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This essay is an introduction into exploring philosophical and anthropological theming of spiritual beliefs, relying on the study of metaphysical human control in order to understand the leading realms of matriarchy. This being in relation to my own spiritualistic deliberation, encompassed with other concepts rehashed from artists such as Remedios Varo to thinkers such as Simone De Beauvoir. These analyses of spirituality derive from my past experiences of the occult, femininity and fascination of the scientific and holistic standpoints of human behaviour. I am curious in the sense of human beliefs forming throughout the centuries, the warfare of destruction and the complexity of what religion and spirituality has come to in contemporary culture. Presenting information based on historical context to apprehend the influence of modern civilisation will be sought out throughout this essay.

The first key word being Matriarchy, and how the development of the matriarchy within social-politics has changed the way we view artistic material, specifically gender based material. Then with the introduction of historical accounts can we then challenge the influence of the patriarchal led social orders versus the matriarchal influence within the arts. All while exploring how women depict experiences, politics and how that might influence our own way of thinking. Matriarchy can be described as social systems that have higher positions of power and privilege held by women, extending to socio and political climates such as property control and moral authority. Feminism has some matriarchal aspects that this essay will discuss; mainly what is determined as ‘valuable’ art in contrast to what is just pure labor, surprise surprise, the cultural production of men was deemed ‘high art’ whilst what many women produced was simply considered ‘craft’ to many individuals. Thus, this topic will cover mainly the historical aspects of what came to develop what we now know as the contemporary art world, how women rebelled against this exclusion of the female presence and how this ties in with all of my chosen topics. This will then be followed up with

accounts of witchcraft and shamanism relations. It is with my belief that all three keywords correspond within each other, and without the affiliation of women I doubt the contemporary world like we know today would be the same.

Matriarchy

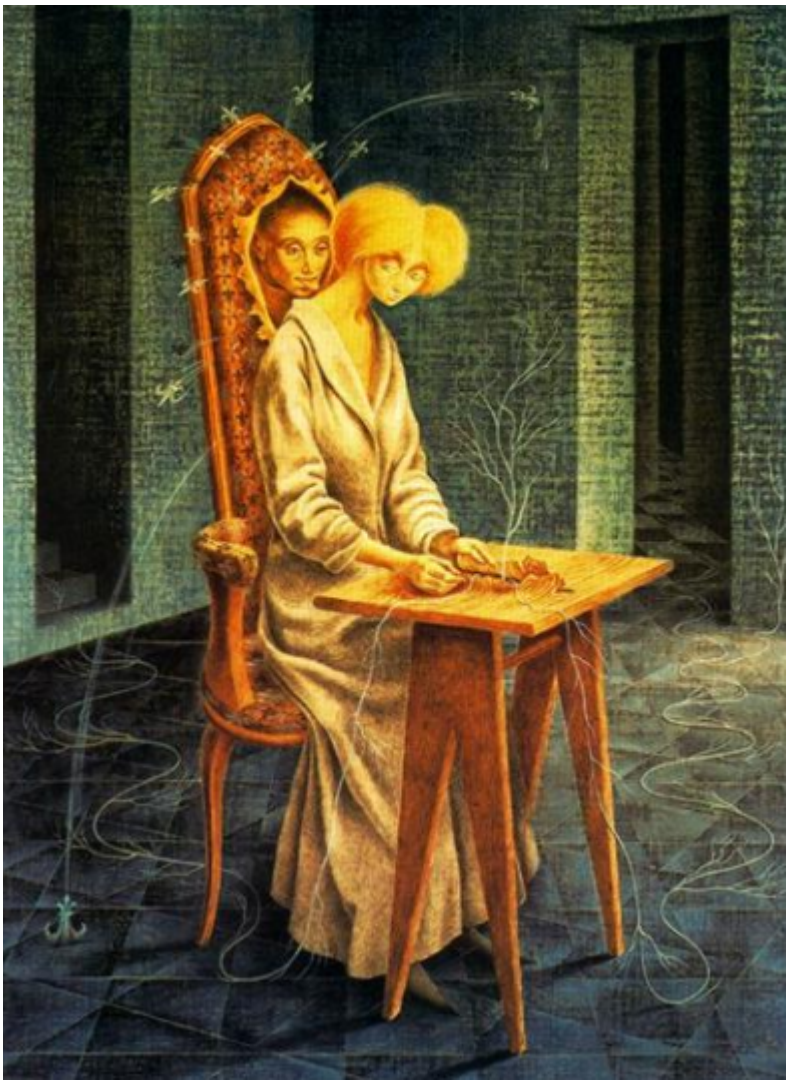

Figure 1: Remedios Varo, 1959

We often forget how far we've come for women to have the same roles as men, the numerous protests, judiciary trials and even the loss of life. Further understanding of eco-feminism being one of the main strands for ecology when discussing spiritual and religious terms. Neopaganism and eco-feminism share the same values, being that women's

alleged connection to nature will thus take over dominance and exploitation; enabling women to rise to higher influential positions thanks to theosophy. It is with my opinion that women may naturally feel more relatable to matriarchal/feminist based art, rather than men; as many paintings are based on experiences, or political ideas that only those who have suffered the weight of the exclusion can only understand. Many influential female painters have their own ideologies and interpretations of what those experiences are and by discussing them here will hopefully expand the further understanding of why feminist art is widely unique. Thinker, Simone De Beauvoir argues within her book The Second Sex, that gender is not innate but socially constructed, stating that *'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'* (de Beauvoir, 1953). Suggesting that society shapes women's identities through cultural norms and expectations. Which is why many of these artworks exist. Many of the hard-hitting paintings that I've encountered were created by women, therefore, why remove the more emotional-intelligent sex from the picture? The painting above was created by artist Remedios Varo, a Spanish painter who fled to Mexico to escape WWII. Varo explored feminine identity and inner transformation,often centering women in her paintings. Varo as well, also challenged spirituality within her work, emphasising that women are active seekers of knowledge and not passive individuals. The artwork above titled *Disturbing Presence (1959) ,* what we can say about the painting is entirely up to the viewer, much like neopaganism religions; the practice relies on the believers themselves, not anyone else. But what we can suggest is what we can see first and foremost, 'the presence' could suggest the women's inner fears or anxieties, turning the psychological torment into physical pain; humorously the face of the torment, is that of a man. So on, so forth.

Being most important however, is that of the female nude body. In institutions previously to the late 1800s, women were prohibited to attend prestigious academies like the Royal Academy to pursue art like men. This included having inability to paint the female nude body themselves, women were only permitted to commit to material led art, copying other artworks or plaster. However, 19th century artist Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun was one of the first women to succeed without full access to the female body. The exclusion of women from

studying the nude represents one of the most extreme cases of patriarchal controls, as it denied women access to their own bodily knowledge while it allowed men to dominate its representation. This reinforced the system where women were objectified rather than empowered as creators. Which explains why many masculine characters were painted as noble men, kings, wealth and fortune; whereas women were painted as aesthetics, entertainment because nothing is more pleasing to look at than the naked female body? Understanding the patriarchal controls makes one aware of the surroundings within a female painting more, even if the painting captures a lonesome nude woman, there's always a man present, the painter.

Figure 2, Paula Modersohn-Baker, Woman With Child On Her Arm, 1906

The figure above is a painting by a German artist Paula Modersohn-Baker. *Woman With Child On Her Arm*, 1906, oil on canvas. Modersohn-Baker, much like Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun made headways for controversial female artist representation, frequently challenging male centered artistic norms. In Modersohn-Baker's own way, she was one of the first to paint nude women in her own perspective, from life; this also included painting pregnant women which too were a taboo topic from this era. Within Linda Nochlin's book *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* Nochlin argues that female artists were historically excluded from essential training, writing that 'deprived of [the nude model] meant, in effect, to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art works' (Nochlin, 1971).

On par with the addition of gender affiliation, 17th century artist Michaelina Wautier dedicated her entire artistic career to subjects that were usually reserved for men. Despite all this Wautier's name lamentably fell short and ironically, her paintings apocryphal to male centered contemporaries. Only in recent years has Wautier resurfaced into a pioneering artist, not negligible for her multiplicity and technical brilliance.

What distinguishes Michealina Wautier as an exceptional artist, is her mastery of the body and her ability to surpass many masculine artists with her range of work . As mentioned women were not permitted to attend such opportunities like life drawing, especially when a male model is present. Yet, her depictions of various male body types,skin, age etc within *The Triumph Of Bacchus* marks her unprecedented talent in sensitivity and command. Much of the discretion within a painting of this scale, was the inability of women to be able to create such a piece; making Wautier's appearance of her self-portrait, gazing directly at the viewer much more disenthralling.

Wautier's paintings of femininity are widely devoid of desire and moral judgement, to which, were commonly found in most female representation during this time; even her portrayal of young men and children radiate a sense of sensitivity, vulnerability and warmth, as opposed to many of the lack lustre made by other artists. Could Wautier's representations of intimate, sensitive and individual lives be a clear indication of the female gaze?65

Figure 3, Michaelina Wautier, The Triumph of Bacchus, 1655-59

This framework highlights the significance of pushing the boundaries of female representation and asserting control in a dominion where a specific gender was permitted. It can be undeniably said that without the reinforcement of female enactment and interpretation that the state of the arts in a contemporary society, would be most likely in a repression of diversity. The female body has always been a center of religion, politics and human rights; with the uprising of gender and sexuality rights, protests, and the change to contemporary art from the 70s, the female body has always been a target for control, meaning and influence; good or bad.

With disbelief, the female body is still a burden of control today. Whereas, in terms of the art education system, it became a site for feminist reclamation transforming objectification into autonomy. A tool for expression and empowerment rather than oppression.

Similarly, in Welsh mythical folklore, a story that follows the otherworld known as Annwn. Here is a matriarchal led society, males and masculine energy exist but only to bring balance to the energies surrounding the world. Women are born leaders and feminine divinity being the highest power within Annwn, even the king doesn't have higher authority than the Goddesses Rhiannon, Arianrhod, Blodeuwedd, Cerridwed and Modron. It is believed that the goddesses are higher forces and are representations of power and ambiguity. So in a way, contemporary artists reclaiming the authoritative, complex female bodies are closer in spirit to those in Annwnn. In regards to my own practice, I dedicate my work based on the repercussions that women face all over the world, politics, war, and representation which were recast to fit a narrative. This holds importance to me, as being self sufficient, learning various perspectives of time, interpretations and the various voices of individuals.

Witchcraft

Witchcraft has long been associated with the use of supernatural powers, ritual practices and esoteric knowledge,much like those in Annwn, however the practice of Witchcraft was positioned as something threatening by dominant religions or social institutions. Historically, accusations of witchcraft were used to control women, particularly towards those who 'defied' social norms or practised independent healing. Norman Cohen further explains how the stereotype of witches (devil worshipping women) was not based solidarity on real practices, but those constructed by Medieval and early-modern authorities; instead of discovering a true cult, judges and theodorians created a myth that those who were accused were made easy to confess to. Cohn argued that the image of the Satanic witch was later invented by authorities, noting that 'Nowhere, in the surviving books of magic, is there a hint of Satanism.' (Cohn, p. 148, 1975)

Witchcraft has an extensive and complex relationship with art and the matriarchy, especially when viewed through the lens of gender, power, equality and ideas surrounding the matriarchy. But in a way, it's less about ‘magic’ but more on symbolism, transforming a historically misogynistic symbol used to restrict and punish female autonomy into a contemporary icon of resistance. This revolution of female embrace allows artists to challenge patriarchal standpoints and narratives to recover suppressed knowledge and feminine power.

In early modern Europe (15th-17th century) witchcraft was an inexplicably feminine form to practice; suggesting that these women were tortured and murdered by the patriarchy because it was something that the men couldn't suppress, ‘because of fearful bounding at this time in this country of these detestable slaves of the devil, the witches or enchanters’ (King James, 1597). From the late 20th century, artists like W.I.T.C.H (1968) began reclaiming the word witch as a feminist symbol; the witch being a figure against patriarchy, capitalism and institutional control. Resulting in the distribution of spiritualistic art, made recognisable by the works of Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and thinkers/writers Mona Chollet and Silvia Federici. Spiritual art although follows themes of abstract or religious art, it is uniquely defined as a practice by its ability to engage with transcendental themes and/or personal spiritual beliefs. However, when spiritualistic paintings first appeared, many were to mock, to create propaganda or threaten women, particularly. As many images of witches created by men were hags, grotesque women who kidnapped and murdered children. It's important to note that women have always been the centre of religious repentance, as Federici exclaims that the witch hunts were ‘a war against women’ (Federici, p.186, 2021) stating that the trials were something more than just blasphemy. Marjorie Cameron’s work figuratively represents her work as an occultist. In contrast to artists like Leonora Carrington who portrayed mystical depictions of whimsical spiritual worlds, Cameron reprised the role of the witch using her art as a ritual to express her desire for female divinity, sexuality as a sacred symbol, transformation and mysticism beyond rational control.

Figure 4, The Shining Star, Loucifer!, Marjorie Cameron.

If we fail to recognise empowering symbolism, cultural imagination continues to restrict women. If society did not grasp the feminist reclamation of the witch, the historical pattern of marginalising and demonising women would likely continue; undermining the ability of women to create, desire and be autonomous much like their counterpartner, the man. Practices of medicine, midwifery and herbalism could remain dismissed and the contemporary art world could possibly have fewer female painters today. Obviously women have the ability now to create work from external factors, but without the reclaiming of the witch would we have the same autonomy for our bodies like we do now?

Women who resist or reinvent the social order imposed upon them have frequently been recast as villains with cultural narratives. Across myth, literature and visual culture, figures who are prescribed gender roles are often depicted as monstrous. For example, the myth of Medusa exemplifies this pattern, once a victim, transformed into horror, her image weaponised and reinforces the consequence of female autonomy. Thus, revealing more of the anxieties of those invested in maintaining patriarchal control. By examining how these stories are perpetuated, it becomes clear how the villainisation of non-conforming women functions as cultural mechanisms of discipline, conditioning both historical and contemporary understandings of gender, power and morality.

Shamanism

Much like witchcraft, Shamanism is the practice of one's spiritual beliefs. However, the main difference between those who practice Shamanism and those who practice Witchcraft is focused solely on the origins and the role of both practices. Being one of the oldest practices of spiritual belief in humanity, 'The study of Shamanism has been revitalised by multidisciplinary interest in states of consciousness and mechanisms of therapy…alternative forms of spirituality' (Atkinson, p. 307, 1992)

Shamanism is the indigenous practice of spirit mediators and healers; while in contrast, Witchcraft being the practice of ritualistic, energy workers who, importantly, was created by culture. But, it is widely regarded that those who are Shamans, the label 'witch' can be taken as offensive, purely because of the history regarding the colonisation of Shamanic practices by the Christian church. Nevertheless, with the recent modern surges of Shamanism being the most practised religion by individuals, many take on the 'witch' techniques, and vice versa. As proposed by thinker Carlo Ginzberg who linked the European witch beliefs to ancient fertility cults and shamanic traditions. Arguing that witchcraft accusations often targeted popular religious practices like shamanism that were obstructed by the state, like Norman Cohen's theory.

In Ginzburg's case, he argues that early modern witchcraft beliefs may preserve elements of older folk traditions. In *Ecstasies*, further links to Shamanic practices suggest cultural origins, much like Witchcraft. Maintaining that these core beliefs were then later distorted by authorities, creating the satanic loving witch stereotype.

Evidently, those with shamanic beliefs are more likely to be recognised as mediators between worlds and influenced by roles such as midwives and healers which are interpreted as actions of spiritual figures. Thus, have obligations that specify care, knowledge and personal control; all of which biologically, women obtain.

With all this being said, could it be suggested that those accused of practising ‘witchcraft’ were actually shamans? Possibly.

Shamanism today is widely different as opposed to historical shamanism. With the upscale of the psychedelic drug use by the hippie movement in the 60s, more ‘visionary art’ was born. Artists Alex and Allyson Grey’s Chapel of the Sacred Mirrors, a non-denominational temple transported from Chelsea to New York (2009); inspired by their recreational use of psychedelic drugs.

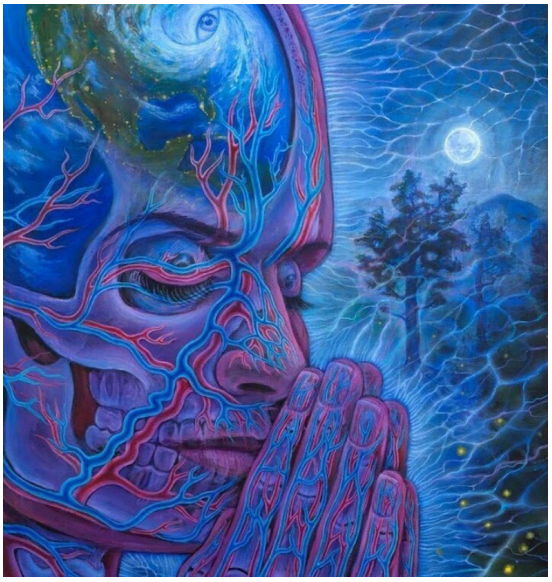

Figure 5, Alex Grey, 2022

Thackara (2017) discusses ‘recent development demonstrates not only a deep disillusionment with the Western way of life, but a search for a path forward examining tradition in order to reimagine our world’. In examination with shamanism and its effects on the spiritual world versus contemporary art.

With the knowledge of how these experiences developed over time, especially with the modern facet.

By exploring these three titles, I’ve begun to understand how they interconnect with lived experience, belief systems and social constructs. Looking at their historical development

reveals the complexity of how our perspectives are shaped today, and how artists engage with feminine and spiritual ideas that feel authentic and personal.

The role of female artists is especially significant without their resistance to traditional limitations. The relationship between femininity and spirituality also appears deeply rooted, reflected in folklore and recurring ideas of feminine divinity across cultures.

This raises important questions, would spirituality look the same without female representation? And why do so many women gravitate toward spiritual and abstract forms of expression?

With all this being said, a standing question that I have decided on for my dissertation, in relation to these topics. *How has the transformation of the 'witch' narrative, driven by female influence in the arts, contributed to changing understandings of spirituality?,*

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