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# ‘Melusina after the scream’: Surrealism and the Hybrid Bodies of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo

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‘I saw a five-legged table composed of two fox terriers, a field of daffodils, and three middle-aged women in an embrace’

Leonora Carrington<sup>1</sup>

*Arcane 17*, written from the Percé Rock in the Gaspé Peninsula in 1944, twenty years after the *First Surrealist Manifesto*, is part prose poem, part travel narrative; an ode to love and a call to arms. Having fled France in exile, Surrealism-founder André Breton gazed out upon the ever-changing landscape and conjured up a vision for a new world order that would place power in the hands of women, metaphorically uniting the irreconcilable forces of the mind—with the male and female representing the conscious and subconscious respectively—and, in literal terms, suggesting that women should be endowed with greater political power. To this end, inspired by the natural beauty surrounding him, the poet imagined his own retelling of the tale of the hybrid femme-enfant, Melusina: ‘after the scream, Melusina below the bust, I see her scales mirrored in the autumn sky.’<sup>2</sup> Fated to become an ethereal being should a man witness her in her hybrid form, Melusina’s transition from serpent-woman to disembodied fay happened as a result of the interventions of man: her scream, thus becoming for Breton, a reaction to the injustices faced by women at large, in horror at how men had mishandled the world

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<sup>1</sup> Leonora Carrington, ‘The Stone Door’ in *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* (New York: Plume, 1988), 76-141, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> André Breton, *Arcane 17*, trans. Zack Rogow (Copenhagen; Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004), 77.

which at the time had been plunged into the chaos of the second world conflict the poet lived through and escaped with his life.

It is unsurprising that the founder of Surrealism, an artistic movement so characterised by hybridity and so focused on the female form, should call upon the image of Melusina, the fabled female hybrid, to articulate of his vision of a new world. What is so telling about Breton's invocation of the Melusine myth in a text that calls for the balance of power to be shifted in favour of women—in art and in life—is that his well-meaning and, for its time, provocative treatise is bound up in the image of a fragmented, hybrid, yet, somehow, female body, prompting the question, why is there such an enduring connection between female corporeality and hybridity? Moreover, how can it be that this image emerges in a text written to elevate women beyond the pale of mere muses or inhabitants of bodies waiting to be cut, pasted and recomposed? It is with these questions in mind that this article will examine hybrid bodies in the works of two surrealist artists, Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo, in an attempt to shed light on an issue as multifaceted and difficult to contain as the shape-shifting Melusina.

This article will begin by examining the hybrid body in surrealist visual imagery, arguing that such images can be placed on a spectrum of surrealist communication from deliberately juxtaposed collages to harmonious painted images of metamorphosis. Hybridisation in images and texts by Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo will then be examined to demonstrate that while the issue of hybridity is complex, there does exist a specifically female hybrid form, particularly within surrealist visual and textual culture, that can be used to make a political statement on women's role in society. Aware of this, and working within an aesthetic replete with female hybrids, Carrington and Varo both used gendered and non-gendered hybrids in different ways, Carrington to highlight the transgressive nature of the grotesque body and to comment on repressed sexual impulses and the constraints of femininity; Varo painting imagery of harmonious, transcendent

unity, each using the hybrid body to move beyond such limiting binary notions of male and female, human and animal, organic and machine.

### **A Spectrum of Communication**

In her insightful study on collage in surrealist image and text, Elza Adamowicz sheds light on the importance of collage within Surrealism as an automatic technique that ‘provide[s] parodic reworking of [...] earlier texts or iconographic fragments’, resulting in a ‘defamiliarisation of the banal and the relations between part-bodies and totalities’.<sup>3</sup> Adamowicz begins her study with the most prolific creator of collage in Surrealism, the German painter, Max Ernst. As an active member of the Dada movement in Zurich, Ernst was quick to partake in the absurd reverie of surrealist activities in Paris. His first exhibition in René Hilsum’s bookshop took place in 1921, three years before the publication of the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, thus illustrating the Dada roots of the surrealist interest in collage, exquisite corpses and, as a result, in hybrid forms. Adamowicz cites a review of the exhibition by a *Daily Mail* reporter which perfectly sums up, however unintentionally, the strange beauty of his creations:

In the window there are things you see in a lobster salad nightmare. [...] Nobody knows what the images are intended to convey. There are faces, and fishes, and animals, and scientific figures, and hats all jumbled up together. The result is...Dada.<sup>4</sup>

Breton, himself an active member of the Dada group, described the beauty to which poetic imagery should aspire in a manner similar to the cutting and pasting of collage in his first manifesto. However, one could argue that it was in his 1932 text *Communicating Vessels*, that he articulately crystallises the concept:

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<sup>3</sup> Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13 & 22.

<sup>4</sup> Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image*, 2-3.

To compare two objects as far distant as possible one from the other or, by any other method, to confront them in a brusque and striking manner, remains the highest task to which poetry can aspire. Its unequalled, unique power should tend more and more to practice drawing out the concrete unity of the two terms placed in relation and to communicate to each of them, whatever it may be, a vigour that it lacked as long as it was considered in isolation. [...] The stronger the element of immediate unlikeness appears, the more strongly it should be surmounted and denied. [...] So two different bodies, rubbed one against the other, attain through that spark their supreme unity in fire; thus iron and water reach their common, admirable resolution in blood, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

The ideas elucidated by Breton in his 1932 text emerge in various different forms in surrealist visual imagery, from the deliberately juxtaposed exquisite corpses, photomontage and collage, to painted juxtapositions, and finally to harmonious visions of metamorphosis. It is here suggested that these varied forms create a spectrum of communication—to use Breton’s terminology—with images at one end deliberately jarring and frustrating the viewer’s expectations, often causing a sense of unease and those at the other end appearing more whole, in communion, and in some cases, harmonious. If we take, for example, the 1935 exquisite corpse Remedios Varo created together with Esteban Francés, Óscar Domínguez and Marcel Jean, the tension implicit in the conjoined sparring pair at the top of the piece is heightened by the inclusion of such enigmatic elements as an upturned spider and a man spying on images of women’s eyes, his own face obscured from the viewer.<sup>6</sup> The effect of this image is indeed intriguing, although not as disturbing as some created by Breton and others, for example the 1928 *cadavre exquis* by Breton, Yves Tanguy, Max Morise and Man Ray that depicts a nude-

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<sup>5</sup> André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 101.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://remedios-varo.com/obras-remedios-varo/decada-1930/figuras-cadaver-exquis-1935/> [last accessed 09/06/2017]

coloured hybrid whose torso resembles a fleshy human heart and whose indeterminate genitals lie above a seahorse-like, serpentine creature that the hybrid appears to be straddling.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, one of the arms of this exquisite corpse is a coiled serpent with the face of a human with red lips and long flaxen hair, reminiscent of the serpentine Melusina.

Moving along the spectrum from exquisite corpse to collage—of which Max Ernst’s 1933 collage novel *Une semaine de bonté* provides many pertinent examples—towards the centre lies the deliberate juxtaposition of incompatible elements in surrealist painting. Keeping within the circle surrounding Carrington and Varo, an example of such deliberately jarring painted juxtapositions is Óscar Domínguez’s *Machine a coudre electrosexuelle* (1935). The human/machine hybrid simultaneously intrigues and disturbs while perhaps providing a nod to Lautréamont’s chance encounter between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table, which Breton often used to exemplify the ideal surrealist image.<sup>8</sup> Other similarly uncanny painted juxtapositions include Salvador Dalí’s *Las acomodaciones del deseo* (1929) that includes elements of collage cut from a child’s book to depict the gaping lion’s maw, a motif read by some as representative of the terrifying vagina dentata complex, and by others as signifying his over-bearing father.<sup>9</sup> Towards the harmonious end of the spectrum lie many of René Magritte’s images of metamorphosis which contain elements that deliberately jar with viewers’ expectations, such as the unfortunate mermaid of *The Collective Invention* (1934) or the boots-cum-feet of *The Red Model* (1934). While these images are not the result of collage or collaboration, Magritte’s unsettling hybrid creations are far from a harmonious union. At the very end of the spectrum, opposite from our starting point, are those works that embody the notion

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/119118> (Lindy and Edwin Bergman collection, 106.1991. Man Ray Trust/ARS.) [last accessed 09/06/2017]

<sup>8</sup> Renée Riese Hubert provides a detailed investigation of the influence of Lautréamont on Breton and the surrealists, including a list of the various works in which Breton cited the poet, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 189-231.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Ralf Schleiber, *Dalí: The Reality of Dreams* (London; New York: Prestel, 2005), 44.

of 'a supreme unity' as sought by Breton, a harmonious metamorphosis often involving a hybrid creature that unlike the exquisite corpses does not inspire disquiet or revulsion, but rather invokes a sense of communion between all things. One clear such example is Varo's *La Creación de las aves* (1957), although within her oeuvre there are many.

This idea of a spectrum of communication is useful in gaining an understanding of the significance of the hybrid body in surrealist imagery. Just like the juxtaposition of incompatible objects can shock at one end or provide harmonious, other-worldly visions at the other, this article suggests that the hybrid body—primarily the human/animal hybrid—in works by Carrington and Varo is at times used to shock or inspire disgust and at others to suggest a higher state of communion, or the idea of attaining a unity representative of transcendence. In particular, the focus here will be to consider the question of gender and the hybrid body, to ascertain why certain hybrid bodies were gendered female, examining hybrids in works by Carrington and then Varo. Breton's *Arcane 17* will then be reconsidered to suggest that a closer examination of female hybrids by female artists can further our understanding of the poet's seemingly short-sighted invocation.

### **Female Hybrids?**

The link between the female body and the hybrid body has long been discussed in both feminist and art historical discourse. The idea of the female body becoming animal is often associated with woman's perceived proximity to nature and the emergence of concealed, animal instincts. In her oft-cited essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', Sherry Ortner posits that the categories of male and female are associated with a set of binary oppositions: male with the day and female with the night, male with culture and female

with nature.<sup>10</sup> Whitney Chadwick's seminal investigations focus on the vegetal rather than the faunal aspect of women's association with nature in Surrealism, particularly the notion of the regenerative powers of the earth connected with reproduction and thus metamorphosis, arguing that 'in *L'Union Libre*, Breton lyrically extolls the parts of a woman's body as herbs, fruit, trees and plants'.<sup>11</sup> This identification of woman as nature is, as Xavière Gauthier observes, a theme to which he and other surrealist poets constantly return, comparing women, especially their sexual organs, to flowers.<sup>12</sup> However, it is not just in Art History that the idea of the female hybrid resonates with notions of female identity and sexuality. Hybridity is increasingly associated in philosophical discourse with shifting subjectivities and corporeal transgression; in many recent studies corporeal transgressions have moved beyond binary gendered notions to discussions of transgendered bodies and bodies that defy definition, as well as becoming an important talking point in intersectional feminisms.<sup>13</sup> Thinking in terms of woman and machine, through the figure of the cyborg, 'a hybrid of machine and organism' that 'populate[s] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted', Donna Haraway aims to deliberately confuse boundaries and to derive pleasure from their confusion.<sup>14</sup> Haraway's model moves away from woman's perceived association with nature through a figure more relevant to contemporary women's experience that resides in an imagined post-gender utopia. While this vision does indeed echo many of the ideas expressed herein, the cyborg's irreverence and distance from both nature and the cosmos renders it an unfitting lens

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<sup>10</sup> Sherry Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', *Feminism – Art – Theory*, ed. Hillary Robinson (Blackwell: Oxford, 2001), 17-33. Such ideas are present in many traditions throughout the world, for example the idea of yin and yang in Chinese philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Whitney Chadwick explores this theme in depth as it relates to female surrealist artists in 'The Female Earth: Nature and the Imagination', *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson; Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1985), 141-180. One such example is Frida Kahlo's *Roots* (1943), a painting that clearly equates Kahlo's fertility issues to an arid earth.

<sup>12</sup> Xavière Gauthier, *Surrealisme et Sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 99.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, 'Gender and the Hybrid Identity: On Passing Through' in *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations* ed. Keri E. Iyall Smith and Patricia Leavy (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 81-101; Surya Nayak, *Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory: Working with Audre Lorde* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

through which to examine works by Carrington and Varo.<sup>15</sup> The most appropriate scholarly intervention on the subject of woman and animal for the present study is that of Rosi Braidotti, whose *Metamorphoses* provides an in-depth investigation of the Deleuzian concept of nomadic subjectivity from various perspectives, including ‘philosophies of difference and concepts such as embodiment, immanence and sexual difference’.<sup>16</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Luce Irigaray’s theories of female subjectivity as constantly shifting and multifaceted (as opposed to the unity-oriented phallogocentric idea) is an appropriate way to conceive of the multifaceted identities and shifting subjectivities of female characters painted by Carrington and Varo.<sup>17</sup> Braidotti, in her interrogation of hybridity in terms of embodiment and subjectivity, identifies a difference in conceiving of the hybrid body between the Deleuzian and the Irigarayan, or more generally, between the poststructuralist and feminist models.

Braidotti argues that for Deleuze, the rhizomatic ‘nomadic subject’ which is a multifaceted, constantly shifting subjectivity, pushes the limits of subjectivity, ‘in a constant encounter with external, different others. [...] The nomadic subject thus engages with his or her external others in a constructive “symbiotic” block of becoming, which bypasses dialectical interaction.’<sup>18</sup> Just as Breton turned to the landscape for inspiration, so too do Deleuze and Guattari, using the ice deserts and sand deserts traversed by the nomad to further elucidate this seemingly ineffable subjectivity in flux:

The same terms are used to describe ice deserts as sand deserts: there is no line separating earth and sky; there is no immediate distance, no perspective or contour; visibility is limited; and yet there is an extraordinary fine topology that

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<sup>15</sup> Haraway explains that ‘Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos. They are wary of holism but needful of connection.’ ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 291-324 (p. 293).

<sup>16</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 119.

<sup>17</sup> Tara Plunkett, *Self and Desire: Surrealism in the Images and Texts of Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington* (Queen’s University, Belfast, unpublished doctoral thesis: 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, 293.

relies not on points or objects but rather on haecceities, on sets of relations (winds, undulations of snow or sand, the song of the sand or the creaking of ice, the tactile qualities of both).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, as Braidotti summarises, the nomadic subject is already ‘open-ended, interrelational and trans-species, it explodes the boundaries of humanism at skin level’.<sup>20</sup> As such, Deleuze’s model of philosophical nomadism, whether applied to a male, female, or hybrid subject, provides ‘a secular form of spiritual inter-connectiveness’ in a manner that suggests the existence of the infinite, or the ‘sphere of the cosmos’.<sup>21</sup> Braidotti observes that feminist theorists like Irigaray and Haraway, on the other hand, ‘prefer instead multiplicities and multiply displaced identities. Non-linearity, non-fixity and non-unitary subjectivity are the priority, and they are situated in close proximity to woman, the native, the dispossessed, the abused, the excluded, the “other” of the high-tech clean and efficient bodies that contemporary culture sponsors’. Braidotti provides many examples of female hybrids in her study to demonstrate the significance of the embodied subject residing within a specifically female hybrid body. One such example which is of particular relevance to many works by Leonora Carrington, is the ‘she-wolf’:

The case of the wolf is emblematic of Deleuze’s theory of the becoming-animal. [...] The best example of this sequence in popular culture is the stage show and film *Cats* where the hybrid morphological creature – half female, half panther – stands simultaneously for ethnic mixity, moral ambiguity, sexual indeterminacy and unbridled erotic passion. The process of trans-species nomadism, or morphological hybridity, is loaded with sexuality in that it entails the erasure of and the transgressing of bodily boundaries. This ‘explosion’ of the civilized confines of one’s ‘self’ reasserts some raw corporeality of the subject, which is often rendered in the

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<sup>19</sup> Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 382.

<sup>20</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 127; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 312.

mode of the orgasm, of the ecstatic, erotic encounter with radical otherness. The *topos* of the wolf incorporates a great deal of these elements, with speed, fur, blood and violence thrown in for thrills.<sup>22</sup>

Reading this particular hybrid body as transgressive, bestial and, above all, female, Braidotti paints a visceral picture of a burgeoning sexuality that is deliberately embodied, containing and emanating all that a human/animal hybrid body would. This rawness reminds us of the physical reality of an embodied subject, something that Carrington, in particular, plays on in her work; a reality that when attributed to the beautiful fay Melusina could make for less than an ideal *femme-enfant*. In sum, there appears to be a consensus that there is a link between the hybrid body and a shifting, multifaceted subjectivity, but whether this is a specifically female subjectivity remains in question. The following analysis of hybrid bodies created by Carrington and Varo will interrogate different types of hybrid forms to shed light on the role of the female hybrid.

### **Leonora Carrington**

Immediately when we think of Leonora Carrington and beastly or hybrid forms, the first image that comes to mind is that of her *Self-Portrait Inn of the Dawn Horse* (1937-8) and the imagery it shares with the short story 'La débutante' (1939).<sup>23</sup> The portrait provides a strong, sexually-charged image of the artist and coincides with her real-life transition from adolescent to young woman. Chadwick identifies the hyena as belonging to 'the fertile world of the night; the horse becomes an image of rebirth into the light of day and the world beyond the looking glass'.<sup>24</sup> There is certainly credibility in the idea that Carrington is using the image of the hyena to represent the bestial, wild side of her own

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<sup>22</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Leonora Carrington, 'The Debutante' in *The House of Fear: Notes From Down Below*, trans. by Katharine Talbot and Marina Warner (London: Virago Press, 1989), 45-47.

<sup>24</sup> Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 79

sexuality. The animal's human eyes, swollen breasts and shared gaze unite it with her, suggesting that they are one and the same. Furthermore, Carrington's lack of breasts in the portrait is supplemented and replaced by the swollen breasts of the hyena.

The image of a hyena as embodiment of the bestial side of human nature, particularly female human nature, also emerges in Carrington's subsequent short story, 'La débutante', published as part of the collection, *La Dame Ovale* in 1939. In the story, the female heroine convinces a hyena she befriended at the zoo to take her place in her upcoming debutante's ball, a rite of passage that Carrington took part in as a young girl. The hyena, enchanted with the idea of attending such an event, agrees to take the girl's place and disguises herself in human clothes. In order to cover her face, the hyena kills and eats the girl's maid, using the maid's face as a mask for her own. The only detail that could give away the secret is the natural musk emanating from the beast. In the story, Carrington plays with the notion of a beautiful, civilised society girl trying to suppress her inherent bestial nature. The tale culminates with the girl's angry mother proclaiming that her ruse had not worked; having heard comments about her pungent odour from the other guests, the hyena had proceeded to remove the human mask she was wearing before eating it in front of the astonished onlookers and escaping through the window. Katherine Conley argues that the unmasking of the beast could act as a metaphor for Carrington revealing her own wild nature behind her beautiful and demure appearance:

Thus Carrington sardonically dramatizes the fantasy of destroying her own beautiful 'mask' in the interest of revealing her true, wilder, freer, but socially unacceptable hidden self beneath. Through the character of the hyena, she expresses her rage against society's expectations of young women.<sup>25</sup>

In this story rather than the woman becoming animal, the hybrid body is that of a hyena which desires to become not only human, but a polite society girl. The resulting hybrid

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<sup>25</sup> Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 51.

body – a hyena in a ball gown paired with a flayed human visage, paints a humorous and very dark picture of how society wishes young women to repress certain ‘bestly’ impulses. Re-reading Carrington’s self-portrait with the short-story in mind, it becomes clear that she has used her own body to construct a narrative of the strictures facing women—and by extension women artists—, given her subversion of a classically male-dominated art historical genre. While the hyena wearing the disembodied face provides a surrealist juxtaposition of incompatible elements that jars with the viewer/reader in the same way as the deliberately discordant exquisite corpses, another human/animal in Carrington’s literary oeuvre moves slightly further along the spectrum of communication, or the coming together of opposites, in her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1950).

After a small group of elderly women have faced down the apocalypse and discovered the Holy Grail, in an episode that heralds the beginning of a new world order with many aesthetic similarities to Carrington’s painted oeuvre, the protagonist Marian Leatherby is introduced to Anubeth, the sister of a rich acquaintance loosely based on Edward James:

The form which then emerged from the Ark was more wildly unexpected than anything my already inflamed imagination could have conceived. Marlborough’s sister Anubeth was a wolf-headed woman. Her tall body was finely proportioned and, apart from the head, entirely human. She was swathed in some glittering cloth, and small pointed shoes like gondolas covered her narrow feet. [...] ‘My sister understands ten languages and writes Sanskrit,’ said Marlborough, ‘but owing to a peculiarity of the palate she finds difficulty in pronunciation, so we always bark at each other. You may however talk English to her, which she understands perfectly.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (St Ives: Flammarion, 1974), 151.

Anubeth's appearance at the very end of a novel teeming with examples of the subversion of gendered boundaries such as the transsexual Maude/Claude Sommers and Leatherby's own 'rather gallant' beard marks the arrival of a world turned upside down.<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence then that in a world in which the continents have shifted and the elements are in disarray, she appears in an ark, the sign of a new age for humans and animals. The hybrid Anubeth thus represents freedom from the rigid boundaries of the old order. Carrington's choice to base Marlborough's sister on Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the after-life is reflected in Anubeth's enthusiasm for 'embalming anything she finds dead'.<sup>28</sup> Her appearance in a glittering gown underlines Carrington's decision to gender the hybrid figure as specifically female and echoes the unnamed hyena in a ball gown, providing almost an inversion of the earlier tale. Anubeth's hybrid form is further accentuated by her own artistic creations which deliberately challenge our expectations of what is normal or acceptable:

Anubeth growled and reached up to get a very strange animal from the ceiling for my inspection. It was a tortoise with a baby's wizened face and long thin legs which were frozen in a gallop. Anubeth says that this kind of collage she made for fun when the keeper of the principal morgues in Venice gave her the present of a dead baby. The legs originally belonged to some storks that died of the cold. It really is very clever. I sometimes wonder if she ought to paint. I am sure she has talent.<sup>29</sup>

The wolf/woman's function as creator of other, albeit deceased, hybrid creatures serves to reinforce the validity of her own form and simultaneously subverts woman's traditional role as mother, as her creation is the opposite of what is hoped from a mother— a surrealist juxtaposition of incompatible elements that plays on human emotions by including a dead baby.

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<sup>27</sup> Carrington, *Hearing Trumpet*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Carrington, *Hearing Trumpet*, 152.

<sup>29</sup> Carrington, *Hearing Trumpet*, 152.

Another deliberately disturbing example of a maternal human/animal hybrid in Carrington's work appears in the short story, 'As They Rode Along the Edge' (c.1939). Virginia Fur, a beastly, hirsute human woman who travels around the forest on a wheel accompanied by 'fifty black cats and as many yellow ones', blurs the boundaries of human and animal in that she is a human who lives as an animal, with the animals, and is often indistinguishable from them as she travels in a whirlwind of hair, fur and claws. While her behaviour—which includes intercourse with a boar named Ignose and boiling and eating six of the seven resulting offspring—may seem to disturb simply for the sake of disturbing, it is important to note that, in true Surrealist fashion, the antagonist of the tale is a saint, Alexander, who wants her body and soul. Virginia Fur as a human being who is at times visually indistinguishable from a clowder of cats, mates with the animals and, at one point, sings the song of a blind nightingale she has swallowed, is perhaps more disturbing and confusing than any human/animal hybrid, as her transgressions are not motivated by a permanently polymorphous physiology but rather her body transgresses the human/animal boundary at fixed points and through fixed orifices. The deliberate sense of disharmony that underpins the tale is made manifest in the discordant crooning of a chorus of nuns who, in their own way, could also be likened to a pack of cats.

Carrington painted and wrote of many hybrids throughout her lengthy career. While many of them were deliberately grotesque, such as the aforementioned examples and the painted figures that populate *The Meal of Lord Candlestick* (1938) and *Down Below* (1941), often their monstrosity was intended to make a political statement on bourgeois excess, female desire, women's bodies, or the futile nature of binary constructs. Conversely, her Mexican paintings are replete with harmonious hybrids that hint at transcendence and unity. One earlier example of the harmonious hybrid that would go on to characterise works such as *The House Opposite* (1945) and *El Mundo mágico de los Mayas* (1963), *Femme et Oiseau* (1938) depicts a self-portrayed Carrington and her lover,

Max Ernst in the form of their totem animals, a horse and a bird. The mane of hair flowing upwards and human eyes link the human-horse hybrid with the self-portrayed Carrington in *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)*; however, here the artist is united, or fused, with her totem animal, a hybrid body in harmonious union, painted the way the artist would like to be seen as opposed to how society would like to see her. The mask motif is present here again as the human face discarded by the protagonist appears as a ghostly apparition, emerging from the doorway which in this image acts as a frame, reinforcing the art-historical roots of the image and thus its function as a subversion of the traditional self-portrait. The empty eyes of the discarded human mask suggest that the human being is not her true form, while its flowing hair reveals it to belong to *La Femme* of the title. While the recurrence of the human face as a mask once again brings ideas such as an inner animality to the fore, the focus here is firmly placed on a unity that transcends binary oppositions such as male and female, human and animal.

### **Remedios Varo**

Hybrid bodies in works by Remedios Varo tend to be both human/animal and human/machine. Like Carrington, Varo was very much a believer in the unity of all things, men, women, animals and objects. As María José González Madrid observes: 'Ya desde su primera exposición, las críticas destacaron esta extraña relación entre los seres y las cosas para la creación de un mundo en el que todos los enseres que rodean al sujeto humano tienen tanta alma como el ser viviente y el ser viviente tiene tanta perennidad como las cosas que le circundan'.<sup>30</sup> There is almost an equal ratio of male to female hybrids in Varo's paintings; others have transcended beyond a gendered distinction to reach androgyne status. Those gendered male are often engaged in scientific inquiry, their

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<sup>30</sup> María José González Madrid, 'Recetas, pócimas, retortas: alquimia y creación en la pintura de Remedios Varo' in *Remedios Varo: Caminos del conocimiento, la creación y el exilio*, ed. María José González Madrid y Rosa Rius Gatell (Barcelona: Eutelequía, 2013), 99-119 (p. 113).

transformation brought about as a result of their endeavours, demonstrating both a narrative of man's unity with nature and the cosmos and a tongue-in-cheek humour.

*Descubrimiento de un geólogo mutante* (1961) shows a geologist equipped with a telescope affixed to some form of glass alembic which is distilling water for an array of plant cuttings. Amidst the barren landscape, rendered with the surrealist technique of decalcomania, the geologist has discovered a large exotic plant. Perhaps as the result of a failed experiment or as a nod to his close proximity to nature, the geologist has become hybrid, complete with wings, a tail and furry pelt that seems to cover his entire torso. A similar scene is evoked in *Planta insumisa* (1961), which depicts another scientific experiment that has resulted in a fusion between man and the natural world. In this strikingly complex image, the rebellious plant has adapted its shape to form complex equations, perhaps those which elude the scientist, while the experimenter's hair has, in turn, begun to mimic the plant. The protagonist's furtive expression, combined with the swathes of frayed fabric that clothe him, suggest a thematic link to *Encuentro* (1959) which is a more evident depiction of a self-portrayed figure's search for the self. If these two paintings are in fact linked thematically, then perhaps the scientist, rather than discovering what he set out to, has discovered a unity between man and nature that was previously unknown to him. Varo also playfully suggests that the plant has greater scientific knowledge than the scientist, an idea that taps into themes of a unified, omniscient cosmos.

When Varo did choose to gender hybrid bodies as female, the resulting image could often be read as providing a commentary on the constraints of domesticity in a manner very similar to the scientists' interactions with their surroundings. In *La tejedora de Verona* (1956), a lone woman seated in a narrow room knits while gazing, her expression forlorn, into the distance. The woman's pale blue colouring provides a stark contrast to the red woman emanating from her knitting, who gazes defiantly at the viewer as she

drifts out the window. With the head and hands of a woman and a body of two dimensional red wool, this female hybrid body could be read on many levels; she could be seen, like the scientists, as a person becoming her work, thus once more hinting at the unity between humankind and the world at large. She could also be seen as embodying the lone woman's desires for freedom from the constraints of the domestic life endured by women. A previous image of a related theme, entitled *La tejedora roja* (1956) shows a similar scene, but this time with many other bodies hanging from hooks in the room. If the hybrid body, in this case a woman/object hybrid, acts a vessel for a shifting subjectivity, then in Irigarayan terms this multifaceted subjectivity is intimately bound up with *female* identity in particular, given the domestic setting. This image could thus be read as representative of a multifaceted female identity, with the protagonist as creator of many possible selves; an idea that also lends itself to an interpretation of Varo's positioning of so many self-portrait figures in the throes of various adventures; each an example of a possible self.

*Mimetismo* (1960), if we follow Janet Kaplan's interpretation, provides a rather negative view of the constraints of domesticity and female passivity, as the seated protagonist has become so passive that she gradually becomes a piece of furniture, her face covered in a fleur-de-lis print, her hands and feet moulded to replicate the wooden features of the chair. It seems important to note, however, that life springs forth from every corner of the room, as material flows upwards from the sewing basket, the chair leg which has grown teeth, grasps at the leg of the table and the elements emerge from a wardrobe.<sup>31</sup> Thus it could be argued that a certain level of harmony is attained as the human becomes inanimate, the inanimate chair gains the organic property of teeth and the clouds, which often in Varo's work depict the cosmos, move from an exterior realm to

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<sup>31</sup> Janet Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 158-159.

the interior. However we choose to interpret this scene of female, domestic hybridity, it is clear that Varo paints a very different vision of the female hybrid body than Carrington's bestial creations.

While many of Carrington's beastly hybrids provide a tongue-in-cheek view of female sexuality, so too does Varo; however, she does so within an aesthetic of harmonious union. *Mujer lechuza* (1960), in a manner reminiscent of *Nacer de nuevo* (1960), presents a radiant figure bound up in the labial folds of a yonic opening that culminates in branch-like filaments suggestive of a tree. Here, the human, floral and faunal converge to present a female hybrid figure, perhaps a nod to Minerva, encased in symbols of female sexuality. With this figure in mind, the 1958 painting *Caza nocturna* takes on new significance. If the 1958 human/owl hybrid is also female, then the night-time hunt could also have sexual undertones. Just as the owl prowls the night skies for food, this huntress is prowling shaded street corners for her prey.

Another striking element of Varo's hybrid bodies is that rather than the human becoming animal, often the human body becomes object or machine. *Tailleur pour dames* (1957), *Au Bonheur des dames* (1956), *Homo Rodans* (1959) and *Los amantes* (1963) all contain human beings who have partly become objects, demonstrating both the interconnectability of all the elements in our world and a commentary on how we can become so consumed with our work, certain objects or ideas that we can physically become them. *Homo Rodans*, in particular suggests that the human/machine connection is an enduring one, as its accompanying pseudo-scientific text written in an invented Latin informs us that man evolved from such wheeled creatures. Given that the sculpture was made primarily from chicken bones, it provides a convergence of human, animal and machine within a tangible object.

On the whole, Varo's Mexican paintings are infused with a sense of harmony that ties in with the interconnectedness of man and the cosmos as demonstrated by some of

her most well-known works, including *Creación de las aves* (1957) and *Harmonía* (1956). The latter depicts an androgynous figure seated at a table placing an array of objects on a musical stave together with an apparition that emerges from labial folds in the wall. As with many of Varo's other paintings, life springs forth from every crevice, suggesting that the harmony they seek exists when all of creation is in balance. The former situates a human/owl hybrid as creator, reinscribing the myth of creation with a hybrid being who distils energy from the cosmos to paint, and thus bring to life, small birds. The creator's positioning in the middle of a circuit that refracts light from the cosmos on one end and distils colour through an alembic on another adds a sense of unity which is crystallised in the communicating vessels that appear in the background. The vessels, which seem to provide a clear nod to Breton, reinforce the idea of this painting as the epitome of Surrealist communication. In terms of the human becoming animal, plant or object, in Varo's world there are very thin boundaries between modes of being.

However, the artist pushes such ideas one step further, as her paintings of harmonious union transcend earthly plains to involve the cosmos. With *Centro del universo* (1961), the artist depicts a hermetic figure wrapped in the same frayed fabric that cloaks many of her other protagonists. The figure's Boschian hat appears to act as a syphon, distilling astronomical elements that converge as the centre of the universe within his chest. This idea is reminiscent of *Ermitaño* (1955), an androgynous figure in the shape of a six pointed star rendered in mother-of-pearl whose chest contains an elongated passageway to an unknown realm. The glowing yin yang symbol, coupled with the hermit's folded arms and peaceful expression, suggest that the road to harmony lies within. These images thus reveal that within any individual, a passageway to inner harmony or the centre of the universe may be found, reflecting the old alchemical maxim 'as above, so below', and placing Varo's painted figures firmly in the centre of convergence

between the macrocosm and the microcosm.<sup>32</sup> Returning to the question of gender and the hybrid body, while the centre of the universe clearly emerges from the chest of a male figure, *Astro errante* (1961), painted the same year, shows a female wandering star making her way through the cosmos. Of interest to the present discussion is the fact that although the male figure contains the centre of the universe, he acts as a vessel. Here, the seemingly celestial/human hybrid has the delicate hands, legs and high heeled shoes of a woman and the face of a star, her cloak various strata of rain clouds. The addition of a child's windmill adds a playful touch to suggest that she carries the elements with her, her face a radiant sun. That the stars can have human features and a person can contain the entire cosmos in their chest suggest that for Varo, the hybrid body is as much a means to comment on issues of domesticity, female knowledge and sexuality as it is the point of communion between humans, animals, machines and the cosmos.

## Conclusion

Returning to Breton's invocation of the serpent-woman Melusina, although she aids the poet to articulate his desire for life to be put back into the hands of woman, she provides yet another manifestation of *la femme enfant*, a tired trope that here resides in a body which, like so many other women in Surrealist art, has been cut, pasted and recomposed beyond recognition as a human female. Breton's view of Melusina as the archetypal child-woman, an idea that was somewhat of a nuisance to both Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo is certainly problematic. However, when one considers the central premise of the text, that power needs to be placed back in the hands of women both in art and in life, it becomes clear that Breton's feminised hybrid works both on a personal, or esoteric level and on a political, or exoteric level. Melusina represents a political intervention on behalf of women at large on an exoteric level, but also an inner, esoteric transformation,

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<sup>32</sup> For a definition of The Hermetic Principle see The Three Initiates, *The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2014), 17.

giving more power to the supposedly irrational feminine part of the mind in order to create surrealist art.

Furthermore, when one considers the variant forms of hybridity discussed by Braidotti, representative of a non-gendered 'secular form of spiritual inter-connectiveness' on the one hand or a transgressive, bestial and, above all, female political being on the other, both ways of seeing the hybrid subject and the hybrid body could be applied to Melusina.<sup>33</sup> Representative of an esoteric inner journey, unifying the opposing forces of the mind necessary for art, Melusina's hybrid body functions as a representation of the spiritual, interconnected, gender-neutral hybrid. However, she also represents political change, embodied in a transgressive, specifically female body.

How, then, does Breton's invocation of the female hybrid relate to hybrid bodies in Surrealist works by Varo and Carrington? The present study has sought to demonstrate that for Varo, the hybrid body largely relates to a non-gendered, harmonious vision of a 'secular spiritual interconnectiveness', the secular form of spirituality implying an esoteric, inner journey of the mind.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Varo's painted visions of harmonious, surrealist communion can be seen as reflecting the Deleuzian rhizomatic model of nomadic subjectivity, not only thematically, but also aesthetically, as for Deleuze and Guattari, 'to be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses', an image that speaks very clearly to Varo's universe in which life springs forth from every crevice, often in the form of roots or tendrils which transform and are transformed as is the case in *Harmonía* and *Mujer Lechuza*.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in their description of the structure of a rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari use decalcomania, a technique that appears

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<sup>33</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 15.

in a vast number of Varo's canvases, to demonstrate the rhizome's resistance to structural or generative models.<sup>36</sup>

Carrington's hybrid visions, on the other hand, like Breton's, work on both an esoteric and an exoteric level. On an exoteric level her deliberately grotesque, bestial depictions of hyenas in human faces and women with wolf heads raise questions about female identity, sexuality and embodiment, as well as bourgeois society and the role of the Catholic Church. In particular, the beastly scent of the human/hyena in 'La debutante' and the copulation with and swallowing of animals by Virginia Fur echo the image of the 'leaky body' that Margrit Shildrick developed in search of a 'radical sexual difference, a difference that speaks to the feminine *beyond* the oppositional gender binary' by reaffirming embodiment.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, Carrington's *Femme et Oiseau* mirrors the non-gendered harmonious, esoteric visions put forward by Varo. In conclusion, while any form of hybrid body has immediate associations with transgression (at one end of the spectrum) or even transcendence (at the other), to take a hybrid body, particularly a human/animal hybrid and gender it female, is to create a deliberately political body like Melusina or Anubeth which cannot be contained, stifled or silenced but rather is created to bark, growl and scream.

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<sup>36</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12

<sup>37</sup> Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 9.