

*Glowing Like Phosphorus:
Dorothea Tanning and the Sedona Western*

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I like the work of Dorothea Tanning because the domain of the marvelous is her native country... —Max Ernst, 1944

People often speak of being profoundly affected by Sedona, the Arizonian red rock country where Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst decamped in 1946. Following the skyscraper urbanity of the claustrophobic New York art scene, Sedona offered restorative possibilities for the surrealist imagination as a faraway sanctuary. Patrick Waldberg described their rudimentary desert retreat as “a pioneer’s cabin such as one sees in westerns.”¹ Ernst was also fascinated by Native American artefacts, and in Sedona his penchant was well catered for in the collectable shape of colorful Hopi and Katsina figures and other ritual objects which decorated his living quarters with Tanning. After frequenting curio dealers during his time in New York, as well as purchasing souvenirs at a trading post near the Grand Canyon, he had built up a sizeable collection of indigenous art forms, such as Northern Pacific Kwakiutl totems.² Indeed, Ernst first came across the red rock country of the Southwest in 1941, on a return journey to the West Coast with his son Jimmy Ernst and third wife Peggy Guggenheim. As is now well-known, he coveted Sedona due to the landscape’s prophetic likeness to his earlier paintings such as *La ville entière* (*The Entire City*) (1934-37). Roland Penrose tells us: “the surroundings were astonishingly like the most fantastic landscapes Max had painted before ever seeing the Wild West. It was as though he had designed the great red mountains and canyons himself.”³ Jimmy Ernst has similarly written of his father’s astonishment when he first encountered Sedona, a form of *déjà vu*, having made almost identical representations of such landscapes several years before their first visit: “The mountain’s green treeline

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Fig. 1. Dorothea Tanning, *Self-Portrait*, 1944. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

abruptly gave way to a band of bright-red rock beneath a peak cap of sun-created pure magenta.”⁴ In May 1943, Tanning visited this extraordinary place for the first time, and following a severe bout of encephalitis in 1945, she and Ernst resolved to return more permanently to its warmer climate—Arizona was a desert state well suited to convalescence. Many of the artworks and one novella that she would produce there have come to define her oeuvre (Fig. 1). One fact that has gone largely unreported in the scholarship on Dorothea Tanning to date is that Hollywood was also on location, a stone’s throw from her desert homestead with Ernst.

This article seeks to explore the complex role that the Western genre played in the work produced by Tanning during her Sedona period, hypothesizing that film is much more important to feminist readings of her practice than previously understood. Hints of cowhand paraphernalia and those very geological vistas so coveted by the film industry can be glimpsed throughout her painting and thinking.

Although I am by no means the first to emphasize the cinematic aspects of her work, the Western genre specifically has been little explored in Surrealism let alone in Tanning's oeuvre. This is surprising given the proximity of the Sedona Western and the fact that Surrealism was undeniably drawn to the medium of film.⁵ I begin by introducing a revisionary methodology and intertextual framework, segueing into the topography of the area, before exploring Tanning's intersection with two select Sedona Westerns, *Angel and the Badman* (directed by James Edward Grant) and *Johnny Guitar* (directed by Nicholas Ray).

In order to rethink this period of "Western Surrealism" without rehearsing the "significant other" model of dialogues between famous artistic couples, I offer a more Tanning-centric perspective by making methodological use of narrative theorist Mieke Bal's notion of feminist "autotopographies," as an alternative, interpretive mode to the typical biographical reportage which tends to proliferate as the official narrative in the existing scholarship on Tanning.⁶ Autotopography draws on the realm of dreams and offers a more embodied form of criticality than a traditional art historical model of iconographical mimicry, source and influence.⁷ Here the Western is not merely a touchstone, rather an active intertext that Tanning performs and lives, interrogating the genre through the textures and luminous topographies of her work. As I will show, one element that Tanning's Surrealism can be seen to share with the Western is a distinctive and recurring white light, a filmic glow which Tanning often referred to as "phosphorus." Such an aura—or, more technically, spotlighting—is often used to emphasize femininity, yet Tanning can be seen to appropriate this glowing special effect for more empowering purposes. I use this glow in order to highlight the problem of gender representations found in key Westerns of the mid-twentieth century period, and in order to offer a more explosive approach. This autotopographical reading of Tanning's Sedona's period focuses on select paintings and her one novel *Chasm: A Weekend*, on which she worked from her Sedona period onwards, finally publishing it in 2004. If Bal's autotopography is "a spatial, local, and situational 'writing' of the self's life in visual art," then Tanning's *Chasm* can be read as a self-portrait, or, more precisely, a displaced autobiography.⁸

Surrealism and the Sedona Western

Sedona has long become known as a haven for avant-garde *émigrés*, such as the sculptors Bob and Mary Kittredge and the creative polymath Helen Frye.⁹ Illustrator Maxfield Parrish and animator Walt Disney also spent time in the area; the light and textures of the landscape profoundly impacted the aesthetics of their respective productions. In the 1970s, Orson Welles purchased property in Sedona, which suggests the growing appeal the landscape held for movie-makers. Although it was still a relatively small community when Tanning and Ernst moved there in the 1940s with only a handful of 500 settlers (compared with today's population of approximately 10,000 inhabitants, augmented seasonally by the lucrative tourist

industry), this was indeed the very same landscape populated intermittently by John Ford, John Wayne, Joan Crawford, Sterling Hayden, Henry Fonda, and Burt Lancaster, among other famous names, during the mid-twentieth century boom of the Western film genre. Indeed, Tanning and Ernst's Sedona period overlaps with Hollywood's colonization of the area as a key setting for over 60 Westerns, such as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Broken Arrow* (1950), and *Flaming Feather* (1952). As Samantha Kavky analogizes: "The westward migration and homesteading of Ernst and Tanning recalls, and even emulates, the self-reliant pioneers of American history and cultural mythology."¹⁰ While the Western genre as a key form of popular culture may have been viewed suspiciously by many of the more orthodox surrealists during the 1930s and 40s as many of its chief proponents began to reject Americanized commercialism, Ernst and Tanning's voluntary removal from the pressurized New York art scene might be usefully rethought through the notion of the "surrealist Western." Living on the edge of the frontier appealed to the transgressive, peripheral natures of these two surrealist avant-gardists, as did the romanticism of the cowhand's rustic lifestyle as a much-needed alternative reality: "Sedona is the other way," claimed Tanning.¹¹ Much like the escapism offered by rural Sedona, the Western genre tends to present a nostalgic fantasy of the Southwest, often in hagiographic, idealized visions of lawless, nineteenth century frontier life and the construction of the railroad. During the period of Ernst and Tanning's inhabitancy, major roadways such as Interstate 17 and Highway 179 were yet to be laid, meaning that the landscape would have retained its unspoiled topography and thus enabling those panoramas so lauded by Hollywood location managers.¹² At this moment in history, the iconic red rocks area was still relatively inexpensive, and the proximity to Hollywood made Sedona an attractive setting for film crews on a budget. Writing on Monument Valley, another series of distinctive red rocks in the "Arizonan Territory" within the context of European film studies, Christopher Frayling tells us of "the dreams which that location has traditionally come to embody, and the location's *cinematic* resonance..."¹³ Likewise, Tanning and Ernst's embodying of Sedona could be said to represent something similar for American Surrealism.

Angel and the Badman (1947), for example, was made in Sedona at the same historical moment that Tanning and Ernst were building their house in the vicinity. As Joe McNeill points out, Republic Pictures fabricated an entire Western street for this film near Coffee-Pot Rock (which would later provide the set for *Johnny Guitar*, 1954), and the production prompted the construction of Sedona Lodge in March 1946, an inexpensive accommodation with the necessary facilities for filmmakers working rurally on location.¹⁴ Much of the set would therefore have been a mere three miles from Tanning and Ernst's studio-house on Brewer Road.¹⁵ Moreover, the film industry was somewhat responsible for the Tanning/Ernst household income at the time—the couple had bought land in Sedona after Ernst won film director Albert Lewin's painting competition of \$2,500 for a depiction of *The Temptation of St*

Anthony (1945) which would star in Lewin's film *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami* (1947).¹⁶

An interest in Westerns supposedly began during her adolescence. While the cinematic viewing of Westerns may be traditionally associated as a bonding exercise between generations of father and sons, Andrew Peter George Tanning took Dotty, the second of his three daughters, to the movies one summer afternoon:

My father and I are out together in the blistering afternoon to see a cowboy movie. No one else would go. Cowboys! Family scorn, unanimous, sends my father on his way, if he really insists on it. But I'll go. In my white shoes and organdy dress. Downtown heat flings up a shimmering veil from the pavement bubbles and our heels indent its black tar like miniature horseshoes. My father wears a panama hat and buys two tickets at the window...¹⁷

That this biographical fragment includes mention of their garments and the shimmering mirage made by the weather on the way to the cinema, as well as a small discrepancy (the film she mentions came out in 1925 not 1922 as she remembers), makes an autotopographical remapping of how such material is made manifest in her work all the more necessary. While her father was buying into the American dream of the family ranch and epic adventures of horse-riding through the desert, Tanning, the future Surrealist, then confesses to her nascent erotic longings: "And while my father thrills to the clever Tony, I am lusting after Lord Churlton, the villain."¹⁸

Arriving in Sedona later in life, she might have recognized the Western settings first encountered during her cinematic outings. Here she and Ernst would encounter local characters like "Cowboy" Elmer Purtyman who took them down the Colorado River and showed them the ancient archaeology.¹⁹ They co-habited with the marvelous geological formations in Sedona such as "Cleopatra's Nipple" which Tanning believes must have been named by a bawdy cowhand, later cleaned up as "Chimney Rock."²⁰ The American performance artist Mike Kelley has also highlighted Tanning's observation in his essay "Go West" (1999), and in doing so, repositioned her viewpoint within a different context:

Like Tanning herself, the cowboy who named Cleopatra's Nipple found wonder in this strange place of a kind that could only be erotic. The landscape, as well as the indigenous peoples living there, their art and their religion, were all eroticized in ways that can only befall the truly 'other.'²¹

Tanning describes her time amidst the spectacular geology of Sedona as follows:

Reader! Imagine the pure excitement of living in such a place of

ambivalent elements. Overhead a blue so triumphant it penetrated the darkest spaces of your brain. Underneath a ground ancient and cruel with stones, only stones, and cactus spines playing possum.²²

What one finds in red rock country is nature's own sculptural exhibition, sublime in scale and visually appealing. Surreal formations and hallucinations can easily be read into the rocks—the shape of each enormous edifice has its own distinctive character and magical appellation: Castle Rock, Merry-Go-Round Formation, Steamboat Rock, Devil's Kitchen, Table-Top, Coffee-Pot, Thunder Mountain (or Capitol Butte), among others. Tanning herself objected to the novelty diminutives of such natural spectacles, suggesting that the pioneers nick-named them as a way of unjustly rationalizing the enormity of these geological manifestations:

There in the red world of jagged souvenirs signed by the great glacier, pioneers named their scenic views to bring them down to size. Cathedral Rock was a ruddy mass imitating for those childlike settlers a cathedral. Courthouse Rock, noble giant reduced in name to a reminder of fiefs and files.²³

Such domestication of geological ancientness is a constant within the Western genre—the “fiefs and files” colonize and dominate the narrative while the landscape is often relegated to the role of backdrop alone. Tanning, and, to some extent, Ernst, meanwhile endow their visions with greater agency—the rocks often become anthropomorphized or autotopographically re-inscribed and are brought to the center of attention. The textures of the sedimentary sandstone and the pockmarked shrubbery found within the landscape were particularly applicable to Ernst's decalomania technique of pressed paint. This is especially the case in his small, blue and orange, all-over canvas *Arizona* (1966) which visually forecasts Tanning's aforementioned “cactus spines playing possum.” Ernst's experimentation with decalomania was well suited to the infinite crevices, erosions and sinkholes of the sandstone surfaces. While working on his *Bryce Canyon Translation* (1946) beyond Sedona, Ernst claimed, in one of his letters to Tanning, the chance effects of this technique make it “More Brice [sic] than Brice [sic].”²⁴ The painting hardly depicts the cozy bosom of mythical mother-earth, but rather it represents his view of red rock country as a volatile, displaced, transgressive bodily topography akin to effervescent elements (Fig. 2).

Color is often used surrealistically by both Tanning and Ernst in order to reverse conventional perspectives promoted by the dissemination of the Western. While the real-life rocks provided the ideal natural stage set for filmmaking, it is worth noting that the rocks also appear as painted backdrops in the occasional scene of *Johnny Guitar*—an artificial authenticity. Moreover, as Joe McNeill points



Fig. 1. Max Ernst, *Bryce Canyon Translation*, 1946. Museu de Arte Contemporaneo, Sao Paulo, Brazil / Bridgeman Images © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

out, Sedona had been a “gray area” to the majority of viewers in the 1930s and ‘40s, so the appearance of the acidic orange color in technicolor films like *Johnny Guitar* would have been cinematically striking.²⁵ Interestingly, Tanning and Ernst sometimes rendered their painterly landscapes in blues and greens, as if to resist the sheer “redness” of the rocks and to re-view them afresh.²⁶ Such alternative views of Sedona can be observed in Tanning’s *Self-Portrait* (1944) and in Ernst’s nightscapes such as *Summer Night in Arizona* (1943) and *Les phases de la nuit (The Phases of the Night)* (1946). Night-time accentuates the red rocks’ dark and menacing presence while the moon offers an analogy to the mystery and ancientness of the rocks. In his travel writing on Arizona, J. B. Priestley wrote: “It seemed to me the oldest country I had ever seen, the real antique land, first cousin to the moon.”²⁷ Ernst seems to draw on such literary comparisons in his *Bryce Canyon Translation*. Here the shrouded moonlight enhances the stratigraphy moving from white pinnacles through red to the blackness at the bottom of the abyss. Similar effects occur in the penultimate chapters of Tanning’s *Chasm* and in *Johnny Guitar*, particularly in terms of moonlight’s exacerbation of the phosphorescence of femininity.

Tanning and the Gothic Western

Often the red spires of Sedona are said to be phallic in form, but I propose that Tanning’s emphasis on poetic forms such as “the red rock chasm” and “Cleopatra’s Nipple” revise this rule. The glowing figure of the feminine damsel is another constant in the Western genre as a character both celebrated and critiqued. She figures recurrently in Tanning’s *oeuvre* as a figment of the narrative realities drawn from her reading practice. A sense of knowing irony is palpable, no doubt in tongue-and-cheek dialogue with Ernst. Melodrama is key to this venture, as found in *Chasm*, a potboiler Tanning dreamed up in order to entertain Ernst on trips through the desert.²⁸ There is lots of evidence in the imagery of the novella to suggest that Tanning was contemplating the typical Western *mise-en-scène* as she worked on the manuscript. *Chasm*, a revised version of *Abyss* (1977) and development of the short story “Abyss” (1949), follows a weekend excursion in the style of a whodunit. Transported to a desert setting of the so-called Wild West in the tradition of “Gothic westerns” such as *Mystery Ranch* (1932), another production primarily filmed on location in Sedona, Tanning’s richly descriptive revision of the Gothic becomes filmic. Such anachronism is shored up by the Surrealists’ interests in the outmoded, especially in the *fin de siècle* aesthetics of childhood, which can often be found creeping into their visual narratives.

While the Gothic is undeniably important thematically for Tanning, I suggest that the Western also forms necessary imaginative landscapes for her.²⁹ The Western genre has its roots in Medieval fantasy—cowboy heroes are the equivalent of knights in shining armor, and both are on horseback in pursuit of adventures and quests. As the Texas-based portrait painter Felice House recently pointed out, the Western

is “a movable painting,”³⁰ carefully composed to accentuate the otherworldly desert settings: Sedona’s distinctive red rocks such as Bell Rock, Courthouse Rock, and Cathedral Rock, are often framed precisely by windows and doorways for internal scenes in *Johnny Guitar* and *Angel and the Badman*. Similarly, the red rock chasm serves as a framing device for Tanning’s writing. As in a fairy tale or Gothic novel, Westerns tend to comprise narratives with multiple voices and moving parts; bandits plan a bank robbery while the outlaw woos the barmaid; a stand-off occurs between the wanted criminal, ambitious prospector, and relentless bounty hunter; meanwhile, a public hanging is in progress and the assailant is miraculously, yet somehow predictably, rescued. Indeed, there is a particular visual language to the Western which would have attracted the surrealist imagination due to its emphasis on found objects and desiring characters, often unsavory types hell-bent on finding the treasure or rebelling against authority. Although *Chasm* ended up being set in 1965 rather than the 1880s timeframe of many Westerns,³¹ it likewise includes multiple storylines reinterpreted by, and meant to appeal to, a surrealist’s temperament: an engaged couple seeking new thrills journey to a remote desert sanctuary; a fetishist enchants a young woman; a man starts looking for answers; a little girl escapes her nursery; a maid murders her employer; a great-grandmother is reunited with her grandchild. In both, there is emphasis on the “site” which, from an autotopographical viewpoint, transforms “a place of the fictional self” into “a stage for the viewer’s dreams (Fig. 3).”³² *Angel and the Badman* is full of desiring bodies and glowing femininity set squarely within the red rocks, “a never, Neverland,” as one character exclaims as he exits through a door into the Sedona landscape. The film follows the budding romance between an outlaw Quirt Evans (the Badman) played by John Wayne (1907-79) and a young Quaker woman Penelope (the Angel) portrayed by Gail Russell (1924-61). Penny appears to glow throughout the film, often wearing a least one white garment (be it a dress, a collar, or a bonnet) and she is often lit from beneath by bright spotlights. Angels similarly pervade the Gothic architectural stages of Tanning’s canvases but they are often of a more mischievous variety, as in *Angelic Pleasures* (1943) or, later, the snarling canine in *Driven Angels* (1962). In *Angel and the Badman*, the combination of the radiant female figure and the monumental rocks pictured in almost every outdoor scene or framed deliberately by doorways and windows creates a close match to the characters and scenery Tanning describes in *Chasm*: “Crossing the sage-dotted hill walked the figure of a child. So small, white-clad, and clearly feminine, it gleamed like phosphorus in the cool night.”³³ This description of a spectral Destina viewed by the desiring character Albert from across the canyon transforms her into a treasure or untouchable relic.

Phosphorus/The Fixed Explosive

Phosphorus is a highly reactive and unstable chemical element, appearing much like red rock sandstone dust when in its inert state, yet glowing a bright white



Fig. 3. Still from *Angel and the Badman*, 1947. Copyright Getty Images

when heat is applied. In surrealist thinking, such phantasmagoria might be best likened to what André Breton termed “convulsive beauty” in his novel *Nadja* (1928) or, more precisely, the static spark of the “fixed-explosive,” a variation which he develops in *L’Amour Fou* (*Mad Love*) (1937).³⁴ A synonymous phenomenon can be observed in the seasonal regularity of forked lightning in Arizona; an atmospheric effect of the Bretonian fixed explosive is captured in the background of Tanning’s painting *Evening in Sedona* (1976, Fig. 4). Destina is likened to phosphorus twice within Tanning’s novella. She is introduced “in her aura of whiteness” as follows: “Her pale skin and white dress light up the beating dimness like phosphorus. From her right hand clenched before her on the table oozes a viscous fluid. It bubbles up between her fingers and spins out thickly on the tablecloth.”³⁵ Such phosphoric descriptions are primarily due to the pristine appearance of her clothing, but are also a way of characterizing her subversive behavior, whether collecting gooey treasures, blackmailing gullible adults, or escaping the confines of her nursery so that she can go on nocturnal visits to see her animal familiar in the desert chasm. Writing on ghostliness in the context of Surrealism, Katharine Conley notes the use of “outmoded Victorian Western clothing” in Tanning’s related visual narratives.³⁶ Here the white dresses behave like period costumes, making her paintings appear akin to the effects found in film stills (another example of the fixed-explosive).



Fig. 4. Dorothea Tanning, *Evening in Sedona*, 1976. The Destina Foundation, New York © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

Such feminine luminosity is further reminiscent of Tanning's interest in Gothic heroines such as Emily in Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and all manner of gleaming artifices and theatrical pyrotechnics. A ghostly whiteness is palpable throughout. Max Ernst similarly uses the motif of the white dress or nightgown as early as *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924) and *The Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* (1930), as well as the white radiating forms that appear in later works such as *After Me, Sleep* (1958). Children and women glow, whether in the Western genre or in surrealist paintings and writings. For example, Tanning's costume design for the Somnambulist or Sleepwalker in *The Night Shadow* (1945) features a white nightdress (Fig. 5). Tanning herself wished to perform from an early age, and, during her early career, served as an extra in the theatre and designed costumes for ballet productions. Such embodied storytelling is vital to this reading, be it an appropriation of a childhood-self or a fictive-self. As Bal reminds us, "that subjectivity is transformed but not eliminated [...] is important to a feminist conception of art."³⁷

Tanning and Ernst starred in two of Hans Richter's films, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947) and *8x8: A Chess Sonata in 8 Movements* (1957). Although they are not



Fig. 5. Dorothea Tanning, Costume Design Night Shadow Sleepwalker, 1945 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

Westerns in the traditional sense, it seems significant that Tanning is costumed in glowing white garments in both. In the former, Ernst pulls her from underneath a bed as a sleeping beauty or Snow White. In *8x8*, she appears as “The Queen” skipping through the empty streets of Manhattan and then along the rocky ridges of the Colorado River after Ernst enters a porthole into this otherworldly domain, mimicking the narrative trope of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Here a group of cowboys sits by the water’s edge, amused by Tanning’s actions and impractical attire. Comparisons between Tanning and contemporary actor Gail Russell’s coiffure, outfits and faraway, dewy-eyed stares are striking here. In *8x8*, Tanning and Ernst take turns cradling a prehistoric stone, returning it to the base of an equestrian statue

at which point they conclude their episode with a Hollywood-kiss. Similar activities recur in Peter Schamoni's filmic portrait of Tanning, *Insomnia* (1978), where once again Tanning is costumed in a shimmering white nightgown, cradling her soft sculptures in the Gothic sequence towards the end. This emphasis on melodrama is in keeping with the Western style of acting, which mimics the popular literature of the 1880s period that is being depicted. Moreover, her earlier performance with her soft sculptures and a curious fossil continues to present an exaggerated view, which is consistent with Surrealism's dream emphasis and an autotopographical repositioning of the self.

Little girls in white dresses populate Tanning's diminutive, dollhouse-like canvases such as *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943) and *Interior with Sudden Joy* (1951)—both painted in Sedona—where the sublime effects of the vast surrounding landscape have driven her inside her domestic imagination (Fig. 6).³⁸ Indeed, both serve as examples of introversion, a miniature, interior perspective contained deliberately, in contrast to the unruly vastness of geological time and the Hollywood spectacular outside. Suggestions of “a little night music” and “sudden joy” both evoke the climatic, or even the explosive, and what Soo Y. Kang has referred to as a form of Lacanian *jouissance* in terms of Tanning's effort at cracking or “jamming” the system.³⁹ Both feature *femmes-enfants* (child-women) embroiled in a kind of naughty



Fig. 6. Dorothea Tanning, *Interior with Sudden Joy*, 1951. Collection Selma Ertegun, New York © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

play or blackmail, unmistakably like Destina in *Chasm*, though also reminiscent of young film “starlets” or the emerging cult of child-actors. The *femme-enfant* features as a figure of rebellion and liberation in Surrealism, especially in Breton’s *Arcane 17* (1944), which was written and circulated concurrent with Tanning and Ernst’s Sedona period. As Breton claimed, “[t]he figure of the child-woman sends fissures through the best organized systems because nothing has been able to subdue or encompass her.”⁴⁰ Tanning appears to have mapped such resultant “fissures” onto the Sedona landscape, as well as to have borrowed the iconography of young women from the Western film genre. In her painting *Interior with Sudden Joy*, one of the girls seems to borrow Dorothy’s ubiquitous ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Meanwhile, *The Guest Room* (1950-52) offers a variation on the typical cozy environment of girlhood. Here a maiden in a white, crumpled nightgown caresses a life-size mannequin, an alternative comforter to the traditional porcelain doll. Two ambiguous figures are positioned at the threshold to this space: a little person wearing a balaclava and cowboy boots with spurs stands next to a naked female figure on the brink of adolescence whose silhouette is reflected behind the door as a nightscape. In the background a shrouded figure oversees the scene, comparable to the ominous presence holding a glowing orb in the background of *Interior with Sudden Joy*. Such esoteric interiors complicate any straightforward connection with the Western genre, and possibly even subvert it into the territory of nightmares. However, in *Angel and the Badman*, Quirt does spend a period of the film convalescing in bed after a shootout while angelic Penny cares for him domestically. Later in the film, when Penny minds her neighbor’s baby, she spookily replicates Tanning’s painting, *Maternity*, made the same year (1946-47). In both paintings the adult and child are dressed in glowing white garments. *Maternity* was prepared during an autotopographical moment of lonely dreaming when Tanning and Ernst were apart.⁴¹ However, the painting had been photographed in a double-portrait of Tanning and Ernst by Lee Miller earlier that summer when she and Roland Penrose visited the couple in their Sedona studios. Again, Tanning self-presents in a white lacy dress as if performing the role of a Western bride-to-be. Another photographic series taken by Miller on this trip features Ernst as Gulliver and Tanning as a Lilliputian damsel (Fig. 7). The image uses depth-of-field for its surrealist effect, as Miller positions Ernst close to the camera while Tanning stands further away, but the composition tricks the viewer into thinking Tanning has shrunk like the frilly petticoats in John Tenniel’s illustrations for *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), or like the glowing Ann Darrow in the clutches of *King Kong* (1933). Miller’s photograph is often reproduced in feminist re-readings of the surrealist movement, and is usually said to offer a witty gender commentary on the couple’s respective statuses within the art world; the older, well-established “master,” Ernst, overshadowing his younger, emerging “apprentice,” Tanning.⁴² However, the doll-like scale of Tanning cowering next to a gargantuan Ernst contributes a fairy-tale dimension to this visual



Fig. 7. Lee Miller, *Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, Oak Creek Canyon, Sedona, Arizona, USA, 1946* © Lee Miller Archives, England 2018. All rights reserved. leemiller.co.uk

play which can be swiftly demythologized, for it is unlikely that Tanning would have allowed herself to be mocked on a sensitive issue which she often complained about.⁴³ Rather it seems more plausible that there is a knowing, collaborative comedy at play with Tanning ironically embodying the damsel in distress from the Gothic novels and Westerns of her youth, threatened by the gigantic, masculine forces of nature, namely, Ernst. Such dynamics are replicated a year later in John Kasnetsis's playful 1947 photograph, where the couple interact with Ernst's monumental sculpture *Capricorn* (1946) as a mythological family portrait. Ernst crouches behind his giant throne, allowing the arm of *Capricorn* to become a visual extension of his own, protectively wrapped around the body of Tanning, again lounging in the guise of a surrealist sleeping beauty. Comparisons between Tanning's pose and the

performances of Western “movie queens”⁴⁴ or divas like Russell and Crawford are perhaps inevitable here, and return to Tanning’s knowing, adolescent swoon and erotic longing for the villain:

And you, Churlton, don’t bother with that simpering lady wiggling her careful curls and swelling her bosom. Leave her to Tom Mix and come to me. I am waiting. Are you really a villain? What is a villain? O passionate Lord Churlton!”⁴⁵

While the Tom Mix films do not feature Sedona, Tanning’s idealization of the villain is transported to some of her early 1950s canvases such as *Portrait de famille* (Family Portrait, 1954) and *Death and the Maiden* (1953), as well as the Bluebeard-type patriarch, Raoul Meridian, in *Chasm*. In the Western genre, villains are named Raoul with surprising regularity, perhaps due to colonial views of Hispanic minorities.⁴⁶ Tanning’s villain, with his murky past in fascist Europe, has colonized the desert ranch Windcote. He is a false father and fetishist, host of a sexual laboratory in which he invites his guest to play. Over the course of the weekend, the relationship between Hollywood couple Albert and Nadine grows stale as the blonde Nadine becomes indoctrinated under the charismatic spell of Raoul.

Chasm: *A Western*

Johnny Guitar similarly features a stale love story (though one which is rekindled) as well as a team of bandits, a saloon owner and an angry town council. Filmed in Sedona in 1953, its effects could be said to pervade the work of Tanning. It is likely that Tanning and Ernst were out of town teaching in Hawaii when this film was being made in Sedona, yet there is visual and literary evidence to suggest that Tanning not only saw but was inspired to embody the female lead in this film through her paintings and writings.⁴⁷ Like *Angel and the Badman*, *Johnny Guitar* utilizes the same street near Coffee Pot Rock for the setting of Vienna’s saloon. Played assertively and melodramatically by actor Joan Crawford (1905-1977), the character Vienna offers a much-needed female role-model. Refreshingly, the film is predominantly focused on her rather than the titular lead played by Hayden Sterling (1916-1986). There are at least two moments in Tanning’s visual and literary oeuvre which could be visual quotations of Vienna in *Johnny Guitar*. During her botched capture, Vienna sits defiantly at the piano, her stance belying her emotional undercurrents. In Tanning’s painting *Dimanche apres-midi* (Sunday Afternoon, 1953), made around the same time as *Johnny Guitar*, a female pianist in a creased white dress throws her head back in ecstasy (Figs. 8, 9). This compositional gesture rhapsodizes the essence of Vienna, exacerbating the vivaciousness of her character. In *Johnny Guitar*, Crawford also wears a voluminous shot-silk white dress—a surprising choice given the masculine attire she adopts for the rest of the feature but an attempt,

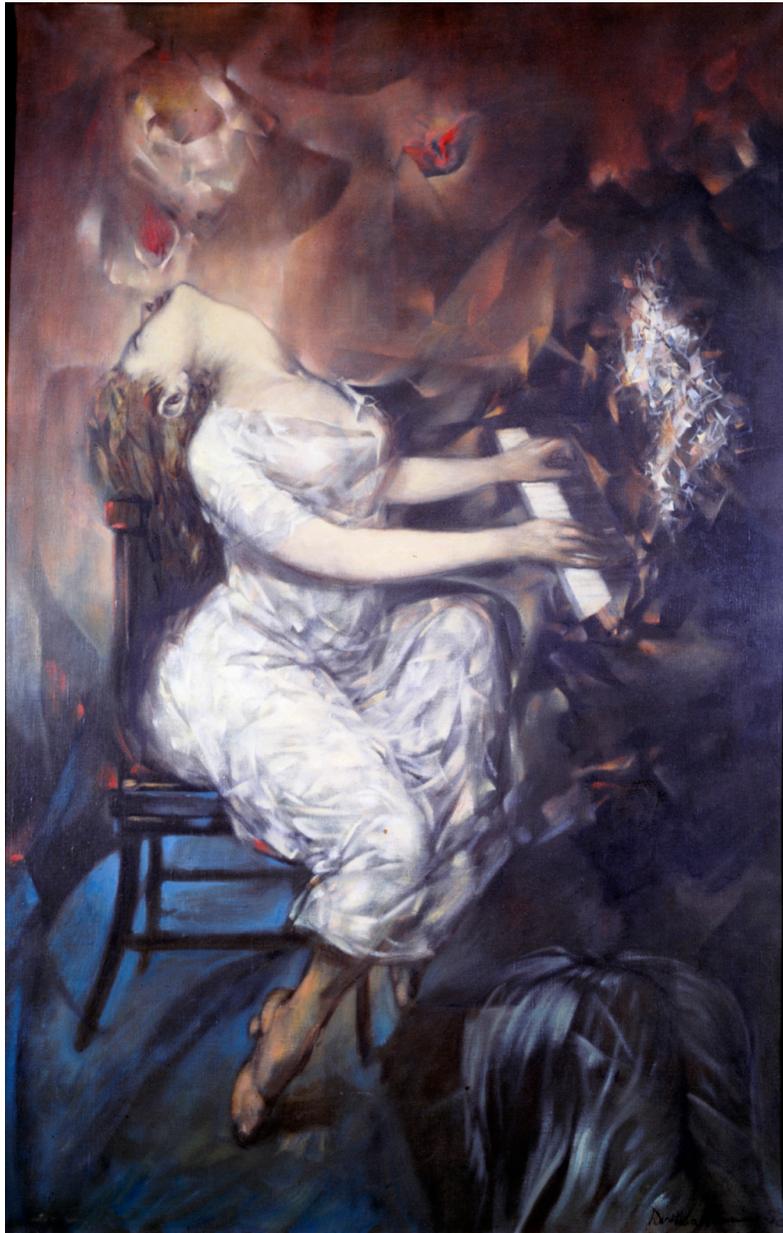


Fig. 8. Dorothea Tanning, *Dimanche apres midi*, 1953 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018.

nevertheless, to connote innocence or a wronged woman. Surrounded by red rock country even inside Vienna's own saloon, the predominance of rusty sandstone renders her white silk, muslin and lace impractical. Vienna is soon pursued outdoors around the red rocks by night in just such a glowing white garment, as if to emphasize her peril. In this way, Vienna/Crawford is further mirrored by the figure of Tanning's attractive socialite/amateur-explorer, Nadine Coussay, who has invested



Fig. 9. Joan Crawford as Vienna in *Johnny Guitar*, 1954

in the proper attire (hiking boots, etc.) but who will never wear them, and ends up lost in the red rocks by night. In this respect, Tanning's novel could be re-read as *Chasm: A Western*.

Destina's tale, meanwhile, mirrors that of the original Sedona—the daughter of a Pennsylvania Dutch family, Schnebly, who historically founded the town. Sedona Schnebly's own daughter, Pearl, was killed in a horse riding accident. In *Chasm* it is Destina's mother and historical family tree that provides the tragic backstory: her great-grandmother is her only true living relative, and with whom she must be reunited. Meanwhile, Destina's memory box operates as a plot device and secret treasure. Tanning's description of Albert spying Destina on horseback is worth quoting at length for its filmic qualities:

But on these thoughts came the sudden clatter of hooves, uneven, cavorting, then the firm staccato beat of a full gallop...It was all over in a moment. Pounding hooves swept close, a phantom form carved with mane and tail and fluttering white, a face swooping near, swooping in and away. Fading, then, as the very air shuddered, leaving an image seared on his eyes like a flashed light...His lips formed a word, a name: Destina.⁴⁸

Here the “phantom form,” whiteness, and “flashed light” conjure the phosphoric spark and fizzle of the Hollywood siren, and Destina is endowed with an otherworldly power like the red rock landscape with which she is in cahoots. The chasm becomes a character as well as a scenic backdrop, a darker force of nature, ready to engulf the adult baddies.

In conclusion, much of the Sedona-based practice of Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning attempts to complicate the Western as a source text by embodying its languages and by overwriting and conceptually reframing its effects. Their surrealist engagement with nocturnal activities, of going underground, are recurrently pierced by a cinematic whiteness. A phosphoric spark is common to the Western and to Tanning’s work, as well as to her photographic portrayal by Lee Miller—be it moonlight, lightning, camera flash, or the iridescent sheen on a crisp white garment. Such phosphorescence can be used to stress a subversive femininity within this traditionally “macho,” rugged landscape. But it should be recalled that such incandescence is by no means a passive endeavor. Rather, it offers a force of illumination, highlighting and revising those prejudices which can still occur, even within pioneering work at the frontier or cutting-edge.

Postscript

After Ernst’s stroke in the mid-1970s, Tanning cared for him in Paris. Unable to work, Ernst chose to watch Westerns and cartoons on television. Tanning observes his flickers of memories during this difficult time: “Watching the cowboys’ lined faces he might have thought of twangy Sedona, far away now.”⁴⁹ Later, Tanning finds herself reminiscing autotopographically, conflating fact with fiction, and likening her memories to sparks of phosphorus: “those faraway beings are fireflies, you might say, each one a bit of phosphorus, a life that brushed mine and caused me, in its glow, to exist...”⁵⁰

With warmest thanks to Sharon Bainbridge, Felice House, Jo Craddock, Pamela Johnson, Kate Conley, Samantha Kavky and Claudia Mesch.

1 Patrick Waldberg, “Max Ernst in Arizona,” in G. di San Lazzaro ed., *Homage to Max Ernst*, (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1971), 55.

2 See for example, M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 204.

3 Roland Penrose, *Scrap Book: 1900-1981* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1981), 140.

4 Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1984), 216. See also, Linda Leigh Paul, *Desert Retreats: Sedona Style* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2003), 37; and Nora Burba Trulsson, “Making Themselves at Home,” *Arizona Highways* (May 2013): 48. As Samantha Kavky points out: “In truth, the similarity between Ernst’s French landscapes of 1940 and American landscapes of 1941 is striking,” see “Max Ernst in Arizona: Myth, Mimesis, and the Hysterical Landscape,” *Anthropology and*

Aesthetics 57/58 (Spring/Autumn, 2010): 212.

5 Films Tanning particularly liked include *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and later *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). Grateful thanks to Mimi Johnson and Brenda Shaughnessy for these insights.

6 Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron eds., *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

7 Mieke Bal, "Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder," *Biography* 25.1 (Winter 2002): 180-202. My article explores how one might apply Bal's "autotopography" to Surrealism and the Sedona Western.

8 Bal, "Autotopography," 180.

9 Indeed, Ernst and Tanning's modest abode attracted an influx of cultural visitations from high profile it-couples including: Lee Miller and Roland Penrose; Dylan and Caitlin Thomas; Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage; Pavel Tchelitchew and Charles Henri Ford; George Balanchine and Tanny Le Clercq, as well as intrepid singletons such as Caresse Crosby and Sonia Sekula. The history of Sedona's art scene has no doubt been enhanced subsequently by Egyptian sculptor Nassan Abiskhairoun Gobran's founding of the Sedona Arts Center in 1961. Grateful thanks to Mark Rownd for his generous insights into Sedona's artistic community.

10 Kavky, 210-11.

11 Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986), 30.

12 See Mimi Johnson cited in Burba Trulsson, "Making Themselves at Home," 49.

13 Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 189.

14 Joe McNeill, *Arizona's Little Hollywood: Sedona and Northern Arizona's Forgotten Film History 1923-1973* (Sedona: Northedge and Sons, 2010), 286. Yuma was another site for a number of films, with some sets still in place there as a tourist attraction. However, not all of the films were in the Western genre, several orientalisising Morocco/Maghreb genre films were made there in the '40s. Grateful thanks to Claudia Mesch for this note.

15 Archaeological traces of their time in Sedona can be found in Ernst's concrete relief sculptures in the eaves and on the exterior walls of their former residence which still stands on Brewer Road, albeit after several conversions.

16 The film was based on Guy de Maupassant's story. See, Warlick, 173. Other entrants included Leonora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, and Paul Delvaux. Tanning also submitted to this competition and received \$500.

17 Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives: A Artist and Her World* (London and New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001), 19. Tanning's dates are slightly off here – *Dick Turpin* came out in 1925 when she would have been about 14 or 15 years old.

18 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 20.

19 *Ibid.*, 155-56.

20 *Ibid.*, 150-51.

21 Mike Kelley, "Go West (On the Art of John Miller)," in John C. Welchman ed., *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 215.

22 Tanning, *Birthday*, 82.

23 *Ibid.*, 83.

24 Letter from Max Ernst to Dorothea Tanning (September 14, 1946).

25 McNeill, 215.

26 Lili DeBarbieri, *Sedona Verde Valley Art: A History from Red Rocks to Plein-Air* (Charleston: The History Press, 2015), 33. Grateful thanks to Victoria Carruthers for exploring this painting with me; see our "Mermaids and Metaphors: Dorothea Tanning's Surrealist Ocean," in Tricia Cusack ed., *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to Present: The Sea as Social Space in Western Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 213.

27 J. B. Priestley, *Midnight in the Desert: A Chapter of Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1937), 2-3.

- 28 Jane Kramer, "Self Inventions: Dorothea Tanning, Painter Turned Poet," *The New Yorker* (3 May 2004): 59.
- 29 See for example, Victoria Carruthers, "Dorothea Tanning and Her Gothic Imagination," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 5.1-2 (2011): 134-158; and Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 122.
- 30 Correspondence with the author, January 17, 2017.
- 31 Calculations from the genealogy in the opening prologue of *Chasm: A Weekend* (London: Virago, 2004) confirm this – Destina Meridian is seven years old and was born in 1958 meaning that the novel is set in 1965, 12.
- 32 Bal, "Autotopography," 185.
- 33 Tanning, *Chasm*, 126.
- 34 André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 19. See also Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), 23.
- 35 Tanning, *Chasm*, 17.
- 36 Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness*, 126.
- 37 Bal, "Autotopography," 187.
- 38 Tanning, *Birthday*, 84. See also *Between Lives*, 152–153.
- 39 Soo Y. Kang, "Tanning's Pictograph: Repossessing Woman's Fantasy," *Aurora: Journal of the History of Art* 3 (2002): 96.
- 40 André Breton, *Arcane 17: With Apertures Grafted to the End* (1944), trans. Zack Rogow, ed. Anna Balakian (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1994), 64, my italics.
- 41 In letters that were sent between Sedona (Tanning) and Reno (Max Ernst) in September/October 1946, they occasionally mention the painterly progress of the artworks they are each working on (Tanning's *Maternity* and Ernst's *Bryce Canyon Translation*). Max Ernst was in Reno because the divorce application laws were faster there. He was divorcing Peggy Guggenheim in order to marry Tanning that October 1946.
- 42 See Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 11, and Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 94.
- 43 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 234.
- 44 McNeill, 494. In Walter Benjamin's view, "film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,'" "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 231.
- 45 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 20.
- 46 The colonial undercurrents of the Sedona Western and surrealist outputs are important to note here. Although they shared an archaeological interest in Native American culture (especially its ruins in Tanning's case and its rituals in Ernst's), as product of its time, Tanning's novella refers to "Indian" rather than "Native American" ruins and there is no apparent self-criticism or consciousness about the characterization of the non-white staff as servile, Tanning, *Chasm*, 37-38. As a German, Ernst was eager to distance himself from right wing politics, and so he would not have viewed propaganda Westerns like *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien* (1936) favorably. Moreover, from today's perspective, Ernst's child-like pleasure in "playing Indian" for Lee Miller's camera could also be read pejoratively, see Kavky, 216.
- 47 Although Tanning does not mention *Johnny Guitar* in her memoirs specifically, she does relate a second-hand tale from Truman Capote about his interview with Crawford for *Vogue*, during which Crawford's daughter, possibly Christina, leads Capote on a tour around her mother's museum of a house. *Between Lives*, 163.

48 Tanning, *Chasm*, 93-94.

49 Tanning, *Between Lives*, 289.

50 Tanning, *Ibid.*, 8.