iconographically and materially.

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<sup>37</sup> Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, *Art / Women / California 1950-2000* (Berkeley and London 2002), p.98.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance Richard Candida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art Poetry and Politics in California*, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995).



### *Jean Varda's collages*

When Henry Miller introduced Anaïs Nin to Jean Varda, she was still mourning the decline of the European 'avant-garde' and spread venom about the corruption of Surrealism in New York. Miller's portrait of Varda as magician who "lives in the miracle" must have ticked all the boxes of Nin's romantic ideal of the artist, which was exactly the way Varda presented himself to her in his introductory letter. Varda created a picture of himself as poet and visionary, and drew on themes Nin addressed in *House of Incest*. He described a dream scenario in which 'Nin' apparently appeared to him as his muse "veiled" by water which evokes the first line of the prose-poem's prologue, "my first vision of earth was water veiled". Nin becomes his spokesperson for a monologue on art drawing on water symbolism and Rimbaud's idea of the artist as seer. The 'Nin' of Varda's dream asserts that "The mystic is the only one who knows that all states of ecstasy are a state of floating in an ambiance more heavy than air. [...] Paradise is at the bottom of the sea." When she appears to him a second time, she proclaims that art is "an overflow of Paradise's surplus" and belongs to the element of water by being fluid and 'transparent'.<sup>39</sup> Varda presents himself as someone who believes in the power of dreams, even though he remained sceptical about psychoanalysis like other artists at that time who turned to Eastern philosophy instead, put off by the commercialisation of psychoanalysis and Neo-Freudianism in America.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Varda drew on similar ideas as Nin, which may derive from their shared European roots.

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<sup>39</sup> Jean Varda in Nin, *Journals*, vol. 4, 1979, p.13.

<sup>40</sup> James Boaden describes the commercialisation of psychoanalysis in the US, which is parodied in Hans Richter's 1946 film *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. Here a man sets up a business to provide dreams for Americans too dull to dream their own. For many exiled Europeans, who saw psychoanalysis as a cure for serious disorders rather than as a mascot of wealth and depth, this idea of buying a fantasy was equivalent to the American's visit to the shrink". Boaden, *The Avant-Garde as Swain: A Critical American Pastoral*, PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London,

Jean Varda was an émigré from Smyrna who, like Miller and Nin, had lived in Paris in the inter-war years even though they had never met during this time. While Varda had mingled with visual artists associated with Surrealism and Cubism, including Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, and Juan Miró, Nin had been part of the group of writers and poets around Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell. To date, Varda and his oeuvre have not been subjected to any serious art historical examination. The reason for his marginalisation may be a lack of information about his life and work or it may indicate that his decorative fabric collages did not fit traditional preconceptions of what constitutes high art. This view led to the exclusion of many artists associated with the counterculture on the West Coast, miles away from the centre of the art market in New York ruled by Abstract Expressionism.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the accounts of artists who knew Varda, Nin's diary is currently one of the only accessible sources of information about the artist, although it has to be used with care, given that all of her artistic portraits were heavily filtered through Nin's own subjective vision. Varda's manifesto printed in the exhibition catalogue (1938) of the Storran Gallery in London, however, reveals that his early work drew on certain aesthetic ideas of Dada and Surrealism, although it was lacking in radical polemics.<sup>42</sup>

While most artists and writers affiliated with the surrealist group in France settled in New York after the outbreak of WWII, Varda quickly established himself as eccentric salon host on the West Coast.<sup>43</sup> He started working in textile collage soon

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May 2008, p.56; See also Joanna Pawlik, *Negotiating Surrealism: Post-war American avant-gardes after Breton*, PhD Thesis, University of Sussex 2008.

<sup>41</sup> See Candida Smith. In her diary Nin noted: "I take Varda's latest drawings to a publisher who first showed interest and then reproached me for not telling him Varda was a West Coast artist, and therefore he was not interested." Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.37.

<sup>42</sup> Varda also took part in the *First International Surrealist exhibition* in 1938.

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of the legacy of Surrealism in America see, for instance: Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950* (New York and London

after settling in Monterey. Back in Paris, he had already experimented with mixed-media works using material found in nature including stones and shells, and later created a form of mosaic made from broken and scratched bits of mirrors, that alluded to his Greek roots.<sup>44</sup> Susan Landauer has compared his early work to Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* constructions of the 1920s, as they incorporated found objects.<sup>45</sup> These early mixed media works presage his interest in assembling techniques, but also the primarily decorative qualities of his work.<sup>46</sup> While surrealist collage has been described as disrupting the "seamless surface of reality by smashing the mirror and importing the other into its cracks", Varda's mirror mosaics had a principally decorative functions.<sup>47</sup> The cracks in the mirror were emphasised with paint to create new patterns, not aggressive scars [Fig. 4.3].

The reproduction of one of his collages on the book cover of the first edition of *Collages* clearly displays the fragmentary nature of the image, but it obscures the most significant aspects of Varda's collages: colour and texture. All of his collages were composed from brightly coloured pieces of fabric, which were cut into different shapes, reassembled into figures and landscapes, and glued to the canvas [Figs. 4.4-

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1995). *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1997). Also Pawlik 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Varda's daughter Vagadu Varda explains, "The technique involved embedding mirrors on boards that had been covered with gesso after scratching the backs of the mirrors and adding paint in the scratches, so that paint could be seen from the front". See <http://www.jeanyankovarda.com/bio/bio.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996), p.48.

<sup>46</sup> There are various explanations as to why Varda chose fabric as source material. Betsy Stroman suggests in her yet unpublished autobiography of Varda that he gradually shifted from glass mosaics to collages. Initially he used paper, paint on wood, but soon started using more fabric pieces. Varda had explained that his choice of fabric and paper was due to practicality. He had to travel a lot to exhibit his works in galleries and his glass mosaics were too heavy and prone to break. Stroman however also points out that, "Varda was generally broke, and so was looking for inexpensive modes of expression. Paper and fabric, particularly when they had been discarded and were available for free, were an ideal medium for him. [...]. When Varda was living in Sausalito, where he was a well known figure, the women who worked in a local thrift shop, called the Salvage Shop, would save any clothes that came in for resale that had particularly interesting fabrics and offer them to Varda for next to nothing". (Sandra Rehme, interview with Betsy Stroman, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Adamowicz 1989, p.13.

4.8]. To keep the fabric in place, Varda would place the canvas on the floor and step on it until the glue had dried. He then applied paint to add extra colour and texture. *Woman Re-constructing the World*, for instance, clearly shows his approach. We see a group of six female figures composed of cut-out, geometric bits of fabric. Their stylised bodies resemble the composite figures seen in cubist paintings, but there is no rupture of perspective and their bodies remain mostly intact. They have no faces and their only distinguishing features are the different colours and patterns of their dresses. The perspective is flat and depth is created by the smaller size of three of the figures and the small architectural details in the background. The background is sand-coloured, which gives the impression of looking at a fictitious oriental setting or a scene from an ancient myth, like *Arabian Nights*. This impression is strengthened by the posture of the woman in the foreground on the left who seems to be carrying a vessel on her head in a manner associated with women of the Middle East.

The fabric material was taken from various sources – scraps from junk shops and old garments – and could be monochrome or patterned. Varda often added gold leaf, which gave the images a heraldic appearance. With titles like, *Knights of the Round Table*, *Queen with Lady in waiting*, Landauer described them fittingly as “carnavalesque friezes suggesting medieval pageantry”.<sup>48</sup> They were more decorative device rather than posing a challenge to the terms of representation. His cityscapes, nautical scenes and figurations mostly drew on literary sources – another aspect which distinguished them from the collages of his Parisian contemporaries: This included Greek myths, medieval tales and other legends from around the world. The

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<sup>48</sup> Landauer 1996, p.48.

colourful textiles and fantastical motifs gave the collages a distinctly decorative, folkloristic quality [Fig. 4.5].

With their geometric shapes, the compositions loosely (and superficially) appear to draw on Cubism's formal strategies, but they never seemed to aspire to Cubism's radical rupture with traditional conceptions of space and surface.<sup>49</sup> They are perhaps best described as ornamental dreamscapes: illustrations of myths and stories that do not disrupt the viewer's perception, unlike the Cubist collages of Picasso and Braque, for instance. These California collages could not be further removed from those produced in Europe. They do not negotiate the arbitrariness of the sign and there is no apparent displacement, because they are not constructed from pre-formed iconic or linguistic messages. The found material derives from a single source: old fabric. The most colourful scraps of fabric are assembled to create narrative scenes; fantasy worlds that suggest an escape from reality rather than an attempt at articulating its rupture. Varda's lack of interest in the semiotics of collage is confirmed by his biographer Betsy Stroman who has suggested that his choice of working with fabric was mostly related to the fact that it was a cheap material that was readily available in thrift stores.

With their emphasis on myths, texture, colour and pattern, Varda's collages advocated the power of imagination, a credo he taught his students at Black Mountain Collage and CSFA. While teaching at Black Mountain College, Varda became strongly affected by the art theory of Josef Albers whom he described as "the greatest teacher alive". Albers's colour theory and craft-influenced, decorative approach to art resonated in Varda's own teaching on colour and form at the college

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<sup>49</sup> Varda continues to refer to Picasso as one of the greatest artists of all time. Varda references Cubism in the titles of some of his California collages such as *Cubism Revisited*.

in the summer of 1946, when Albers was head of the art department. When asked about his choice of material, Varda would claim that material was irrelevant; all that mattered was form and colour which also linked him to other artists interested in the transcendental.<sup>50</sup> It is highly likely that Varda was also familiar with Anni Albers's textile works that drew on the bright colours and bold patterns of Mexican and Latin American cloth.<sup>51</sup> But colour and form in his collages were always in service of the narrative and rarely moved into pure abstraction.

Between 1945 and 1952, Varda taught at the California School of Fine Arts (now called the San Francisco Institute of Art). He was recruited by Douglas MacAgy, who turned the school into a hub for experimental activity in the arts.<sup>52</sup> While Varda's decorative work fitted squarely within the prevailing Abstract Expressionism at the college, he blended in well with the department's anarchic approach to art and teaching based on Clay Spohn's emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation.<sup>53</sup> Spohn was also working with assembled junk, which has been regarded by Daniel Allbright as comment on artistic pretentiousness and as anticipating the rise of funk art of the 1950s.<sup>54</sup> During his time at the faculty Varda promoted an experimental approach to materials and a romantic theory of the metaphysics of art around ideas of alchemy and magic drawing on Symbolism and Surrealism. One of his favoured aphorisms was "modern painting is the last

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<sup>50</sup> Varda later shared a houseboat with one of the founders of the Dynaton movement, Gordon Onslow Ford, who were interested in transcendentalism.

<sup>51</sup> See *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, eds. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock, ex.cat. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (Ostfildern : Hatje Cantz , 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Rebecca Solnit, 'Heretical Constellation: Notes on California, 1946-61', in Phillips 1995, p.77. Also Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 121.

<sup>53</sup> Solnit in Phillips 1995, pp. 69-122.

<sup>54</sup> See Whiteley 2011, p.58.

sanctuary of magic”.<sup>55</sup> In comparison to the expatriates circle around Peggy Guggenheim, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst in New York, which Nin so detested, Varda may have seemed a lush figure, but his art incorporated a Romantic aesthetic that Nin promoted in her own work as an alternative to social realism. Nin particularly latched on to his celebration of art as ‘sanctuary of magic’ and collage as alchemy, which she celebrated in her novel *Collages*.

### *Anais Nin’s Collages (1964)*

From the mid-1950s, Nin began engaging more strongly with Varda’s collages, and with the practice of assembling found objects and transforming them into art, which found expression in *Collages*. She even fashioned herself a collage maker like Varda – while Varda used scraps of old fabric, she drew on ‘found’ material from her diary to create a collage of art and life. In an interview from 1972, Nin explained:

“*Collages* was inspired by seeing Varda work with his little bits of material. I began to think about the people that I knew in Los Angeles and they suddenly formed a pattern of dreamers. They were all absolutely possessed by some myth or some dream so I put them all together with others not from Los Angeles, [...] and that formed a collage of dreamers who couldn't possibly talk to each other because each one was pursuing his own fantasy. So they were like little pieces in a collage. [...] Varda also was one of the characters, creating his own world.”<sup>56</sup>

Nin regarded the collage mode of her novel mainly as referring to her use of thinly disguised literary portraits of her friends. While this was a strategy that Nin had used in all her fiction writing, in her final novel this material was woven together in a

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<sup>55</sup> Landauer 1996, p.48

<sup>56</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks* 1975, p.215

more playful way through stories and myths.<sup>57</sup> Nin made her semi-fictional characters meet in different scenarios which trigger new stories either on the plain of the main narrative of Renate's journey or on a meta-level, as myths told by the people she encounters – a process Nin compared to a chemical reaction or alchemical process.<sup>58</sup> To align herself with Varda's collage practice, Nin dressed her characters in colourful clothes to evoke Varda's exotic women and mythical scenes. Dresses can have symbolic function to reveal a character's state of mind, like Renate's coral-red dress which signifies her newly found confidence after leaving Bruce who cheated on her with another man; they can also be used decoratively like the ornamental kimono worn by the consul's wife who Renate meets on her journey. In her self-conscious imitation of Varda's collages we can see that Nin mainly saw him as a story teller, magician and weaver of myths, rather than as artist who engages with social circumstances. This is confirmed in Nin's literary portrait of Varda who is introduced in the middle of *Collages*.

Renate first meets 'Varda' at a bohemian night club where she works when she doesn't sell enough paintings. The club is described as a meeting point for beat artists and writers, which drew on Nin's accounts of the L.A. scene from her diary. The club is significantly called *Paradise Inn* located by the sea, which recalls Varda's letter in which he described the source of artistic creation as fluid paradise.

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<sup>57</sup> In a letter to her Japanese translator Kazuko Sugisaki Nin wrote: "The names [in *Collages*]: They are half real and half invented. [...] Varda is real, a Greek name (relative of Agnes Varda, the film maker). Renate is a real first name. Judith Sands is Djuna Barnes, writer, an invented name. Bruce is a pseudonym. [...] Nobuko of course is real. Those who consented to have their real names used I left in. The others I changed". Nin cited by Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.

<sup>58</sup> Nin wrote that "all the characters in *Collages* had chemical effects on each other". Nin, *Novel*, p.132. Varda has often been quoted as saying that "Nothing endures [...] unless it has first been transposed into a myth". In *Collages* Nin fuses Varda's statement with her own statement that her female protagonists are "women with transportable roots". Nin's 'Varda' says: "Nothing endures [...] unless it has first been transposed into a myth, and the great advantage of myths is that they are ladies with transportable roots". Nin, *Collages*, p.80.



He arrives at the Inn with a selection of collages for an exhibition, which is the start of Nin's literary portrait of the artist, which spans two chapters.

Nin introduces 'Varda' with a description of his collages which does not take into account the materiality or flatness of his scenes, but emphasises their 'aliveness'. They become 'cosmic tableaux' that depict a 'reality' more alive, 'real' and appealing than external 'reality':

“They eclipse the sun, the sea and the planets. The laminated blues dimmed the refractions of the ocean and made it seem ponderous and opaque. His tremble greens vibrated and made the plants seem dead and the flowers artificial. His shafts of gold made the sunrays pale.”<sup>59</sup>

Even his one-dimensional, cut-out female figures become alive at the hands of the artist:

“he dressed his women in irradiations; his colours breathed like flesh and the fine spun pulsated like nerves. [...] women became staminated flowers, ... as fragrant as if he had painted them with thyme, saffron and curry. They were translucent and airy, carrying their Arabian Night's cities like nebulous scarves around their Lucite necks.”<sup>60</sup>

The synaesthetic description of 'Varda's' collages serves Nin to promote her Romantic notion of artistic imagination and the power of the artist to transform life, which she connects to the figure of the alchemist. Nin focuses strongly on the process of assembling, the transformation of mundane objects into art, which she called 'alchemist brew'. It becomes the framework for her description of 'Varda'. Nin described 'Varda' as “alchemist searching only for what he could transmute into gold”.<sup>61</sup> This is even more pronounced in Robert Snyder's documentary *Anais Nin*

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<sup>59</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.78.

<sup>60</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.78-79.

<sup>61</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.80.

*Observed* (1973) where Varda appears as one of Nin's major artistic 'role models' alongside Henry Miller. Nin recounts the moment of unpacking *Women* *Reconstructing the World*:

"I fixed my eyes on the Varda collage. It was as if I had stepped out of my life into a region of sand composed of crystals, of transparent women dancing in airy dresses, figures which no obstacle could stop, who could pass through walls, beings designed like sieves to allow the breeze through. Through these floating figures with openings like windows, life could flow . . . I escaped from the confinement of four brown walls, . . . for I acquired in these moments of contemplation of Varda's collage the certainty that such a state of life was attainable, [...], for he has invented nothing, he has transcribed his moods and visions and vistas, experiences and images. [...]"<sup>62</sup>

Already in her early writing Nin had used the motifs of alchemy and magic to describe the work of the poet. This may be related to the revival of an interest in alchemy and occultism in Paris in the beginning of the twentieth century, which also resonates in the writing of Apollinaire, Breton, Rimbaud, Ernst and other artists and writers associated with Symbolism and Surrealism.<sup>63</sup> This renewed interest in alchemy was not limited to the arts and also entered psychoanalytical thought. Nin's first analyst René Allendy, for instance, discussed the topic in his dissertation *L'Alchimie et la Médecine* and published an article about the relevance of occultism in the periodical *Le Voile d'Isis* in 1920.<sup>64</sup> Viennese psychoanalyst Herbert Silberer wrote a psychoanalytic interpretation of alchemy, which became central to Jungian theory.<sup>65</sup> Jung, in turn, was pivotal in reviving the study of alchemy, which he discussed in his *Psychology and Alchemy* in 1944. This was adapted by the emerging

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<sup>62</sup> Nin cited in Robert Snyder, *Anaïs Nin Observed: From a Film Portrait of a Woman as Artist* (Los Angeles: The Swallow Press, 1976), p.70.

<sup>63</sup> M.E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Warlick 2001, p. 29.

<sup>65</sup> Herbert Silberer, *Hidden symbolism of alchemy and the occult arts*, transl. Smith Ely (New York 1971).

counterculture of the 1950s and 60s, which celebrated all things spiritual. It was also an approach celebrated by certain assemblage artists like Wallace Berman, as I will explain shortly.

Max Ernst was one of the first to draw parallels between alchemy and collage in ‘*Au delà de la peinture*’ in 1936. Collage maker and alchemist both use found matter which is extracted from the original context and re-combine it with other separate parts to create something new. Alchemy became a general metaphor for the “creative process and for the self-revelation that came from making art”.<sup>66</sup> Although the motivation for the alchemist was the production of gold, the final result was less important than the self-knowledge acquired during the process. Similarly, Ernst placed a strong emphasis on the process of making of a work of art which became, as M.E. Warlick argues, “the vehicle for an investigation and knowledge of his personal identity”.<sup>67</sup> While Nin’s novel cannot be compared to Ernst’s collages, we can see a similar use of the alchemy metaphor in relation to art production.

Nin’s emphasis on transformation in relation to art was closely linked to Baudelaire’s idea of the poet as rag picker of experience, which he expressed in his poem ‘*Le Vin de Chiffonniers*’ (1857).<sup>68</sup> Nin first re-worked this theme in her short story ‘*Ragtime*’ first published in 1938 which was based on her experience of seeing rag-pickers in the slums of Paris described in her diary in 1936.<sup>69</sup> Nin wrote:

“The rag picker worked in silence and never looked at anything that was whole. His eyes sought the broken, the worn, the faded, the fragmented. A complete object made him sad. What could

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<sup>66</sup> Max Ernst, ‘*Au delà de la peinture*’, cited in Warlick 2001, p.135.

<sup>67</sup> Warlick 2001, p. 135.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘*Le Vin de Chiffonniers*’, in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

<sup>69</sup> Anais Nin, ‘*Ragtime*’, *Under a Glass Bell*, pp.80-83 (Athens, Ohio: Swallow, 1995 [New York: Gemor Press, 1944]). Anais Nin, *Journals*, vol.2, 1979, pp.113-114. See also Sharon Spencer’s discussion of ‘*Ragtime*’ in relation to collage-making in *Collage of Dreams*.

one do with a complete object? Put it in a museum. Not touch it. But a torn paper, a shoelace without its double, a cup without saucer, that was stirring. They could be transformed, melted into something else.”<sup>70</sup>

Many years later, Nin recycled this idea by portraying Varda as new-age rag picker. In her diary she described Varda as “a poet, sublime rag-picker who turns everything into an object of beauty”.<sup>71</sup> He “rescues us from the stranglehold of realism” and “fulfils the main role of the artist, which is to transform ugliness into beauty”.<sup>72</sup> She wrote that she could “see him visiting the scrap heaps of any town, picking up wood, discarded boats, furniture, taking them home, reshaping and repainting them into a Byzantine object of beauty”.<sup>73</sup> In an interview she emphasised, “This is the power to create out of nothing [...], being able to create something out of clay, out of glass, out of bits of material, out of junkyards, out of anything is the proof of the creativity of man and the magic of art”.<sup>74</sup>

Nin elaborated on the idea of transformation through a dialogue between Varda and his daughter in *Collages*. She used them as ventriloquist’s dummies to defend her romantic ideal of the power of artistic imagination against the hallucinations produced artificially by psychedelic drugs. In the novel, ‘Varda’s teenage daughter is described as studying to become a scientist and does not believe in the transformative powers of art. Nin writes, “Varda creates his own mythical world with scissors and cloth, his daughter needs drugs”. He tries to ‘convert’ her by telling her a story of a blind man who relied on his daughter’s description of their home as idyllic. When he regains his eyesight, he discovers they had been living in great poverty in an old shack. Instead of being shocked, he tells his daughter: “It is true

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<sup>70</sup> Nin, ‘Ragtime’, in *Under a Glass Bell*, p.81.

<sup>71</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 5, p.107.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.4, 1979, p.241.

<sup>74</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, 1975, p.185.

that the world you described does not exist but as you built that image so carefully in my mind and I can still see it so vividly, we can now set about to build it just as you made me see it". 'Varda's' daughter only understands him better after trying consciousness expanding drugs. She finds that her visions are similar to 'Varda's' collages which he created without artificial 'short-cuts'. Anna Balakian argues that this "hallucinatory dialogue" between Varda and his daughter "could pass for an elaboration of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* with the same sense of murals, music, space, cosmic connections, dynamic transformations of objects".<sup>75</sup> 'Varda's' daughter explains:

"My senses were multiplied as if I had a hundred eyes, a hundred ears, a hundred fingertips. On the wall appeared endless murals of designs I made which produced their own music to match. When I drew a long orange line it emitted its own orange tone. The music vibrated through my body as if I were one of the instruments and I felt myself becoming a full percussion orchestra, becoming green, blue, orange, gold".<sup>76</sup>

Nin had used her experience of taking LSD part in one of the earliest scientific experiments with the drug as material for this description, which however served to critique drug-use.<sup>77</sup>

Nin's almost naive celebration of artistic imagination can be seen as symptomatic of her reaction against American modernism, which she believed "got rid of magic for realism".<sup>78</sup> In 'Realism and Reality' Nin had argued that it is the poet's task to create a world that is more 'real', not by trying to document it, but by portraying it as it is

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<sup>75</sup> Balakian in Nalbantian 1997, p.75.

<sup>76</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.91.

<sup>77</sup> Anaïs Nin: "I wrote part of LSD experience in *Collages* ...." Nin, *Journals*, vol. 5, p. 146.

<sup>78</sup> See Nin, 'The Artist as Magician', in *A Woman Speaks*, pp181-219. Also Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, 1968.

experienced.<sup>79</sup> Reality for Nin, as Thomas M. March argues, “is not located in the external world alone, as something static and unchanging, but rather in the encounter of the internal world with the external.”<sup>80</sup> Nin was not alone with her critical stance towards ‘external reality’. She picked the romantic motif of the rag-picker and alchemist at a time when certain artists working in California began using junk to create art and express their experience of life in America and critique canonical modernism. They identified with the nineteenth-century bohemian that Walter Benjamin had linked to the figure of Baudelaire’s rag-picker in his essay ‘*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*’.<sup>81</sup> Thomas Crow sees a reprisal of Baudelaire’s *chiffonier* in American art and literature at mid-century, from Robert Rauschenberg’s use of junk to the emergence of the figure of the outsider in literature.<sup>82</sup> It became specifically popular among artists working with assemblage in San Francisco. They drew on Dada, Surrealism and Romanticism and shared a sense of rebellion against the mores of post-war American culture; although opinions as to what degree their work could be called political or dissenting are divided. This also relates to the view of San Francisco as city with a “history of ‘poet prophets’ and countercultural bohemianism” which is described critically by Gillian Whiteley as “a conglomerate of myths, popular clichés and stereotypes”.<sup>83</sup> In 1958, Bruce Conner, Michael McClure, Jess, Wallace Berman and others founded the ‘Rat Bastard Protective Association’.<sup>84</sup> The name was coined by Conner as a pun on the San Francisco garbage collectors company Scavengers’ Protective Association. These

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas M. March, in Salvatore 2001, p.162.

<sup>80</sup> March in Salvatore (ed.), p.163.

<sup>81</sup> See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss et al, *Art Since 1900: modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p.417.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European art in the era of dissent* (London: Laurence King 2004), p.71.

<sup>83</sup> See Whiteley’s discussion of literature on California assemblage in her chapter ‘Dissenters, Drifters and Poets: “Placing” Assemblage in the San Francisco Bay Area’, in Whiteley 2011.

<sup>84</sup> See Boaden. Also Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna (eds.), *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and his Circle* (New York, NY : D.P.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2005).

‘scavengers’ would collect the discarded remains of society and were considered as having a low status. They were glorified by Conner & Co. as romantic outcasts. The Rat Bastards also consciously referenced a Romanticised past with their initials ‘RBP’ which alluded to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB).

Varda fashioned himself as a persona that fitted this framework, a romantic outsider artist. Literarily a rag picker, his entire environment had a ‘junk-aesthetic’. Varda rejected the establishment, materialism and academicism. Always broke, he relied on scraps from thrift stores to make art.<sup>85</sup> In 1973 Nin explained in an interview: “Varda also went to the junkyard, and from discarded boats made himself a beautiful Greek Sailboat. This is the power to create out of nothing we need to restore ourselves... the proof of the creativity of man and the magic of art”.<sup>86</sup> In the late 1940s, after moving to San Francisco, Varda and Gordon Onslow-Ford, gradually converted an old ferry boat, the Vallejo moored in Sausalito Bay into a two studios and living quarters.<sup>87</sup>

Nin also acknowledges assemblage in a short passage within the ‘Varda’-chapter in which the narrator lists fictional saints who nourish ‘Varda’ with creative inspiration.

One of these saints is ‘Saint Banality’ who is described as

“[reigning] over the artists who could take everyday objects and turn them into extra-ordinary ones, like the postman in France who built a castle out of the stones he found on his route every day; the shoe cleaner in Brooklyn who decorated his shoe shine box with medals, unmatched ear-rings, broken glass and silver paper to look like a Byzantine crown; the mason in Los Angeles

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<sup>85</sup> See Foster and Krauss et al. 2004, p.416.

<sup>86</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p.185.

<sup>87</sup> In her diary Nin notes, “When I left San Francisco he had already acquired a ferryboat from which the motors and wheels had been extracted, leaving a pool-like centre to look into. He was beginning to make windows for the deck. With time the ferryboat grew in beauty. [...]. Everything is made by his own hands, with little or no money. [...]. He is a poet, sublime rag picker who turns everything into an object of beauty.” Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.107.

who built towers out of broken cups, tiles, tea pots and washstands”.<sup>88</sup>

This excerpt contains allusions to two iconic examples of vernacular or outside art, which became role models for artists working in collage and assemblage: The ‘postman in France’ most likely refers to Ferdinand Cheval, a French postman from Hauterives near Lyon who spent more than three decades of his life creating *Le Palais Ideal*, an ‘ideal palace’ out of stones and rocks bound together with lime, mortar and cement [Fig. 4.6]. In *The Novel of Future* Nin had referred to Cheval and Watts as prime examples of the transformative power of dreams.<sup>89</sup> Cheval, who began building his stone palace in 1879, claimed that he was inspired by a vision he had after tripping on a stone. For the next 33 years, he would collect stones during his daily mail route and used them to build his Ideal Palace. It is more than likely that Nin had heard of Cheval when she lived in Paris as he received recognition from Breton and Ernst.<sup>90</sup> In 1932, Max Ernst paid homage to Cheval with a collage titled *The Postman Cheval*.

The story of a common man who built a fantastical palace ‘inspired’ by a vision touched upon major surrealist ideals related to their interest in dreams and the unconscious. Built by an untrained amateur it was, like the drawings of children and the insane, a creative expression which did not grow from the mind, but the unspoilt unconscious, which drew on Baudelaire’s notion that ‘genius is simply childhood recovered at will’.<sup>91</sup> A similar aesthetic applies to the second reference in Nin’s excerpt, the “mason in Los Angeles”, which refers to Simon Rodia and his *Watts Towers* in Los Angeles – a cathedral-like construction of steel pipes and rods

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<sup>88</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.81.

<sup>89</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.19

<sup>90</sup> See Sawin 1997, p.59 for a discussion of the importance of the Palais Ideal for French surrealists.

<sup>91</sup> Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (London: Studio Vista, 1972), p. 14.



wrapped with wire mesh, and decorated with found objects including pieces of porcelain, sea shells, tiles and broken glass bottles [Fig. 4.7]. Rodia was an uneducated Italian labourer, who worked in Los Angeles as a tile-setter and lived in the suburb of Watts. Like Cheval, Rodia spent more than three decades of his life, from 1921-1954, collecting junk at night and turning it into a fantasy construction.

The subtext of art born from unspoilt imagination is emphasised by placing Rodia's and Cheval's work on one level with that of an unknown shoe cleaner from Brooklyn who decorates his shoe box with found objects. Like Varda's collages made from rags, Rodia's and Cheval's works become testimonies to the power of dreams and the imagination. Nin was not interested in medium-specificity, the cutting and pasting. She emphasised the process of transformation rather than the final result. Similarly, Rodia never considered his project as finished, although one could say that he left Watts once the towers were fully covered in bric-a-brac. "Don't you understand?" he said. "It's the end; there's nothing there".<sup>92</sup> Nin turned Rodia, Cheval and Varda whose work expressed a highly personal vision into elements of her own 'collage of dreamers obsessed with their own fantasy'.

Even though these examples seem to share a similar assemblage aesthetic, it is important to note that Cheval's stone palace was built in a different geographical and historical context, and from different materials than the Watts Towers. One was built in the nineteenth century, stands in a rural village in France and was made from natural found materials. The other was built in the 1950s in what has been described as a "sprawling suburb of Los Angeles, a drab and dusty accumulation of one-storey houses and vacant lots" and was made of the remains of everyday life.<sup>93</sup> While there

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<sup>92</sup> Cardinal 1972, p. 172.

<sup>93</sup> Plagens 1999, p. 74.

are different interpretations of the meaning of the Watts Towers, Nin's contextualisation indicates the widely held belief that the Towers are a 'challenge to triviality and ugliness'.<sup>94</sup> But California assemblage made from urban detritus did not only acknowledge the power of imagination. Rebecca Solnit argues that "to make from scratch, to start from nothing, is only to contribute, while to re-contextualise what has been made is to critique".<sup>95</sup> With its junk aesthetic, Rodia's work is generally considered as one of the first and most pre-eminent examples of proto-assemblage that foreshadows the work of American assemblage artists.<sup>96</sup> More than just a manifestation of the power of imagination the towers, just like the junk art they preceded, have been seen as a critique of American society which celebrated material progress on the expense of humanistic values.<sup>97</sup> Roger Cardinal argues that it was "a 'something big' that is not mimetic of American bigness, but a brilliant alternative to it in the way it exploits the very things that America discards."<sup>98</sup>

Assemblage became specifically important on the West Coast. Peter Plagens defined it in as "the first home-grown California modern art", although, as Joanna Pawlik pointed out, this popular vision of the California avant-garde as isolated from other influences ignores the impact of the influx of European thought through exiled artists from France and Germany – a view which is confirmed by Nin's own narrative which creates a chronology that sees Europe as the origin of assemblage.<sup>99</sup> By comparing Varda to these two examples of proto-assemblage, Nin draws a lineage from European 'avant-garde' to California assemblage. A similar lineage was drawn in the seminal exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in

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<sup>94</sup> Cardinal 1972, p.172.

<sup>95</sup> Solnit 1995, p.85.

<sup>96</sup> Plagens 1999, p. 74.

<sup>97</sup> See Plagens 1999.

<sup>98</sup> Cardinal 1972, p.172.

<sup>99</sup> Plagens 1999, p. 74.

1961, curated by William Seitz, which first introduced and established assemblage as an art practice.<sup>100</sup> It included collages produced in Europe before WWII and the assemblage works created by contemporary artists in California.<sup>101</sup> It showed collages by European artists including Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp alongside emerging American assemblage artists like Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner, Jess, Robert Rauschenberg and many others. Nin's narrative can be seen as evidence that the California art scene, as described by art historians was not as isolated from external influences as they often claim, but were influenced in one way or another by the legacy of the historical avant-garde through the influx of European artists – whether they were rejected, adapted or re-appropriated.

In her diary, Nin had bemoaned the lack of old, shared symbols and markers of European traditions in America, which were reflected for instance in classic architecture. She expressed the desire for a “new unifying myth accompanied by meaningful visual symbols”. *Collages*, I want to suggest, can be seen as an indirect attempt at creating such a myth with shared visual symbols by embedding her art references within a chronology that sees Europe as the point of origin for California art production. She thereby indirectly aligned herself with recent criticism against the notion that California art emerged within a vacuum of its own history, a view promoted, for instance by Plagens.<sup>102</sup>

Varda's collages also suggested such a lineage and reflected his roots in European models, although he liked to play down his academic training, and, like many of his peers, cultivated a certain anti-intellectualism. While he would defend his work as being art rather than craft, Varda was a self-proclaimed boudoir-artist who claimed

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<sup>100</sup> Solnit 1995, p.84-5.

<sup>101</sup> William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

<sup>102</sup> See Pawlik 2008.

not to be interested in materialism. This reflects tendencies that can be seen in the work of other artists and poets living in California. Brandon Taylor argues that many artists would not seek public approbation, but the approval of like-minded friends.<sup>103</sup> It was a direct reaction against the art market and the dawn of mass-market conformity. His colourful collages fake the child-like naiveté of an amateur artist or vernacular art, and betray his formal academic training. They depict scenes that show no sign of modern life like the work of the American folk art revival of the 1920s and 30s which drew on vernacular culture.<sup>104</sup> Varda's motifs, however, never engaged with the nature of American life, but drew on myths and fairytales. What set his collages apart from vernacular art which was limited to a nostalgic look back at a romanticised past, were their ironic titles often alluding to Cubism or Surrealism in a mocking tone.<sup>105</sup> Varda evokes European traditions in a humorous way, thereby acknowledging the movements he was indebted to, but simultaneously distancing himself from them. In 1944, Henry Miller had described this ambivalence in his short homage to Varda published in *Circle* magazine, titled *Varda the Masterbuilder*. He argued that for Varda, "the collage is no longer as it was for Picasso and other French painters, an experiment or notation preparatory to the final attack. With Varda it has become the thing-in-itself, a creation".<sup>106</sup> While this statement is a grave misrepresentation of the approach of Picasso and Braque who saw their collages as finished works, Miller's observations give us an interesting portrait of Varda. Miller styled Varda as a craftsman, a 'masterbuilder' rather than a trained artist (which he was).

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<sup>103</sup> Taylor 2004, p. 121.

<sup>104</sup> Artists like Arthur Dove used fabric and lace to create folkloristic collages in the 1920s.

<sup>105</sup> For example 'Cubism Revisited'.

<sup>106</sup> Henry Miller, '*Varda the Masterbuilder*', in *Circle* (1944).

Varda's playful junk art, compared to the morbid work of Bruce Connor, for instance, was a less open attack on modern society, but commented on it by suggesting utopian alternatives, which can almost be described as deliberately apolitical. Varda's libertarian life-style and the positive message of his work that 'art is joy' links him to the emerging counterculture and Beat artists like proto-hippy Wallace Berman whose motto "Art is Love is God" was often printed on his work.<sup>107</sup> Varda promoted an aesthetic that reflected a belief in personal freedom, love and all things spiritual and anti-bourgeois – from Cabbalistic mysticism and peyote rituals to domestic creativity – similar to a new generation of young American artists and poets living on the West Coast.<sup>108</sup> Varda's boat, the Vallejo, was a floating salon which played a major role in the rise of the artistic renaissance of the Bay Area in the 1950s [Fig. 4.8].<sup>109</sup> It became a meeting place for artists, writers, poets and other counter-culture figures, including Harry Partch, Roberto Matta, Timothy Leary, SFMA curator Grace McCann Morley, Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Varda also shared his living quarters first with Dynaton co-founder Gordon Onslow-Ford who promoted transcendentalism and later Zen philosopher Alan Watts.

In her diary, Nin promoted Varda's proto-hippie ideology: "For Varda, art is an expression of joy", Nin wrote. "He wears the same colours he uses in his work: pink

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<sup>107</sup> Wallace Berman quoted by George Herms in the foreword to: *George Herms: Selected Works 1960-1972* (ex.cat. California State University, Los Angeles, Fine Arts Gallery, November 5<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>th</sup> 1972). See also *Wallace Berman: support the revolution* (Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992).

<sup>108</sup> In his first home in Monterey, Varda soon gathered a group of followers who were not only looking for new forms of artistic expression but also for spiritual guidance, comparable to fellow collage artist Wallace Berman, who would collect groups of artists, poets and writers who had a shared interest in Kabbalistic mysticism, peyote rituals, marijuana, personal gifting and domestic creativity. Taylor 2004, p. 127.

<sup>109</sup> Fariba Bogzaran, Jasmine Moorhead and Briana Tarantino, *Gordon Onslow Ford: From the Vallejo*, (Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco, October 2007).

pants, or an old rose sweater, green and purple”.<sup>110</sup> In *Collages* she wrote that “His collages taught how to remain in a state of grace of love”.<sup>111</sup> In 1967, Varda’s niece, the French film-maker Agnès Varda captured his playful approach in her short documentary film *Uncle Yanko*, which portrays Varda as an aging hippie who dresses in colourful clothes to match his collages [Fig. 4.9]. Commenting on her film, Agnes Varda emphasises ‘Yanko’s’ bohemian surrounding, the “aquatic suburbs of San Francisco” which is the “intellectual heart and centre of the bohemian”. She writes that that “nevertheless, he is involved in young American movements; hippies and drop outs come to see him in his house-boat.”<sup>112</sup> [Fig. 4.10]

Varda mingled with the beatniks in San Francisco who met at North Beach cafes such as The Iron Pot and The Black Cat to exchange views.<sup>113</sup> Varda’s self-consciously naïve approach to life and art was symptomatic of a wide-spread attitude towards social and political issues, which has been interpreted as ignorance. Nin perpetuates this in her writing about Varda. Not only his mythical collage scenes, but also his living environment becomes a sanctuary. She described his home in Monterey like a building from a fairytale or scene from his collages [Fig. 4.11]. It becomes a

“a beautifully proportioned high-ceilinged house, topped by a turret with a flag of Varda’s own making fluttering in the wind. [...] His collages illumine the walls. It is a feast of colour and textures. The food is served in big wooden bowls, as for giants, and he uses giant wooden spoons. ...the turret ... with its four small windows opened like an oriental mirador [...]. Janko Varda is the only modern artist who creates not the sickly-sweet fairy

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<sup>110</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. IV, p.242.

<sup>111</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.80.

<sup>112</sup> <http://dafilms.com/film/8404-uncle-yanko/>

<sup>113</sup> Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area 1945-1980*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985)p.12.

tales of childhood but the sturdy fairy tale of the artist. [...] He was a tireless raconteur of magic tales. [...].”<sup>114</sup>

Susan Landauer argues that many artists turned inward and to mysticism, away from social and political reality, after the experience of WWII and the awareness of the destructive potential of modern technology could cause. Individual imagination and a focus on dreams, myth and magic became a form of escapism.<sup>115</sup> Drawing on Richard Candida Smith, Landauer points out that

“the fundamental lack of support for contemporary art coupled with a growing opposition to canonical modernism after 1950 resulted in a self-sufficient underground network of printing presses, artist- and poet run galleries, and private venues. The sustaining ideology of this strikingly independent community was that of ‘the innocence of the clean slate’ – an almost religious belief in personal experience as the only authentic source of values’.”<sup>116</sup>

Nin’s image of Varda/’Varda’ in her novel and diary, then, is a product of myths propagated as much by Varda himself as by others around them, myths which are related to the historical and social circumstances of the post-war period, and specifically to the history of San Francisco and the role it played in the formation of beat culture.<sup>117</sup> Some commentators on art production in California have described this tendency across different art forms as ‘pastoral thinking’ that challenged the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism. Drawing on the writing of Thomas Crow and William Empson, James Boaden outlines two symbiotic versions of the pastoral, “that of complex ideas presented in ‘simple’ forms and the development of

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<sup>114</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 4, 1979, p.239-40.

<sup>115</sup> Susan Landauer, “Painting under the shadow: California Modernism and the Second World War”, in Paul J. Karlstrom ed., *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900 – 1950*, p.43

<sup>116</sup> Susan Landauer, ‘Countering Cultures: The California Context’, in: Peter Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (Berkeley, Calif. ; London : University of California Press, 2006), p.2-3.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance. Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 6.

inaccessible golden ages”.<sup>118</sup> Varda’s mythical scenes and Nin’s portrait of Varda (and his self-fashioning) as bohemian rag-picker, who creates magical dream-worlds can be regarded as examples of such thinking. In *Collages*, a longing for an escape from external reality into myth or a fictional past may also be seen in the circular structure of the narrative, which starts in Vienna and leads us back to the European city via America. The first paragraph which is simultaneously the last, described a park scene in the Austrian capital which resembles a fantastical, carnivalesque Varda-tableau:

“They sat under the trees in the parks summer and winter. Some wore costumes of other periods, and some no clothes at all. Men, women, children, kings, dwarfs, gargoyles, unicorns, lions, clowns, heroes, wise men, prophets, angels, saints and soldiers preserved for Vienna an illusion of eternity.”

In this nostalgic description of Vienna, the city becomes a dreamlike, magical place, a retreat from the reality of the present. Boaden relates such a melancholic ‘retreat into the imaginary past’ to the trauma of WWII.<sup>119</sup> Nin has often been accused of ignoring political and historic events in her writing, but her diary is filled with accounts of the loss of the ‘old world’. Varda’s ‘world’ becomes a welcome domestic sanctuary, just as Varda exclaimed: “art is the last sanctuary of magic”. His fantastical collages become almost literally an escape for Nin. She proclaimed in the 1970s: “There are some painters who give me the feeling that I would like to live inside their paintings. I’ve always had that feeling about Varda’s collages [...] I wanted to be inside his collages and he wanted his collages to be part of my life.”<sup>120</sup> But we have already seen in chapter 2 that Nin’s mourning of the ‘old world’ was also related to the negative reception of her own ‘esoteric’ writing in America. She

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<sup>118</sup> Boaden 2010, p.18.

<sup>119</sup> Boaden 2010, p.19

<sup>120</sup> Anaïs Nin in Robert Snyder, *Anaïs Observed*, 1976, p.68.



saw Varda's collages as an affirmation of a Romantic (an elitist) notion of artistic imagination which came under attack from all sides: the New York 'neo-avant-garde' and even the counterculture with their emphasis on group experience, collaborative work and consciousness expanding drugs.

Varda's assembled fantasy worlds and his engagement with or denial of social and political 'reality' parallels the collages and the domestic environment of San Francisco-based artist-poet couple Jess and Robert Duncan. Jess's collages and assemblages drew on Ernst and Gaudi, as well as sources such as children's books, twentieth century poetry, fairy tales and science fiction, and were often inscribed on the back with literary passages.<sup>121</sup> It is highly likely that Varda knew the couple, at least through their mutual friends.<sup>122</sup> In the late 1940s, Duncan was part of a group around Varda's friend James Broughton and Madeline Gleason, whose work similarly drew on fairy tales and childhood chants.<sup>123</sup> In 1951, Duncan and Jess moved into Broughton's former apartment on Baker Street, which they turned into a bohemian hide-out decorated with colourful fabrics, make-shift furniture and found bric-a-brac.<sup>124</sup> In his memoir, Broughton listed the paintings by local artists that adorned the walls of this 'neo-Merzbau', which also included a collage by Varda and an 'inlaid Moroccan headboard from Anaïs Nin's houseboat on the Seine'.<sup>125</sup> While Varda started working in collage long before Jess, their work shares a similar

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<sup>121</sup> Michael Auping, *Jess: A Grand Collage* (Buffalo, 1993), p.15. In the early 1960's, Jess created assembled sculptures, the "Assembly Light" series, at a time when assembled sculpture had become a dominant artistic form in the bay area with artists like Bruce Connor, George Herms and Wallace Berman as main practitioners, Boaden p.101.

<sup>122</sup> Varda was part of group of artists and poets around James Broughton and acted in his experimental film 'The Bed'.

<sup>123</sup> Boaden 2008, p.86.

<sup>124</sup> Boaden 2008, p.87.

<sup>125</sup> Boaden 2008, p.87; taken from James Broughton *Coming Unbuttoned* (City Lights, San Francisco, 1993), p.68; According to Boaden, the paintings are discussed in an undated letter from Broughton to Duncan written from the ship taking Broughton to Europe in July 1951, Robert Duncan Papers, State University of New York, Buffalo, (RDP, SUNYB), Broughton correspondence file. The headboard is mentioned in Broughton, p.71.

nostalgic view of the past, a love of stories, fairytales and myths – Varda, however, was not interested in their romantic view of childhood which is reflected in their domestic environment.<sup>126</sup> Duncan referred to his life with Jess and his writing as being part of a *grand collage*, drawing on music, art, and literature.<sup>127</sup> Collage as general practice of assembling found materials was an ideal medium to address the past as it already incorporated a sense of nostalgia and a domestic amateur aesthetic. In the nineteenth century, before collage entered the realm of art, the practice of assembling memorabilia and turning them into a collage was a popular past-time, especially in the form of scrap books.<sup>128</sup> Duncan also admitted his huge debt to Nin's writing and for a short time became a member of her circle after he lived in New York in 1941.<sup>129</sup> Nin started helping him out financially and became his mentor until a fall-out ended their friendship. Duncan also engaged with notions of fragmentation and multiplicity through collage. His treatise on the future of poetry published in the same year as Nin's *Novel of the Future* declared ideal poetry as 'grand collage'. In 1964, the same year *Collages* was published, Duncan also published a poem dedicated to the *Watts Towers* titled '*Nel Mezzo Del Cammin Di Nostra Vita*'. These may be coincidences, but they show an engagement with similar themes of fragmentation and synthesis in art and literature.

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<sup>126</sup> Boden argues that the interest in childhood and the domestic as seen in Jess's and Duncan's work and environment was a reaction against modernism's neglect of domesticity. See Boaden 2010, p.81-2.

<sup>127</sup> See, for instance, Auping 1993.

<sup>128</sup> Waldman 1992, p.11.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Duncan returned to the West Coast in 1945 and soon became a fixed name on the San Francisco poetry scene; according to Nin, *Journals*, vol. 3, 1939-1944, Duncan also often ghost-wrote pornography for Nin's anonymous patron which was later published as part of *Delta of Venus*. Boaden 2008, p.85.

### *Collage and the modern self in Anaïs Nin's writing*

Collage was not only a vehicle for Nin to escape into a romanticised past or fantasy world. Collage and assemblage became useful tools for her in thinking about a 'new synthesis' in relation to art and identity that she would describe later in the *Novel of the Future*. There, she criticised the "outmoded concepts of wholeness as semblance of consistency created from a pattern, social and philosophical, to which human beings submitted". She called this the "artificial unity of man" and argued that "man is not a finite, static, crystallized unity. He is fluid, in a constant state of flux, evolution [...]".<sup>130</sup> She declared that the role of the novelists was "to make a synthesis which includes fluctuations, oscillations, and reactions" and to reassemble "the fragments in a more dynamic living structure".<sup>131</sup> Her search for a new form of art that could express the notion of a fragmented self was symptomatic for a lot of modernist artists, writers and composers at that time. Solnit suggests that in the 1950s, assemblage became popular in California, partly because it could express the artists' fragmented identity without imposing a false coherence, leaving it with inherent tension between original meaning and new context.<sup>132</sup> Nin's engagement with heterogeneous art forms also related strongly to her conflicting views specifically on female identity, which she would try to align with the concerns of second-wave feminists in the 1970s – a complex topic that I will discuss in relation to *Collages* in a separate step.

Nin had first negotiated the idea of a 'dynamic synthesis' in the 1920s through D.H. Lawrence's "philosophy that was against division".<sup>133</sup> She regarded Lawrence's

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<sup>130</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.193.

<sup>131</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.193.

<sup>132</sup> See Solnit 1990.

<sup>133</sup> Nin, *Lawrence*, p.13.

world as built on a fusion of concepts, but also on a “system of mobility”, determined by flow.<sup>134</sup> This idea of mobility was initially related to personal growth or life force and has also been linked to Nin’s (and Lawrence’s) engagement with Henri Bergson’s *elan vital*, Proust’s idea of remembrance and Emerson’s circular motif.<sup>135</sup> Nin’s notion of synthesis in art and life, however, became more complicated when she began engaging with psychoanalysis and different notions of identity. She struggled with what she perceived as the fragmentation of the self, which she viewed as either negative triggering a search for ‘wholeness’ or it could be viewed as positive, as her quote from 1968 suggests. Nin would later re-define her utopian, ‘unscientific’ notion of ‘wholeness’ of the self as a flexible synthesis, which allowed for a harmonious co-existence of multiple selves. Already in the first volume of her diary she admitted: “I have always been tormented by the image of the multiplicity of selves. Some days I call it richness, and other days I see it as a disease”.<sup>136</sup> This ambivalent relationship to fragmentation, multiplicity and ‘wholeness’, was acted out by the characters in her novels, which is well documented in Nin-criticism. All her female protagonists experience a form of disintegration of the self, which mainly refers to their struggle with traditional notions of femininity – from the seductress or independent artist to the obedient daughter or wife. In relation to the character Sabina, for instance, who also appears in further novels, Nin admitted, “Sabina caused me a great deal of trouble, because I wanted to describe fragmentation without the disintegration which usually accompanies it. Each fragment had a life of its own. They had to be held together by some tension other than the unity we are familiar with. [...] if she had no centre to

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<sup>134</sup> Nin, *Lawrence*, p.67

<sup>135</sup> See for instance Nalbantian 1997, p.49.

<sup>136</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, 1979, p.54.

hold on to, she could be destroyed”.<sup>137</sup> While Nin’s characters seek synthesis, this synthesis has to allow for fluidity; synthesis that leads to stasis is described as just as negative as complete fragmentation. Suzanne Nalbantian argues that:

“the notion of any fixed state was closest Nin would ever come to a living ‘death’. In continuous flux through the landscapes of her continuous novels, she gave free passageway to the selves’ motion. [...] She sought to transpose this fluid relativism to her fiction with characters continuously developing through interpersonal relations and open-ended narrative with no conclusion to circumscribe any character”.<sup>138</sup>

Nalbantian argues that this related to Nin’s adaptation of Bergson’s idea of self as in constant becoming and Proust’s related “notion of the composite” to her theory of identity as fluid and changeable.<sup>139</sup> Anna Balakian sees in Nin’s work a struggle between Rimbaud’s poetic concept of the ‘other’ and psychoanalysis’s notion of unconscious others. She detects a gradual move away from the influence of Rimbaud to the exploration of many selves “along the more fashionable lines proposed by Otto Rank and René Allendy, and the influence of Freud.”<sup>140</sup> Helen Tookey has argued more convincingly and scholarly that this simultaneous “pull towards wholeness of identity” and celebration of multiplicity, especially in her essays and lectures of the 1970s, was entangled with feminism’s and psychoanalysis’s complex and often contradictory engagement with notions of identity.<sup>141</sup> She argues that Nin’s emphasis on change and process, and her idea of the changeability and fluidity of the

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<sup>137</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.163.

<sup>138</sup> Suzanne Nalbantian, *Aesthetic Autobiography: From Life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 178.

<sup>139</sup> Nalbantian 1994, p.61.

<sup>140</sup> Anna Balakian, ‘Anaïs Nin, the Poet’, in Nalbantian 1997, p.70. See also Stephen Frosch, *Identity in Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>141</sup> Tookey 2003, p.51. See for instance Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1998). Rachel Bowlby, *Still Crazy after all these Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990). Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986).

self goes back to her engagement with Rank's *Art and Artist* and *Truth and Reality*, especially with his concept of 'creative will'.<sup>142</sup> But she also draws attention to Nin's attempts at making connections across different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts, which she links to her "peripatetic life". She detects traces of Nin's early reading of Emerson's "American narrative of self-discovery and [self-] creation" in her later interest in Rank's ideas of 'creative will'.<sup>143</sup>

Rank's ideas became a useful tool for Nin in her self-conception as a female artist, something she found missing in the work of Freud and limiting in that of her previous analyst Allendy who wanted to impose 'normality' on the creative personality.<sup>144</sup> The concept of 'creative will' is connected to Rank's idea of neurosis as failure in creativity (discussed in *Art and Artist* and expanded in his 1935 lecture '*Neurosis as Failure in Creativity*'), which Nin strongly identified with.<sup>145</sup> For Rank, the artist and the neurotic were shadows of each other. He regarded the neurotic as an artist whose creativity was blocked and the artist as a 'productive neurotic'.<sup>146</sup> Both refuse to adapt to normative 'reality' and do not accept themselves as they are, but try to create an artistic self. For Rank this continuous process of self-creation begins with the "act of self-naming as an artist", which the neurotic has to do in order to unblock his creativity. This seems to be negotiated in Nin's portrait of 'Varda' in *Collages*. In response to his daughter's favouring of drug-induced

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<sup>142</sup> See Tookey 2003, pp.59-60. Nin emphasised her strong interest in Rank's *Truth and Reality* in her essay 'On Truth and Reality', in Nin, *In Favour of the Sensitive Man*, p.47.

<sup>143</sup> Tookey 2003, p.8.

<sup>144</sup> Tookey 2003, p.60. The relationship between Freud and his 'disciples' Otto Rank, Jung, Ernest Jones and others is a complex one and cannot be discussed here in detail. Tookey offers a brief introduction in her chapter "'As Fluid as Mercury": Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Questions of Identity', in Tookey 2003, pp.51-90. For a discussion of analysts like Rene Allendy who focused on the psychology of the artist see Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: a history of psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>145</sup> Nin cited in Tookey 2003, p.65.

<sup>146</sup> Tookey 2003, p.66.

‘dreams’, Varda argues, “Doesn’t that prove that when you remove an inhibiting consciousness and let men dream, they dream like painters or poets?”

The creative person, according to Rank, not only re-creates him-/herself, but also uses his/her imagination to recreate the world around. The neurotic and the artist cannot accept the notions of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ imposed by society, but must transform the world and create their own ‘truth’.<sup>147</sup> In *Collages*, Nin addressed this through her notion of alchemy and rag picking. The fantasy worlds created by Varda and the assemblage artist who transformed junk into art were prime examples of ‘creative will’. Nin linked Rank’s idea of creative will and esoteric notions of magic and alchemy in her lecture ‘*The Artist as Magician*’ from the early 1970s. There, Nin mainly associates creative will with ideas of change and movement as in *Collages*.

Tookey argues that Nin shares with Rank the refusal of any normative model of the subject, which is at the heart of his notion of the artist and ‘creative will’, and Nin’s notion of multiplicity of the self. Nin takes on board the psychic division implicit in Rank’s concept of creative will, which describes a subject caught between the desire for difference or ‘individuation’ and the desire for belonging.<sup>148</sup> Nin alluded to this conflict by arguing that the creative will “pursues the artist and haunts the artist”.<sup>149</sup> Tookey emphasises that Nin plays down this conflicting aspect of identity and interprets ‘creative will’ as crucial for the “positive movement towards psychic harmony and ‘synthesis’”. The ‘creative will’ becomes, as Nin explains, “a centre of gravity in your own soul, an axis in an unstable world, a core”.<sup>150</sup> This parallels Nin’s understanding of the unconscious, which she evokes in the form of the dream,

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<sup>147</sup> Tookey 2003, p.71.

<sup>148</sup> Tookey 2003, p.81.

<sup>149</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, 1975, p.2.

<sup>150</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p. 2.

as “instigator of the creative process in art and life” and source of richness, which ignores the possibility of psychic conflict.<sup>151</sup>

In *Collages*, Varda’s collages become expressions of the harmonizing power of the artist who re-assembles fragments into a dynamic new ‘whole’. Although ‘Varda’s’ female figures are assembled from scraps of fabric glued to the canvas, they are described as light and airy, floating through a “landscape of joy”.<sup>152</sup> Nin turns the fragmented, static figures into a ‘dance’ of forms which seems antithetical to Varda’s very physical and dry process of collage making. As I explained in my discussion of *House of Incest*, to Nin, dance symbolised freedom, growth and life. In a description of Varda’s collaged ‘women’ from 1973 they are:

“enclosed in a dance of forms, squares, diamonds, rectangles, parallelograms of moods and sidereal delights, subtle harmonies and pliant mysteries. They are made of intangibles, lights and space, labyrinths, and molecules which may change as you look at them. Elusive and free of gravity. They bring freedom by transcendence”.<sup>153</sup>

Her description of the collaged dancing women attributes them with mobility, freedom and transcendence. In *Collages*, Nin’s emphasis on freedom and mobility also becomes linked with the search for personal freedom of the beatnik scene on the West Coast. Renate often visits bars frequented by ‘beatniks’ who are dressed in clothes from thrift shops. Again, Nin draws a link between ‘Varda’s’ fabric collage figures and the ‘dreamers’ in her novel. In one episode, Renate befriends the flamboyant beat girl Nina Gitana de la Primavera who leads a life without rules and restrictions. This urge for freedom and mobility is also addressed in the magazine Renate develops “when she grew tired of painting portraits”; its guiding principle is

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<sup>151</sup> See Tookey 2003.

<sup>152</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.79.

<sup>153</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.3, 1979, p.302.



“freedom of imagination, of expression, of style, of subject” and its editorial principle is that “it must be alive”.<sup>154</sup> It is described as a collection of photographs, experimental fiction, even recipes contributed by her friends, which were rejected by other magazines or “believed dangerous”.<sup>155</sup> Here, Nin may have referred to McCarthyism, when many artists and members of the Hollywood film-industry were accused of treason, perversion and promoting an anti-democratic message.

Renate’s magazine recalls Wallace Berman’s ‘assemblage’ underground magazine *Semina* (1955-1964) – a loose portfolio of images and text, including poems, photographs, drawings and collages.<sup>156</sup> Nin must have known the magazine as she moved in similar circles as some of the contributors, also as it covered French poets such as Cocteau, Elouard, Valery, Baudelaire and Artaud.<sup>157</sup> Small underground art and literary magazines printed by hand were springing up on the West Coast during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>158</sup> Michael Duncan argues that with the loosely put together *Semina*, Berman created a new form of expression, which drew on earlier avant-garde models while simultaneously anticipating postmodern artworks that rejected traditional authorship and its loose form which allowed for the inclusion of chance.<sup>159</sup> Nin was also aware of earlier models of such a ‘collage approach’ to structuring literary and visual content. In September 1934, she described visiting Marcel Duchamp:

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<sup>154</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.138.

<sup>155</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.140.

<sup>156</sup> Michael Duncan explains, “seven of its issues were printed on loose-leaf pages inserted in a sleeve; five of those issues had no prescribed order or sequence. Photographs, drawings, and collages by Berman and others were juxtaposed with texts, often on the same page”. Michael Duncan, Introduction, *Wallace Berman and His Circle*, p.22. See also Lucy Bradnock 2010, p.105.

<sup>157</sup> Nin acted in Kenneth Anger’s *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* alongside Cameron who was part of the *Semina* editorial team; she was also friends with Aya Tarlow . See *Wallace Berman and His Circle*; Michael Duncan, ‘Semina: Annotated Contents’, in *Semina Culture*, pp.47-69.

<sup>158</sup> Christopher Knight, ‘Bohemia and Counterculture’ in *Wallace Berman* 1992, p.47, Bennett and Carter, ‘Transition: Modernism, The Avant-garde and the Little Magazine’, in *Outside the book: contemporary essays on literary periodicals* (Canberra, 1987; May), pp. 227-245

<sup>159</sup> Duncan, p.22.

“He showed me a portfolio, a box, really, which he said should now take the place of completed books. “This is not a time in which to complete anything”, he said. “It’s a time for fragments”. This box contained an unfinished book. Scraps of drawings on any old paper, notes torn from a notebook, odds and ends, half-finished comments, a word all by itself, in large handwriting, the elements with which to compose a book which he would never write. A symbol of the time.”<sup>160</sup>

At this early point in her career, she linked this idea to D.H. Lawrence:

“[T]he idea of the casual, unfinished book was not a surrender to an easy way of creating, accepting the chaos, the fragmentary quality of life, but had much more to do with D.H. Lawrence’s quest for a way to capture a description of life and character without killing it, a way to capture the living moments. For this, it was important to follow the waywardness of life itself, its oscillations and whims and mobility’.<sup>161</sup>

Michael McClure described *Semina* as a precise “game of art” determined by rules, which however gave the artist freedom and allowed room for the imagination.<sup>162</sup> The emphasis on freedom and rules within free association reflected Nin’s understanding of collage as guided chance game. This playful approach is reflected in an episode that takes place shortly after Renate meets her ex-boyfriend Bruce again who gives her a Chinese puzzle box. Each compartment contains a story from his past which Renate is to open in no particular order to find answers to her questions about his identity; the box becomes a metaphor for yet another ‘fragmented self’.

Mobility and process are also emphasised in the circular structure of the novel.<sup>163</sup> In the final episode the writer Judith Sands gives Renate a manuscript of her novel.

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<sup>160</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.1, p.366.

<sup>161</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 1, p.367.

<sup>162</sup> Michael McClure quoted in Duncan, p.22.

<sup>163</sup> For a discussion of Nin’s oeuvre as ‘continuous novel’, see, for instance: Sharon Spencer ‘Anaïs Nin’s “Continuous Novel” *Cities of the Interior*’, *A Casebook on Anaïs Nin*, ed. Robert Zaller (N.Y. : New American Library, 1974), pp.65-76. Also Harriet Zinnes, ‘The Fiction of Anaïs Nin’, in Zaller 1974.

Renate reads the first paragraph which is also the opening paragraph of *Collages* and takes the reader back to the beginning. The notion of a dynamic synthesis, chance and progress is most prominent in the incorporation of her experience of seeing Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York* on March 17, 1960 in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, which was also attended by Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage [Fig. 4.12]. She referenced it in the final scene in which Renate and her friends attend the happening. Tinguely's *Homage to New York* was a celebration and parody of modern life, kinetic sculpture composed of junk that would destroy itself after its assembly. Diane Waldman explains, "when it did not completely break down, it was set on fire after its performance".<sup>164</sup> Tinguely's friend and biographer Pontus Hultén described the machine as "made of an enormous quantity of materials, and included eighty bicycle wheels, motor parts, a piano, a go-cart, timers, a battery, a meta-matic, sculptures and innumerable tubes".<sup>165</sup> *Collages* contains a detailed description of the 'suicide' of the machine, which was unpredictable:

"The skeleton of the mischievous dinosaur of the dump heap did not collapse, its suicide was about to fail. The artist gave a kick, discreet kick to the last supporting beam and then it collapsed, and the public moved closer to the smoking remains, picking up fragments for souvenirs, dismantling".<sup>166</sup>

Tinguely used objects found on junk yards to explore chance, emphasise experience and comment on urbanisation and mass culture.<sup>167</sup> Like Varda and Nin, Tinguely's work emphasised playfulness and was regarded as humorous or 'joyous' and 'free'.<sup>168</sup> Tinguely saw its freedom in its self-sufficiency (in theory) as a closed

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<sup>164</sup> Waldman 1992, pp. 247-249.

<sup>165</sup> Pontus Hultén, *Jean Tinguely, A Magic Stronger than Death* (New York: Abbeville Press. 1987), p.67, cited from Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.88.

<sup>166</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.168.

<sup>167</sup> Waldman 1992, p. 249. See also Sillars 2009.

<sup>168</sup> K.G. Hulten wrote in the announcement to *Homage to New York* in 1960 that Tinguely's machines "make anarchy. These things are more free than a human being can ever hope to be. They represent a

system. Laurence Sillars writes that “Constructed in several sections, *Homage* was to perform and unravel sequentially as a play, a piece of music or a narrative, as it slowly obliterated itself in front of a live audience”.<sup>169</sup> He described it as an examination of “consumerism, waste, destruction and creativity in pre- and post-industrial society”. As “dematerialised sculptures”, it only lived on in memory and documentation.<sup>170</sup> In the announcement to *Homage to New York*, in 1960, Peter Selz wrote that “Jean Tinguely’s experiments are works of art in which time, movement and gesture are demonstrated – not merely evoked. Tinguely accepts the Heraclitan change inherent in life. His is a world in flux and constant self-transformation”.<sup>171</sup> This interpretation is reflected in Nin’s use of the junk sculpture in her novel. Logan points out that the Tinguely episode allows Nin to add a kinetic ending to *Collages*.<sup>172</sup> This kinetic ending stands in stark contrast to the static gothic statues of Vienna, described in the beginning of the book. Again, we can find a comment on the decline of the historical avant-garde while celebrating certain ideas promoted by the very same group. Renate moves from European traditions that are described as frozen in time to the mobility of kinetic sculpture via American collage and assemblage, which are discussed in the framework of the past. ‘*Homage to New York*’ is also considered as one of the first happenings which have been described as form of assemblage by William Seitz in his catalogue for *The Art of Assemblage*.<sup>173</sup>

Nin’s description of the art of assembling in *Collages* foreshadows the rise of collage as overriding aesthetic principle that gave birth to new forms of expression beyond

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freedom that without them would not exist. They are pieces of life that have jumped out of the systems: out of good and bad, beauty and ugliness, right and wrong. [...] This kind of art accepts changes, destruction, construction and chance, that rules anyway.” Hulten cited in Sillars 2009, p.62.

<sup>169</sup> Sillars 2009, p.21.

<sup>170</sup> Sillars 2009, p.27.

<sup>171</sup> Peter Selz in Sillars 2009, p.52.

<sup>172</sup> Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p. 89.

<sup>173</sup> Sillars 2009, p.20.

assemblage, such as performance and happenings. In ‘*On These Paintings*’ Max Ernst had explained that “When the thoughts of two or more authors were systematically fused into a single work (otherwise called collaboration) this fusion could be considered as akin to collage” (17). This foreshadows the broadening of the term collage to include multi-disciplinary performance in the 1960s, although one has to be careful not to draw a too neat teleological lineage. Peter Plagens argues that the spirit of assemblage informed the catharsis of process and performance art.<sup>174</sup> In 1972, George Herms emphasised the link between assemblage and poetry, and its place within interdisciplinary arts in his statement printed in his exhibition catalogue:

“...These works are .... True concrete poetry, the/ assemblage tip of ice-berg brings me to my range:/ from poetry thru sculpture/ via the plastic arts/ (drawing, painting, collage, photo)/ and the temporal arts/ (theatre, dance, film, circus)./ I pledge allegiance to my imagination.”<sup>175</sup>

Allan Kaprow who coined the term ‘happening’ in 1958 is probably the best examples of the logical progression from assemblage to happenings. Kaprow saw happenings as new “fresh” art form that “couldn’t be confused with paintings, poetry, architecture, music, dance or plays” which were “residues of a European past” that had “lost their artness ... by overexposure and empty worship.”<sup>176</sup> Eva J. Friedberg also emphasises the intended fusion of art and life in his work. Friedberg writes that “For Kaprow and others, the incorporation of everyday experience into art was central to challenging the formalist privileging of the autonomous, rigorously self-referential art object promoted by formalism”.<sup>177</sup> Jeff Kelley argues that for

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<sup>174</sup> Plagens 1999, p. 94.

<sup>175</sup> George Herms, CAL Statement, *George Herms Selected Works 1960-1972*, ex. Cat., California State University, Los Angeles, Fine Arts Gallery, 1972.

<sup>176</sup> Alan Kaprow cited by Erin Elder in ‘How to Build a Commune: Drop City’s Influence on the Southwestern commune Movement’, in Auther and Lerner 2012, p.5.

<sup>177</sup> Eva J. Friedberg, ‘Collective Movement: Anna and Lawrence Halprin’s Joint Workshop’, in Auther and Lerner 2012.

Kaprow "the modernist practice of art is more than the production of artworks; it also involves the artist's disciplined effort to observe, engage, and interpret the processes of living, which are themselves meaningful as most art, and certainly more grounded in common experience".<sup>178</sup> Although this was also at the heart of Nin's project (and that of the historical avant-garde), the unconscious was of no concern to him, neither was psychoanalysis or the dream, which had become unfashionable terms.<sup>179</sup>

Although Nin was always curious about new developments in the arts, especially in relation to underground practices, her relationship to the counterculture was conflicted. This included her relationship to and position within second-wave feminism and feminist art production as we can see in *Collages*. Nin's celebration of the fluidity and multiplicity of the self in relation to collage has been placed within the context of postmodern feminism and feminist artists working in California in the 1970s who played with multiple personas and were trying to challenge traditional notions of subjectivity.<sup>180</sup> Writing on Nin from the 1970s celebrates the multiple selves of Nin's characters in reaction to traditional notions of the apparently coherent male subject. Tookey points out that in her lectures from the 1970s, Nin placed a strong emphasis on Rank's 'creative will' (compiled in *A Woman Speaks*) and argues that her "emphasis on the positive, harmonizing role of creativity is clearly related to the feminist context".<sup>181</sup> This 'feminist context' refers to the critical engagement with the notion of 'identity' and psychic division at that time. She argues that Nin's project in these lectures is to promote feminism's "positive identity for women" by

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<sup>178</sup> Jeff Kelley, *West of Center*, p.23-4.

<sup>179</sup> See Pawlik 2008.

<sup>180</sup> Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (eds.), *Women/Art/ California 1950-2000: parallels and intersections*, p.107; See Philipa Christmass, 'Changing Perspectives: Toward a new critical appreciation of Anaïs Nin's writing' in *Anaïs: An International Journal*, vol.15, 1997, pp.82-84.

<sup>181</sup> Tookey 2003, p.81.

emphasising an image of ideal identity that is “fluid enough to encompass change and difference, but does not disperse completely or fragment into conflict”. Tookey writes, “For Nin, writing and speaking in the early 1970s, notions of psychic fixity and normative gender identities must be replaced by a model of the self as fluid enough to encompass difference and change, but cohesive enough to represent a ‘centre of gravity’, a basis for liberation. In these texts, Nin generally played down the conflictual aspects of subjectivity, finding it difficult to incorporate such ideas into the context of women’s liberation”.<sup>182</sup>

In the 1970s Nin tried to brand *Collages* and the ‘collage of dreamers’ she created in the novel as a celebration of ‘universal sisterhood’, which prompted certain Nin-scholars to place her into the context of feminist art practitioners who used collage as a means to protest against patriarchal structures. Feminist art criticism of the 1970s and 80s, has identified collage as a specifically feminine art practice, as it is allegedly anti-authoritarian, sensual, and experiential.<sup>183</sup> Nin’s interest in collage has been seen in a similar framework.<sup>184</sup> Logan regards Nin’s use of collage as feminine technique which is experiential and anti-authorial. She writes that “form and content coalesce ... A woman speaks here of her longing for autonomy. She achieves that autonomy in daring to play all the roles available to her within and beyond traditional gender boundaries”.<sup>185</sup> Spencer connected Nin’s attempt to synthesise the arts with her quest for a feminine writing. She calls her work “a literature of flesh and blood”, which necessarily has to create synthesis and “reconnect what has been

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<sup>182</sup> Tookey 2003, p.84.

<sup>183</sup> See Logan in Nalbantian 1997.

<sup>184</sup> Mary-Rose Logan considers Nin’s use of collage as feminine technique and metaphor for female fragmentation. She writes that ‘form and content coalesce’. Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p. 80.

<sup>185</sup> Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p. 80.

fragmented by excessive intellectual analysis”.<sup>186</sup> In the *Novel of the Future*, Nin aligns herself with essentialist feminism and argues for a specifically feminine tendency to unite.<sup>187</sup> In an interview from the 1970s, she remarks: “One of the aspects of art is that it’s fragmented and woman’s ability to use her total intuitive perception is the quality she should bring to art. If she can handle to play all these roles [mother, writer etc] she will have wonderful synthesis ... And I think we also have been given some qualities, some extra-sensory qualities, to achieve them with”.<sup>188</sup>

Women artists working in California in the 1970s would combine autobiographical subject matter, a concern with the body and traditionally feminine craft media.<sup>189</sup> The pattern and decoration movement, for instance, was founded in California. Miriam Shapiro started creating collages made from fabric and lace which she called *femmage*. Nin was also a close friend of Judy Chicago, who was part of ‘Woman House’. The interest in craft, vernacular art and folk traditions, the domestic and personal traditionally linked to women’s craft used to radicalised and politicised in the work of these artists indicates the subversive potential of the pastoral mode of address. They used collage to subvert traditional forms of representation and bourgeois values and turned it into a “radical deconstruction of the language of the father.”<sup>190</sup>

Varda’s fabric collages may seem to evoke such a traditionally feminine, vernacular mode of art production, which can be linked to quilt making, weaving and sewing.

His use of scraps to make art may subvert the boundaries between high and low art,

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<sup>186</sup> Spencer, ‘The Music of the Womb: Anaïs Nin’s “Feminine” Writing’ in: Friedman, Ellen G. and Fuchs, Miriam (ed.), *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction*, Princeton 1989.

<sup>187</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.74.

<sup>188</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p.110.

<sup>189</sup> Burgess Fuller and Salvioni 2002, p.98.

<sup>190</sup> Adamowicz 1998, p. 11.



but did it also subvert that of gender-relations? And did Nin's imitation of Varda's fabric collages to create an apparently feminist narrative manage to do so? Varda's collage-gift with the title '*Women Reconstructing the Worlds*' may seem to affirm Nin's agency and role as female artist – or this is what Nin and Varda want us to believe. It was a homage to Nin, which suggested that she was a woman who initiates change and has artistic agency. Writing in the 1970s, Nin certainly gives the collage a subtext of female liberation in keeping with the themes that occupied her at that point. In 1973, in Robert Snyder's documentary *Anais Nin Observed*, Nin described unpacking Varda's collage *Women Reconstructing the World* as “one of the strangest and most prophetic coincidences, because I was working on a novel about free women called *Ladders to Fire*. There were four women in it, and in the collage there were four women who were almost literal descriptions of those characters”.<sup>191</sup> She continues, “I call them ‘women of transportable roots’, because they are mobile and fluid, and international. They belong to the whole world.”<sup>192</sup> She also changed the number of women represented in the collage from the actual five to four to match it with her novel's four female characters. Once again, she emphasised their fluidity while ignoring the immobility of the figures glued to the canvas. It seems likely that Varda sent her this particular collage with the genuine intention to flatter and affirm her as a strong female writer. But Nin's dependency on Varda to affirm her own status as a female artist is symptomatic of Nin's relationship to male ‘mentors’ whose role it is to guide her. This conflict is even more pronounced in *Collages*, especially in Nin's negotiation of male and female creativity through Renate and ‘Varda’.

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<sup>191</sup> Nin in Snyder 1976, p.69-70.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

In her literary portrait of Varda as alchemist and rag picker, Nin focused specifically on 'Varda' as creator of 'women' from scraps of fabric. In Nin's humanistic world view, the figure of the artist or poet as creator had a high status and the artist's signature became an important symbol of potency and creation. She wrote about Varda, "Everything that came from his hands [...] was signed Varda".<sup>193</sup> Juxtaposed with painter Renate who searches for identity, this develops into a problematic discourse on male and female subjectivity and creativity. Nin's description of collage as alchemical process, then, is two-fold. It relates to the power of the artist to create and somehow becomes entangled in Nin's ambiguous negotiation of female identity and creativity in relation to male power structures.

'Varda' is described as "cut[ting] into all the legendary textiles of the world [...] to give birth to women who only appear to men asleep" and "housed them in facades of tent shelters".<sup>194</sup> She re-presents him as "always mixing a new brew, a new woman, and when he sat at his large table, scissors in hand, searching for a new marriage of colours, a variation in triangles, in squares and semicircles, interweaving cupolas and breasts, legs and columns, windows and eyes on beds of pleasure, under tents of rituals of the flesh, each colour became a music box".<sup>195</sup> She wrote that "his women were interchangeable and mobile. [...] Every collage was rich with a new harem".<sup>196</sup> Nin's dubious description of 'Varda' as creator of harems of women is highly problematic. Again, we see Nin's alignment with male values. Instead of promoting a collective of free women, she celebrates a community of enslaved women under the command of a male figure of authority.

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<sup>193</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol. 4, 1979, p.239-40.

<sup>194</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.79.

<sup>195</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.80.

<sup>196</sup> Nin, *Collages*, p.80.

Franklin and Schneider argue that Nin portrays Varda as the creator of women, someone who heals fragmentation and makes them ‘whole’.<sup>197</sup> Fragmentation is caused by men and cured by men. Renate’s boyfriend Bruce causes Renate’s identity crisis when he cheats on her with another man while Varda takes on the role of artist-creator who heals fragmentation. Logan points out that Nin portrays Renate as one of Varda’s women by making her wear a bright coral-coloured dress, in which she resembles the “translucent and airy” women of the collages. The dress becomes a metaphor for Renate’s self-empowerment and path to independence after she witnesses her boyfriend cheating on her with another man. On the other hand, she argues, Renate is almost too complete. When asked to paint a portrait of Renate, Varda rejects the offer and explains to his friend Henri that ‘She is *femme toute faite*’.<sup>198</sup> Nin’s portrait of Varda as mentor, who calls woman into being with his pseudo-Protean creative power clashes with Renate’s claim for agency as female artists in her own right. In a diary passage from 1953, Nin described the real-life Renate Druks as a woman who “can penetrate any experience or role without dissolution of herself. They are extensions, dilations, expansions, not dissolutions. She can play various roles with none disconnected from each other. She is fluid as mercury, which can move in all directions and yet not be divided”.<sup>199</sup>

Nin also opposes this notion of the male artist-creator by picturing herself as a collage maker who heals fragmentation. Nin wrote in her diary in summer 1970 about the real-life Renate Druks, “Renate, who has to struggle to survive economically, disperses her energies on many fronts, tells me my portrait of her

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<sup>197</sup> See Benjamin Franklin V and Duane Schneider, ‘Collages’, *Anais Nin: An Introduction* (Athens, OH.: Ohio University Press, 1979).

<sup>198</sup> Logan in Nalbantian 1997, p.80.

<sup>199</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.131.

keeps her from going to pieces. She only has to read it to reassemble herself”.<sup>200</sup> Nin’s conflict between perpetuating the male-artist-as-creator-myth and her longing for female agency as artist-creator is also reflected by the fact that in *Collages* Varda becomes part of Nin’s creation as she includes her literary portrait of him into her collage of dreamers. She becomes a collage-maker herself. The belief in her own ‘creative will’ as female artist is reflected in an entry from Nin’s diary from the late 1940s:

“I believe one writes because one has to create a world in which one can live. I could not live in any of the worlds offered me ... I had to create a world of my own, like a climate, a country, an atmosphere in which I could breathe, reign, and re-create myself when destroyed by living. That, I believe, is the reason for every work of art.”<sup>201</sup>

In ‘*The New Woman*’ written in the 1970s, Nin repeated that “one writes because one has to create a world in which one can live”. Tookey argues that in texts of the 1970s, Nin tries to emphasise that this is not a private world, but can become an “intersubjective world, rather than remaining a solipsistic one”. Nin wrote: “I was creating the world I wanted, and into this world, once it is created, you invite others and then you attract those who have affinities and this becomes a universe, this becomes not a private world at all but something which transcends the personal and creates the link”.<sup>202</sup> Tookey regards this as Nin’s justification against claims by second-wave feminists that Nin placed too much emphasis on the personal and the individual, and neglected the collective and political.<sup>203</sup> Nin suggests a collective female subjectivity, but struggles to create it. Nin described her novel as a “portfolio

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<sup>200</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.7, p.259.

<sup>201</sup> Nin, *Journals*, vol.5, 1979, p.149.

<sup>202</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, pp.172-3, cited in Tookey 2003, p.77.

<sup>203</sup> Tookey 2003, p.77. See also instance Estelle Jelinek, ‘Anais Nin: A Critical Evaluation’, in *Feminist Criticism*, eds. Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olsen (Metuchen, NJ.: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

of loosely related portraits of women searching for identity and wholeness”. She also explained that she created a collage of dreamers who could not possibly meet. While she lets them meet in various encounters, they never form a community, but meet and move on. The novel’s allegedly ‘feminist’ message, then, is highly questionable.

Philip Brian Harper also argues that Nin never managed to create a female world or female collective. He points out that already in *Ladders to Fire*, which contained all of Nin’s female characters from previous novels, she dropped Stella, because, as Nin wrote in her preface, “she seemed so complete in herself rather than related to other women”. Harper argues that “Nin’s women are incomplete subjects, and, in their incompleteness, somehow ‘related to’ each other. Yet, rather than achieving a structural wholeness in their interrelation, Nin’s characters are primarily motivated to seek completion through men”.<sup>204</sup> Instead of forming a community of incomplete women to form wholeness, Nin’s characters seek wholeness through men, which shows that Nin finds it difficult to create a collective of female subjectivity.<sup>205</sup> Harper had linked this to Nin’s fear of homosexuality. In her writing, male homosexuality becomes a form of misogyny and female ‘homosocial’ behaviour is conflated with lesbianism, which she sees as narcissistic, as we could see in *House of Incest*. He concludes that men are both cause and cure of fragmentation, and suggests that all the women in Nin’s fiction are looking for individual identity but are denied “any means of forging a stable, centred self-identity”. Even when they appear to be ‘complete’ like Renate, he argues, “their attempts lead circularly back to denial of individual selfhood”.<sup>206</sup> As Renate reaches the end of her journey of self-empowerment, the circular structure of the novel brings her back to the beginning,

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<sup>204</sup> Philip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (New York, 1994), p.58

<sup>205</sup> Harper 1994.

<sup>206</sup> Harper 1994, p.65.

Vienna. Nin's use of Varda's fabric collages as tool to create a discourse on female identity and the role of the woman artist present problems that remain unresolved. Nevertheless, Nin's engagement with the painter Renate Druks and the collage artist Jean Varda and his work reveals the rich dialogue which can ensue when text and visual art meet. It highlighted the complex and often shifting notions of gender and identity politics, questions around the radical potential of counterculture art production, and the relationship between California assemblage and European models.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> See Michael Duncan 2005, p.9.

## Conclusion

My exploration of Anaïs Nin's attempts at recreating what she described as 'the multimedia of our unconscious life' through a synthesis of different art forms started in New York in the 1950s with translations of her surreal prose-poem *House of Incest* into photomontage, film and music by different artists, and ended in California in the mid-1960s with Nin's own translation of different art forms – collage, assemblage and kinetic sculpture – into her final novel *Collages*. Each of the resulting art works and artistic encounters created complex discourses around hybridity and artistic collaborations, which went beyond structural concerns. We have seen that with each attempt at translating the synaesthetic language and poetic symbolism of Nin's writing into different media, and vice versa, Nin's attempts at integrating other artist works into her writing, caused points of friction and rich dialogues which make us rethink if or to what extent one art is translatable into another, the role that gender played in such 'translations' as well as the shifting historical, socio-political and geographical contexts.

Simon Shaw-Miller has described a hybrid art form as "a historical phenomenon that emerges out of existing artistic conventions and fields of activity".<sup>1</sup> Drawing on philosopher Jerrold Levinson's definition of different types of 'hybrids' in his essay '*Hybrid Art Forms*', he identifies three different types: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and crossdisciplinary. The first refers to art forms in which the different elements remain distinct and do not merge into a third form. The second refers to a synthesis of the elements into a third form. The third defines an unstable

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Shaw-Miller, *Visible Deeds of Music: art and music from Wagner to Cage* (New Haven, London: Yale UP, 2002).

relationship between the different elements with a movement in the direction of one art. While these categories are useful in thinking about hybrid art forms, Shaw-Miller has argued against such strict divisions and suggests that the “conception of fluid boundaries between the sonic and the visual (as indeed also between the textual) is a closer reflection of artistic practices throughout history, than the seeking out and patrolling of borders on the basis of time, space, or media alone”.<sup>2</sup> Nin’s ‘hybrids’ can be viewed as examples of this contention that media purity in modernism is the “historical exception”.<sup>3</sup> They were diverse and cannot be grouped under one or the other, although Nin’s initial intention was that of a synthesis of the arts into a new form. This also relates to the effects these hybrids had on the audience.

While the cross-fertilisation of music, sound, text and visuals in Ian Hugo’s *Bells of Atlantis* fused into a synaesthetic whole which apparently generated a quasi-psychedelic experience, in Edgard Varèse’s *Nocturnal I* the different elements were deliberately juxtaposed to create an aural assault on the audience. In the 1958-edition of *House of Incest*, we detected a pushing and pulling between text and images, whereby the photomontages were mostly dependent on the text, but were also laced with subtle visual alterations. Nin’s novel *Collages*, on the other hand, was more an ekphrastic discourse on a ‘collage aesthetic’ than a ‘collage novel’. As with all of Nin’s ideas, her approach shifted and resists an academic reading as an ‘art theory’. It is easier to see Nin’s hybrids as dynamic encounters. This also relates to the fact that we were not always dealing with ‘proper collaborations’. Nin did not always have control over the production process; and in the case of Varèse’s *Nocturnal I*, the relationship between the different elements was determined by the composer, not

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<sup>2</sup> Shaw-Miller 2002, p.x.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Nin. For these artists a fusion of different art forms often had additional functions and served as a means for structural experiments.

Although Nin may have followed everything that was new and controversial in the arts, she was never interested in the materiality of different media, but only how they could be used to express the symbolic messages from the ‘unconscious’. To Nin, the dream was “nourishment for the imagination” and the function of art was to draw on the dream and create a connection to the unconscious, with the artist as ‘oracle’ who translates and communicates its secret messages.<sup>4</sup> But in America at mid-century, Nin’s Romantic notions of ‘unconscious’, dream and sensuality as she applied them to her search for the ideal art form had either lost their significance or had acquired new meanings – not only for her collaborators, but also for her audience, as we have seen particularly in the reactions to the film *Bells of Atlantis*. Psychoanalysis and Bretonian Surrealism had been subjected to substantial modifications. This also related to Nin’s elitist notion of art and the role of the artist as seer which was reflected in her ‘quixotic’ crusade against psychedelic drug culture in defence of the artistic imagination. Nin realised that André Breton’s approach to art was in certain ways passé and declared that Surrealism was “not a school or dogma anymore, but a way of expressing the unconscious”, but she still needed to emphasise its importance to defend her own surreal writing from the hostile American publishing world.<sup>5</sup> Nin’s Romantic ideas also accounted for the strange ‘dualism’ of her collaborations and the pushing and pulling between themes and strategies that were outmoded by the 1950s and others which blended in with contemporary artistic concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (Peter Owen: London, 1969 [New York: Macmillan, 1968]), p.119.

<sup>5</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.35.

Shaw-Miller has described such a ‘pushing and pulling’ between the different elements in hybrid art forms as the natural state of hybrid art forms. I have tried to show that this was not only the case on the level of form, structure and content, but also in relation to gender: the different vocabulary used by the artists who produced these hybrids, which may be read as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. Gender became the strongest point of friction in Nin’s artistic encounters. The readings of her novels by her male ‘collaborators’ often resulted in what the audience today would describe as stereotypical representation of the female body as object and fetish or, in its musical variety, of the female voice as monstrous and hysterical. The incest theme in Nin’s writing became a troublesome point of attraction for these artists who often focused on the taboo topic to exploit its potentially shocking implications instead of its poetic meaning for Nin. Such readings brought out the ambiguities in Nin’s own writing which she had described as particularly ‘feminine’ and different from the writing produced by men. We have seen, however, that this was a highly conflicted subject as Nin often portrayed her female protagonists as female stereotypes herself: as femme fatales, hysterics or muses who needed father-figures to help them form a ‘complete self’. In each art work these ambiguities were brought to a boiling point when Nin’s ‘feminine writing’ was translated by a male artist into a different art form or, in the case of *Collages*, when Nin attempted to weave the art works of male artists like Jean Varda into her apparently female consciousness raising narrative. Nin’s alignment with male artists to formulate a feminine aesthetic linked her to French feminist Julia Kristeva and her controversial understanding of *l’écriture féminine* as practiced mainly by male avant-garde writers. This raised similar questions regarding the subversive potential of Nin’s writing and its diverse hybrid adaptations. But instead of asking whether men and women use *verbal* language

differently, we have seen that the debate has to be opened up to include visual and musical language, especially in such collaborative hybrids. These issues would become even more pertinent towards the end of Nin's life, when she began consciously engaging with the essentialist strand of second-wave feminism.

After publishing *Collages* in 1964, Nin decided to abandon fiction writing and concentrate on her diary, giving lectures and writing reviews. She claimed that writing fiction made her feel too much like a "craftsman" and that writing in her diary was more spontaneous and closer to life. This may be seen as a reaction to critics who called her fiction staged and her characters unrealistic or as symptomatic of her disappointment with the limits of literature in relation to other art forms. Her renewed emphasis on diary-writing may also be seen as attempt to align herself with the project of feminist artists and writers with their focus on women's experiences and female consciousness-raising.<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, Nin's project of developing and promoting a form of 'feminine creation', which emphasised the personal – emotions and experiences – came full circle when feminist thinkers, artists and writers began negotiating similar concerns in their work.

But Nin wasn't finished with the novel yet, although her outlook on its contemporary state was sinister. In 1968, she published her pamphlet *The Novel of the Future*, in which she asserted that "the novel lags behind theatre, film, painting, modern dance and modern architecture".<sup>7</sup> She welcomed the jet-age, quoted Marshall McLuhan's media theory and declared multimedia art as the only way forward. She proclaimed that she was "a fervent believer in the enriching influence of one art upon another, a believer in cross-pollination between the arts, which is now expressing itself in the

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<sup>6</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.162

<sup>7</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.167.

integration of the arts, in the use of light, sounds, happenings, theatre, sculpture on the stage”.<sup>8</sup> Nin’s ongoing modernisation project also had a strong impact on the terminology she used to describe her ideal art form. She now referred to what she perceived as the richness of the unconscious as the “multimedia of our unconscious life”, undoubtedly affected by the emergence of happenings and early multimedia art.<sup>9</sup> She asserted that what is called ‘multimedia’ in art best reflects the “variety of levels on which we live”.<sup>10</sup> She drew awkward parallels to Marshall McLuhan’s credo ‘The medium is the message (or massage)’ and used him as spokesperson for her belief that art has to be the expression of the unconscious. She claimed: “Form and style are born of the theme, inspired by the theme” and “The subconscious will determine the theme and the theme will determine the form”.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to Nin’s literary output, Tookey has argued that

“while [Nin] cites Symbolism, Surrealism, and psychoanalysis as the chief contexts of and influences on her development as a writer, [...], she also attempts to argue that, although American literature (and culture more generally) was dominated through the 1940s and 1950s by ‘social realism’ and politics, with a corresponding rejection of Surrealism and ‘poetic prose’, the cultural shift of the 1960s has brought a closer parallel to the original concerns of the modernists.”<sup>12</sup>

Nin now explained that she wanted to evaluate “some of the writers who have integrated poetry and prose” in a relation to “trends now acceptable and recognised under other names, ‘expanded consciousness’, or ... ‘psychedelic’.”<sup>13</sup> She regarded her own writing as precursor of psychedelic art and described a particularly

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<sup>8</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.164.

<sup>9</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.118.

<sup>10</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.79, 82.

<sup>12</sup> Tookey 2003, p.138.

<sup>13</sup> Nin, *Novel*, pp.3-4.

synaesthetic passage from her novel *Winter of Artifice* (1939) as “a description of turning on! Of multimedia, if you wish”.<sup>14</sup> Nin enjoyed the light shows of the ‘psychedelic’ happenings and even fashioned herself and D.H. Lawrence as predecessors of Timothy Leary.<sup>15</sup> But Nin’s idea of a synthesis of the arts in the service of the unconscious and the senses became outmoded as artists began experimenting with multimedia effects to explore the effect of art on perception and different states of consciousness. This is reflected in the writing by psychologists like Anton Ehrenzweig, Herschel B. Chipp, Rudolf Arnheim, and R.D. Laing.<sup>16</sup> Synaesthesia became linked with the psychedelic culture. Film technology was often used for consciousness expansion, fuelled by LSD which stimulates temporary synaesthesia.<sup>17</sup> Erin Elder writes, “cameras and drugs (often combined with music, lights, mirrors, objects, and other contraptions) were perception tools that helped create consumable media that evidenced this new mystic mindscape. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan’s claims that ‘the medium is the message’, these artists aimed to produce media that communicated, not so much by way of content but through the characteristics of the media themselves”.<sup>18</sup>

Despite her enthusiasm about multimedia art, Nin made no real attempts at further experiments with different hybrids, although she tried to raise interest in film adaptations of her novels. Until her death, film would remain her most favoured art form, and she would continue to persuade film directors to adapt her novels. She had hoped for *Collages* to be turned into a film and even found an actress for Renate’s

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<sup>14</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.52.

<sup>15</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.113.

<sup>16</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.113. Nin read Anton Ehrenzweig’s *Psycho-analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* in summer 1953.

<sup>17</sup> Erin Elder, ‘How to Build a Commune: Drop City’s Influence on the Southwestern commune Movement’, in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p.8

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

part, as she noted in her diary.<sup>19</sup> But the project was never realised. Writers approached her about film-adaptations of her story of *Sabina*, but Nin rejected their suggestions on the grounds that they were misrepresentations of her writing.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, it would not be any of her novels, but her affair with Henry Miller and his wife June Miller, which would become the subject of a film, Philip Kaufman's adaptation of *Henry and June* (1990). While Nin's novels remained commercial failures, her diary, on the other hand, brought her the fame she had hoped to gain from her fiction, after the first volume was published in 1966.<sup>21</sup>

Nin gathered a devoted following of women who called themselves her "daughters" or "Ninnies".<sup>22</sup> Her 'disciples' also included scholars like Anna Balakian and Bettina Knapp, who became Nin's spokeswomen and promoted an uncritical view of her work.<sup>23</sup> Nin went from "coterie writer for a discerning few to a major cult figure" as Deirdre Bair put it.<sup>24</sup> In the 1970s, Nin awkwardly tried to align herself with second-wave feminism, although her views remained conflicted. She also attracted the attention of Feminists who rejected and openly attacked her emphasis on psychoanalysis and criticised her stance against political action.<sup>25</sup>

Nin now declared that the 'urge to unite', also in relation to art production, was a particularly feminine trait.<sup>26</sup> In an interview from the 1970s, she remarked:

"One of the aspects of art is that it's fragmented and woman's ability to use her total intuitive perception is the quality she

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<sup>19</sup> See Marie-Rose Logan, 'Renate's Illusions and Delusions in Collages', in *Anaïs Nin: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Nalbantian (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.89. Also Deirdre Bair, *Anaïs Nin: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p.503.

<sup>20</sup> See Bair 1995, p.460.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.479.

<sup>22</sup> See Bair 1995, p.481-487.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.480 and 486.

<sup>24</sup> Bair 1995, p.495.

<sup>25</sup> Bair 1995, pp.493-4.

<sup>26</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.75ff and p.13.

should bring to art. If she can handle to play all these roles [mother, writer etc] she will have wonderful synthesis [...].”<sup>27</sup>

She argued that women have been given “some extra-sensory qualities” to achieve this synthesis. She proclaimed:

“Because [women] are sensory, they feel things with their whole bodies, and all these senses are unified more than in men who can proceed into an abstract ideology. So even though women are now doing abstract mathematics and abstract science – I don’t mean that they’re incapable of doing it – usually all the parts of themselves are involved and this requires a much more complex language and expression.”<sup>28</sup>

As a retort to the searing criticism her novels received, Nin argued that she was misunderstood because the “world of the critic is masculine”, a “one-party world”, which did not understand feminine writing.<sup>29</sup> In defence of claims that all her female protagonists resembled herself, she argued that this was because they described the “essence” of woman.<sup>30</sup> She argued that the “American man” who “has made the definitive conquest of nature [...] is the one most afraid of woman as nature, of the feminine in himself”.

As a writer, Nin became the token-woman for literary scholars who were proponents of French Feminism. Scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, who looked at Nin’s synaesthetic language, often drew attention to her connection to *l’écriture féminine*, but failed to view Nin’s writing in the light of the criticism against the essentialism involved in connecting women to the maternal and the body. Sharon Spencer’s subjective criticism, for instance, is symptomatic of this tendency. She adopted a poetic language similar to Nin’s which served to raise Nin’s profile as a female

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<sup>27</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks: The Lectures, Seminars, and Interviews of Anais Nin*, ed. Evelyn J. Hinz (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1975), p.110.

<sup>28</sup> Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, p.81 (interview from 1973).

<sup>29</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p. 178.

<sup>30</sup> Nin, *Novel*, p.145.

writer rather than exposing her work to critical analysis. She praised Nin's 'musical' writing as "a literature of flesh and blood", which necessarily has to create synthesis and "reconnect what has been fragmented by excessive intellectual analysis".<sup>31</sup>

Nin openly aligned herself with essentialist feminists who placed an emphasis on female consciousness raising, the female body and the maternal. She associated with feminist scholars like Deena Metzger and feminist artist Judy Chicago who was a founding member of *Woman House* in Los Angeles. Her friendship with Chicago resulted in the book *Fragments from the 'Delta of Venus'*, a collection of Nin's erotic writing with illustrations by Chicago which was published as a tribute to Nin after her death in 1977. Ironically, the only 'all-female collaboration' of the writer who only collaborated with men was with one of the most prominent members of the California feminist art movement of the 1970s. Nevertheless, Nin continued to summon male role models to support her approach. In contrast to the 'American man', who apparently lacked the sensibility to understand women, she portrayed D.H. Lawrence as a proto-feminist who "knew women" and wrote in a feminine style.<sup>32</sup> Nin emphasised Lawrence's interest in the "harmony between the sexes" and became once again his major female spokesperson, almost forty years after the publication of her *Unprofessional Study*. This time, she defended him against feminists like Kate Millet who attacked Lawrence's in her seminal *Sexual Politics* (1969). In 1974, in Nin's introduction to Heinz Frederick Peters' biography on Lou Andreas-Salomé, Nin argued almost as if in defence of her own controversial

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<sup>31</sup> Sharon Spencer, 'The Music of the Womb: Anaïs Nin's "Feminine" Writing', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Nin, *Novel*, pp.75 and 78.



position: “She took her pattern of life from men but she was not a masculine woman”.<sup>33</sup>

Nin may be a controversial figure, but it is also these conflicts and frictions in her writing, and her eager absorption and appropriation of new ideas which make her work such a rich source for scholarship; as we have seen, this also relates to the fields of modern music, the visual arts and counterculture art production. The same can be said about the artists and composers she worked with, most of whom were equally marginalised and remain overlooked in scholarship until today, as their approach was neither radical nor fitted into the dominant narratives of American modernism. We have seen particularly in the meeting between these artists and Nin, that there is more to her work than meets the eye, even if the dialogues that these juxtapositions created were fraught and conflicted. They reveal the individual ways that different male and female artists and writers negotiated the shifting historical, and socio-political circumstances in their work, outside of dominant narratives; and the fruitful dialogue that can ensue when they came together in a dynamic ‘cross-pollination’ of the arts and of ideas.

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<sup>33</sup> Nin in introduction to Heinz Frederick Peters, *My Sister, My Spouse: A Biography of Lou Andreas-Salomé* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), cited in Suzette Henke, ‘Androgynous Creation: From D.H. Lawrence to Djuna Barnes: Anaïs Nin’s Aesthetic Evolution’, *Anaïs: An International Journal*, volume 15, 1997, pp.85-94, p.85.

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