The Praying Mantis in Man’s Club
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Keywords: Surrealism, the Paranoia Criticism, the Praying Mantis

Abstract. This paper aims to use the praying mantis as a starting point to explore Salvador Dali’s ambivalent treatments toward women. As we all know, the mantis is one of the Surrealists’ favorite metaphors for the devouring woman. In this paper, the author will borrow Salvador Dali’s paranoia-critical interpretation of Jean-Francois Millet’s Angelus and The Great Masturbator, to argue that the Surrealists tend to treat woman as an object of their masculine dreams of femininity, instead of as a subject and autonomous individual. The way the Surrealists treat the praying mantis can somehow reflect males’ ambivalence toward females. In Surrealism, the man’s club, women closet to male Surrealists like Dora Maar and Jacqueline Lamba are subjects in Picasso and Breton’s masterpieces, but only serve as the stimulators for their imagination to dream in their masculine dream. It is pathetic that the concept of “woman” has always been objectified by male needs.

1. Introduction

Surrealism is a man’s club. Their shared ambivalent attitude towards women dates back to 19th image of femme fatale, “the voracious and devouring woman who caused man’s fall from grace” [1]. The praying mantis is one of their favorite metaphors for the devouring woman. The mantis’ given prefix of “praying” has to do with the visual association with praying, holding their front legs together before chests when waiting for the prey. What makes the Surrealists fascinated with the praying mantis is their distinctive sexual and mating rite, in which the female mantis will eat the male mantis after coitus. So someone would argue that the prefix should be “preying” instead of “praying”. Andre Breton and Paul Eluard even kept mantises at their homes and invited others to observe this cannibalistic mating ritual. For Eluard, he argued that this brutal custom projects certain ideal relationship, which is “diminishing the male and magnifying the female” and taking over the absolute superiority [1].

In addition, of the Surrealists, Andre Masson can be considered as the one who is the most interested in exploring the image of the praying mantis. His fascination with the praying mantis somehow carried forward his preoccupation with the turbulent cosmos of the insect world and the violence beneath. In his paintings, he kept inviting the viewer to look into the miniature cosmos, to explore the linkage between death and eroticism [2]. Later, Masson even associated the praying mantis with the legendary Babylonia queen, with the caption of “Semiramis: Ishtar, Earth-Mother, Mantis. Minotaur: pre-natal life, bestial murder, death” [2]. It is not hard to see that the praying mantis is treated as the sexually aggressive queen, the cruel goddess, the embodiment of nature’s indifference, or in other words, the femme fatale. The mantis continues to be and compelling and intriguing image, and there are numerous representations by other artists like Max Ernst and Felix Labisse. The Surrealists develop an intoxicating desire to explore the praying mantis, the seductive but deadly force. On one hand, they depicted them as the alluring femme fatal who destroyed her lover after the mating, while on the other hand, they considered them as “a release from finite boundaries” since the sexual cannibalism suggested something divine and mimetic pantheism [2].

From what have mentioned above, we can see the way the Surrealists treat the praying mantis can somehow reflect males’ ambivalence toward females. Take Salvador Dali as an example, on one hand, Dali develops the fear and uncertain attitude toward women, but on the other hand he is fascinated with Gala, his future wife. In this essay, I’m going to use the praying mantis as a starting point to analyze Salvador Dali’s ambivalent treatments toward women by looking into his
paranoia-critical interpretation of Jean-Francois Millet’s *Angelus* and *The Great Masturbator*, and to further argue that the Surrealists treat woman as an object of desire, of their masculine dreams of femininity, instead of as a subject and the autonomous individual.

Figure 1. Jean-Francois Millet, *The Angelus* (1859), Oil on Canvas, 55.5cm x 66cm. Musee D’Orsay, Paris, France.

2. **Salvador Dali’s Paranoia-Criticism**

The Paranoia Criticism is the invention of Salvador Dali, which refers to “the irrational knowledge” based on a “delirium of interpretation” [3]. It can help one tap into the subconscious through systematic irrational thought and a self-induced paranoid state. The function of this critical activity is to “allow the reappearance of what had only been perceived before at the periphery of our sight, in fact, what had been repressed” [3]. Compared with dreaming, which also “constitutes a concealed fulfillment of a repressed wish”, paranoiac-critical activity is “a less concealed attempt to actualize or decipher what had been culturally repressed” [3]. Following the inducement of paranoid state, one can get the rid of previous knowledge and understanding of the world and reality, perceiving the world in different, fresh and more unique manners. It is neither critical nor paranoiac thinking, but a daydream-like way of searching for meaning and looking at the world and reality around. In other words, the paranoiac delirium of interpretation associates different realities by exploring them irrationally and forms a systematic structure. And in this context, these elements form the new relationships.

Figure 2. Salvador Dali, *The Great Masturbator* (1929), Oil on Canvas, 110cm x 250cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Dali’s paranoia-critical activity is an organizing force of objective chance. Breton once defines objective chance as “unexplained coincidences that seem to answer the individual’s needs” [4]. Dali himself confesses the coincidences do play a significant role in his elaboration of the paranoiac-critical interpretation in Millet’s *Angelus*. However, compared with Breton’s notion, Dali tends to consider “the manifestations of objective chance on a more sustained level” [4]. In Dali’s
surrealistic world, woman becomes cannibalistic ruler like praying mantis, who redeems man and devours him at the same time while the man becomes small or even invisible in the matriarchy. In his associative process, it is the spontaneous memory such as the fault memory that his mother sucking his penis or the mantis his girl cousin put on his neck gives rise to the irrational interpretation, reversing the power relationship in reality and resolving contradictions. It is himself who stands at the center, “with the childhood memory of books he had read or that had been read to him, his infantile sexual theories, the sexual terrors of his adolescence, his relationship with Gala” [3].

Dali’s basic aim of paranoia-criticism is to “systematize confusion”, that is to say, to create a new order or system in the external world, and thereby subvert the reality [4]. Paranoiac-critical interpretation can be seen as merely the climate which allows Dali to exercise his freedom, to tell and suggest, without disturbing by the dictates other than those of his own imagination.

3. The Incestuous Motherly Love

In his paranoiac-critical interpretation of Jean-Francois Millet’s Angelus, Salvador Dali recalls his spontaneous childhood memory and thus provokes his great fear of the incestuous motherly love. Dali was impressed by Millet’s Angelus when he was young, but later, he was struck by it because of the new visional message he found as an adult. Angelus, for him, symbolizes the ambivalent relationship between mother and son. In the painting, he argues that there are three stages after reconstructing. The first stage is the woman (the mother) adapts praying mantis’s pose as “a prelude to the cruel mating”, while the man (the son) arouses the sexual desire [5]. The second one is derived from the “erotic personality” of the wheelbarrow, suggesting the son “executes with his mother coitus from the rear” in an animal manner [5]. And the third stage refers to the devouring assault after the mating. It is very obvious that Dali adopts female mantis’s “spectral” attitude in the devouring mating ritual in the fantasy of woman. Dali identifies himself as the man (the son) in Angelus, who is dominated by the mother figure and “devoured” by her. Dali confesses that his fear comes from “the false memory of his mother sucking or devouring his penis”, revealing “the fear of being absorbed, annihilated and eaten by the mother” [5]. The cannibalistic form of maternal love is the source of hidden subject of the innocent religious painting Angelus. Dali interprets this act of incestuous and devouring motherly love as an act of violence, seeing through the innocent religious painting and decodes the woman’s will to destroy, which explains the man’s fear of love. Furthermore, this fear of being eaten by mother reflects Dali’s fear of being castrated and being swallowed up.

In addition to the praying mantis, Dali also identifies further metaphors, the type of a kangaroo, carrying her child in the pouch on her belly. The belly represents seemingly a primary nutrient that signifies life, an inescapable and safe enclosure, but, at the same time, a deadly peril and a prison. Dali thus associates it with the lait de Sainte Therese, “a poisonous plant which his mother warned him against” when he was a child [5]. However, this poisonous peril can also enhance male sexual potency. Again, the associations alternate between the poles of love and violence, life and death, dissolving contradictions and breaking the boundaries.

Furthermore, Dali associates the devouring motherly love with the act of pouring coffee. One day, he happened to see the coffee pot and cups had the Angelus images imprinted when he was travelling along the coast. And then he found that the symbolism of mother-son relationship is still inherent in the coffee service, thus identifying the pot filled with milky coffee as the mother, and the cup as the son. He thinks this act is “an act of symbolic functioning, with the disproportionate and brutal pairing of the coffee the mother pot and the cup, of the mother and the son, with the latter, as an outcome of the sexual act, being devoured by the mother” [5]. The mother pours her liquid into the cup (the son), so that her son is filled with mother’s liquid, that is to say, the substance. The son no longer contains things of his own, but serves as “an emanation of his mother”, who “liquidates” him [5]. The liquidated cup is another symbolism Dali finds to support his interpretation of Angelus’s incestuous mother myth. Dali associates Millet’s painting with the insect, the devouring motherly love, the kangaroo, and the coffee set. These deliriums of interpretation are
coming from spontaneous memories, which dissolves identities, reverses the power relationships that exist in reality.

4. The Grasshopper-Mantis at the Mouth

Dali’s paranoia-critical interpretation of Angelus is based on the devouring mating rituals of mantis, while the grasshopper-mantis appeared in monumental The Great Masturbator is noted because of its stiff phallic shape. In this painting, it is evident that there are the self-portrait face of a man, the face of a heroine-savior, and a grasshopper-mantis covered on man’s mouth. The head of a woman grows out of the nape of his neck; her mouth is positioned at the crotch of a standing man. It seems that the male phallus is neither erect nor exposed, and the woman’s mouth is shut and therefore no threatening. The “great masturbator”, is actually Dali himself, who develops the fear of being castrated by Gala, his future wife, or, the praying grasshopper-mantis. Dali painted this exactly before his marriage with Gala, who used to be the Russian poet Paul Eluard’s wife. Through painting, he expresses his anxiety and uncertainty about their future. In addition to the distressed fact that he took away friend’s wife, at the same time, he was afraid that Gala would do the same to him and swallow him up devouringly [6]. Neumann argues that a man holds fear for woman is immature, still regarding him as “a vulnerable phallus rather than an independent entity” [6]. In this case, masturbation thus provides as a substitution for man to escape from coitus, protecting himself from being castrated.

However, Dali develops the paradoxical attitude between the fear of being castrated and the strong sexual desire towards Gala, who is feared and loved at the same time. Dali’s interest in the gastronomic sex can somehow explain why the grasshopper-mantis is being situating at the mouth, “an erogenous zone which could suggest either a toothed, castrating vagina or the place of intake for comestible, erotic pleasures” [2]. While Gala, grows out of the nape of man’s neck, showing care with the male phallus with her mouth shutting up, “therefore (temporarily) not menacing and threatening” [6]. In this masturbatory dream, Gala’s proximity to the male genital is contradicted with the grasshopper-mantis’s attack on the mouth. In the painting, although the grasshopper-mantis with phallic shape represents Dali’s fear of being consumed by woman, the grasshopper-mantis, perched on the man’s mouth, looks like it is menaced to devour rather than being devoured. From the changing attitude towards praying mantis, one would argue that it seems that it is Gala who “exorcises” Dali’s demonic potential. The praying mantis not only represents as a source of fear and anxiety, but also as a possibility uniting with one’s objects of desire [2]. Dali has mentioned this relationship with one’s object in his essay, in which he holds the opinion that “the object tends to bring about our fusion with it and makes us pursue the formation of a unity with it” [6]. It can be used to explain Dali’s paradoxical attitude towards the praying mantis, the cannibalistic relationship and the fascination with Gala.

For Breton, Dali becomes “the incorporation of this repressed desire through his paranoiac-critical method, in which the masculine ego molds the images and realities of the external world to correspond to his own inner needs and desires” [6]. The Great Masturbator is such an example, which reveals Gala’s dual role as the stimulator of Dali’s repressed desire that excites the delirious process, and the linkage between internal and external reality. Like Gala, other women close to Surrealists such as Dora Maar and Jacqueline Lamba are beloved for the quality for their imaginations. They are well known for their roles as muses or models for the Surrealists, not because of their own values. People rarely know that the muse of Pablo Picasso Dora Maar is a photographer and poet, and the subject of Breton’s poems Jacqueline Lamba is a painter. It seems that surrealism is a man’s club, in which a group of males live in their masculine world, constructing “the male phantasms of the feminine” with eyes closed [6]. They treat woman as an object of desire, of their masculine dreams of femininity, instead of as an autonomous individual. These masculine dreams in man’s club reflect Surrealism’s misogyny or ambivalent attitude toward woman, with its emphasis on unconsciousness, dreams and automatic writing, etc. Therefore, it is not surprising why they would represent woman as the praying mantis, the mythical creature, and sometimes the mythical beast who aims to diminish the male and magnify the female.
5. Summary

In conclusion, Dali fears that the incestuous motherly love and the future wife will devour him like the praying mantis, but he also develops the fascination with Gala, the object he wants to unify with. And the praying mantis, as one of the favorite metaphors male Surrealists like to draw, is a female archetype of male appropriation in their male phantasms of the feminine. Dali finds that the woman adapts praying mantis’s pose as a prelude to the cruel mating, thus concluding that the Angelus symbolizes the incestuous mother-son relationship. While in The Great Masturbator, he replaces the praying mantis with the grasshopper-mantis, and puts it at the mouth of his self-portrait face. In the painting, Dali depicts Gala, his future wife as a heroine-savior, showing good care with the male phallus with her mouth shutting up. The contrast between the grasshopper-mantis and Gala makes Dali’s attitude towards women becomes more complicated. However, Gala, who is feared and loved at the same time, only serves as a muse and model for him. In Surrealism, the man’s club, Gala is not alone. Other women closet to male Surrealists like Dora Maar and Jacqueline Lamba are subjects in Picasso and Breton’s masterpieces, but only serve as the stimulators for their imagination to dream in their masculine dream. It is pathetic that the concept of “woman” has always been objectified by male needs. For males, the dominant of the patriarchal world, woman is only “man’s mediator with nature and the unconscious, femme-enfant, muse, source and object of man’s desire, embodiment of amour fou, and emblem of revolution” [7].

References