

REMEDIOS VARO:
FANTASTICAL MUSICAL SPACES
AND THE BOUNDARIES OF GENDER

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The richness of fantastical and oneiric images depicted in Remedios Varo's pictorial *œuvre* strikes the viewer in subtle and complex ways. Her paintings typically depict a variety of fantastical settings and gothic dreams elaborated in her own distinctive and individual style. She presents a highly personal narrative, filled with (mainly) female or androgynous figures which seem to embody, symbolically, an aspiration to explore her inner spiritual world, as well as acting as metaphors for the recuperation of the sources and power of women's creativity. Some of Varo's paintings foreground music as the privileged subject matter, and the richness of conceptual signifiers in her musical imaginary allows us to engage in a densely gendered reading of her symbolic economy. Music in Varo's *œuvre* appears as an imagi-

nary “embodied abstraction” and seems to fill a silent space; yet its discursive power is symbolically foregrounded. An exploration of the signification of music in Varo’s compositions is useful here because, as Richard Leppert has shown, visual representations of music-making can function as agents of socio-cultural formation. Leppert makes reference to the spaces delineated by social order and social ordering and the importance of music’s agency in the demarcation of (historical class) boundaries (Leppert 1988, 1-10). I am thus interested in extending into a more explicit feminist context Leppert’s figuration of music as having “agency” in cultural situations, especially in the visual art by this female artist. Varo’s paintings richly engage a spectrum of gender signification, clearly articulated through a female’s lens, at a time when world-views about women favored stronger patriarchal definitions of femininity. In this sense, her fantastical musical spaces seem to metaphorically dissolve, rather than demarcate, gender boundaries within an imagined social (dis)order, and thus the agency of music seems to be refigured to feminine ends through visual representation. In other words, the abstract figurations of musical agency in Varo are suggestive of a disruption of gender boundaries or binarisms vis-à-vis the circumscribed patriarchal meanings ascribed to music, and this disruptive potential is anchored in a fantastical and overtly subversive imagination of “musical practice.”

Varo was a latecomer to the surrealist movement, joining the group in France in the mid 1930s, and is well known among surrealist women painters. She was finally exiled to Mexico in 1941, where she

began to rebuild her life and continued to have exchanges with the surrealist group that had been displaced there as a result of the Second World War. Yet, her most mature and best-known works were produced in the 1950s until her death in 1963, and thus well after she had moved beyond Surrealism as the only source of artistic influence and inspiration. In *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, Whitney Chadwick has argued that the development of a specific, unique, personal narrative is also traceable in the work of other surrealist women artists. She suggests that surrealist women functioned independently of Breton's inner circle and the broader configuration of the Surrealist movement, and associates the isolation in which these women artists worked with their drifting apart from the shared theoretical positions and principles of the Surrealist group. Chadwick also highlights the distinct aesthetic perceptions of women surrealists vis-à-vis male surrealists (Chadwick 1997, 219). Male surrealist artists emphasized the mechanisms of the unconscious and its effect upon artistic production through the content of dreams, whereas women surrealists tended to accentuate not just a personal reality validated through the unconscious mind and the images of dreams, but a symbolic economy which might be referred to as self-referential in nature and dominated by a personal inner reality and complex narrative flow (1997, 221). Moreover, it has been noted that male surrealists tended to decontextualize an image in order to associate it with some other which was often the result of a limited repertoire of interpretative webs, largely conceived as projections of sexual desire (Belton 1993, 51-2). In quite opposite

fashion, Varo would seem to contextualize an image within a magic realist narrative that lends itself to multiple interpretations, especially from a feminist perspective; it is therefore this self-referentiality in her symbolic economy, and the adaptation of her own fantastical gothic/magic world in connection to music in particular, that forms a privileged site for the examination of the boundary between the inner world and its outer representation.

It would thus seem that although Varo initially shared some of the aesthetic conceptions of surrealism, especially in her earlier works, her “musical language,” as it were, speaks a personalized idiom which indicates a departure from the subject matter and aesthetic preoccupations of the surrealist artists in Breton’s circle. On this point, it is undeniable that the Surrealist group was constituted as a “men’s club” which tended to perceive women only as objects, muses, or projections of their own dreams or sexual fantasies, exposing an all too familiar patriarchal and misogynistic view of women in Western art.¹ Varo, as well as other female surrealists, might have been brought into a kind of isolation as a by-product of this negative relation to Breton’s postulates; she would consequently seem to engage with a highly personalized narrative of music as a means of both reaffirming women’s subjectivity and reevaluating women’s artistic talent and creativity on its own terms. In Varo’s work, music is brought to the fore as a *topos* in her rich imagery, an aspect that clearly comes in contradistinction to Breton’s apparent lack of interest in (and, indeed, hostility to) music, as evidenced in his declaration “the birds have never sung better than in this

1. For further discussion of misogynistic views within Surrealism, see Kuenzli 1993.

aquarium” or his categorical demand, “let the curtain fall on the orchestral!” (Caws 1997, 10).²

In spite of this negative relation to Breton, it would seem that both men and women surrealists used similar vocabulary even though they fundamentally spoke different dialects (Belton 1993, 59). The major components of surrealism, such as psychoanalysis or the magical value of the image, emerge as important sources of Varo’s inspiration. The fantastical musical spaces figured in some of Varo’s compositions recreate the interplay between the non-real and the real, and thus these spaces in Varo’s particular vision of the world and reality go hand in hand with Breton’s recognition that “the admirable aspect of fantasy is its containment of reality” (Guigon 1991, 18).³ But most evocative for our purpose here is the putative search for her own poetic universe and her engagement with fantastical musical elements which transfigure real into non-real and non-real into real. As we have already intimated, Varo’s work shows a marked predilection for the representation of musical agency as a primary operator in the mapping of the boundary between universal and embodied realities.

Music as a theme appears in works such as *Armonía*, *Energía cósmica*, *Música solar*, *El flautista* and *Vuelo mágico*, among others. In these works, women and androgynous figures are the source of creativity and performativity, imagined explicitly as transgressing the boundaries of gender and patriarchal power. Music forms a central tenet in Varo’s fantasy world, as it provides a connecting line that feeds into her own self-image as woman and creator of art. Yet music is also associated with spiritual powers and a

2. Breton quoted in Caws.

3. In the Surrealist Manifesto, Breton acknowledges this quality of fantasy. See *Remedios Varo: arte y literatura* 1991.

celestial harmony which governs and maintains all things. This latter vision could well have been drawn from an appropriation of the Hermetic tradition, as Chadwick points out: myth, the occult, and alchemy's quest for the reconciliation of opposites aimed at a process of "material and spiritual purification in the creation of divine harmony on earth and in heaven" and would have meant for women surrealists a re-possession of "creative powers long submerged by Western civilization" (Chadwick 1997, 190, 186). Another source for Varo's interest in spirituality is the work of Gurdjieff, a mystical thinker of Greek/Armenian origin whose beliefs contained elements of occultism and theosophy. He was greatly influenced by oriental thought that deals with the meaning of human life on earth, and his teachings had an impact on Varo and other surrealist artists. Indeed, her *œuvre*, which often depicts a spiritual or harmonious ordering of the world, reflects an increased interest in magic, the gothic, and the occult. It therefore seems that Varo's use of the musical element refers to an archaic source or tradition, which could have been derived from oriental philosophies as well as Gurdjieff's eclectic belief in the effects of music on the human psyche and Medieval and Renaissance theories of the harmonious universe. The latter embraces a symbolic interpretation of the universe, which implies "the concert of all strings in pure measures with no discords" (Webb 1980, 509). Similarly, music for Varo provides the means for a unitary cosmological vision, a mystical connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm which also falls in line with the execution of her own (wholesome) cosmic

universe.

In *Armonía* (figure 1), an androgynous-looking woman sits at a table in an enclosed space and composes music on a staff made out of objects from the vegetable and mineral worlds. These objects lie about the room as if waiting to be picked up and placed onto the staff, while tiny birds fly around the room near a nest made on a chair. Every small object in Varo's universe has its place and contributes to the stability of that world. The scene evokes the power of creation that joins all creatures through the lines of the staff, which functions as a metaphor for the macrocosm. In this manner, the objects act as tones of an imaginary cosmic melody. Women are the mediators in this process. The role of the woman mediator, as we shall see, is a crucial operator in Varo's *œuvre*. The embodied experience of women as producers of meaning is paramount here, despite the fact that there is a danger in privileging a female essence or nature: Western dualist rationality has consistently portrayed the female as inferior. Both women's and music's agency can be read here in a recuperative manner, not just as a non-reductive question of mere textual strategy, but as a way of challenging male myths of cultural origins. Varo's rich intertextuality resonates in this picture with ancient Greek philosophical thinking and a medieval harmonic order (Beatriz Varo 1990, 110; Chadwick 1997, 203). It is not by chance that a small piece of paper containing a mathematical sequence of numbers constituting the value of π (pi) is placed on the lines of the staff. Gurdjieff's conception of "objective music" was derived from Pythagorean principles of the connection between

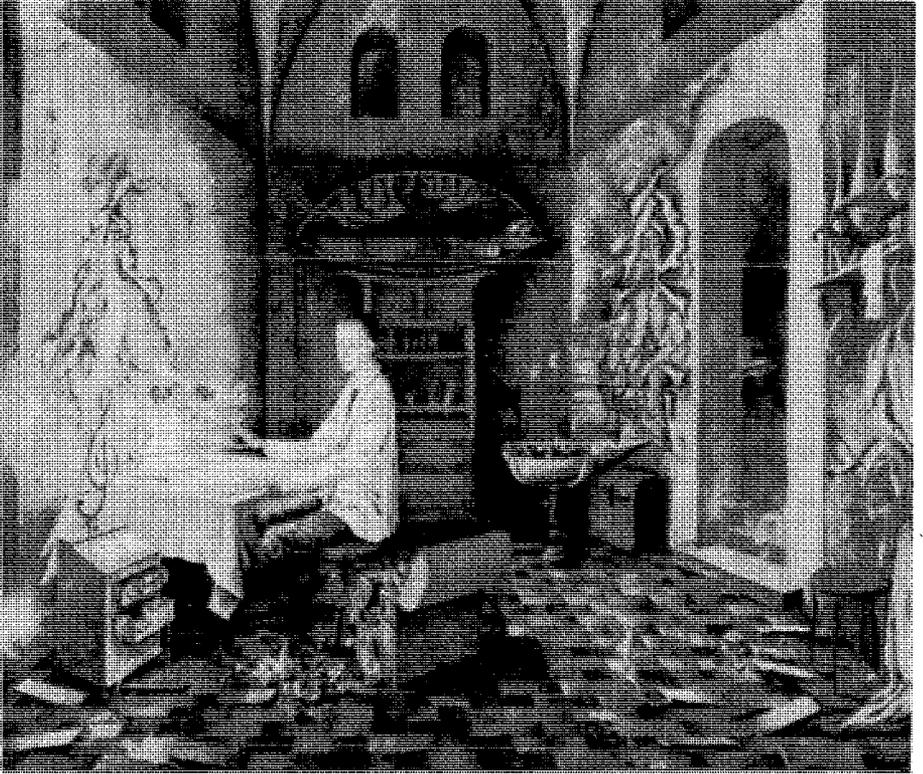


Figure 1. *Armonia*

number, music, and the symbolic interpretation of the universe. This philosophy was influential throughout the Middle Ages and experienced a revival and adaptation in the late Renaissance (Webb 1980, 512). Pythagoras placed special emphasis upon the power of music to cure physical illnesses, which also explains Gurdjieff's interest in music's effects on human beings and other living objects. The origin of Pythagoras' theory is found in his discovery of the monochord, "a single string stretched like the string on any modern stringed instrument and divided by seven frets" (Webb 1980, 510). The harmony of the universe was thought of as composed of the vibrations produced by the monochord as these increased or decreased in a precise mathematical ratio. The cosmos was thus understood as the proportion of mathematical canons and was projected as harmonious and arithmological. In Varo's *Armonía*, we can see a recuperation of this idea in a highly personalized and figurative version of the harmonious universe. By placing women at the center, as bearers of this ancient knowledge, as healers and mediators in the process of music creation and its effects, Varo appears to be destabilizing an almost exclusively male knowledge within the status quo; bestowing this power on women can be read as a way to challenge the patriarchal claims to that knowledge.

In *Music in Renaissance Magic*, Gary Tomlinson discusses the association of music with magic and the occult as understood by the world of the Renaissance Magus. Tomlinson analyzes the principles and magical ontological postulates by which sixteenth-century maguses ordered the world into three hierarchical realms: the lowest elemental realm

of matter, comprising the four elements and their compounds; the middle celestial realm of the planets and stars; and the highest, supercelestial realm of intelligences. He suggests that “the occult powers of the mundane things revealed not only the difference of form and matter, but the absolute supremacy of form over matter as well” (Tomlinson 1993, 46). Forms disassociated from corporeality acquired a new re-valued meaning, as they were rendered superior to the forms manifested in matter. From this principle, Tomlinson concludes, “numbers, letters, geometrical solids, and harmonies, all pure forms unconstrained by bodies, gained special occult force” (1993, 49). This superiority over matter and the occult force of certain objects and numbers seem to be operating in the dynamics of Varo’s *Armonía*; indeed, the interconnection between all things within the Renaissance magical ontology relies heavily on likeness and the attraction of things to one another: similitude, sameness, correspondence, and unity played a central part in the universe and were sources of control and power. This power, however, flowed hierarchically, from top to bottom “through the world soul according to particular harmonic concordances—*harmonico concentu*—and touching any point in this emanative hierarchy” (1993, 48). Although the flow of power in Renaissance magic emanates from divine exemplars, the ubiquity of correspondences and “active affinities” established among this “undifferentiated likeness” rested dangerously on the verge of a collapse of the world into a diffuse and diluted power, whereby sameness and undifferentiation would make power inoperative, something that would have been considered unac-

ceptable within a symbolic patriarchal law. In my view, this scope, intrinsic to magic and the occult, is itself reworked in Varo's fantastical musical spaces as a female/androgynous figure who, by mediating these harmonic concordances, refigures music and thus the loss of control and power as something celebratory. In response to a knowledge which had been indelibly marked as masculine, a kind of privileged knowledge associated with the feminine is foregrounded here. Thus, music as a cultural trope appropriates the fear of the occult into an essentialized yet non-hierarchical female epistemology; in other words, Varo transforms an archaic subversion into a contemporary, feminine subversion.

Energía cósmica (figure 2) draws on similar "gothic" symbolism, since the painting depicts the corner of a room which is beginning to be overgrown by vegetation and other elements from the natural world. From the deteriorated plaster of the walls two female figures stretch out their arms, one to play the viol and the other to stroke a cat, a gesture from which tiny stars are emitted, filling the otherwise almost empty space. Two orifices in the wall allow cosmic energy to pass through, making the dim vegetation complete the composition. Rich symbolism in this painting points to an interplay between the non-real depiction of the illustration and the "real" connotations evoked, which are inscribed within culture. The cat, symbolic of a domestic yet simultaneously wild space, parallels music played also within a private space. Music is relocated here within the traditional closed domestic realm where women have historically performed it.

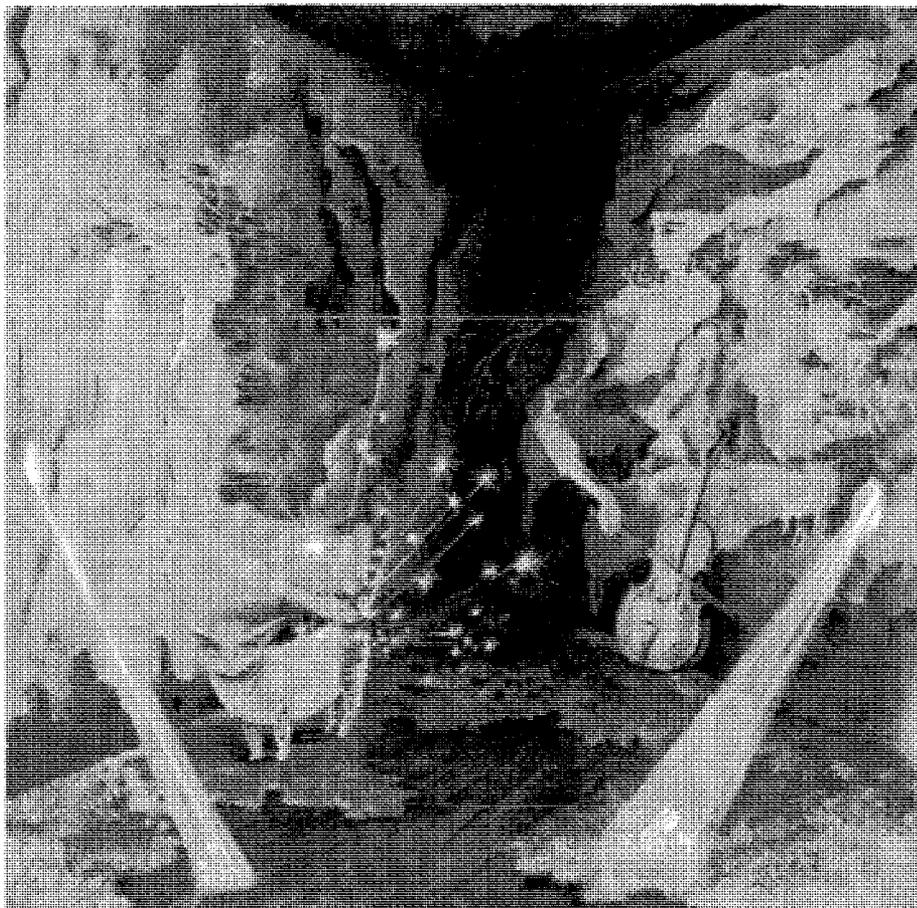


Figure 2. *Energía cósmica*

Analyses of musical discourse emphasize how music raises questions about power insofar as music's ubiquitous presence "embodies relations between the private and the public and acts to shape individual human subjects as well as classes of subjects" (Leppert 1993, 18). It can also work as a metaphor for the delineation of socio-cultural roles (Leppert 1993, 7). The allusion in *Energía cósmica* to domesticity, a space apparently reserved for women, is complemented by the female figures who merge with or emerge from the wallpaper as if forming part of the very materiality of the room. Although this association is connected to an enclosure, an almost claustrophobic cultural confinement of women to the home, Varo's magical musical performativity is here linked to the permeable boundary between the blurred female figure performing music and the neglected room environment; it is also linked, as previously suggested, to the occult universe which unifies the world into a wholeness as reflected through the conductive energy of the cosmic rays. Moreover, in discussing the ideology of the domestic, Lawrence Kramer suggests that the interior of the home can be a "safe haven" outside the rationalized world mirroring its non-material counterpart in the interior of the subject. The unrationalized inner world is thus posited against the rationalized one (Kramer 1998, 29). Viewed in this way, *Energía cósmica* allows for a reevaluation of the domestic space in a less dichotomous manner, where the binarism public/private is problematized in two ways: first, by highlighting the privileged knowledge of women as a source of inner, mysterious, and natural powers of creation and, secondly, by inviting us to visualize an inti-

mate private space where gender boundaries have been problematized and where the demands of obedience to a higher authority have also been neutralized, becoming here inoperative (see Kramer 1998, 29). Thus, binarism here dissolves into a non-real, yet (semantically) essentialized gender (dis)order.

The mark of gender (dis)order becomes apparent through the figure of the androgyne depicted in Varo's paintings. Both *Música solar* (figure 3) and *El flautista* (figure 4) present an androgyne as a performer of music. While the figure of the androgyne, according to Chadwick, served male surrealist artists as a metaphor to absorb the image of woman into their own image, women surrealist artists opted to underscore the "biological and spiritual forces that distinguish woman's experience from that of man, and that place her in direct contact with the magic powers of nature" (1997, 182). The androgyne can function here as a figure that works through a possible liberating escape from the culturally-enforced "laws" of gender. *Música solar* is framed within the essentialized natural environment of a forest, also often a site of feminine sexuality in the Freudian symbolic economy. The main figure, placed in the foreground, plays music from imaginary strings formed by the sun's rays. Musical melodic threads emerge from the performance, spiralling upwards to envelop other creatures in the forest, while the sunlight, in combination with the creative power of this music, fertilizes the ground where a few flowers are growing. The cape of the androgyne is also made of forest vegetation, as if to emphasize the connectedness among the natural elements as well as the living creatures in the painting.

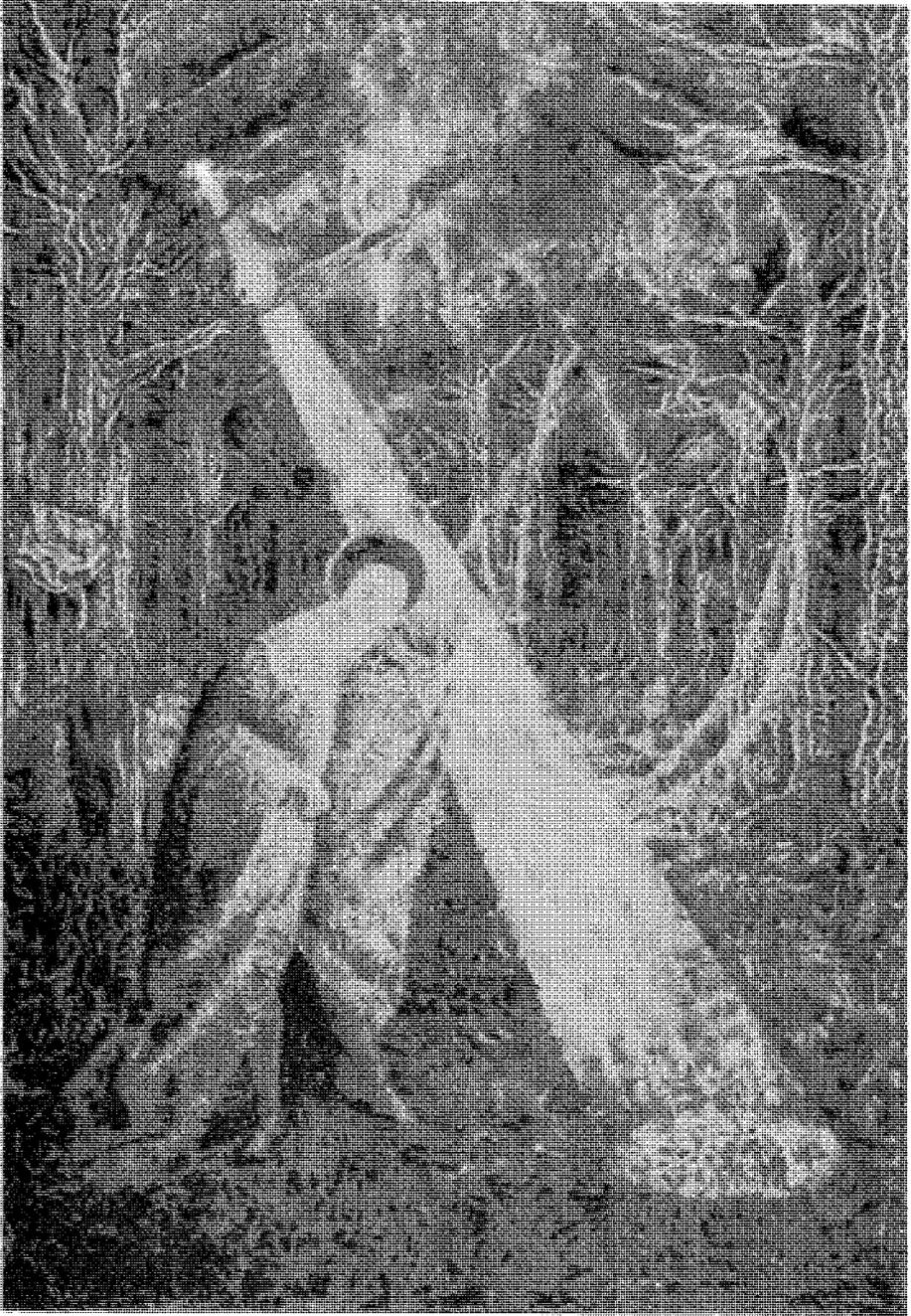


Figure 3. *Música solar*

Susanne Klengel has suggested that the threads of women's weaving in Varo's paintings symbolically work as existential metaphors for life (Klengel 1991, 27). Likewise, the musical melodic threads in *Música solar* function as a lifeline to the natural world from the source of the liberating creative power of the androgyne. Furthermore, this power of the androgyne endorses historical-cultural perceptions about the underlying nature of creativity; Ian Biddle has suggested that European culture has tended to assume that there is something "unmasculine" about creativity that has been "located dangerously close to a kind of 'mother action' and seemed to abandon the artist to an isolated space that was dangerously homologous to the feminine realm of the private (morbid) space" (Biddle 1999, 124). The androgyne's music performance here can thus be associated with this feminized space, whose quality lies in its interconnectedness with the cycles of nature, which in turn are associated with the cycles of the feminine. The androgynous figure here can be read as an enactor of cycles that underpin the collapse of binarisms.

El flautista also presents an androgynous being placed in an oneiric landscape playing the flute, an instrument from which a musical melody is magically rebuilding, out of fossils, a symbolic octagonal building. The geometrical octagon depicted by Varo represents an intermediate stage between the square and the circle. The square, according to Carl Jung's harmonic geometry, is the stage of man who has not reached final perfection, while the circle is man's final state of perfection. The tower could also be said to represent the universe divided into three levels corre-

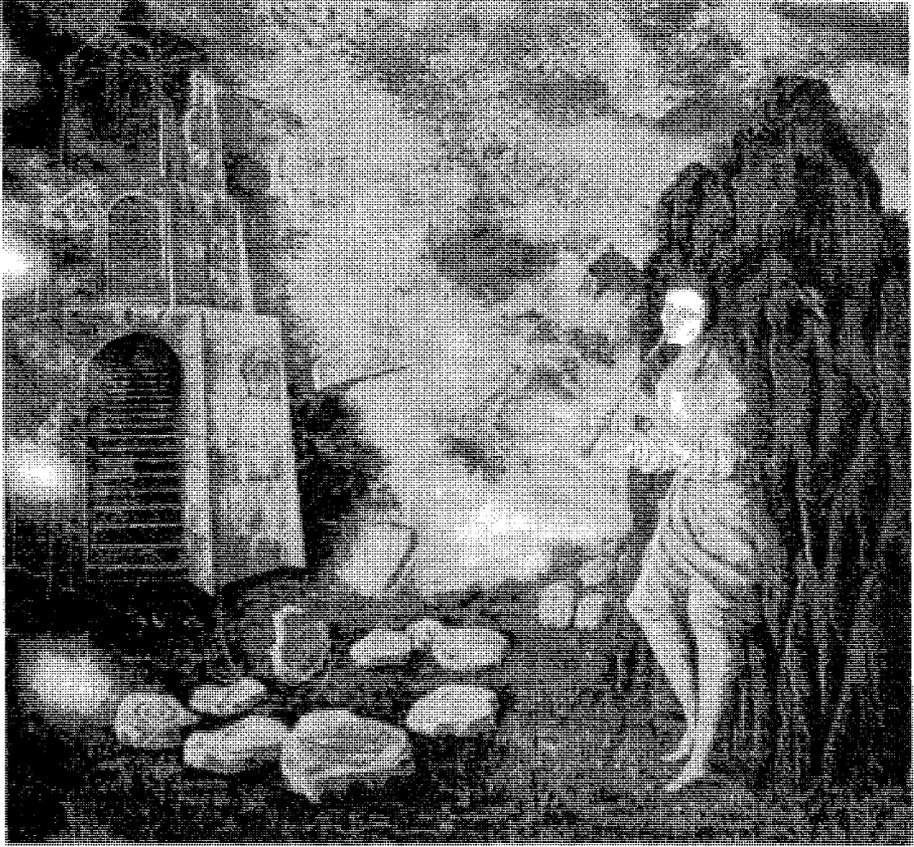


Figure 4. *El flautista*

sponding to the elemental, celestial and intellectual world (see Beatriz Varo 1990, 109). The androgyne here is partly identified with the natural world as if she/he were either emerging from or forming part of an essentialized natural environment. The androgynous musical performance is constructing this edifice out of remnants from the past. Thus music here provides the connecting line between time and space, linking it, as in *Música solar*, with the natural world as well as the past. The androgyne, being the focal point in this performance, acts as a marker of a fascination with cultural ambivalence. She/he is the Other—neither man nor woman, but possessing the privileged knowledge to create and unify the world across time and space into a wholeness. Leppert's discussion of the historical understanding of time and space points to the problematization of space and time as central to the formation of the modern world and explains how, in early modern times, cycle was disappearing in favor of vector (1993, 21-22). Categories such as time and space, he continues, have become the dimensions through which human dynamism and agency operate, having given rise in the process to conceptions of the human individual. Hence, the conception of life as a cycle, closely associated with women, nature, and pre-modern times, gave way to the conception of vector, linked to linearity and men's symbolic order, as represented in a post-Enlightenment rationalized thinking. The co-presence of these topoi (time and space) in Varo's gothic depictions, together with the fluidity of gender representation through the androgyne, is suggestive of a reversal of vector into cycle, a return to an archaic feminine order and knowledge in which the

non-real works as a projection of an idealized and uncanny social order.

The final picture in my analysis, *Vuelo mágico* (figure 5), contains most of the elements previously discussed. Here, Varo depicts a female figure covered in drapery playing music in the left hand corner of the painting. Her musical instrument, a hurdy-gurdy, releases melodic threads that rise in the air to hold, in a kite-like manner, a second smaller female figure who spreads her winged arms in flight. Again, the musical threads possess a connecting value, this time not with the cosmos or the universe, but with another woman. The flying figure clearly resembles a bird, a creature charged with symbolism in Varo's *œuvre*. Birds were also present in *Armonía* and *Musica solar* and are usually considered in Varo's world to be spiritual collaborators with humans. The presence of a small wheelbarrow on the right-hand side of the painting in addition to the hurdy-gurdy, a musical instrument for street or popular music, suggests that the sitting woman may be an itinerant player, jongleur or vagabond. Analyzing the figure of the jongleur, Jacques Attali writes that, in pre-modern times, musicians and entertainers, jongleurs and troubadours, had no fixed employment and moved from place to place offering their services, becoming highly disreputable figures akin to vagabonds or highwaymen. As such, they were considered dangerous and irrational, embodying music and the spectacle of the body. The precapitalist world, maintains Attali, was characterized by its polyphony and was "a world of circulation in which music in daily life was inseparable from lived time" (Attali 1985, 14). What we see in Varo's *Vuelo*

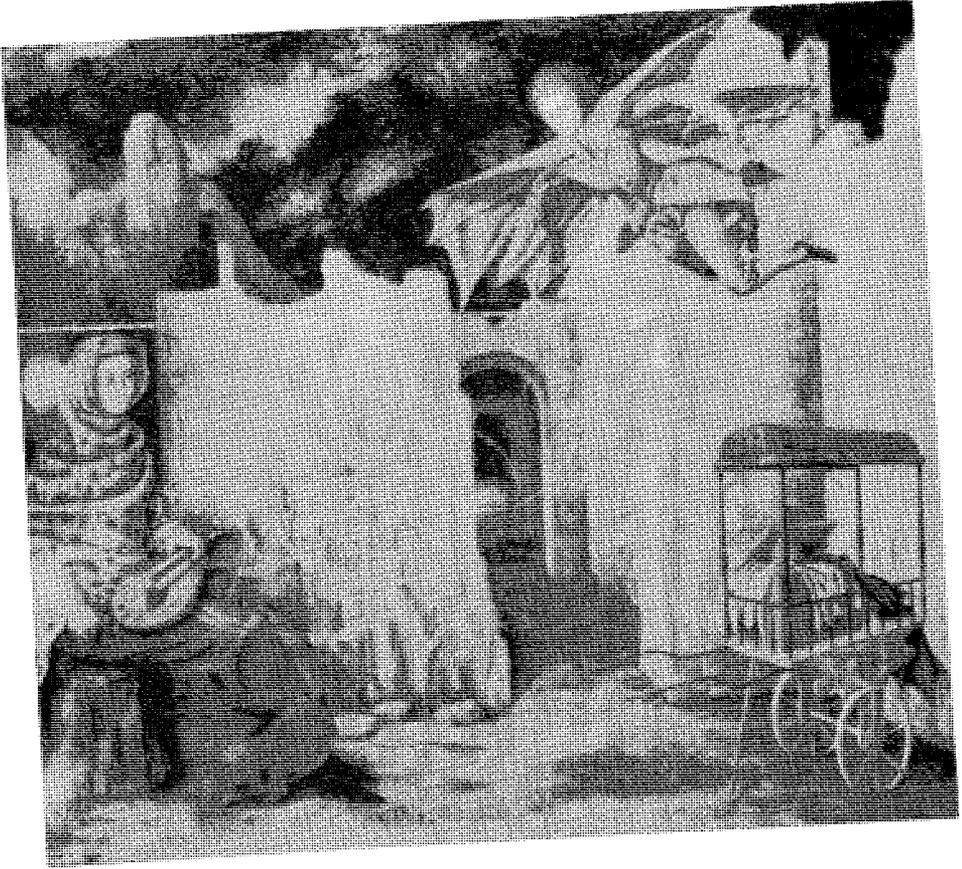


Figure 5. *Vuelo mágico*

mágico is an appropriation of both the archaic, pre-modern world and the figure of the jongleur, who is here a woman instead of a man.

Varo reworks the jongleur by taking his/her social role as a circulator of music and appropriating it to feminine ends. The social function of music as a means of social cohesion and the status quo is refigured in a feminine subversion. The co-presence of the winged woman joined to the jongleur by the musical thread resonates with Attali's idea of music being inseparable in daily life from lived time; the difference here is that, in this depiction, music appears to be the physically inseparable connecting line, the umbilical chord, as it were, from one woman to another. As the jongleur woman is associated with the realm of the irrational, she is the dangerous body that contains the magical and the occult powers of music, whereas the woman flying, dressed in a suit and seemingly freed from archaic pursuits, signals toward the public realm, embodying symbolically the representation of a world as it would be desired (from a feminist stance). From this vantage point, the visual imagery serves somewhat as a comment on an absence, since this cultural link only denotes in Varo the projection of an idealized world, depicted through gothic elements and fantastical iconography.

The dynamics in the painting can be read in terms of Kristeva's conceptualization of the semiotic and the symbolic, which represent for her two inseparable modalities within the signifying process and two aspects or stages in the process of the subject. Although the semiotic is associated in Kristeva's writings with the maternal and the pre-linguistic, her the-

orization does not seem to imply a gender differentiation grounded in embodied subjects, but, rather, it is understood as a pre-gendered space posited nonetheless (and dichotomously) as feminine and maternal. In psychoanalysis, the semiotic is associated with the state of infancy prior to entering the symbolic order or law of the father. Perhaps the best way to understand the dichotomous nature of this “pre-gendered” space is to think of it from a specifically feminist perspective, which finds in the pre-symbolic a place where femininity can enter into a kind of free play, unencumbered by the burden of masculine symbolization. Within the semiotic, Kristeva generates the imagery of the chora and the centrality of the mother’s body where the subject is both generated and negated in a process of changes and stases called “a negativity” (Payne 1993, 169). The semiotic, generated within a feminine space, has the potential to bring in a marginal experience of the subject which would otherwise be inexpressible, and it is thus possible within this space to investigate in depth the agency of artistic creativity vis-à-vis the signifying process. On the other hand, the symbolic is defined in Kristeva’s theory as “a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of biological (including sexual) differences and concrete historical family structures” (Payne 1993, 167). Kristeva describes how the child must split himself from his mother in order to attain his sexual identity within the symbolic and hence the necessity to abject the mother in order to become autonomous. The child daughter, however, does not split from her mother in order to unify herself and form her sexual identity, but

must agree to lose or metaphorically “kill” the mother through a negation process in order to lose her and thus to enter properly into the symbolic (and language) (Oliver 1993, 61-62).

The dynamics of Varo’s *Vuelo mágico* direct us symbolically to a recovery of a formal relation to the semiotic: the woman vagabond, representing the occult and the pre-rational, is located within the semiotic as well as the private space of the domestic. This aspect is emphasized in the painting by the vagabond’s position within the walls of a home that is in ruins and abandoned. She is the semiotic mother’s body, whereas the winged woman rising above the walls of the building can be interpreted as an icon of the symbolic, as the daughter crossing the boundary from the semiotic to the symbolic order. This connection can be further explained by Kristeva’s theory of the relationship between the semiotic mother and the semiotic negativity of the child (daughter), for whom the primal repression is the semiotic identification with the mother’s body. The child daughter encounters the paradox of not being able to get rid of the semiotic maternal body and carries it locked in her psyche. Within psychoanalysis, the construction of female sexual identity requires the daughter to abandon the mother as a love object for the father. The way to turn the maternal body (or the Thing) into an object of desire is, among other things, through analysis. The mother/daughter separation, in Kristeva’s words, is then “no longer a threat of disintegration but a stepping stone toward some other” (Oliver 1993, 63).⁴

From this perspective, a closer reading of the female figures in Varo’s *Vuelo mágico* would take us to

4. Kristeva quoted in Oliver. I am following here Oliver’s account of Kristeva’s conceptualization of the abject mother. See Oliver 1993.

the instance of semiotic negativity (of the primary dyad between the mother and child), whereby the jongleur mother needs to be abjected by the winged daughter; still, the daughter strangely remains attached through the musical cords to the semiotic and archaic mother and thus the pre-rational. The illustration echoes the dangerous boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic, although this danger is reconceptualized by Varo. The winged woman, looking at the other in compliance, seems to be challenging the fear of abjection, of abjecting the mother under the threat of her own abjection. Furthermore, both women seem to master, in a strange way, the perturbation of the irrational, appearing reassured and unconcerned in an empowering gesture full of new meanings. Music is, in *Vuelo mágico*, the umbilical cord in this correlation, relocated figuratively in the space where the semiotic and the symbolic collapse, in the realm of experimentation. Performed by the woman jongleur, music incarnates a semiotic archaic feminine knowledge, which delineates the law before the symbolic law, the occult powers of ancient knowledge prior to rational knowledge; it materializes here as a dangerous subversive presence, and it would therefore seem to operate as a kind of “liberating” abjection.

To conclude, I have tried, through a recuperative reading, to show how Varo’s vivid symbolism plays with the non-real and the fantastic in order to re-appropriate and transfigure reality into an idealized and uncanny social and gender order, and also to transform, through the musical trope, an archaic subversion into a contemporary, feminine subversion.

Leppert suggests that human sight can be the problematizing agent of “musical” silence, and that “musical discourse operates even in silence...you have to be there and to “see” the silence to know that what was happening was nonmusically musical” (1993, 17). Varo’s highly personalized surreal world richly engages with the gothic and the magical in order to de-stabilize gender binarism through the categories of time and space and the figure of the androgyne. Thus, imaginary space and time (linked to music) enables a visualization of places where the boundaries of gender are disturbingly subverted in a fictitious terrain/space, inviting an interpretation which resonates with notions of the post-modern. Music, which is associated with a magical pre-rational feminine knowledge, is placed in a realm of dangerous experimentation, between a semiotic occult knowledge and a symbolic, patriarchal, and rationalist knowledge. Yet, even more significant in Varo’s *œuvre* is her surrealist tendency to estrange and denaturalize deeply embedded cultural tropes. Surrealism plays not with realistic narratives but with dislocated, dream-like narratives. Even though cultural location here is less localized than in other modes of cultural production, her mode of critique, the free association of tropes, is still ideologically meaningful and culturally subversive. In other words, Varo denaturalizes these misogynistic tropes in order to critique them, and music is a powerful operator in this project.

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