COLLAGED CODES:
JOHN CAGE’S Credo in Us

By
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For Kirsten, Sebastian, and Benjamin
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Collaged Codes: 
John Cage’s *Credo in Us*

Abstract

By

GERALD PAUL COX

John Cage and Merce Cunningham’s life-long collaboration is one of the richest performing arts partnerships of the twentieth century, one that led to radical new modes of expression in music and dance. This dissertation offers a comprehensive study of their first collaboration, *Credo in Us* (1942), a satiric dance-drama about a dysfunctional married couple set in the American West. Cunningham and Jean Erdman jointly created the choreography and Cunningham wrote a scenario and script inspired by James Joyce and French surrealist poetry.

Conceived just weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, *Credo* offers a window into a unique moment in American cultural history, when exiled European artists escaping Nazi persecution arrived in New York and engaged with their American counterparts. Cage was immersed in this thriving community of artists while living in Peggy Guggenheim’s home, where he met the luminaries of the European avant-garde, including Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and André Breton.

It is in this vibrant context that Cage creates his score for *Credo*, which is significant for two interrelated reasons. First, it embraces a collage aesthetic, juxtaposing a diverse range of musical styles and sounds, from folk music and jazz to phonograph samples, radio sounds, and “found” percussion noises. Second, Cage’s incorporation of
random elements in the score anticipates his later embrace of indeterminacy and chance procedures in the post-war period, a move that had profound implications in music, art, literature, dance, and theatre that resonate to this day.

This study takes an interpretative approach that encompasses the interdisciplinary elements of *Credo*, as well as its historical and social context. Its focus is on the interrelationship between the dance, script and music and how the collaborative process informed Cage’s embrace of a collage aesthetic. This illuminates the ways in which Cage’s aesthetic engagement with the European avant-garde and collaborative work with choreographers informed his most significant compositional experiments. From this perspective, Cage appears less as an iconoclastic trickster working alone on the margins of the music world, and more as a voracious Dadaist embracing ideas from a wide range of sources to challenge the boundary between art and life.
Introduction

Collaged Codes

No two days bring events which are exactly the same.
It follows, Croesus, that human life is entirely a matter of chance.
--Solon of Athens to Coresus, King of Lydia

Performances of *Credo in Us* begin with a fortissimo declamation of a recording of a “classical masterpiece.” Most audiences instantly recognize a familiar melody or texture like the opening of Beethoven’s “Fifth.” If not, their faces betray frantic questioning: “Is it Dvořák’s *New World Symphony* or Tchaikovsky’s *Pathétique*?” Once satisfied with their conclusion (and likely proud of their knowledge of classical music), they might slip into a feeling of nostalgia. Their reverie however ends abruptly with the raucous entrance of tin cans, gongs, and a buzzer; literally the noise of junk annihilates the peaceful mood of the nineteenth century with sudden violence. Nonetheless, the sound of the symphony lingers on and reappears periodically through the work, a Proustian reminder of the power of memory and times past.

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2 Cage specifies classic works by “Beethoven, Sibelius, Shostakovich, or Tchaikovsky” in the original score from July 1942, as well as in the published version of the score from 1962. This study is primarily based on the original score, which is located at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, though uses musical examples drawn from the published score. See *Credo in Us*. New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1962.
3 For a political reading of *Credo*, see William Brooks, “Music and Society,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, (Cambridge University Press, 202), 216. “Everything in *Credo for Us* [sic], then, means something; everything is to be heard as other than pure sound or pure structure. In its invocation of judgment, taste, and memory to undercut cultural assumptions, *Credo in Us* seems far removed from the works and aesthetic positions most commonly associated with Cage.” It is important to note that Brooks’ statement is based on the suite version of *Credo* and is thus far removed from its original context as part of a dance-drama.
It is one of the most audacious openings in American music, one worthy of Zurich’s famed Cabaret Voltaire and on par with other subversive Dada theatre works by Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball. With this simple yet bold theatrical gesture, John Cage (1912-1992) shocks the audience by subverting their expectations of what is supposed to happen in a concert hall, first by playing a recording of what is commonly heard in such venues, then by interrupting it using the noise of everyday objects. Of course, for most audiences attending a Cage concert such jarring juxtapositions would be expected as Cage’s reputation as a provocateur often preceded his performances.  

By the time he died in 1992, Cage had become an international figure, known not only for his compositions but also for his essays, poetry, and art works, as well as his role as a mentor to a generation of artists. At a memorial concert at Manhattan’s Symphony Space, Credo in Us ended the program, providing the last word on Cage that evening. Alex Ross, in one of his first assignments for the New York Times, recalled the mood:

Toward the end, the carnival became an elegy. Essential Music, the percussion-and-piano ensemble that organized the event, delivered an intense performance of “Credo in Us,” a tightly structured work from 1942 with a searing climax. During its epilogue, the hall darkened. For a minute at the end, the stage was held only by a desk, a lamp, a glass of water and a gray jacket draped over an empty chair. In the mind's eye, John Cage walked out and began to read.

Credo is a touchstone work in Cage’s oeuvre. It includes elements of his percussion and piano music, experimentation with electronic sounds, and indeterminate gestures that anticipate his engagement with indeterminacy a decade later. In many ways Credo represents a microcosm of Cage’s aesthetic development. This aspect of the work may in part explain why Credo has become one Cage’s more popular works in both the U.S. and

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abroad. The American composer/conductor John Adams included *Credo* in the season-opening concert of London’s Southbank Centre with the London Sinfonietta in 2009. While performances in the U.S., particularly at music schools and conservatories, are too numerous to list, highlights include a performance by members of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, sponsored by the Pulitzer Foundation in 2007, and as part of Michael Tilson Thomas’ Maverick Series for the San Francisco Symphony in 2000. In addition, dozens of commercial recordings and a constant stream of new YouTube videos have given *Credo* a vibrant presence on the web.

Music critics have in turn become respectful of the intricacies of Cage’s unique directions for performances of *Credo*. Ivan Hewett, writing for *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, lamented the use of prerecorded samples in place of the specified random radio sounds in a 2004 performance:

> But there was a glaring moment of misunderstanding in the piece *Credo in Us*, where Cage asks one player to switch a radio on and off. Here a prerecorded sample was substituted, with the result that, instead of being disconnected fragments, the bursts of ‘radio’ joined up into a coherent narrative. It was as jarring as a wrong note in a Beethoven sonata.

Hewett’s observation is interesting for two reasons. First, he was aware of Cage’s instructions calling for the use *random* radio sounds and understood that using samples defeated the point of the gesture, which was to open the work to the radio sounds of the moment. Second, by equating Cage’s instructions with a wrong note in Beethoven, Hewett respects Cage’s position as an artist.

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6 Recent international festivals included, Espai d’art contemporani de Castelló, in Castelló, Spain (2008); the Contemporary Music Festival in Klaipeda, Lithuania (2007); La Casa Encendida in Madrid, Spain (2006), and at the “late night” festival in Koblenz, Germany (2006). See “Performances” at www.johnCage.info.
While popularity and critical acceptance does not necessarily convey importance, a question arises: Why has one of Cage’s most popular and representative works gone unstudied for so long? One reason is that most performers, critics, presenters, record producers, and scholars are only familiar with Cage’s arrangement of *Credo* as a “suite of satirical nature” published by Henmar Press in 1962. This is not unlike admiring Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* without considering its original context as a ballet score. While the music has circulated widely in this “suite” form, very little scholarly attention has been given to the composition’s complex position as part of a choreographed, scripted drama—an especially surprising fact given that this was Cage’s first collaboration with Merce Cunningham.

Cage and Cunningham’s life-long collaboration is one of the richest performing arts partnerships of the twentieth-century, significant for introducing nonnarrative modes of expression in music and dance and for proposing a new—more independent—working relationship between composer and choreographer. Their initial work drew on Martha Graham’s dance-dramas, a genre popularized in the 1930s that combined narration and dialogue with dance. Cage and Cunningham’s first dance-drama, *Credo in Us*, which premiered at Bennington College in 1942, departs from Graham’s narratives based on myths or patriotic themes. Inspired instead by Dada, surrealist poetry, and popular radio dramas, the work, subtitled a “Suburban Idyll,” is a satire on the sterile conventions of the American middle-class told through the perspective of a feuding married couple, each with two names, “Husband/Shadow” and “Wife/Ghoul’s Rage.” These double-names
signify each character’s public and psychological personas and served as a point of departure for the dance.\textsuperscript{9}

Cage’s score for \textit{Credo} is a rich collection of disparate musical styles, everyday noises, sampled recordings of “classical” masterpieces and random radio sounds. Cage calls for a set of ten graduated tin cans (high to low), two muted nipple gongs, two Indian tom-toms, a buzzer, “string” piano (requiring the pianist to mute the strings inside the piano and play the outside shell of the piano), a phonograph and radio. The work is unique in Cage’s output for its extensive use of musical borrowing and recordings.\textsuperscript{10} Cage uses a collage aesthetic both as a technique to juxtapose everyday noise (e.g. the sound of a buzzer) with rarefied classical music, and also to subvert longstanding notions of what constitutes a musical work.\textsuperscript{11} This recycling of classical music, the use of musical clichés, and the recasting of the banal sounds of everyday life in \textit{Credo} suggest a stunning range of meanings that come to light when viewed in the context of the drama.

\textbf{The Title “Credo”}

Cage communicates the importance of \textit{Credo} through the title. The use of the Latin \textit{Credo} (“I believe”), with its provenance as the profession of the faith in the Roman Catholic mass, adds to the profundity (and satire) of the work. Cage also uses the term in the title of his 1940 manifesto, “The Future of Music: Credo,” a document that outlines his beliefs on the value of all sounds, including noise; as he proclaimed in that text: \textit{“I BELIEVE THAT THE USE OF NOISE TO MAKE MUSIC WILL CONTINUE AND}

\textsuperscript{9} Jean Erdman interview with David Patterson, 1993.
\textsuperscript{10} William Brooks, “Music and Society,” 216.
\textsuperscript{11} Critic Paul Griffiths refers to \textit{Credo} as a collage, comparing it to Cage’s later tape pieces, for example, \textit{Williams Mix} (1952-53). See Griffiths, \textit{Modern Music and After: Directions Since 1945} (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), 161.
INCREASE UNTIL WE REACH A MUSIC PRODUCED THROUGH THE AID OF ELECTRICAL INSTRUMENTS.”  

In “Credo,” Cage calls for the establishment of experimental music centers where “the new materials, oscillators, turntables, generators” would be developed and use in performances, including for “theatre and dance.” To Leta Miller Cage’s manifesto is “a culmination, rather than a precursor, of this formative period, its ideas honed from Cage’s interactions with the Seattle artistic community, and reflecting the influences both within and outside of music.” This study regards *Credo in Us* in a similar way, as a reflection of his experiences in New York in 1942, and a “culmination” of his work with choreographers, engagement with visual artists in Los Angeles and Seattle, and work with CBS radio in Chicago. As a theatre work that uses “new materials” like a phonograph and radio, *Credo* in many ways appears as a musical analog to Cage’s “Credo” manifesto.

In a 1983 interview with Charles Amirkhanian, Cage described the title of *Credo in Us* as meaning both, “I believe in the U.S.” (United States) and “I believe in us,” signaling the work’s split personal and public perspective. As a drama about a dysfunctional marriage, “us” may refer specifically to the marital strife between Cage and

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13 Ibid. 6 and 13.

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his wife Xenia, or, from another perspective, as a declaration of Cage and Cunningham’s growing personal and professional relationship.16

**Toward a Collage Methodology**

This study follows closely the intricacies of *Credo*. In other words, the process of interpretation generates the methodological approach and takes into account *Credo*’s inherent multiplicity, fragmentation, and randomness. *Credo* is a work in flux. It is a composition open to its present time and space through the use of random radio sounds, yet remains rooted to its point of origin in 1942 through the use of borrowed material from the period. A central goal of this study is to preserve the tension and open-ended nature generated by the collage medium. Marjorie Perloff in her discussion of poetic collage notes the interpretive challenges posed by such works:

> Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; and that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.17

The act of interpreting such a collage work ends up transferring aspect of the collage into the study. The seemingly random juxtaposition of ideas, multiple perspectives, and odd forays into topics that seem completely irrelevant make sense when considering the inherent multiplicity of a work that draws together Beethoven and boogie-woogie. As such, the organization of this dissertation takes the form of a collage. The process of “ungluing” and exploring the various borrowings, appropriations, and quotations reveal

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surprising juxtapositions and simultaneous occurrences, which are reflected in this study. This strategy is adopted in part to retain the ambiguity of the fragmented elements and their “alterity” within the overall work. The goal here is not to organizing *Credo* into a coherent narrative nor in suggesting an overarching meaning for the work, but to use each element of *Credo* as a point of departure from which to explore various themes, including Cage’s social milieu, experimental compositional techniques, collaborative approach with choreographers, and relevant historical and cultural topics, among others. Each theme in part generates its own web of connections. For example, the discussion of Cage’s social network and the influence of various mentors and patrons on the *Credo* project involve mapping a “collage” of relationships spanning several years. The social history of *Credo* takes on added importance when considering that the work would not have been created if not for a few key relationships and historical events, like the rise of Nazism in Europe, which brought to the U. S. two important figures in Cage’s life: Arnold Schoenberg (immigrated in 1933) and Marcel Duchamp (1942).

What are the goals of this study? The first is to provide a re-evaluation of *Credo in Us* as one of Cage’s most significant works from the 1940s; a work which also prefigures Cage’s later engagement with indeterminacy. The second is to use *Credo* as a case study to better understand Cage’s collaborative process with choreographers. The third goal is to examine Cage’s creative process and adoption of a collage aesthetic at this point of his career. Cage was thirty when he wrote *Credo*. By this time he had already composed over twenty works, written a manifesto, and founded his own percussion ensemble. He had also established himself as one of the most innovative composers of dance works by developing new modes of working with choreographers. What is striking
of Cage’s early career is his ambition and ability to assimilate and synthesize a wide range of ideas drawn from various sources. In many ways the collage medium was ideally suited for Cage’s intense curiosity, intelligence, and artistic fascination with capturing and discovering new sounds.

Cage’s practice of borrowing and appropriation was not confined to his musical works. Musicologist David Nicholls as documented a similar process in Cage’s creation of his 1940 manifesto, “The Future of Music: Credo,” which paraphrases the writings of Luigi Russolo, Edgar Varèse, Henry Cowell, and Carolos Chávez:

Cage: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise.”
Russolo: “Every manifestation of our life is accompanied by noise.”

Cage: “We want to capture and control these sound, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.”
Russolo: “We want to attune and regulate this tremendous variety of noises harmonically and rhythmically.”

Cage: “Every film studio has a library of “sound effects” recorded on film. With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of any one of these sounds and to give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach of the imagination.
Chávez: There have thus been formed the so-called libraries of sound. . . Here at hand, ready to be used in our creations, are all the sound-elements possible or imaginable . . . In the course of . . . re-recording we can . . . amplify all or parts of the sound, correct the temp, give accents, or weaken certain passages.”

Nicholls also points out that Cage’s use of Varèse’s phrase, “organization of sound,” and Chávez’s statement that “an isolated sound. . . possesses physical qualities: intensity, duration, timbre, pitch,” were used on multiple occasions in later contexts. Borrowing and appropriation thus appear to be an integral part of Cage’s creative and intellectual process. Chavez’s book also includes a section on the radio and diagrams on the use of

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20 Chávez, Toward a New Music (1937; New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), quoted in Nicholls, 498
radio studios to create and broadcast works into a concert. This may have inspired Cage’s early experiment with the radio studio for *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* (1939) and subsequent use of the radio in *Credo, Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951), and *Radio Music* (1956).

In many ways Cage’s method of creating the “Credo” manifesto using borrowed phrases and the use of two different typographies as a way to signal two simultaneous modes of communication reflect the same collagist practices employed in *Credo*. Nicholls’ observation that Cage’s borrowings reflect his “almost embarrassing number of parents and grandparents among the ultramodernists and their forbears”\(^{22}\) is only reinforced by this study. That Cage appropriated ideas from others is a well-known fact. What is stressed here is the strategic and sophisticated way in which he engaged with collage practices in order to create the score for *Credo*.

**Chapter Summaries**

The title and the wide range of ideas it generates serves as a point of departure for this study. A brief overview of the four chapters illustrates this approach. Chapter One, “Dramatic Relationships,” examines the social and historical contexts surrounding the creation of *Credo*. It investigates the drama’s treatment of a marriage conflict within the wider historical context of the “marriage crisis,” a label given to a social trend beginning in the 1930s, of rising divorce rates, declining birth rates, and the migration of women out of the home and into the work place. In terms of choreography, *Credo* is examined in relation to three Martha Graham dance-dramas, which featured Cunningham and Erdman

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
in lead roles. It also explores the position of *Credo* within the experimental dance community at the Bennington School of Dance and draws upon source materials from the period, including photographs of the dance made by the famed dance photographer Barbara Morgan, Jean Erdman’s choreography notes, and critical reviews.

Chapter Two, “Elements of a Musical Collage,” focuses on Cage’s score and his evolving mode of working with choreographers. It includes a detailed analysis of the music in part to understand how Cage uses a combination of composed music and random sounds to underscore the dramatic action.

Chapter Three, “‘I believe in us’: Musical Reference as Personal Code,” examines the drama’s theme of marriage and intimate relationships in light of Cage’s deteriorating marriage to Xenia and against the backdrop of Cage and Cunningham’s evolving personal relationship. Specifically, it investigates how musical references are used within the dramatic context of the dance in order to signal moments of interiority and a range of coded allusions, as well as possible connections to personal biography. It also views *Credo* in the context of Cage and Cunningham’s earlier involvement in the production of Jean Cocteau’s *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* (1939) at Cornish.

Chapter Four, “Radio America,” examines Cage’s use of radio in the context of his second reading of the title as, “Credo in the United States.” During the 1930s and early-1940s, the radio was considered the site of a new American public sphere that would unite the country. Cage uses the radio as an indeterminate element in *Credo*, a choice that prefigures his later radio works, including the *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for twelve radios (1952). This chapter also explores the context of that decision in light of Cage’s evolving ideas on the expressive use of sound and sound effects and his sound
score created for the CBS radio drama, *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, which was broadcast in May 1942. This context sheds light on how Cage uses the radio at the beginning and end of *Credo* to suggest a “radio” frame for the drama, one which situates what comes in between—dance, text, and music—in the context of radio broadcasting.

**Credo in Scholarship**

*Credo in Us* has not received the detailed attention it deserves among scholars.\(^{23}\) This is due in part to the fact that the details of its original context as a dance score have remained hidden in the archives. Furthermore, *Credo*’s very provenance as part of a dance-drama may have also contributed to its neglect. W. Anthony Sheppard redresses this problem in his excellent book *Revealing Masks*, arguing that music theatre works have often been overlooked in favor of long-established genres like opera and ballet.\(^{24}\) Nonetheless, he emphasizes the importance of music theatre works on the development of twentieth century music, citing such examples as Stravinsky’s *Renard* (1916), *L’Histoire du Soldat* (1918) and *Les Noces* (1917-1923), and Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* (1909), *Pierrot lunaire* (1912), and *Die glückliche Hand* (1910-1913). These works are broadly unified in Sheppard’s study by their unique approach to fusing theater and music.\(^{25}\) Sheppard’s assessment of the importance of this genre is unequivocal, arguing


\(^{25}\) Ibid.
that these works “constitute the ‘expression and embodiment’ of concerns central to twentieth-century music, modernist art in general, and society at large.”

Eric Salzman observes that these mixed media works “involve some merging of arts, forms, techniques, means, and electronic media, all directed at more than one of the senses and generally involving some kind of total surrounding.” Salzman’s definition both captures the forces at work in Credo and outlines the complexity of analyzing it as well. This study attempts to capture the interdisciplinary nature of the work by addressing the choreography and script in equal measure before moving on to Cage’s musical setting.

Cage’s unique compositional method used in Credo may be another reason why it has been overlooked as it neither fits the structural methods used in many of the percussion works nor is it an indeterminate work—it is both. The 1940s were a period when Cage refined his musical language in part by searching for a spiritual and psychological basis for composition. His essay, “Forerunners of Modern Music,” (1949) describes his evolving interest in merging rational/irrational aspects of composition by allowing certain aspects of the process to be “consciously controlled” (structure and method) and others “unconsciously allowed to be” (content). Cage links this method to the relationship between the mind and heart.

Credo is a fine example of this period of Cage’s work as it reflects the duality between intention/non-intention and the integration of rational and irrational elements through the use of “composed” music with indeterminate elements. A persistent question in this study is how Cage’s choices relate to the dance, or, from another angle, how the dance may have informed Cage’s

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26 W. Anthony Sheppard, 5.
27 Eric Salzman quoted in W. Anthony Sheppard, Revealing Masks, 6.
compositional ideas. My sense is that there is a close connection between the
choreography, script and music in Credo. Exploring these connections in detail presents a
fresh perspective on the relationship between Cage’s work with dance works and his
evolving musical language. Unfortunately, relatively little attention has been given to
Cage’s dance scores in the context of their original theatrical context, as many were lost
or removed from circulation by Cage or the original choreography has been lost.29

_Credo_ is an exception. Cage exhibited a clear fondness for the work throughout
his career starting with the publication of an arrangement of _Credo_ as a “suite of satirical
nature,” in his Henmar Press catalog in 1962. Drafts of the original dance score remain
intact at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPLPA). Photographs
of the original choreography taken by famed dance photographer Barbara Morgan are
located at the Barbara Morgan archive and provide an invaluable visual record that is
augmented by Jean Erdman’s choreography notes, also located at the NYPLPA. Finally,
a complete view of _Credo_’s script has been impossible since Cunningham’s text was long
presumed lost. However, in 2008, I discovered much of the script written into Cage’s
manuscript score.30 For the first time since 1942, this study brings together the source
documents for dance, scenario, script, and music in order to provide a comprehensive
view of this long neglected and important work.

29 One exception is the recently discovered _Fads and Fancies of the Academy_, Cage’s 1940 score composed
for a dance by Marian van Tuyl for a dance program at Mills College.
30 Merce Cunningham’s script for _Credo_ was first presented in my paper titled: “Private Confession or
Public Discourse?: The Use of Genre in John Cage’s _Credo in US_,” at the Ninth Annual Graduate
Humanities Forum Conference of the Penn Humanities Forum at the University of Pennsylvania, in
February 2009. Around the same time, Daniel Callahan at Columbia University also examined
Cunningham’s script in “Choreomusical Relationships in Merce Cunningham’s Second Hand and the
Aesthetic of Indifference,” a paper given at the American Society of Musicology Annual Meeting,
**Credo and the History of Modernism**

*Credo* plays an important role in the history of modernism in part by the way Cage challenges traditional notions of the musical work and the idea of a composer as author. While there are many competing chronologies, most histories of modernism regard the concept of authorship as a central tenet. For literary scholars, modernism may begin in the mid-nineteenth century with the poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), who captured the perspective of the *flâneur*, the city stroller, absorbing simultaneously the sounds, smells and sites of a newly urbanized world. Cultural critic Daniel Albright suggests the period between 1907 and 1909 as another beginning point for modernism, when Picasso painted *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*, Schoenberg shifted to writing atonal music and the careers of Igor Stravinsky, Gertrude Stein, Erik Satie, and Jean Cocteau were on the rise.\(^{31}\) While Cage was an avid student of modernism, borrowing freely from the Dadaists and futurists, he is also unfairly credited for bringing modernism to its end. Both Albright and the philosopher/composer Leonard Meyer suggest that Cage had effectively subverted the traditional notion of the author and artwork by abdicating control of the outcome of his indeterminate compositions.\(^{32}\) In many ways, Cage begins his path toward indeterminacy with *Credo* through the use of radio and phonograph elements, which are selected by the performer. As such, *Credo* when performed live can never be heard the same way twice and the performer plays a key role in the outcome of the work. For example, the performer may choose to play whatever he or she chooses,

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\(^{32}\) Albright, 31. See also Leonard Meyer, “The End of the Renaissance?” in *Music, The Arts and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth Century Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 68-84. Meyer uses the term “radical empiricism” to describe Cage and other artists who actively challenged the ideas of control, causality, narrative, and teleology in various artforms. “Radical empiricism is not, however, an attempt to redefine goals and values within the long tradition of Western art and thought. Rather it seeks to break decisively with the most basic tenets of that tradition.”
from radio static to death metal or sports radio, though these choices are mediated by what happens to be broadcast over the radio at the moment of performance. From this perspective, Cage seems to be shifting creative responsibility toward the performer by cultivating a collaborative form performance. This is not unlike a jazz performance, where the “composer” provides a chart that is realized by the performer. It also recalls Cage’s early works, like *Living Room Music* (1940), which leaves the choice of instrumentation (e.g. household objects) up to the performers. In this way, Cage was working firmly within the traditions of popular culture and modernism’s vibrant avant-garde, with no stated intention of overturning the role of the author.

Cage’s shift toward indeterminacy may be linked to his engagement with the European avant-garde, particularly Dada. Recent scholarship by art historian Brandon Joseph, architecture historian Thomas Hines, and music historian and theorist David Bernstein shed light on Cage’s engagement with the manifestoes and philosophies of the avant-garde as an important aspect of his aesthetic development. Bernstein, in his essay “In Order to Thicken the Plot,” locates ideas of the historic avant-garde that Cage embraced and disseminated in early-1940s, a period when many argued that the avant-garde movements had faded. In particular, Bernstein examines the futurist and Dadaist fascination with multimedia performance art, citing Marinetti’s 1913 manifesto “Variety Theatre,” which celebrated the chaotic spectacle of jugglers, dancers, poets and musicians performing simultaneously; the spirit of which continued in Cage’s dance and theatre performances.

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33 This term is used to denote those movements known to Cage, including futurism, constructivism, Dada, and surrealism and, defined broadly, encompass movements that challenged nineteenth century concepts of “organic” art as autonomous art objects divorced from reality. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). The connections between Cage aesthetic ideas and visual artists has been highlighted in several exhibitions, including “Cage · Cunningham · Johns,” at the Anthony d’Offay Gallery in London (1989), “Sounds of the Inner Eye,” at the Museum of Glass: International Center for Contemporary Art, Tacoma, Washington (2002), and “The Anarchy of Silence,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona and The Henie Onstad Art Centre in Norway (2010).
works, “happenings,” and later “musicircus” events. Furthermore, he argues that political and social activism and the rejection of traditional notions of art, embrace of chance and simultaneity, and the challenge to the boundary between art and life were all values Cage absorbed from the avant-garde.  

Cage’s role in the resurgence of post-war avant-garde aesthetics in many ways begins during World War Two, when he engages with exiled European artists. *Credo* in many ways exemplifies the collage aesthetic that a work that established the foundation for his most radical theatre works in the post-war period, including *Williams Mix* and the *Black Mountain Piece* (from 1952) and the later mixed media works like *HPSCHD* (1967-1969) and *Variations VII* (1966). Indeed, H. Wiley Hitchcock singles out Cage’s influence on a generation of post-war composers working through a collage medium:

> Intersection and interaction are by definition the common ground among several other kinds of works that became increasingly important in the post-war period: collage pieces (from the French word for “paste up”), mixed-media productions, and a new kind of music theater closely related to mixed media. Although many influences conjoined to stimulate the rise of such works, they were all to some degree indebted to precepts and example offered by John Cage.

Many of Cage’s ideas on noise, simultaneity, and collage techniques can be traced to his engagement with the visual arts several years before his move to New York in 1942. Cage was well positioned to cultivate correspondences between visual art and music as he had firsthand knowledge of the techniques and methods employed by painters. Before devoting himself to composition, Cage was a painter. In the early 1930s, he painted landscapes in the style of van Gogh then moved on to more abstract forms

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inspired by Piet Mondrian.\textsuperscript{37} In 1933, after dropping out of Pomona College, Cage travelled through Europe with his partner Don Sample, visiting museums and attending concerts in Paris and at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and later recalling: “The effect was to give me the feeling that if other people could do things like that I myself could.”\textsuperscript{38} It is this sentiment that fueled Cage’s constant quest for the new sound or idea, and led him to lasting engagement with the avant-garde.

Cage immersed himself at this time in \textit{transition} magazine, one of the most important avant-garde journals of the interwar period that featured articles on music, art and experimental language that claimed to be: “The most complete syllabus of radical creative activity in the postwar period.”\textsuperscript{39} Some of Cage’s own back issues of \textit{transition} are found in his library at the John Cage Trust at Bard College. In these issues, Cage read works by Gertrude Stein and James Joyce and viewed Dada works by Ernst and Duchamp, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Hugo Ball, and Man Ray, along with Bauhaus constructivists Joseph Albers and László Moholy-Nagy. Cage also read about Dada theatre and Hugo Ball’s \textit{Cabaret} (1915), and would later cite the profound influence of these Dada works on his development.\textsuperscript{40}

When Cage returned from Europe he showed his paintings to two important art collectors, Walter Arensberg (collector of works by Duchamp) and Galka Scheyer

(collector of the “Blue Four,” Lyonel Feininger, Alexej Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee) and presented his music to Richard Bühlig, as Cage recalled: “When I showed my music to people whose opinion I respected and I showed my painting to people whose opinion I respected, the people who heard my music had better things to say about it than the people who looked at my paintings had to say about my paintings. And so I decided to devote myself to music.”

Cage viewed his education as a composer as integrally tied to the experiments of visual artists. In a letter to Jawlensky in 1935, he simply notes: “I write music. You are my teacher.” In a similar vein, “One way to write music: study Duchamp.” Cage’s music was further channeled into a renewed engagement with Dada in Seattle, where he taught at the Cornish School from 1938-39 and met the artist Morris Graves, whose Dadaist sensibilities influenced Cage’s view of performance as theatre. For example, at a 1938 performance of Cage’s percussion work *Quartett*, Graves made a dramatic entrance carrying a bag of peanuts and a lorgnette (a pair of glasses with a handle) that had doll’s eyes in place of the lenses; during the performance, following the third movement, Graves shouted, “Jesus in the Everywhere!”

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44 Herzogenrath, 226. In 1942, Morris Graves achieved national recognition when his works were included in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States*. After the exhibition ten of his paintings were purchased by the MoMA. Shortly thereafter, in April, Graves fortunes change dramatically when he was drafted by the military against his will. After deserting from the military, he was imprisoned at the military stockade at Fort Lewis, Washington.

While in Seattle, Cage also came into contact with Nancy Wilson Ross (1913-
1986), who had lectured on the connection of Dada and Zen since the mid-1930s. Cage
may have learned through transition that several Dada artists had studied Eastern
philosophy: Hannah Hoch was given a copy of the Tao-te-ching from Raoul Hausmann
and Tristan Tzara spoke of Dada as a “quasi Buddhistic religion of indifference.”
Ross noted three similarities between Dada and Zen: First, the use of shock as a way of
opening the self to something new; two, the use of randomness achieved by games of
question and answer, and; three, the dynamism that exists when all things are in harmony,
as in nature. The convergence of the political and spiritual ideas in Ross’ lectures
resonated with Cage, who recalled the importance of these lectures in his later writings.

Cage’s exposure to the art world in Europe, Los Angeles, Seattle and Chicago
takes a monumental leap forward when he and Xenia move into Guggenheim’s Halle
House in the late spring of 1942. Guggenheim’s home was the epicenter of the expatriate
art world, where Cage met face to face with Piet Mondrian, André Breton, Max Ernst,
Joseph Cornell, and Marcel Duchamp. His immersion within this community provides an
important context for this study of Credo.

Credo as a Musical Collage

Credo is one of the earliest examples of an American work to bring together
recorded phonograph samples, random radio sounds and “live” music. Credo has been
described as a collage, a term drawn from the French verb coller (“to glue”) and, in its

46 Tzara quoted in Herzogrenrath, 9.
47 Herzogrenrath, 9. See also Nancy Wilson Ross, Three Ways of Asian Wisdom (New York: Simon and
Schuster: 1966), 179.
broadest definition, as an artwork comprised of layers of both borrowed, found, and original material to generate a multiplicity of simultaneous meanings.

The term collage is used in this study to denote a technique, whereas the phrase collage aesthetic is used to denote a philosophical position that applies the ideals of collage (multiplicity, simultaneity, fragmentation, etc.) to other art forms, thus serving as methodological link from the visual arts to poetry, ballet, music, theatre, and film.\(^48\) The collage aesthetic concept has gained wide currency among music historians to describe works by Satie, Stravinsky, Ellington, Feldman, Crumb, Berio, and Schnitke (among others) by such scholars as Richard Taruskin, Glenn Watkins, David Metzer, and Daniel Albright. Further, theatre and dance historian Roger Copeland uses the term to describe Cunningham’s choreography, as well.

Like visual collage with its interpolation of everyday objects, like newspaper articles, Cage uses popular tunes and found sounds simultaneously with other disparately related items (e.g. a buzzer and a Beethoven symphony) as a way to bridge the boundary between art and life. Cage’s extensive use borrowed and sampled material generates a soundscape that conjures multiple time dimensions (past-present-future), social contexts (high/low, concert hall-dance hall), and various psychological and public realities. These come into focus when viewed in the context of the script and dance. There is also an element to chance in collage, as Ernst wrote, “I am tempted to see in collage the exploitation of the chance meeting of two remote realities on an unfamiliar

plane…coupling two apparently uncoupleable realities on a plane apparently unsuitable to them.”

Rickard Taruskin describes collage as modernist practice, not as a precursor or part of a postmodernist aesthetic. In a description works by Henry Brant, George Crumb, and others using a collage technique, he observes that

as an expressive resource collage remained well within the accepted boundaries of modernist practice, in no way contradicting or threatening its premises. Brant’s progressively more ambitious collages subscribe fully to the modernist ‘onward and upward’ project—even grander, even bigger, ever more omnivorous. Like other modernist devices that became conventional, collage was easily absorbed, in moderate doses, into the mainstream concert repertoire. There is no reason to apply a term like “postmodernism” to it.

Echoing themes expressed by art historians, Taruskin notes the use of collage to express the “simultaneous awareness of past, present and future” and its power to “evoke modern life in its irreducible heterogeneity.” His most extensive treatment of the term comes in section devoted to the use of collage in theatrical contexts. Indeed, Credo fits Taruskin’s criteria based on its use in a theatrical context as a way to effectively depict the fragmented reality of modern life conjured in Cunningham and Erdman’s drama, as well as to articulate the drama’s multiple time (three generations) and space (rural and urban) settings.

**Toward a Methodology of Reading Collage**

49 Max Ernst quoted in Katherine Hoffman, “Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview,” *Collage Critical Views*, Katherine Hoffman, ed. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 17. One of Ernst’s most famous collage books, with poetry by Breton, *La femme 100 têtes* (1921) has a phonetically punning title similar to *Credo*, which understood both as “The Woman One Hundred Heads” or “The Woman without a head.” This book was also used as the basis for a set of piano preludes by George Antheil which uses yet another translation of the title, “The Woman with a Hundred Heads” (1932-33).


51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 419.
This study treats *Credo* as a theatre work and considers the music, dance, and
script as integral components. Contextual methodologies drawn from musicology, art
history, and interdisciplinary studies are used in this interpretation, which takes into
consideration artistic biography, popular culture, and social context. I draw on the work
of art historians who specialize in the study of collage, including Patricia Leighten,
Christine Poggi, David Cottingham, and Jeffrey Weiss, each of whom approach collage
from different perspectives and methodologies, though with the same goal of analyzing
the elements of a collage, like newspaper fragments and other found images, within a
broader cultural context. For example, Patricia Leighten situates Picasso’s *papier-collés*
in the context of anarchism; Weiss explores Duchamp and Picasso in the context of
popular culture and the music hall; Poggi stays within the art world by juxtaposing the
Futurist and Cubist approach to visual and poetic collage as a way to illustrate a common
goal of subverting traditional modes of representation; while Cottingham takes into
account both popular culture and the Balkan war to underscore the relationship between
the artistic avant-garde and geo-political conflict.

*Cage’s Credo* shares many of the themes of these early collages: The interpolation
of recognizable musical elements drawn from popular culture (boogie-woogie); a satirical
take on bourgeois values (using tin cans to drown out a “classical” masterpiece); and the
use of randomness to challenge traditional notions of stylistic unity and structure (the
radio). What connects the visual and performative collage is that they are able to generate
a wide range of meanings for the viewer/listener. One can look at a Picasso collage with
its references to the Balkan wars in newspaper clippings situated in a Parisian music hall
scene, and ignore the newspaper details, and simply enjoy it as a playful depiction of
public life. At the same time, when one considers what the newspaper fragments actually say in light of Picasso’s anarchist affiliations in the period before World War I, a darker and more nuanced interpretation arises.53

Collage as a medium captures the tension of modernity between surface details (an advertisement or cup of coffee) and substance (a newspaper article about war). In Credo the boogie-woogie may conjure images of dancing at Harlem’s Savoy ballroom while lurking in the background the radio forges a connection to reality; a reality in 1942 that would have been dominated by World War II.

Papier-collé provides a useful metaphor for this interpretive study: By peeling away (“ungluing”) the musical elements of Credo for investigation and comparing them with the text and dance, a network of possible meanings begins to emerge. For example, Cage’s use of a cowboy song conjures a range of meanings in light of the popularity of radio and movie Westerns in the 1930s and 1940s. Does Cage simply use the reference to underscore the setting of the dance, noted in the scenario as “Westward Ho!” (by way of a reference to the 1935 film Westward Ho starring John Wayne)? Or is it also as a reference to the shared western heritage of the three collaborators (Cage, California; Cunningham, Washington; Erdman, Hawaii)? It also operates on another level by signifying the battles between cowboys and Indians, which serves as an effective metaphor of marital strife between Husband and Wife.

Daniel Albright’s work Untwisting the Serpent offers a useful methodology for negotiating the complex interconnections in works like Credo, which merge poetry,

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53 Patricia Leighten, “Picasso’s Collages and the Threat of War, 1912-13,” The Art Bulletin 67/4 (December 1985): 653. “Many of the newsprint texts in Picasso’s collages of 1912-13, long seen as mere passages of color and texture, take on concrete political meanings when they are read in light of Picasso’s early immersion in the anarcho-Symbolist milieu of Barcelona and pre-War Paris.”
dance, and music. Albright proposes a vertical approach, examining constituent elements together in order to present a holistic view of the work; to read a dance gesture, musical phrase, and poetic utterance together in order to offer an interpretation that approaches the “total effect” sought by the collaborators. The intention here is to reveal a side of Credo that has never been seen or heard, one that reunites the well-known music with the unknown dance and script in order to identify patterns of correspondence and tension. Nonetheless, the goal is not to depict Credo as a Gesamtkunstwerk but as the complex interaction of three, independently created elements that, when taken together, attempt to capture and communicate something about the state of the artists’ lives and the world in 1942.

Credo is a work that transcends its position as merely a piece of music by Cage or a lost dance by Cunningham and Erdman. In many ways it continues to reflect the zeitgeist of its origin in 1942 while retaining a direct and powerful connection to the present moment in live performance. One of Duchamp’s most famous works also presents a similar connection between past and present. The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (a.k.a. Large Glass), made in New York between the years 1915-23, in many ways serves as a visual metaphor for Credo. Cage linked his use of radio to the way Robert Rauschenberg used pop culture references in his collage works and attributes this practice “with great impact to the work of Marcel Duchamp.”

Was the catalyst for using a radio in Credo sparked by Duchamp? How much did Cage pick up from Duchamp at Guggenheim’s home in early July 1942? Similarly, both Large Glass and Credo are

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54 Albright, 5
55 John Cage interview with Irving Sandler in Conversing with Cage, Richard Kostelanetz, ed., 173
indebted to science and radio communication, use human-machine analogies, abound in punning word play, and deal with the seemingly insurmountable barrier between men and women. More broadly however, it is how Duchamp and Cage challenge the boundary between art and life in a deceptively simple way that makes both works revolutionary—like a painting on glass which is a window into an ever-changing environment, or the use of a radio as a portal into a wireless American landscape. As such, both works are continuously updated by their cultural contexts and thus always reflective of their time and space—a radical idea that reshaped the way we think about art and music.


57 See John Cage, “Juilliard Lecture (1952),” in A Year From Monday (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 102. “It acts in such a way that one can ‘hear through’ a piece of music just as one can see through some modern buildings or see through a wire sculpture by Richard Lippold or the glass of Marcel Duchamp.”
Chapter One

Dramatic Relationships: The Origins of *Credo in Us*

“Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them.”

--John Cage, “Experimental Music”

“*Credo in Us* was adult beyond what any “youngsters” have the right to be.”

--George Beiswanger, dance critic

*Credo in Us* began as a theatre work created collaboratively by Cunningham, Erdman, and Cage with costumes by Charlotte Trowbridge. *Credo* was first performed on August 1, 1942, at the Summer Dance program of Bennington College in Vermont and later revised and performed in New York City at the Studio Theater (October 20-21, 1942) and in Chicago at the Arts Club (February 1943). Critics were not sure what to make of *Credo*: Was it a tragedy, comedy, or farce? Was it derivative of Martha Graham’s dances or an auspicious beginning for the young choreographers? This confusion has confounded scholars as well, who ask similar “either/or” questions: Is *Credo* a biographical portrait of Cage and Xenia’s crumbling marriage or a satire on American notions of marriage more broadly? Does the reference to “U.S.” in the title suggest that it’s a critique of America?

This chapter attempts to bring a degree of order and historical context to an

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3 Trowbridge made the costumes for Erdman and Cunningham’s *Ad Lib.* and *Seeds of Brightness,* Erdman’s *Transformation of Medusa,* and Cunningham’s *Renaissance Testimonials,* which appeared on the Bennington program with *Credo in US.* She also created the look for Cunningham’s *Totem Ancestor,* which appeared on the New York program with *Credo.* She also created some of the most memorable costumes for Martha Graham (e.g. *Night Journey*). See Charlotte Trowbridge, *Dance Drawings of Martha Graham* (New York: Dance Observer, 1945).
interpretation of *Credo*, while allowing it to be, as it was, a complex and untidy theatre work. No theory of grand unities will be promoted—*Credo* is not a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Yet as we wade through the choreography, images, scenario, script and music, we will consider how these elements relate to each other and what they mean in a larger context of artistic influence and social circumstance.

The circumstances that surround the creation of *Credo* are in many ways more dramatic than the actual drama. The history of the work involves a fascinating array of characters, including Peggy Guggenheim, Max Ernst, Joseph Campbell, and Martha Graham, John Steinbeck, the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee, Marcel Duchamp, and the photographer Edward Weston. This network of relationships takes place in an equally interesting setting spanning a geographical range that moves up the west coast from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, to Southeast Alaska and then east via Chicago to New York City and Bennington, Vermont. What makes the origin of *Credo* so compelling is how entwined it is with the lives of its young creators and those around them—lovers, mentors, patrons, and critics that influenced their artistic development. As a drama about marriage, it also raises questions about Cage’s troubled relationship to his wife Xenia and his evolving relationship with Cunningham. What unfolds in this chapter is a portrait of three artists embarking on their first creative project, itself a satire on lost love deeply rooted in aspects of their personal lives and situated within the upheavals of artistic, social and political life in America at the dawn of WWII.

**Origins: A New Year’s Eve Dinner in New York**

In 1941, Cage and his wife Xenia Cage (1913-1995) were living in Chicago, where
he was teaching a course in “sound experiments” at László Moholy-Nagy’s School of Design—which was modeled on the interdisciplinary curriculum of the Bauhaus school in Germany. During an unbearably frigid winter, the young couple decided to explore the possibility of moving to New York City, where Cage hoped to solve his financial problems by writing music for film and radio. In December 1941, they visited New York to establish contacts. Cage met with Davidson Taylor at CBS to pitch an idea for a Columbia Workshop radio drama; this would become *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*. He also met with Aaron Copland and officials at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and had a brief encounter with Martha Graham, who intimated that she was interested in working with him. Cage’s visit with Graham was encouraged by Cunningham, as Cage recalled in a letter: “Martha wrote thru Merce that she wanted me to work with her in New York, that she would provide for me and that I was fearless and completely imaginative (all of which gladdens my heart).” Xenia noted that if they had not committed to giving a concert in Chicago at the Arts Club, they would have stayed in New York so Cage could work with Graham.

Cage’s visit culminated in a New Years Eve party with Joseph Campbell, his wife, Jean Erdman, and Cunningham (Xenia had become ill with shellfish poisoning and missed the party). At the time, Campbell, a professor of comparative mythology and

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4 Kostelanetz, Conversing with Cage, 11
5 *The City Wears a Slouch Hat* was reconstructed by John Kennedy and recorded by “Essential Music,” in 1997 with the actor Paul Schmidt for Mode records. The original broadcast is available from the Cortical Foundation album No. 14. For further discussion, see chapter four.
6 Presumably this began discussion of Cage’s percussion concert at the MoMA as part of the League of Composer’s twenty-fifth anniversary season. The concert took place in February 1943, and was covered by *Life* and *Time* magazines.
7 Letter from John Cage to Doris Dennison. Series I, Box 2, Folder 6. John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library. Unexpectedly, Graham would dismiss Cage when he arrived at her studio looking for work in the spring of 1942.
8 Ibid.
religion at Sarah Lawrence College, served as an intellectual guide to many artists, including Graham, Cunningham, and later, Cage. Over dinner and drinks that evening the plan to create *Credo in Us* was first discussed when Campbell suggested that Erdman and Cunningham should present a recital together and that Cage should write the music.

So when the evening was over, we were decided, we were going to do this. So there was the plan, how would Merce and I work together? Well, neither of us wanted to be choreographed, we both wanted to choreograph, so what we did was to agree on two or three duet ideas, and then each of us compose our own parts. We just had a sketch of the opening and closing, and then each one choreographed his or her own part.⁹

A major reason for the collaboration was for Cunningham and Erdman to begin creating their own dances and experiment with improvisation, ballet and other ideas outside of Graham’s aesthetic. As Erdman summed up, Cage and Campbell “were eager to have us get out from under Martha’s thumb.”¹⁰

**Dance Influences: Graham, Balanchine, and Vaudeville**

Erdman and Cunningham had joined the Martha Graham Dance Company within months of each other between 1938 and 1939. This was a transitional period for Graham, during which she moved beyond the plot-less group dramas of the 1930s to create dance-dramas, fusing narration and dialogue, and dealing with substantive matters as diverse as mythology, psychology and American history.¹¹

Critics praised Graham’s innovative dance-dramas for the way they opened up dance to a wider range of theatrical expression, comparing it to the development of sound film, as one critic observed in 1942:

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The Dance is expression in movement, usually with no word spoken. The dancer translates ideas into line and form, and a dance scenario or libretto is only a statement of the idea and a diagram of the movement through which it is expressed. It can be set down in a program note. Like the silent film, the wordless dance has a purity and an intensity of expression all its own. Yet there are certain things dance can say better when, like the sound film, it is complemented by words and the eloquence of the voice.

In the particular form of theatre dance that Martha Graham has developed in such works as ‘American Document’ and ‘Letter to the World,’ the spoken word is an integral part of the dance. Sometimes the movement evokes the words; sometimes the voice calls forth the patterns of the dance; and sometimes the two play back and forth in dramatic counterpoint. The result is a new kind of dance-play which, without losing any of the unique quality of dance, admits feelings and ideas that are more subtle and more dramatic.12

Graham cast Cunningham and Erdman in psychologically probing dance-dramas, including Letter to the World (1940), a psychological portrait of Emily Dickinson; Punch and The Judy (1941), a satiric tragic-comedy about marriage; and the patriotic drama American Document (1938; rev. 1942), Cunningham later recalled that “Those few years working with her and being in her company provided an experience of the dance that was not available elsewhere then. I have always been grateful for it.13

Credo in Us reflects the influence of these dance-dramas and is further animated by experimental practices circulating in American dance during the early-1940s. Many of these ideas were drawn from the visual art world, which functioned for most of the twentieth century, according to theater historian Roger Copeland, as the “modernist tastemaker and avant-garde trendsetter” for dance.14 First was the influence of surrealism, which probed that which was hidden—the psyche, the meaning of myths, the often multiple meanings embodied in language, and the physical, unspoken language expressed between people. Fueled by the writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and focused on

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a quest for authentic expression through the engagement with unconscious impulses, this surrealist impulse is most evident in Graham’s works, such as *Letter to the World* (1940).

Another early influence on Cunningham was the work of George Balanchine, which featured a style that was less formal than that of classical ballet, with an emphasis on movement and clarity of motion rather than narrative development. Balanchine had worked on Broadway creating dances for over twenty Broadway musicals, like *The Boys From Syracuse* (1938), *The Lady Comes Across* and *Rosalinda* (both 1942), and several Hollywood films, and in these works embraced vernacular movement and a theatrical approach that valued dance on equal par with script and music. Dance historian Camille Hardy summed up Balanchine’s integration of diverse influences: “While he was the first to place pure classicism on the Great White Way, he also interspersed these numbers with jitterbug, tap, jazz, and ethnic forms.”

Cunningham worked with Balanchine while a student at Lincoln Kirstein’s School of the American Ballet in 1941, and as one of six men dancing in the corps de ballet of Balanchine’s *Ballet Imperial* in its 1942 New York debut. In fact, Cunningham was rehearsing with Balanchine while revising *Credo* for its New York premiere during the fall of 1942. Cunningham brought elements of Balanchine’s eclectic style to bear in *Credo* through the use of popular dance.

*Credo*’s inclusion of popular idioms may also derive from Cunningham’s childhood interest in “vaudeville.” As a child Cunningham’s first experiences seeing dance came through vaudeville when his parents took him to see shows at the Liberty Theatre in Centralia, Washington. As a young dancer he also performed in short vaudeville shows.

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16 Vaughan, 23.
organized by his teacher Maude Barrett. In 1935, Barrett took Cunningham and other
dancers and a pianist on what he described as “a short and intoxicating vaudeville tour”
down the West coast to Los Angeles performing in nightclubs along the way. At one
performance, Cunningham recalled, Barrett realized she had no make-up so she asked the
performers to “bite your lips and pinch your cheeks, and you’re on.”  
Barrett’s devotion
to the theater and dance was an important influence on Cunningham:

All my subsequent involvements with dancers who were concerned with dance as a conveyer of
social message or to be used as a testing ground for psychological types have not succeeded in
destroying that feeling Mrs. Barrett gave me that dance is most deeply concerned with each single
instant as it comes along, and its life and vigor and attraction lie in just that singleness. It is as
accurate and impermanent as breathing.

Cunningham’s interest in popular dance and theater remained an integral aspect in his
early work with Graham, as mentioned above. For example, he played the role of
interlocutor in Graham’s American Document in 1942, a work that included a elements
drawn the minstrel show, like a “cake walk,” “walk around,” “crossfire” dialogue along
with acrobatic movements.

The dancers performed a stylized bow and stepped high with skirts held waist level. Graham's
version of the Walk Around included processional walks, rapid leaps, cartwheels two by two across
the stage, acrobatic tricks and, as [Lincoln] Kirstein put it, ‘gestures borrowed from minstrel strut
and cake-walk.’

American Document bore little resemblance to mid-nineteenthcentury minstrelsy of Dan
Emmett and his Virginia Minstrels or the Christy Minstrels. Graham did not use

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18 Cunningham, “The Impermanent Art,” reprinted in Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years, David Vaughan, ed.
19 Ibid.
20 Vaughan, 23. It is important to note that Cunningham began as a drama major at Cornish before
switching to dance. He continued acting in his first year in New York in 1939, appearing in e. e. cummings’
play Him. Furthermore, Cunningham’s devotion to Barrett is evident in other dances incorporating popular
dance, like Two Step, a solo dance set to an orchestral arrangement of Satie’s music-hall song “La Diva de
L’Empire,” in which he used soft-shoe technique. See Vaughan, 53.
21 Maureen Needham Costonis, “Martha Graham’s American Document: A Minstrel Show in Modern
Dance Dress,” American Music (Fall 1991): 300.
blackface, stock characters, or costumes drawn from the minstrel tradition. Instead she used the theatrical structure of short scenes, narration, and variety as a novel way to tell the story of America History, which included significant segments on slavery and Native Americans. Cunningham spoke the lines of Red Jacket, a member of the Seneca Nation. The dance depicted the “evil day” when Native Americans’ were removed from their traditional lands.22

Cunningham’s work with Graham and interest in vaudeville likely served as the impetus for the use of narration in Credo and diverse choreography. In the Bennington program, Credo is subtitled, “A dramatic Playlet for Two Characters.”23 “Playlet,” a vaudeville term used to denote a brief, one-act drama usually lasting about twenty minutes, is often centered on a single conflict involving one or two main characters within a minimal setting.24 Credo follows the standard playlet form, itself being around twenty minutes and centered on two characters and one conflict—their marriage. Cunningham’s punning poetry and Cage’s eclectic score fit the “playlet” genre. Brett Page in his 1915 book Writing for Vaudeville describes the three schools or themes of vaudeville playlets, “realism, romance, and idealism.”25 Viewing Credo through the lens of vaudeville may also illuminates Cage’s choice of music and instrumentation, which, like a pit orchestra, underscores the stage action with a range of stock musical tropes and sound effects. The spirit of vaudeville may also have informed Cunningham and Erdman’s use of popular dance and modern dance choreography.26

22 Ibid., 302.
23 Program courtesy of the Bennington College Library Archive, May, 2008
24 Brett Page, Writing for Vaudeville (Springfield Mass: The Home Correspondence School, 1915), Chapter IV.
25 Ibid.
It is important to note that vaudeville is one among many references in Credo. It is in a sense, vaudeville one step removed from the actual vaudeville of 1900, which featured comedians, acrobats, animal acts, singers, and a wide range of music and short plays presented over nine acts, in some cases. It is even removed from the touring shows on the Orpheum circuit that traveled throughout the West, which Cunningham may have seen as a child. Credo references one part of the vaudeville--the playlet. The playlet therefore becomes one element among many in the collage texture of Credo. This reference to popular culture also echoes the practice of many collageurs in the early-twentieth century who included popular themes in their collages, from Picasso’s music hall references in the papier collés to Max Ernst’s cuttings from popular magazines seen in La femme 100 Têtes.27

The Credo Drama

Credo is a satire about American culture told from the perspective of a husband a wife locked in a failed marriage. Erdman commented that Credo was a critique of their own upbringing; “the parents having a little too much trouble, or something--it was in the air that young people always had some criticism of the generation before.”28 In Credo, these “parents” have two names: “Husband/Shadow” and “Wife/Ghoul’s Rage;” the theme and choreography of the dance evolved from these names, as Erdman recounted, “You see, we decided on the theme and the theme was this expression of this really badly put together couple. Just for me to express the name that I was given, which was Ghoul’s

27 Charlotte Stokes, “Collage as Jokework: Freud's Theories of Wit as the Foundation for the Collages of Max Ernst,” Leonardo 15/3 (Summer, 1982): 199-204
28 Fetterman, 12
Rage, and he Shadow, was enough to get us going.”²⁹ They drew on what they knew best for the dance, Graham’s movement vocabulary:

I remember there was this promenade and, you see Martha Graham would always have these lovely walks for people to do, so we had this walk together, and then all of a sudden one of us would do what we call a “Graham contraction,” turn around spin back and … come back again, and then the other one would go off and come back again.³⁰

The choreography expresses the essential qualities of each character’s personality:

Husband/Shadow is weak, thus he never lifts or supports his wife. In contrast, Erdman, who describes Wife/Ghoul’s Rage as a violent she-male, employs gestures like the “Graham Kick,” aimed at Cunningham’s head (Figure 1) to convey her anger.³¹ The structure of Credo positions the characters in a sequence of settings, using four so-called “Façade” sections that frame three “Progressions.” The first “Progression” is a solo for Cunningham danced to a cowboy song; the second, a solo for Erdman, is danced to an “Indian” tom-tom rhythm; and the third is a duet set to a boogie-woogie.

The following reconstruction of Credo’s dramatic action is based on the scenario and script, photographs by Barbara Morgan, the most famous dance photographer of the day, and Erdman’s choreography notes, which include stage directions, costume ideas, and drawings.³² The ordering of the images here is based on my own speculation, which is informed by Erdman’s notes and the scenario and script.

Reconstruction of the Credo Drama

The opening lines of the scenario establish a formal Victorian setting recalling

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２⁹ Jean Erdman interview by David Patterson, May 15, 1993.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Jean Erdman Papers MGZMD 170 Box 27, Folder 1. NYPLPA.
³² Jean Erdman, 1942, NYPL Jean Erdman Papers, box 27, folder 1. There are three pages of handwritten notes in a small bound notebook. The section on Credo is titled “Dance of Death-Deus ex machina” (The ways of the World). Nancy Allison, former dancer in Erdman’s company and executor of her estate, confirmed, to the best of her knowledge, that these notes are in reference to Credo.
Grant Wood’s iconic painting of a stiff rural couple in *American Gothic* (1930): “They are happied husband and wifed…. They Façade their frappant ways across a sacred spot.”33 Their sacred spot is a home somewhere “Westward Ho.” The first sounds of *Credo* are of a radio playing loudly then slowly fading away,34 followed by the lines: “Shadow’s in a gimlet haze/These things were in Ghoul’s rage.” Husband/Shadow is drunk and Wife/Ghoul’s Rage is angry; she makes her dramatic entrance, “circle stage with wild jazz theme female.”35

Marital tension is quickly established in the first duet in Façade 1: “male enters with human-sentimental theme in jazz idiom-gradually develops to mechanical movement-which brings female on stage….where she catches male at peak of dehumanized movement (about to finish) runs him to place where duet starts.”36 The scenario also references Husband/Shadow as a machine: “Ah, but what! This breakage of pattern. And he on-and-ons—is he only machine?”37 Erdman uses an aggressive series of movements, including one in which she attempts to kick Cunningham, a moment that captures her anger and his fearfulness (see Figure 1). Erdman recalled: “Merce, he was not about to help you out in that character, he was playing Shadow, you see. Not about to help you out in any lifts, so I had to keep my toe up in the air. It was a turn I think, it was a stunt turn, you see.”38

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33 Bennington program.
34 Cage later changed the radio to “radio or phonograph” in the suite version.
35 Erdman papers, 1.
36 Ibid.
37 Bennington program.
38 Jean Erdman interview by David Patterson, May 15, 1993.
Husband/Shadow’s weak status is also expressed in Trowbridge’s costume, specifically the necktie and tunic top that combine to create the illusion of a necktie split in two, a significant gesture of emasculation. Wife/Ghoul’s Rage’s costume, a fit and flair dress, embodies the symbol of femininity highlighted by the ruffle collar and hat. Erdman notes how her costume reflects her split character, “Dress as a seductress-devil (for a + c) and have a cloak like a nurse or protectress for B” (ABC may reflect the three sections of the dance). All the images consistently position Wife/Ghoul’s Rage in the role of the aggressor. In her notes, Erdman amplifies this mythic figure to global importance: “She-devil (It’s the women who make war?! that you Who make heroes?! Who destroy?! will die.”

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39 Erdman choreography notes, 2.
40 Ibid.
The scenario depicts Wife/Ghoul’s Rage as lost in a fantasy world, “with her unreality.”
The couple’s mutual ambivalence is captured in this image of Wife/Ghoul’s Rage hanging, unsupported, from Husband/Shadow’s neck. (Figure 3).
The First Progression, a solo for Husband/Shadow, is set to a Cowboy tune, reinforcing the Western theme in the script: “So he searched for the Glory that was Greeley’s.” This is likely a reference to Horace Greeley (1811-1872), editor of the *New York Tribune* and politician, who was mistakenly believed to have coined the phrase, “Go west, young man, and grow up with the country,” a phrase that echoed the spirit of America’s westward expansion and manifest destiny.\(^4\)

After the quiet cowboy solo, there is a brief duet underscored by a cacophonous texture of percussion, piano and radio sounds that frame a rapid succession of lines alluding to Husband/Shadow’s affairs: “And so, Shadow took the leave philistine and

\(^4\)The phrase “Go West young man” was mistakenly attributed to Horace Greeley. For more information and speculation on who may have coined the term, see Robert Chadwell Williams, *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom* (New York: NewYork University Press, 2006), 40.
libertined his civilization western,” a clever pun on the words libertine and liberty to suggest the philanderer’s freedom cast on a larger historic stage with the use of “civilization western.” This line, like the title, invokes two perspectives, the personal and public.

The script references the couple’s emotional distance at a moment of catharsis near the end of the First Progression, “The apathy of intellectual indulgence/it gave them both away.” Cage’s score includes fortissimo block chords in the piano and rapid, polyrhythmic lines for tin cans and radio sounds that frame the lines: “So Shadow, Livid and screamed,” [noise music] “His arrowhead picking increased by dalliances” [noise music] “And much jerking and braking to mater the ends for time too ancient in that castle on the vastern plainte wheat.”42 There is one image that suggests the anger at this moment with Cunningham in full flight, knees tucked in looking down on Erdman, whose head is flung back and arms outstretched (see Figure 4).

![Figure 8 Credo in Us photograph by Barbara Morgan, 1942.](image)

42 Cunningham script. The words “arrowhead picking” and “dalliances” may be read as allusions to Husband/Shadow’s philandering.
In Erdman’s notes, Husband/Shadow is killed by Wife/Ghoul’s Rage, “using mechanical quality of movement which builds in tension she always ‘on his back’ preventing him from returning to human-sentimental movement until he is exhausted-killed.”

In Façade Two, the drama shifts perspective to Wife/Ghoul’s Rage and is set up by the scenario: “Ghoulish, however, digging back, this thing in her broke through to ancestral gold; and he was stampeded after.” A rapid succession of spoken lines moving from a nostalgic tone to anger precedes her solo dance: “And she tilted eyes at number of memories oh, bad too that kept peering up.” Cage uses an Indian tom tom rhythm to frame her lines: “Until great sunstroke of Ghoul’s Rage when light hit her in common form/So usable but itchy.” Here she is portrayed as a utilitarian object, “so usable” and “bitchy”—using “But itchy” as a homophone for “bitchy.”

Cage continues the Indian tom tom rhythm to underscore Ghoul’s solo dance in the Second Progression. As her dance builds in tension she begins a dance of death, Erdman notes: “Solo female runs rampant-unleashed fury until everything is destroyed and her dynamic of energy is used up-she gradually approaches center by counter clock-wise circulation to a continual spinning and peeling off sound and sight moving off into the distance (with music and lights)–to black out and silence.” Cage scores this moment with the piano alone playing a repeating dissonant chord in an ostinato pattern that is nearly identical to a chord used in the “danse sacre” section of Stravinsky’s section of Rite of Spring, which occurs at the climax of the pagan rite with the sacrifice of the

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43 Erdman, 1
44 Cunningham script.
45 Erdman, 1.
virgin. Similarly, Cage uses this reference to underscore the moment of “death” for Wife/Ghoul’s Rage, whose circular dance also recalls Nijinsky’s choreography for the sacrificial dance.

After this climactic moment, Façade Three begins with a brief moment of reconciliation when Husband/Shadow sees his wife who has in fact fainted and not died: “An his Fainted Rage de Ghoul—it was she too he thought with memories.” Cage returns to the Stravinsky quotation to frame the final line: “But Credo in us was Ghoul’s Rage Motto & la vie bid them well to use it,” or to paraphrase, “I believe in us is a belief they would be wise to follow.”

The Third Progression opens with a piano solo of a blues introduction to a boogie-woogie dance. The harmonic progression, marked by simple chords in the left hand, steadily ascends three octaves, creating a sense of levity and resurrection. Indeed, Erdman’s notes suggest that it is jazz that brings Husband/Shadow back to life. While the scenario briefly conveys the levity of the moment, “Ah such eyes,” it also foreshadows the return to the status quo, “but still a zombie.”

The final duet is set to a boogie-woogie, originally a blues piano style characterized by a driving bass line popular in the 1920s. During the late-1930s and early-1940s, boogie-woogie returned to popularity in part through big band recordings, Broadway musicals and films. Cunningham, who loved to dance to jazz at the Savoy Ballroom, may

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47 Interestingly, Stravinsky’s *Le sacre* was one of Campbell’s favorite works. Is it coincidence that Cage would borrow an idea from Stravinsky, a composer he disliked at the time, to use in work commissioned by Campbell? Or was Cage striving to find the most obvious musical trope to represent sacrifice and death, one that his New York audience of artists and musicians would immediately recognize? These questions will be explored in later chapters.
48 Bennington program.
have choreographed this section as a variation on the “Lindy Hop,” a six-step dance that was a popular dance at the Savoy at the time (see Figure 5 and 6).\footnote{A description of Cunningham time dancing at the Savoy is included in chapter three. See also Vaughan, 23.}

![Image](image1.png)  ![Image](image2.png)

Figure 5 and 6, Credo in Us, photographs by Barbara Morgan, 1942.

After the duet, when the boogie-woogie fades away, the Coda Façade begins with the return of the “dance of death” music along with machine-gun-like sounds played on a tin can. There is also the return of the radio. This noise texture conveys an abrupt return to the reality of everyday life, and we may imagine, the sounds of war.

**Jean Erdman’s Analysis of Credo**

Erdman’s analysis appears on the second and third page of her choreographic notes and reveals the importance of WWII on her conception of Credo. Presented in table form with four headings: “Literal, Moral, Allegorical, Anagorical,” she lists in columns the meaning of each level of meaning:

- **Literal:** “A man is ruined by a woman.”
Allegorical: “The people having lost touch with God are driven to death and hell by the devil. Eve ruins adam This war is the result of man’s self-forgetting and urge to distraction. And this war results in the destruction of the world.

Anagorical: “1. The dismemberment circle. 2. End of a world age. 3. Forms of maya are self”

Moral: a. An American ‘you may dance to forget’
B. An American soldier and nurse ‘you must dance to forget’
C. She-devil (It’s the women who make war??) that you Who make heroes?! Who destroy??) will die.

Political sense (my attitude toward it)
Moral issue from Christian view
World view of Hindus and inevitable phases.
Personal view of what makes individuation-fullness of development.50

Anagorical refers to the interpretation of sacred texts in part to find hidden meanings. Erdman’s anagorical reading suggests her interpretation of World War II as an “End of a world age.” The term “maya,” from Sanskrit, means the power to produce illusions. In this case, it also refers to “Mahamaya,” a goddess personifying the power that creates phenomena. The political/moral segment considers the characters as an American soldier and nurse. She provides a surprising statement at the close of her chart that it is women who are responsible for war. Moving between the historical, mystical, and individual perspectives of her character, Erdman merges the Christian moral of ‘thou shalt not kill’ with the Hindu cycle of death and re-birth.

Erdman’s notes reflect a level of engagement that recalls the practices of Stanislavski, whose theatrical method required rigorous self-examination, historical and psychological research, and a detailed study of script and character with the goal of creating performances of psychological depth. Nonetheless, Erdman takes her analysis to ever deeper levels of inquiry that recall methods used by Joseph Campbell in his

50 Erdman, Choreographic notes, 2-3.
comparative analysis of myths from different cultures and historical periods. In this light, Erdman’s exploration of the anagorical level may have been used to connect her character to the universal figure of the she-devil or to the mythological origins of the dance of death (“dismemberment circle”).

In her notes, Erdman includes a drawing of “the hero’s journey,” a diagram that Campbell developed to describe the shared elements of the hero myth from different cultures and historic periods. It is a description of various rites of passage involving separation, initiation, and return, for example, the story of Odysseus as depicted in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. It begins with the hero’s decision to depart from everyday life in order to begin an adventure or quest, usually by entering into conflict. As part of this departure phase, the hero begins a transformation in which the old self dies in preparation for a new phase of being. The initiation phase begins a period of trials in which the hero encounters failure or distraction. One distraction is the “woman as temptress,” a figure that recalls Erdman’s character. The temptress symbolically represents the physical or material temptations of life. The next trial is the hero’s conflict with an overwhelming power, usually associated with a father figure, in which the hero is symbolically killed. Within this phase, Campbell lists the “dismemberment circle, crucifixion, abduction, and night sea journey,” among others. The return marks the final phase of the process and results in the hero’s mastery of both the spiritual and material worlds.51

Several themes from this journey are incorporated into *Credo*. The idea of a spiritual journey into a fantasy world, the meaning of the symbolic deaths, and liberatory moment of the emergence of a transformed self, signified by the boogie-woogie dance. It

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also helps explain the motivation of having the characters move between an inner world and an outer world and the significance of their doubled names in which “husband” and “wife” signify their public selves and “Shadow” and “Ghoul’s rage” their private personas.

**Dramatic Scenario and Script**

The following scenario for *Credo* appeared only in the first program at Bennington:

Place: Westward Ho!
Time: Three Generations.

“They are happied husband and wifed. They have harmonious postures. They Façade their frappant ways across a sacred spot.

Ah, but what! This breakage of pattern. And he on-and-ons—is he only machine?—with her unreality. But soon breakage too.

So he searched for the Glory that was Greeley’s, and she wondered after. It killed time.

Ghoulish, however, digging back, this thing in her broke through to ancestral gold; and he was stampeded after. But that was no elixir.

Boiling both and retching, now finally with fruitful efforts; a caraway! “Ah, such eyes.” But still a zombie.”

Cunningham’s scenario is full of double entendres, puns and faux-French constructions.

Traditionally the dance scenario outlines the structure of the dance. Like an opera synopsis, it is intended to guide the audience through the drama. Cunningham’s satiric interpretation is clearly intended to obscure rather than clarify the dramatic action.

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52 Bennington program, 1
Cunningham’s references to the American west may also reflect the fact that Cage, Erdman, and Cunningham’s families had all migrated west. Cunningham’s parents’ moved to Washington State in search of adventure and freedom, as he recalled:

I think, that both my parents had an instinct for adventure. Both left the middle of the country to come west for their careers. My mother came from Minnesota, to teach school. My dad came from Kansas, to study law. I once asked him why he hadn’t set up practice in a city, Seattle maybe. He said it was a conscious decision because he wanted to able to do all kinds of law, from homesteading cases to defending murderers. He said he felt free in Centralia, and knowing his temperament, I can imagine also that [he] didn’t want somebody else telling him what to do.53

Cage’s family began their westward migration before the Civil War, when Cage’s great-grandfather, the minister Gustavus Adolphus Cage, migrated from Virginia to Tennessee,54 then on to Greeley, Colorado—another possible connection to “Greeley’s Glory.”55 Cage’s grandfather, also a preacher, continued west to Los Angeles, where Cage’s father was born. Erdman’s father, John Piney Erdman, a missionary from New England, migrated to Honolulu and served as a nondenominational protestant minister at the Church of the Crossroads where he preached in both English and Japanese.56

Musically, Cage carefully frames the text in his words, by “running the music up to the words, and leaving a space for the words, then continuing the music.”57 Like the scenario, the script is also in an irregular poetic meter and punning tone:

Shadows in a gimlet haze(?)
These things were in Ghoul’s rage.

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53 Vaughan, 12.
57 Vaughan, pg. 33. When Cage arranged Credo in 1962 into a suite, he left the silences where the texts had been. Is this relevant?
And so, Shadow took the leave philistine and libertine his civilization western.

The apathy of intellectual indulgence
It gave them both away.

And money soon ended visiting their
Castle on the vastern plainted wheat.

So Shadow
Livid and screamed.

His arrowhead picking
Increased by dalliances.

And much jerking (?) and braking to matter the ends for
Time too ancient in that castle on the vastern plainted wheat.

And she tilted eyes at number of memories
Oh, bad too that kept peering up.

Until great sunstroke of Ghoul’s Rage when
Light hits her in common form
So usable but itchy

And how much it spangled so money times.
And how much…

Guilted (quilted?) cultures
Fit for a queen unequivocally.

So again the retching came.
Pourquoi?

And his fainted Rage de Ghoul—
it was she too he thought with memories.

But Credo in Us was Ghoul’s Rage Motto
And la vie bid them well to use it.⁵⁸

Cunningham’s approach to writing was similar to his choreography, as Cage

⁵⁸ John Cage Credo in Us manuscript. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. JPB 94-24 folder 69.
recalled: “He had always a very spontaneous feeling with respect to words, as he does with respect to movement.” Erdman revealed that Cunningham did not want anyone to know he had written the scenario or script, so they agreed to tell people that the text was translated from the French surrealist journal Minotaure (1934-1939), which regularly featured writing by André Breton, whom Cunningham met through Peggy Guggenheim. Cunningham’s style also evokes the influence of James Joyce.

Cage and Cunningham each owned identical copies of the black bound first American edition of Finnegans Wake, published in 1939 by Viking Press; Cunningham’s copy is inscribed “June 1941, pour l’autre Cage.” Cage noted how Cunningham came to use ideas drawn from Joyce: “We did a great deal of … browsing in books—and I think this idea of finding titles in books came from Martha Graham. It’s just that we were browsing in different books than she was—it was mostly Finnegans Wake, really. Then there was Pound, and Stein of course, and e. e. cummings.”

Cage set another text by Joyce shortly after Credo in November 1942, with The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs, for voice (intoning only three pitches) and a closed piano played like a drum, a technique also employed in Credo. Widow, drawn from Finnegans Wake, recalls Cunningham’s script in its use of faux-French female names: “Madame Isa Veuve La

59 Ibid.
60 Fetterman, pg. 12. See also Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss, Surrealism, Politics and Culture (London: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 94. After finding Cunningham’s script in Cage’s manuscript score at the New York Library for the Performing Arts, I sent it to David Vaughan, archivist of the Cunningham Dance Company, who confirmed that the text matched the tone of Cunningham’s other dance-drama text, Four Walls (1944).
61 David Vaughan, Cunningham Dance Company archivist, who compared the Credo script to Cunningham’s script for Four Walls, corroborates the connection to Joyce. See David Vaughan, Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years, 332. See also David Nicholls, John Cage, 30. Nicholls refers to the scenario as “bizarre, almost Joycean.”
62 I found this copy in Cage’s library at the John Cage Trust at Bard College. Laura Kuhn, director of the Cage trust, suggested the book belonged in Cunningham’s library in New York. The inscription alludes to Cage and Cunningham’s close relationship.
63 Vaughan, 32.
Belle” in Widow and “Ghoul de Rage” in Credo.

Many of the Joyce references chosen by Cage and Cunningham are drawn from his satiric treatment of Catholicism and the mass. For example, Cage’s “In the Name of the Holocaust,” another 1942 dance score for Cunningham and Erdman, uses the homophone “Holocaust” for “Holy Ghost,” a phrase drawn from Finnegans Wake. The title for Credo may be linked to Joyce’s semi-autobiographical book, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man about Stephan Deadalus’ struggle with Catholicism and his moment of artistic awakening. In the book, during a school debate about universal peace, Stephen’s teacher, Cranly, utters into his ear the phrase, “Credo ut vos,” as part of phrase translated as: “I believe you are a bloody liar because your face shows you are in a damned bad humor.” While Credo ut vos here refers to the singular pronoun and is intended as an insult, it is the sound of the phrase, Credo ut vos, which likely captured their attention.

Their mutual interest in Joyce at this early stage of their career also points toward their interaction with Campbell, who was then writing A Skeleton Key to Finnegan’s Wake. Erdman confirms Campbell’s encouragement of Cunningham’s writing. “Merce did a lot of creative work of his own…. So when he apparently did some writing…I think Joe saw more of it than I did, but it was his [Joe’s] suggestion that we might use that idea [for Credo] from what he had written.” Campbell devoted himself to the study of Joyce in the 1930s and 1940s. Like Cage, Campbell first learned of Joyce’s work through the

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64 See Susan Scaff, “80
65 Translation: “Credo ut vos sanguinarius mendax estis quia facies vostra monstrat ut vos in damno malo humore estis.” See James Joyce, A Portrait of the Young Artist as a Young Man (Ware, Hertfordshire, 1992), 150, fn., 226.
66 Jean Erdman interview with David Patterson, 1993.
journal *transition*, which published Joyce’s *Work in Progress* series. He met Joyce while on a trip to Paris in 1927, where he learned, with the help of Sylvia Beach at the bookstore Shakespeare and Company, how to interpret the complex historical and mythological narratives embedded in *Ulysses*, which although banned in parts of America and Britain, was a sensation in Paris at the time.

Twelve years later, Campbell used the phrase “Credo in Us” in a letter to Erdman while traveling in India in October 1954. His reference recalls the double meaning of the title used for the dance, both as an affirmation of the U.S. and his longing for Jean: “All that, plus missing you, makes me know that in my native habitat I am the happiest, luckiest guy in the world. All I have to do is what I want to do—and exactly what I want is what I have to do. So three cheers…Credo in us!” The usage here opens the question of whether Campbell had initially coined the title? Was this a phrase that Campbell used before 1942? Campbell often wrote in his journal about his life “credo” in the early-1930s, but there is no evidence of his usage of the full phrase. As such, its usage in the letter was likely a simple reference to the memory of the dance-drama itself.

Campbell’s involvement with *Credo* as intellectual guide is similar to his involvement with Martha Graham and other artists; he would often listen to artists’ musings, dreams, ideas and link them to themes in literature, psychoanalysis, history and myth. Campbell described the process in an interview later in his life:

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67Cage’s personal copy of the “Homage to James Joyce” edition of *transition* from March, 1932, is housed in the library of the John Cage Trust at Bard College.
88 Ibid., 83.
All I have done has been to try to show through the traditions that have come to us where this realm of the muses really is, and what happens when a real artist gets hold of it. I've seen it in the dance...with Jean's work and in others like Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham or in the work of sculptors or painters. They don't try to copy something that has been given to them; they see an experience of their own life in these terms [archetypes] and that takes knowing what the archetype is and forgetting it, then reading out of that something that kicks back all the way. I remember back in the 1940s and 1950s how there were a couple of very important artists who were just doing clichés. . . . That's not what it's all about; it's to see and experience the archetypology of a living moment. What the artist must render is a living moment somehow, a living moment actually in action or an inward experience.\(^{71}\)

Campbell’s description illuminates how he may have influenced the creation of *Credo*. Furthermore, his references to “capturing a living moment” became core aesthetic principles for both Cunningham and Erdman’s later dances. Campbell’s quote sheds light on how he may have contributed to the production of *Credo*, specifically in his encouragement of Cunningham to use his own writings.\(^ {72}\)

**Cage’s “Intentionally Expressive” Phase**

All elements of *Credo* contribute to this tension between surface and substance, biography and art. Through the title alone we may view *Credo* as encompassing two disparate readings, the personal and the public. Cage was fascinated by the tension between private and public life during WWII, observing that: “Being involved in the complexities of a nation at war and a city in business-as-usual led me to know that there is a difference between large things and small things, between big organizations and two people alone in a room together.”\(^ {73}\) He struggled with the idea of living in a consumer

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\(^{71}\) Joseph Campbell, *The Hero’s Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work* (Navarto, CA: Centennial Press, 1990), 190

\(^{72}\) Jean Erdman interview with David Patterson, 1993.

society while the atrocities of war were taking place abroad, describing intimate, personal relationships as an “antidote” to war and the problems of society.74

For Cage Credo marks the start of a life-long collaboration with Cunningham and stands as the first of a series of “intentionally expressive” 75 works, many for dances by Erdman and Cunningham (or both) that reflect unsettling changes in his domestic and aesthetic life. These works include Forever and Sunsmell (1942, choreography, Erdman); In the Name of the Holocaust (1942, choreography, Cunningham and Erdman); Our Spring Will Come (1943), Tossed as it is Untroubled (1943, Cunningham), Amores (1943), She is Asleep (1943), Four Walls (1944, Cunningham); Root of an Unfocus (1944, Cunningham); and The unavailable memory of (1944, Cunningham). Perhaps the most important work in this series is The Perilous Night (1943-44), a six-part work for prepared piano, which was composed after Cage’s separation from Xenia. Cage referred to this as his “autobiographical” work in which he sought to depict the “dangers of the erotic life and describes the misery of ‘something that was together that is split apart.’”76

After a critic commented the work sounded like “a woodpecker in a church belfry,” Cage lost his faith in music’s ability to communicate. “I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn’t communicating this at all. Or else, I thought, if I were communicating, then all artists must be speaking a different language . . . The whole

74 David Revill, The Roaring Silence, John Cage: A Life, (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), 82. Cage’s works from this period reflect the tension between public life and private intimacy through his approach to texture, instrumentation, and dynamics, evident in how he scores the transition from moments private confession to dystopian urban scenes in the radio drama The City Wears a Slouch Hat (1942).
musical situation struck me more and more as a Tower of Babel.”

The historian Kenneth Silverman notes in his 2010 biography of Cage that several of these prepared-piano works reflect Cage’s sadness as his marriage to Xenia collapsed, noting that Cage even composed the reflective A Valentine Out of Season for her as a “peace offering.” Historian Jonathan Katz suggests another timeline for Cage’s involvement with Cunningham, noting that several works from 1942-46 (beginning with Credo) reflect “in a distinctly allegorical, even expressive way . . . his involvement with [Cunningham].” Cage’s own description of how his emotions had become entwined in works from this period requires an examination of Cage and Xenia’s life together preceding their divorce in 1945.

Xenia Andreyevna Kashevarof and John Cage

Scholars have largely overlooked Xenia’s role in Cage’s life. What is known is that she was the youngest daughter of a Russian Orthodox priest, Andrew Kashevarof and Tlinget mother, Marva Trivalev. Raised primarily in Southeast Alaska, Xenia was one

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78 Silverman, 62.
80 Katz believes Credo marks not only the start of Cage and Cunningham’s professional work but also their personal involvement. He suggests that Cage and Xenia separated in 1942, and that Xenia returned to the California. Instead, she remained in New York, worked for Duchamp and played percussion in Cage’s 1943 concert at MoMA. Certainly, their marriage began to deteriorate in 1942, but they were not, according to the recollections of Joseph Campbell and the recent work of Kenneth Silverman’s history separated until 1944 and divorced until 1945. See Kenneth Silverman, Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage (New York: Knopf, 2010), chapter two and three.
81 The Tlinget are the indigenous people of Southeast Alaska. When the Russians established their outpost, New Archangel (modern day Sitka) in the early-nineteenth century, they established a Russian Orthodox Church, school, and orphanage for use by the local Tlinget population. Many Tlinget converted to Christianity, which is why Xenia’s mother had a Christian name. Xenia’s last name has been spelled in two different ways: “Kashevaroff” and “Kashevarof.” I use the later version, which was used by her father in a report to Bishop Philip of Alaska in 1916 that listed the names and birth dates of his children. Cyril
of five exceptionally talented sisters and one brother. During her childhood, her family moved to different communities along the north Pacific coast, where her father was posted to various clergy posts in California and Alaska, including St. Michael’s Cathedral in Sitka, Alaska, the former capital of Russian America.

Xenia was a talented artist and interacted with some of the most important collectors, artists, writers, and composers of the twentieth century. As an adolescent, she was sent to live with her sister Natalia (“Tal”) and her husband, the writer Ritch Lovejoy—an apprentice of John Steinbeck—in Pacific Grove, California. Xenia studied painting and book binding in Carmel, California, where she met Edward Weston in 1931. Weston photographed her in a series of portraits that captured beautiful high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and penetrating gaze. Several of these portraits are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.82 She and Weston carried on an intimate relationship at the time; he described her in his journal as “X…delightfully unmoral, pagan,—a grand person to love.”83

Xenia later attended Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where she studied art. On a college break in 1934, she traveled to Los Angeles, where she first met Cage. When Cage saw her in his mother’s Arts and Crafts Shop, he noted: “It was love at first sight on my part, not on hers.” On their first date he asked her to marry him. At the time, Cage was still involved with several lovers, including Don Sample, an artist with whom he had traveled throughout Europe in 1931. Sample had helped shape Cage’s early artistic and

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82 The prints of those sessions are now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
intellectual development in part by introducing him to the avant-garde journal *transition*. Cage claims he was open about his bisexuality with Xenia from the beginning of their relationship.\textsuperscript{84}

Cage was also involved with the writer Pauline Schindler, a champion of avant-garde through her work with the magazine *Dune Forum*, which published articles on music, art and architecture, along with early photographs by Ansel Adams and Weston. When the twenty-two year old Cage met her, she was fifteen years older and separated from her husband, the famed Viennese architect Rudolph Schindler.\textsuperscript{85} Their brief correspondence reveals details of Xenia’s reluctance to marry, as well as the names of Cage’s various lovers.\textsuperscript{86} Cage also discusses his plans to marry Xenia and describes his first lessons with Schoenberg. He confessed to Pauline, “I have another new feeling of you. You flutter. I saw two butterflies over my head against the sky ... I love you all the time.”\textsuperscript{87} And about Xenia, he wrote “She sent me an Eskimo drum and I have asked her to marry me again and she is going to write me soon. I know she is. I have a magnificent gift here which I shall be paying for the rest of my life.”\textsuperscript{88} Cage communicated his mixed feelings about the promiscuous lifestyle he was living in Los Angeles, and recalled how his male friends teased him about his pending marriage to Xenia, whom they referred to as “Alaska.”

I told Ramiel about Xenia some time ago. So that last night Brett said to me, How is Alaska coming? I was very confused and said what do you mean, Xenia? He said, yes,

\textsuperscript{84} Hines 85-86
\textsuperscript{85} Rudolph Schindler built the Kings Road House with funding from Pauline’s family. He worked for Frank Lloyd Wright and was close friends with the architect Adolf Loos and composers Arnold Schonberg and Anton Webern.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 4. Undated typed letter.
I’m interested. I couldn’t reply, and stuttered like an idiot and my head whirling, why should he be interested and why should he look so sadly and kindly and patiently and add Are you serious? That whole little world with its complexities of never always sleeping together knows.\(^89\)

Cage’s description of his early relationship with Xenia and evolving ideas on marriage establish an early biographical context from which to view *Credo*. Details of their relationship hereafter are provided in order to understand the context of Cage’s description of *Credo* as “I believe in us,” which may refer to Xenia and/or Cunningham. An interpretation of *Credo* from this interpersonal perspective is explored in chapter three.

After a year, Xenia agreed to marry Cage. They drove to the desert near Yuma, Arizona and were married on June 7, 1935 at 5:00 am.\(^90\) Thereafter they lived in Los Angeles with Cage’s parents in Pacific Palisades before moving into their own place in Hollywood.\(^91\) Cage and Xenia were an exotic couple to behold, with Xenia’s striking beauty and biting wit and Cage’s eager curiosity and boyish good looks. They attended art openings at some at the city’s elite salons.\(^92\) They visited Galka Scheyer’s home—a dramatic structure designed by Richard Neutra nestled in the Hollywood Hills overlooking the city. Scheyer, a German-Jewish émigré, had strong connections to the *Blaue Reiter* group and was dealer for the German “Blue Four” (Wassily Kandinsky, Alex von Jawlinsky, Paul Klee, and Lyonel Feininger). Through Scheyer, Cage purchased a painting by Jawlinsky, *Meditation*, in 1935, for twenty-five dollars, which Scheyer recorded in a letter to Jawlinsky:

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 4. Same letter as fn. 48.
\(^{90}\) Silverman, 23.
\(^{91}\) Hines, 86.
\(^{92}\) Thomas Hines, “Then Not Yet ‘Cage,’” 89.
I showed him your new heads. He was thrilled and asked how much they were. He is very poor and is being trained without paying tuition because he is so gifted. Because I know you and because of the genuine excitement which is so wonderful to witness in youth, I made him a very cheap price of $25.00. He already made an installment of $1.00. Isn’t that sweet? . . . The visit of this youngster John Cage was a pleasure of a kind that has become rare.93

Scheyer introduced Cage and Xenia to the art collector and philanthropist Walter Arensberg. Cage and Xenia visited the Arensberg home, where they came into contact with a collection of modern art curated by Marcel Duchamp, whose own works, like The Bride and Nude Descending a Staircase, (both 1912) and several “readymades” were prominently displayed.94

Xenia supported Cage intellectually, artistically, and musically. She played in all of his percussion orchestra concerts, even after they separated, and often mocked his pretentious conducting and nitpicking attention to rhythmic detail: “And John hearing every teeny weensy grace note we happen to leave out [First Construction in Metal]—and himself playing like a madman. We plan to catch him up one of these days on an f#, but we’re at a disadvantage because we don’t have the score.”95 She complained in January 1942, “the cycle begins again,” in preparation for a percussion concert at the Arts Club of Chicago, “rehearsing, hammering, yammering.”96 A fine percussionist, she played the most difficult parts in his early percussion works, including Credo, and accompanied dance productions for Hanya Holm in 1942.97

Xenia also worked as Cage’s copyist, often working through the night writing out

95 Letter Xenia Cage to Doris Dennison, February 6, 1942. Series I, Box 2, Folder 6. John Cage Collection. Northwestern University Music Library. The reference to f# is a witticism, there are not exact pitches stipulated in first construction.
96 Letter Xenia Cage to Doris Dennison, Jan. 7, 1942, quoted in Silverman, 45.
97 Ibid. Xenia provides an extensive description of playing for a Holm production in Chicago.
parts when a deadline was pressing, as with City Wears a Slouch Hat. Most importantly, she translated Luigi Russolo’s (1885-1947) “Art of Noises” (L’arte dei Rumori) around 1939-40, which Cage used as a model for his own manifesto, “The Future of Music: Credo.” The essay ignited Cage’s interest in experimenting with electronic sounds. ⁹⁸ In a letter to Henry Cowell he noted, “Xenia is busy translating Luigi Russolo’s Art of Noise published by the Italian Futurists in Italy in 1916 . . . Their instruments were apparently mechanical, rotating bodies, having sliding ranges of about two octaves. I am at present making a library research of what has been accomplished in the field of electronic music.” ⁹⁹

Xenia and Cage met Cunningham in Seattle in 1938 at the Cornish School. Cage was drawn to Cornish on Lou Harrison’s recommendation and the promise of access to a “closet full of percussion instruments,” including Chinese gongs, tom-toms, cymbals, and woodblocks that had been left by the choreographer Lore Deja. Cage was composing music for and accompanying Bonnie Bird’s dance classes. Bird, trained in the Graham technique, choreographed two works in 1939 that would be important precursors to Credo in Us: Marriage at the Eiffel Tower, based on Jean Cocteau’s Les mariés de la tour Eiffel (1921) and Imaginary Landscape.

Xenia was an extrovert and threw epic parties that lasted until dawn in Seattle, often with the artists Morris Graves and Mark Tobey in attendance. In Chicago, for Cage’s 30th birthday, she threw a surprise party for her husband, who she referred to by the pet names, “Bun” or “Bunny”:

⁹⁸ The reference to Russolo corroborates Leta Miller’s assertion that Cage wrote his manifesto for a lecture given to the Seattle Arts Club in February 1940, not 1937, as dated in his book Silence.
⁹⁹ Letter John Cage to Henry Cowell, August 8, 1940. Series I, Box 2, Folder 19, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
We all wore costumes... We had so much fun decorating the place, dragging in trees and making paper flowers to tie on them.... Also we had puppets for entertainment the loveliest puppets I've ever seen. There wasn’t enough to eat, however. We had enough to drink but forgot to attend to the food. Al took pictures and I hope they turn out. One of me sitting on the beer keg side-saddle, wearing my feather boa... One of Bunny necking the daylights out of Marcia Winn under the tree. I must say I was startled to wander into the room and find that going on. We had to go home when the deaf land-lady said she’d call the police if we didn’t quiet down.  

The portrait that emerges, while incomplete, is that Cage and Xenia were tolerant of each other’s dalliances with other lovers. Xenia was aware of Cage’s bisexuality and both shared a love for Cunningham. Cage revealed significant details about this period of his private life for the first time in a 1992 interview with Thomas Hines. He commented that he Xenia had an open marriage and that both were attracted to Cunningham. While they were together as a “ménage à trois,” Cage realized he “was more attracted to Cunningham than to Xenia.”  

Xenia was also entranced by Cunningham, as alluded to in her letters, where she described him as “very beautiful and exciting and marvelous and dances like a god only better.” After Cage and Xenia moved to New York, where Cunningham was living, they once again became a threesome, when they briefly lived together in Erdman and Campbell’s Waverly Place apartment in the Village. Erdman recalled, “Merce came and stayed here. So I think that all three of them were here, and they had a cat because we have cat marks on the walls for a while. But you know it was very handy for them with that piano here.”  

An accomplished visual artist, Xenia created mobiles, books, sculptures, and

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100 Letter from Xenia Cage to Doris Dennison, April 6, 1942. Series I, box 2, folder 6. John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library.

101 Thomas Hines, 99 n. 60


103 Patterson/Erdman interview.
collages. In 1942, shortly after arriving in New York, Xenia replaced Joseph Cornell as Duchamp’s assistant and worked on the construction of the *Boîtes-en-valise.* These portable cases, filled with miniature reproductions of Duchamp’s most famed works like *Bicycle Wheel, Chocolate Grinder No. 2, R. Mutt,* and *L.H.O.O.Q,* were created in secret and functioned as miniature galleries of Duchamp’s works. Though made up of “reproductions,” the valises continued Duchamp’s challenge of conventional notions of authenticity and originality in art.

In January 1943, Xenia was included in "Exhibition by 31 Women" at Guggenheim’s “Art of this Century Gallery.” Described as a surrealist sculptress in *Life* magazine, her mobile sculptures were exhibited at Julien Levy’s 57th street gallery. In 1944, she collaborated with Levy and Ernst by building the table for their “Wood Chess Set” for “The Imagery of Chess” exhibition organized by Duchamp and Ernst at the Levy Gallery, for which Cage provided *Chess Pieces,* a work written over an image of a chess board and printed on cardboard.

Xenia’s work with Duchamp afforded Cage close proximity to Duchamp and his ideas. It may have also served as a catalyst for Cage’s experimentation with borrowed material and found objects like the tin cans, buzzer, radio and phonograph in *Credo.* However, it would be an oversimplification to call *Credo* a “Dada work” and equally so to call it a Surrealist investigation of the Cage-Xenia-Cunningham relationship. While Dada is evident in aspects of the score, script and dance both reflect an element of

107 After her divorce from Cage in 1945, Xenia worked as a set designer in New York; later, from 1964-1980, she worked in the Drawings and Prints Department at the Cooper Hewitt Museum. Her administrative work is archived at the Smithsonian as Record Unit 283, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Department of Drawings and Prints, Records, 1968-1978.
psychological struggle. The score, script and dance reflect the sounds and noises of everyday life (exteriority) as well as moments of quiet reflection (interiority), which are inflected with an element of fantasy.

Perhaps Xenia’s greatest gift to Cage was an exemption from active duty in World War Two. As a young girl, Xenia suffered from tuberculosis of the bone, which required surgery to remove the bone marrow from one leg. This led to a “complete ankylosis of the left knee joint,” leaving her with a limp.\(^\text{108}\) When Cage was ordered to report for induction into the Army in the fall of 1942, he applied for a III-A exemption—hardship to dependents, by presenting a doctor’s letter detailing Xenia’s condition. Once Cage was released from service in the Army, he went to work for the U.S. Navy to do research for his father on secret projects involving aviation navigation in zero visibility conditions.\(^\text{109}\) Oddly, during his life and in numerous interviews, Cage never mentioned the true reason for his release from active-duty. He also mixes the order of events in order perpetuate the idea that he was deferred from the draft because of his father’s top-secret work.\(^\text{110}\) Did Cage feel indebted to Xenia for keeping him out of battle? Did they stay married, even when their relationship was falling apart, in order to keep Cage out of the war?

*Credo* may reflect aspects of Cage and Xenia’s marital issues along with Erdman’s memories of her parent’s marriage. However, if we step back from this biographical perspective, a larger social and artistic view of marriage comes into focus, one that


\(^\text{109}\)Ibid.

includes numerous art and musical works in the twentieth century. To better understand this trend, we must examine the social forces at work, particularly news of the widely reported “marriage crisis” sweeping through America in the years after World War I.

**Art and “The Crisis of Marriage”**

*Credo* is a drama about marriage. Erdman described it as a critique of their parent’s middle class values.\(^{111}\) Cage noted: “rather than showing the glories that ballet had shown between the prince and the princess . . . it showed the ingloriousness of the American family.”\(^{112}\) Their dramatic choice was hardly new. The depiction of marriage in art works, plays, operas, ballets, and musical works extends from Homer’s *Odyssey* to to Howard Hawks’ *His Girl Friday* (1940). In the twentieth century, however, marriage, weddings, and brides became popular subjects among composers, writers and avant-garde artists in America and Europe. For composers, the conflict between husband and wife stimulated the development of new compositional techniques to depict the psychic angst of marital strife. Dissonant harmonies, eerie textures, extended instrumental techniques, new modes of singing (*sprechstimme*), exotic scales, and atonal and twelve-tone techniques were employed to this end. Examples include Claude Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), Arnold Schoenberg’s Second String Quartet, Op. 10 (1908),\(^{113}\) Béla

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\(^{112}\) Helms, 84.

\(^{113}\) William Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in The Origins of Twentieth Century Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 279. Schoenberg’s first foray into atonality came in his Second String Quartet, the second half of which was written after he discovered his wife having an affair with their painting instructor, Richard Gerstl (1883–1908), which resulted in Mathilde’s separation from Schoenberg and later, Gerstl’s gruesome suicide.
Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle* (1911),114 and Anton Berg’s *Wozzeck* (1925), among many others.115

During the 1930s and ’40s, changes in the institution of marriage inspired artists and writers, like Edward Hopper, Georgia O’Keefe, and Sherwood Anderson, to explore the topic of changing gender roles, alienation, and marital discord in their works. Responding in part to the “marriage crisis,” a pervasive fear spreading through the country over the rapid rise of divorce rates, declining birthrates, and, with the rise of industrialization and urbanization, changing gender roles in the home as women entered the workforce in greater numbers.116

Numerous articles in newspapers and popular magazines decried the crisis of marriage: “What is the Family Still Good For?” (*American Mercury*, 1930); “Fighting Breakdowns in Marriage” (*Literary Digest*, 1936), and Hannah Lee’s “Good and Married” (*Collier’s*, 1942), which predicted that by 1950 there would be one divorce in every four marriages.117 These articles reflected a growing anxiety about the meaning of marriage and the future of the family. Sociologists and anthropologists examined the crisis and promoted an array of analyses and solutions in such books as: *Love and Marriage*, *What is Right with Marriage*, and *Marriage for Moderns*. Victor Calverton’s

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115 Douglas Jarman observes that the tritone B/F signifies the tension between Wozzeck and Marie. At the climax, “Wozzeck plunges the knife into Marie’s throat. A brief, nightmarish version of all the main musical motives associated with Marie is heard…Marie’s waiting motive…with the fateful B-F tritone in the bass, and the inverted form of Wozzeck’s entrance motive appear as he leaves.” Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 38.
The Bankruptcy of Marriage (1928) and Floyd Dell’s Love in the Machine Age (1930) were influential in bringing the crisis into the national spotlight.\(^{118}\) By the start of WWII, the U.S. Government viewed the decline in marriage as a matter of national security.\(^{119}\) In response, schools and universities developed courses designed to support marriage and home economics while religious organizations and private and professional groups instituted the first marriage counseling programs.

One persistent theme in literature and art was the fear of mechanization and the encroachment of machines in the home as the source of impotence and alienation between husbands and wives, a prominent theme in the depiction of Husband/Shadow as a machine in *Credo*.

Cage and Cunningham came of age in the machine age, an era in which men were capable of creating, harnessing, and directing vast mechanical power. Machine technology was deeply interwoven with masculine identity, as reflected in the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz and Lewis Hine, whose series "Work Portraits," (e.g. “Power house mechanic working on a steam pump,” 1920) capture the theme of man as machine. Machines were seen as de-humanizing and emasculating. As one historian observed “while American men have long been concerned with making machines, machines have long been at work making men.”\(^{120}\) In Sherwood Anderson’s story *Poor White* (1920), the husband Hugh McVey is rendered impotent by machines, as his wife observes: “Thinking of machinery and the making of machines had . . . been at the bottom of his inability to talk with me, as well as his inability to have sex.”\(^{121}\)

\(^{118}\) Vivien Green Fryd, 15.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., 17
\(^{120}\) Bret Carroll, American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia (New York: SAGE, 2003), 450
\(^{121}\) Sherwood Anderson, Poor White (New York: New Directions, 1993) quoted in Fryd, 20
Cunningham’s idea to create a character described as a machine and whose mechanical movements restrict human motion resonate with many depictions of humans depicted as machines or as human/machine hybrids. The visual iconography for these creatures, called “mechanomorphs” became a central theme among Dadaists in Cologne and New York who used these images to critique the growing mechanization of society and to critique gender relations in marriage, for example, Hannah Höch’s depiction of a couple shackled to modern gadgetry in *Bourgeois Wedding Couple—Quarrel* (photomontage, 1919) and László Moholy-Nagy’s *Jealousy* of a couple depicted as shadows that look like photo negatives (a collage with photographic, photomechanical and drawn elements, 1927). Cunningham likely viewed similar Dada works on his gallery tours with Guggenheim in the early-1940s.122

Marcel Duchamp’s “wedding” works depict the insurmountable gulf between husband and wife and the theme of mechanization in *The Passage of the Virgin to Bride* (1912), *The Bride* (1912) and *The Bride Stripped Bare of Her Bachelor’s, Even (Large Glass*, 1915-23), which portrays the Bride floating out of reach above a cadre of machine-bound bachelors. Years later, in an interview with Moira and William Roth, Cage described the experience of seeing *Large Glass*:

> Looking at the *Large Glass*, the thing that I love so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in one place or another or, in act, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond.123

*Large Glass* may have served as an important metaphor for *Credo*. Aside from the shared theme of marriage, its open form, a transparent glass reflecting the surroundings of the

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gallery, merges the iconography of the bride and bachelors within a real life context. One sees other museum visitors, the shifting light within the gallery, other artworks, and sometimes oneself in the work. Similarly, Cage’s use of radio in *Credo* reflects the random sounds floating across the airwaves at the time of performance, and situates the drama’s characters in a similar “real life” context.

Max Ernst also created a series of works in the early-1920s in response to Duchamp’s *Mariée*, including his photo collage *Die Anatomie als Braut* (“The Anatomy of the Bride,” 1921), which fuses dissection and mechanical imagery. There is also the painting *La Belle Jardinière* (1923), which is dominated by a half-human half-mechanical head atop the Virgin Mary. What is fascinating is that for several years, Ernst and Duchamp exchanged ideas through their art works while living in different parts of the world. When they were finally reunited in July 1942, at Guggenheim’s Hale House, Cage and Xenia there too.¹²⁴

**A Surreal Marriage: Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst**

*Credo* in many ways begins with Ernst, whom Cage and Xenia met at an exhibition of Ernst’s works in Chicago in the spring of 1942. He gave the Cages an open invitation to stay in Guggenheim’s home should they come to New York. Weeks later, Xenia used a small inheritance left to her after her father died to buy bus tickets to New York. When they arrived “penniless,” Cage called the Guggenheim residence. Ernst answered the phone and didn’t recognize Cage’s voice, but asked him if he was thirsty. When Cage said that he was, Ernst invited him for cocktails the next evening. Cage reported this to Xenia, who was not happy: “Call him back,” she replied. “We have everything to gain

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¹²⁴ Ibid., 101.
and nothing to lose.” When Cage called back, Ernst said, “Oh! It’s you. We’ve been waiting…your room’s ready.” The Cages moved into Hale House a large brownstone on East 51st street with terraces overlooking the East River.

During the war, Hale House was “a magnet for the expatriate artistic community,” many of whom Guggenheim had helped escape from Europe through her work with the Emergency Rescue Committee in Marseilles in 1941. Her most famous expatriate guest was Ernst, who interned in three concentration camps before Guggenheim and Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, arranged for his escape. Guggenheim and Ernst flew to the U.S. from Lisbon in July 1941.

Ernst was a central figure in the history of Dada and Surrealism, first in Cologne, where he was an important leader of the Dada movement, and later, when he joined with André Breton and a circle of writers and artists in the early-1920s in Paris to found the Surrealist movement. Breton found in Ernst’s collages an affirmation of a new approach to art centered on the interplay between inward psychological states and external everyday events, exhibited through Ernst’s use of fragments cut out from popular magazines.

Ernst's contribution is a brilliant embodiment of the Surrealist aesthetic, offering a visionary, cosmos made up of spaces and creatures that fascinate with their oscillation between fantasy and reality. He presented a world of the almost-possible, in paintings that make the sudden leap from the ordinary, to the other, the unexpected, that Breton's

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126 Named after Nathan Hale, a hero of the American revolution
128 Guggenheim, *Out of this Century*, 227. Headed by Varian Fry, the Emergency Rescue Committee distributed money to refugees. Breton and his family were in residence at the ERC’s chateau “Belle Air” with other surrealists in 1941. Guggenheim donated money and worked in tandem with the ERC to help artists escape the Nazis mainly by helping them escape to Spain or Portugal then book passage to the U. S.
129 Complicating matters, Ernst had lost track of his wife, Leonora Carrington while imprisoned, but found her again in Lisbon, though married to a Mexican gentleman named Renato Leduc. Guggenheim graciously arranged for Carrington and Leduc’s travel to the U.S. See Guggenheim, *OTC*, 238-39.
After arriving in the U.S., Ernst and his adult son Jimmy lived with Guggenheim and traveled with her to Arizona, New Mexico (where they viewed Hopi and Navajo ruins) and California. Ernst aided Guggenheim as curator for her new gallery and worked with Duchamp as co-editors of the avant-garde journal VVV. Uncomfortable “living in sin with an enemy alien,” Guggenheim and Ernst married over Christmas 1941, far from New York City in Virginia, in order to avoid publicity.

Through Guggenheim, the Cages entered one of the most eclectic salons in New York City at one of the most important historical moments in twentieth century art. For the first time, European Dadaists, surrealists, sculptors, painters, writers and collageurs met with American writers and artists. Cage and Xenia attended parties with Breton, Joseph Cornell, Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, William Saroyan, and the stripper/art collector Gypsy Rose Lee. Further, their arrival coincided with the final planning stages of Guggenheim’s new “Art of this Century” gallery designed by the Viennese architect and designer Frederick Kiesler.

Guggenheim had initially conceived of her new gallery as an interdisciplinary art center dedicated to both visual art and performance and wanted Cage’s percussion orchestra to make its New York debut at her gallery on October 20, 1942. Guggenheim and Kiesler wanted to cultivate the interconnections between music and visual art.

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130 Werner Spies and Sabine Rewald, *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005), 12
131 Hopkins, 101
132 Ibid., 263
133 Ibid., 29.
134 Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of this Century* (New York: Universe Books, 1979), 270. Kiesler told Guggenheim she would not be remembered for her collection of paintings, but for the way he presented them in his revolutionary setting.
Kiesler suspended paintings from the ceiling, created special viewing devices for Duchamp’s *boîte-en-valise* and Paul Klee’s *Magic Garden*, designed concave walls for the Surrealist gallery, installed an elaborate lighting system, and built special sculptured chairs and study areas where patrons could handle paintings. Cage described the gallery in much the same way as Guggenheim’s parties: it was “a kind of funhouse...You couldn't just walk through it, you had to become part of it.”¹³⁵ *Time* and the *New Yorker* favorably compared Guggenheim’s gallery to a trip to Coney Island.¹³⁶

**Hale House Parties: The Summer of 1942**

Life at Hale House in the summer of 1942 was as surreal during the day as it was at night. In the afternoons, Ernst would frequent museums and galleries to see Native American Art. Ernst began to collect Haida and Tlinget totem poles (one twenty feet high) and Hopi and Zuni kachina dolls and masks.¹³⁷ Guggenheim, whose new gallery was costing more than anticipated, was not pleased with Ernst’s expensive collecting habit, which became a source of marital tension.¹³⁸ Furthermore, Ernst’s fondness for Alaskan native art intersected with Xenia’s presence at Hale House. Her Tlinget heritage and knowledge of Tlinget and Haida iconography captivated Ernst.

At night, Guggenheim’s home became the center of the New York art world.

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¹³⁶ Ibid. 201
¹³⁷ Ibid., 186-187. Ernst, impressed with an exhibition of primitive art he saw at the San Francisco Museum of Art, began collecting Native American art on credit from a dealer named Carlebach in New York. He would pay his bills after he sold a painting. Guggenheim blamed Ernst’s new passion for his frequent absences and refusal to help with household expenses, an issue that was even more problematic as Guggenheim was buying most of his paintings.
¹³⁸ Mary Dearborn, *Mistress of Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 197. Guggenheim hired the Viennese sculptor and architect Frederick Kiesler to design the gallery, which he conceived of as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He used only the finest materials, oak floors (instead of pine) and linen for the walls (not cotton, as planned). See also *The Story of Art of This Century.*
[Hale House] seemed like partyland. I suppose because whenever I went there a big rambling party was going on with people draped everywhere, drinking and talking while someone sat in a sort of booth telephoning. The Walls around the telephone were all bescribed with numbers and messages, and this seemed Bohemian, as the rest of the place was on the grand side and the living room was dominated by that outsized Alice-in-Wonderland throne of Max Ernst's.\textsuperscript{139}

Breton presided over a series of surreal games at such parties, dictating the rules of the Game of Truth, the Blindfold Game, and the Game of Murder, all of which were taken quite seriously by the guests. For example, in Breton’s \textit{Le jeu de la vérité}, participants were required to answer intimate questions about their sex life; if anyone was caught lying, they had to pay a fine.\textsuperscript{140} “The object of the game was to dig out people’s most intimate sexual feelings and expose them. It was like a form of psychoanalysis done in public. The worse the things that we exposed, the happier everyone was.”\textsuperscript{141}

After one of Guggenheim’s sultry summer parties, she, Ernst, Cage, and Xenia decided to play a similar game. They agreed to undress to see how detached they could remain from their bodies.\textsuperscript{142} Apparently the “detachment” did not last long when Ernst became visibly aroused by Xenia.

One evening, toward the end of a drunken party, someone suggested a game that was designed to test the players’ indifference, or lack of it, toward one another. The Cages, Max, and Duchamp stripped, while Peggy and Frederick and Stefi Kiesler looked on....Duchamp folded his clothes neatly as he disrobed; Max immediately failed in the indifference stakes, as his eyes took in Xenia’s naked body and his penis responded appropriately. The game ended in an orgy of sorts, in which Cage took Peggy to bed while Max did the same with Xenia.\textsuperscript{143}

Xenia described an alternative version of the party (or perhaps another party altogether) in a letter to Rue Shaw, describing how she modeled a pair of Guggenheim’s

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 191. See also Guggenheim, \textit{OTC}, 266. Guggenheim asked Ernst if he preferred making love at the age of twenty, thirty, forty or fifty.
\textsuperscript{141} Guggenheim, \textit{OTC}, 266.
\textsuperscript{142} Guggenheim, \textit{OTC}, 279-280
\textsuperscript{143} Gill, 300.
“chartreuse-and-purple lounging pajamas,” cut low in the back. Ernst and Duchamp teasingly told her she had it on backwards. She went along with their ruse shifting the pajama’s low-cut back to the front. She records little thereafter noting, “John and I and Max and Peggy and Marcel had a whale of a time, which can’t be described because of reputations etc.”

Guggenheim remarked on Xenia and Ernst’s affair in a journal: “Zenia [sic] took it all rather too seriously, as she wept copious tears in a bus one night soon after this, Kiesler told me, because she decided Max was not the angel she had suspected him to be.” It is unclear how involved Xenia and Ernst had become, but their affair may explain the simmering tension between Guggenheim and Cage.

Around this time, Guggenheim and Cage had a dramatic falling out. The often-cited story is that the conflict centered on Cage’s plans to do a percussion concert at the Museum of Modern Art in February 1943. Guggenheim believed Cage and his percussion ensemble had an exclusive engagement to perform at the opening of her “Art of this Century Gallery” in the fall of 1942, even though Cage’s MoMA concert would come four months later. Sensing that Cage was taking advantage of her willingness to pay for the shipment of his three hundred percussion instruments from Chicago, Guggenheim made it clear that he and Xenia were no longer welcome:

When Peggy discovered that [MoMA concert], she cancelled not only the concert but also her willingness to pay for the transport of the instruments. When she gave me this information, I burst into tears. In the room next to mine at the back of the house Marcel Duchamp was sitting in a rocking chair smoking a cigar. He asked why I was crying and I told him. He said virtually nothing but his presence was such that I felt calmer. Later on, when I was talking about Duchamp to people in Europe, I heard similar stories. He had

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144 Ibid.
145 Guggenheim, OTC, 271.
calmness in the face of disaster.\textsuperscript{146}

Adding to the confusion of this scenario is the fact that the New York premiere of \textit{Credo} conflicted with opening of Guggenheim’s gallery. It might be possible that Cage later confused the MoMA concert with the \textit{Credo} dance recital. Another reason Guggenheim may have excused Cage was to end Ernst’s affair with Xenia.

David Nicholls suggests Cage’s misstep with Guggenheim was due to his inexpereince dealing with “the great and the good” and chalks up his decision to pursue the MoMA concert as “naïveté.”\textsuperscript{147} Cage, however, viewed the situation as a result of his own excessive ambition, a trait that Mina Lederman, the esteemed editor of \textit{Modern Music}, observed, describing Cage as so eager to please that he became “abrasive.”\textsuperscript{148}

Cage was ambitious and sensitive about his artistic standing in New York:

Well because of my ambitiousness I was not satisfied with one concert at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery I wanted other concerts beside. So I met everybody there [New York] and I already had many recordings of my work not and I was in touch with CBS. I had access to the studio, I could play my recordings and also give other concerts. I was offered the Museum of Modern Art . . . all this within two weeks.

Cage often recounted his fall out with Guggenheim and meeting with Duchamp as a turning point:

What matters is the calming effect of his presence, you see. And the fact that he did not get excited about something that caused me so much emotion. He kept that attitude with so many things… this disinterest…It was like the disinterest of a yogi. It was powerful, strong, disciplined.\textsuperscript{149}

Cage’s encounter with Duchamp during that emotionally volatile summer may have

\textsuperscript{146} Jeff Goldberg, interview with John Cage, 1976, excerpted in \textit{Conversing with Cage}, Richard Kostelanetz, ed., 11
\textsuperscript{147} Nicholls, \textit{John Cage}, 29.
inspired Cage to include the indeterminate radio and phonograph elements in *Credo*, ideas which reflect Duchamp’s Dadaist practice of turning everyday objects into art. Nonetheless, the confrontation with Guggenheim required Cage and Xenia to find a new home.

Xenia turned to Campbell who offered the Cages help. Campbell had remained fond of Xenia and her sisters after his trip to California and Alaska in 1932. Erdman recalled:

> John and Xenia came here…at a time when Merce and I were at Bennington…working with Martha Graham. John and Xenia didn’t have any place to stay so they stayed here. And at that time my husband’s piano…it was a Steinway baby grand and it became the kind of piano that John used for much of his early composing.

In a barter agreement, Cage agreed to complete *Credo* in lieu of rent for Campbell and Erdman’s Waverly Place apartment.

**Joseph Campbell in Alaska: “Credo of Life”**

Campbell emerges as an important influence not only in the creation of *Credo* but for Cage’s artistic development as well. Campbell gave Cage access to his library of Asian philosophy encouraging him to read Ananda K. Coomaraswamy’s *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934), which describes the Hindu theory of rasa (“ideal beauty”) and the eight emotions or moods central to rasa, which Cage used as the basis for the *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano (1949). Campbell opened up world

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150 Larsen, 209.
151 Patterson-Erdman interview.
152 Leta E. Miller and Fredric Lieberman, *Composing A World: Lou Harrison, Musical Wayfarer*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 89. Miller’s source is a Jean Erdman interview: “Xenia then contacted Joseph Campbell and the Cages stayed in the Campbell Apartment before finding a place of their own.”
153 Silverman, 67. See also James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 29-35. There are eight moods or emotions of rasa: four light moods (the Erotic, Heroic,
myths to Cage by allowing him to read his manuscript *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In light of Campbell’s “commission” of *Credo*, his intellectual connection to Cage and his friendship with Xenia, it is worth examining the adventurous origins of his trip to California, where he met Xenia’s sisters, Natalia and Sasha, and to Alaska where he eventually met Xenia.

In 1932, Campbell moved to California, where he hoped to escape his bookish East coast life. He first settled in Los Angeles, where he began writing his own life “Credo,” a six-point manifesto that drew on mythology and ideas from Joyce, Nietzsche, and Swedenborg that stated, in brief, his commitment to a life of both action and intellectual reflection. Campbell moved up the coast to Monterey in early 1932, where he became friends with John Steinbeck (1902-1968), the marine biologist Ed Ricketts (1897-1948), and a coterie of locals, including Xenia’s sisters Natalia (“Tal”) and Sasha. While Xenia attended high school nearby during the school year, she was not present when Campbell came through during the summer months.

When Campbell arrived on the scene, he was a handsome twenty-seven year-old, scholarly, athletic, and cosmopolitan. He immediately felt at home among the fisherman, philosophers, writers and musicians, a motley group that would be immortalized in Steinbeck’s short novel *Cannery Row* (1945). Ricketts, known as “Doc,” had a small research laboratory (called “the Bank”), which served as an informal community gathering spot during the 1930s and 1940s. It was here that Ricketts co-authored two books: *Between the Pacific Tides* (1939) with Jack Calvin (Xenia’s brother-
in-law) and the Sea of Cortez (1941) with Steinbeck.\textsuperscript{155}

Campbell found a home at “the Bank” discussing mythology, music, science, and literature, all the while drinking copiously and playing music on the phonograph. All three men were on the cusp of their careers and still in the process of finding their voices. Campbell and Ricketts shared a curiosity about the role of mysticism in a scientific culture and shared a passion for Goethe’s Faust and the music of J. S. Bach, while Steinbeck and Campbell bonded over their mutual interest in Carl Jung and world mythology.

Their friendship soon soured, however, after Campbell fell in love with Steinbeck’s wife, Carol, in May 1932. This fractured the group: Steinbeck soon departed on a solo journey to the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Campbell and Ricketts went to Alaska on a research trip. Campbell was not the only one leaving a complicated affair. Ricketts, at thirty-four, was having a sexual relationship with the seventeen-year-old Xenia, which Steinbeck noted: “[W]hen I first met him [Ricketts] he was engaged in a scholarly and persistent way in the process of deflowering a young girl.”\textsuperscript{156}

In June 1932, Campbell joined Ricketts on an expedition of the coastal waters of the Inside Passage of Southeast Alaska, an archipelago of thousands of tree-covered islands, misty fjords and glaciers spilling into the North Pacific. Calvin and Xenia’s sister Sasha\textsuperscript{157} captained the thirty-foot boat “Grampus” from Seattle, Washington, through

\textsuperscript{155}Between the Pacific Tides is one of the earliest books on the marine ecology of the north Pacific coast. Now in its fifth edition, the book remains the foremost guide on the intertidal ecosystems of the north Pacific coast.
\textsuperscript{156}Tamm, 16
\textsuperscript{157}Calvin and Sasha remain Alaskan legends for their fifty-three day voyage from Tacoma to Juneau in a seventeen-foot Willits canoe, the Nakwasina, in 1929. Using only a sail and paddles, their adventure was documented in a National Geographic article in 1933. See Jack Calvin, ‘‘Nakwasina’’ Goes North: A Man, a Woman, and a Pup Cruise from Tacoma to Juneau in a 17-Foot Canoe,” National Geographic (July 1933): 1-42.
British Columbia, Canada, and up to Alaska via Sitka and Juneau over a period of ten weeks.\footnote{158 Tamm, 16-17. The writer/explorer Jack Calvin had known Steinbeck since their student days at Stanford and had captained Steinbeck and Ricketts’ past research expeditions to the Sea of Cortez.} For Campbell the trip was a realization of part of his “credo” to become observant of his own sensations: “I believe in an ultimate question mark; in the importance to myself of my own sensations; and in Self Perfection as the most likely justification of any existence.\footnote{159 Larsen, 165}

Campbell read and kept a diary where he noted his observations about the innumerable islands, channels, and the coastal mountains, which rise vertically out of the sea, while Ricketts collected jellyfish for commercial sale, as well as starfish, hermit crabs and other sea life for his research.\footnote{160 Tamm, 184-185.} Both men, though, were preoccupied with their recent affairs. In a diary entry from Petersburg, a small Norwegian fishing village, Campbell wrote about Steinbeck’s dysfunctional marriage and the complex relationship between husbands and wives. Campbell re-visited these ideas throughout his life as he counseled couples, like Cage and Xenia, during periods of marital strife. It is also the topic of *Credo in Us*—an interesting fact in light of Campbell’s involvement in the conception of the work and his early relationship with Xenia.

Once in Sitka, Calvin laid anchor in Thimbleberry Cove near his cabin, where Xenia, a bored and isolated teenager, was spending the summer babysitting her seven-year-old niece:

> I wasn’t crazy about my sister or my brother-in-law. Ed [Ricketts] was no longer my lover, and there was a glamorous man aboard. So Joe [Campbell] would come over to my cabin—they all would…He was a very exciting man. I had my little windup phonograph with *Le sacre du printemps* of Stravinsky, and I’d play that…and Joe would explain to me, ‘Now listen when the flute does this,’ etc. Meanwhile I was thinking of quite different things than what the flute was doing…Then one day I decided it was a sunny day, and I walked into an obscure place near the water and took off my upper, to get
some sun on a big rock. Then I hear water splashing and I thought it was a seal. Out came this heavenly, naked Joseph Campbell, glistening with cold icy water. He said, ‘Hello Xenia,’ and he came up and sat on a rock with me…I don’t know how he could stand that cold water. He [just] …sat beside me, and we discussed a few things…He was not embarrassed, why should I be?  

Xenia and Campbell would spend their time together taking walks engaged in conversation among the Sitka Spruce trees observing the Tlinget and Haida totem poles in the forests around Sitka. They had agreed to keep their relationship platonic in part to stop the admonitions of Sasha, who felt the older, worldly Campbell to be threatening to the young Xenia (it appears they did not know of her relationship with Ricketts or Weston). Campbell, still reeling from his affair with Carol, also wanted to keep their friendship uncomplicated.  

After three weeks in Sitka, the expedition made the final leg to Juneau. Xenia went along primarily to spend more time with Campbell and to see her parents. She recalled, “So we got on the boat. I had to sleep in a sleeping bag, and we’d…anchor in some beautiful little harbor or cove in the night, and Joe would come up in his sleeping bag and lie beside me on the deck. It was a beautiful thing.” On quiet evenings, Xenia encouraged Campbell to tell stories. He drew upon his vast knowledge of myths recounting “Tristan,” “Sir Gawain,” or the native-American “Old Man” tales. Campbell was also becoming familiar with Tlinget and Haida folklore and recounted the stories he had learned interpreting totem poles.

In late-August, the “Grampus” pulled into Juneau, where Campbell met Father

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161 Larsen, 206. Cage uses an excerpt from The Rite of Spring in Credo in Us, an idea that Campbell or Xenia may have suggested, considering Cage’s dislike of Stravinsky.
162 Ibid, 207.
164 Ibid., 208.
Andrew Kashevarof (1863-1940), Xenia’s father. A music lover, Fr. Kashevarof was born in Alaska and educated in San Francisco, where, by the age of eighteen, he had learned to play the organ, violin and piano. He attended seminary there and took his first post at St. Michael’s Cathedral in Sitka. In 1920, while continuing to serve as priest in Juneau, he became curator of the Alaska Territorial Museum collecting a vast trove of native artifacts from around the state. He became an expert on Tlinget culture, lecturing and writing about a wide range of topics from the Sitka-Wrangell war between rival tribes in 1850 to the meaning of the Tlinget Potlach gatherings.

Campbell was immediately drawn to the elder Kashevarof, who over dinner on the first night recounted Siberian shaman stories and the history of Alaska. Xenia recalled, “Joe made a hit with my father because he picked up the balalaïka and immediately started to play it like an old professional.” The next day they attended a Mass in the Russian church, where Fr. Kashevarof chanted the mass in Russian and gave the credo in Tlinget. The rest of the weeklong trip was filled with trips to Mendenhall glacier, picking late-summer blueberries, and playing music in the evenings. On August 26, Ricketts and Campbell boarded the Princess Louise for Seattle.

The voyage to Alaska had been life changing for Campbell, who recalled years later in a letter to Ricketts his “deep nostalgia for those wonderful days, when everything that has happened since was taking shape. That was, for me at least, the moment of the great death and re-birth that Jung is always talking about, and all of you who were involved in

165 Larsen, 208.
166 Sergei Kan, Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity Through Two Centuries (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 489-90.
167 Ibid. 208.
the ‘agony’ are symbolic dominants of what is left to me of my psyche.” Xenia would carry her free-spirited Alaskan ways into her marriage to Cage in 1935, at 5:00 am. Campbell would begin teaching at Sarah Lawrence weeks after the Alaska trip and would later marry his former student Erdman on May 5, 1938 at 5:00 pm; whether it was planned or coincidence that both couples went through the effort to marry at the fifth hour, is unknown. But Campbell, like Cage, believed in the power of numbers, deliberately choosing to marry on the fifth month on the fifth day at the fifth hour as the number five belongs to Thor, the god of thunder, which is also a reference to the Hindu-Buddhist tradition of the thunderclap as the moment of awakening, and, similarly in Joyce, to the thunder that represents Stephen Dedalus’ awakening in Ulysses. Marriage for both couples marked an important rite of passage, the death of their old selves and the start of new lives.

Campbell’s role as the catalyst behind the creation of Credo is linked to the evolution of his own personal “credo” while in Alaska and his friendship with Xenia and later Cage.

**Bennington, Vermont: Bennington School of Dance**

Erdman and Cunningham developed the choreography for Credo at the Bennington School for Dance at Bennington College in Vermont, where the school operated from 1934 to 1942. Four of the most prominent modern dance choreographers of the day had residences during the six-week session, including Graham, Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), Charles Weidman (1901-1972), and Hanya Holm (1893-1992)—known collectively as the “Big Four.” Cage began his association with the school in 1939, with a concert of

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169 Tamm, 17.
170 Larsen, 274.
percussion music at Mills College, where the dance program was in residence.\textsuperscript{171}

The Bennington program gave experienced choreographers like Graham and Humphrey the space to workshop new works and also served as a laboratory for young choreographers like José Limón, Lincoln Kirstein, Nina Fonaroff, Eve Gentry, Cunningham, and Erdman to develop new dances. It was also where composers and choreographers came together to collaborate and share ideas. Music was an integral part of the rigorous training program for young dancers, and all were required to study music history with Louis Horst and performance with Franziska Marie Boas (1902-1988), who taught both percussion and dance.\textsuperscript{172} Boas' required all dance students to study percussion and started one of the first percussion ensembles in the United States. Her educational practices at Bennington reflect in part the close connection between percussion music and choreography at the time.\textsuperscript{173}

The war had an adverse effect on the Bennington dance program in the summer of 1942. The dance festival—the performance segment of the dance program that typically featured the debut of major works by Big Four since 1935—was cancelled. The \textit{Bennington College Bulletin} announcement was succinct: “The War makes it impossible to hold the Festival at this time.”\textsuperscript{174} However, classes in technique, composition, and music continued. In addition, for the first time the curriculum included a class on

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\textsuperscript{172} Boas was the daughter of the well-known anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) who taught at Columbia University.

\textsuperscript{173} D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, \textit{The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies} (New York: SAGE, 2006), fn. 395. Boas founded the Boas School of Dance in New York in 1933, where she taught “intercultural” dance. The Boas studio also served as a studio space for Cage in the early-1940s.

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government and economics, featuring a weekly “Forum on War and the Future.” As part
of this program, the teachers participated in a “Forum on Arts and the War.” The war
likely a constant topic of conversation as it had directly resulted in the loss of several
talented male dancers to the draft. 175 Financial hardship was also a problem; as one
commented: “The War swallowed up most of the ambitions of my generation. From 1942
on it was just a matter of keeping the wolf from the door.” 176

For dance critics Walter Terry and John Martin 177 the War marked a moment when
modern dance had moved out of its phase of abstract experimentation and into a period of
“magnificent and encompassing theater.” 178 They were both entranced with Graham’s
dance-dramas and believed this represented the future of American dance. Shortly before
leaving for the war in 1942, Terry summed up:

I have seen the modern dance make its final emergence from the strangleshrouds of
cultism into the bright light of pure theater...In fact, all of the modern dancers have at
last become truly modern, and not simply modernistic. After years of revolt from
heritage, they have at last turned to that heritage for the richness it has to offer. 179

The War did bring about changes in dance that Terry and Martin could not predict. It
created a cultural vacuum that was soon filled with new ideas from a younger generation
of choreographers and marked the end of an era of modern dance at Bennington.

The fact that there were no major productions planned in Bennington for the
summer of 1942 freed younger choreographers to develop new works. “A Program of
Dances” by Jean Erdman, Merce Cunningham and Nina Fonaroff was one of two

175 Ibid., 117
176 Nona Schurman quoted in Kriegsman, 117.
177 Ibid., 265. Terry was dance critic for the Boston Herald from 1936-1939 and for the New York Herald
Tribune, 1939-1942. He served in WWII and returned to his position in 1945-1966. John Martin was the
Kriegsman, 323 and 325.
178 John Martin quoted in Kriegsman, 118.
179 Ibid., 117.
programs presented by young choreographers in early August. For Cunningham and Erdman, Bennington offered them their first opportunity to break out of their roles as “Graham crackers” and pursue their own experiments.\textsuperscript{180} While confined within Graham’s rigorously controlled aesthetic, Cunningham and Erdman found relief through improvisation (e.g. \textit{Ad Lib.}, 1942) and the development of their own ideas through \textit{Credo}. Their routine at Bennington in the weeks before their dance recital included rehearsals with Graham on a revised version of \textit{American Document} and independent studio time to work on \textit{Credo} and other dances for their August recital, including two additional duets: \textit{Seeds of Brightness} (music by Louis Lloyd) and \textit{Ad. Lib.} (music by Gregory Tucker) and two solos: \textit{The Transformation of Medusa} (music by Louis Horst) for Erdman and \textit{Renaissance Testimonials} (music by Maxwell Powers) for Cunningham.\textsuperscript{181}

The rich intellectual and artistic climate of Bennington provided an ideal setting for the creation of \textit{Credo}. Cunningham and Erdman were exposed to ideas drawn from Graham’s aesthetic, specifically the psychological dances exploring the root of human experience and the Americana dances that engaged with issues of race, religion and economic and social injustice.

The satiric tone of \textit{Credo} also reflects ideas in circulation at Bennington, specifically Eve Greenhood’s dance \textit{Bargain at Any Price (A Satire on Advertising)}, which is similar in tone and structure to \textit{Credo}.\textsuperscript{182} Greenhood’s dance for seven dancers,

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\textsuperscript{180} Interview with Nancy Allison, May, 2008. The term “Graham Cracker” was a pejorative term used to describe dancers in Graham’s company who were required to replicate rote movements to Graham’s exacting specifications.
\textsuperscript{181} Benington Program, August 1, 1942. Two additional solos by Nina Fonaroff were included in the original program: \textit{Hoofer on a Fiver} (music by Tcherepnine) and \textit{Café Chantat—5 am} (Larmanjat?). The first names of these composers are not included in the program.
\textsuperscript{182} Greenhood was known after 1945 as Eve Gentry after she took her husband’s surname. She studied with Martha Graham and danced professionally with Hanya Holm (1936-1942) and later formed the Eve Gentry Dancers. See “Eve Gentry, 84, Dancer and Notator,” The New York Times (25 June 1994).
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some costumed as radios, also included two narrators. The symbolic use of the radio in both *Credo* and *Bargain* suggests that it was becoming an important cultural topic among choreographers. Indeed, the movement titles and script of *Bargain* offer a direct critique of advertising during the war:


Greenhood’s satire took aim at big business and radio advertising, a fact that may have informed the decision to include a radio in *Credo*. Her sentiments echo Cage’s own feelings about the war, which will be discussed in chapter four. Cunningham and Erdman may have also shared her critique of advertising:

I felt in the face of the War that the practice of advertising was frivolous, outrageous and irresponsible. I wanted to show how the media affected the public’s thinking, how it was getting people to buy and do things they didn’t need and how, in spite of the War, it was continuing as though there were nothing more serious in life. It was a humorous work. I used voice and sound. In that time we got most of our advertising from the radio. I had two people with props and costumes to suggest radios.183

*Bargain* is an example of the politically charged dance created by young choreographers at Bennington during the summer of 1942. Cunningham and Erdman were in a unique position at Bennington. They created *Credo* and other dances and developed their ideas alongside other young choreographers. Yet they were also professional dancers in Graham’s company. In this environment, they merged new ideas in circulation at Bennington with Graham’s established aesthetic.

**Martha Graham and The American Dance-Drama**

*Credo* reflects aspects of three Graham dances well known to Erdman and

183 Greenhood quoted in SAK, 120. Greenhood was on the faculty of the Bennington summer session where she taught Holm and Humphrey-Weidman technique.
Cunningham: *American Document* (1938); *Letter to the World* (1940); and *Punch and the Judy* (1941). Graham’s *American Document*, one of her longest dances on American history, was being revised at Bennington while Cunningham and Erdman were creating *Credo*.  

As discussed earlier in the chapter, *American Document* is based in part on the structure of minstrelsy shows. Cunningham in his role as interlocutor opened the program by reciting the “words of democracy:”

> “Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening. This is a theatre. The place is here in the United States of America. The time is now, tonight.”

Graham wanted the audience “to feel no obscurity or doubt at any time about what is happening on the stage.” Graham sought to create the illusion of American democracy at work through the interactions of the dancers on stage and between the performers and audience in part by engaging the audience directly through dialogue. She presented an un-sanitized version of American history, exploring the repressive morality of the Puritans, the expulsion of Native Americans from their lands and the gruesome history of slavery and racial segregation.

For Graham and her peers, dance was didactic and activist and meant to inspire responsible change in society. To this end, the text of *American Document* is made up of quotes from the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation, The Second Inaugural Address; speeches of Red Jacket of the Senecas; sermons of the Puritan preacher Johnathan Edwards; The *Song of Songs*; and

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184 *American Document* was premiered at Bennington on August 6, 1938, and reprised there in the 1942, a week after the premiere of *Credo in US*

185 Maureen Needham Costonis, 297-300.


187 Ibid., 147-148

188 Foulkes, 151.
selections from Thomas Paine, among others. Dance movements were interwoven and reflected the theme of spoken texts. John Martin, *The New York Times* dance critic, called the production "as successful a combination of speech and movement as any that has yet been made." Sophie Maslow, a principle dancer in the original production, later connected its themes to the effects of the Great Depression and the New Deal:

> “American Document” was very much of its period. There had been the Depression, yet there was a sense that a recovery was taking place. Roosevelt's New Deal policies had considerable support, and there was a strong labor movement. Martha was always concerned for the underdog. So, despite our country's troubles and the threat of fascism abroad, she made an affirmation. It was only natural then to do a work like this.\(^{190}\)

Shortly after reprising the work at Bennington in 1942, Graham wrote that hearing “vicious and terrifying words” on radio broadcasts originating from Fascist countries of Europe made her realize that "our own country - our democracy - has words, too, with power to hearten men and move them to action."\(^{191}\)

Cunningham had appeared in another speaking role for Graham as the “Yankee Orator” in *Land Be Bright* in March 1942. The work received one performance in Chicago, which was seen by Xenia and Cage; Xenia described Cunningham as “more marvelous than ever.”\(^{192}\) Around this time, however, Cunningham began to have doubts about Graham.

I began to fear that the Graham work was not in lots of ways sufficient for me. I suppose it came about from looking at other dancing and being involved with the ballet—something about the air, and the way she thought about dancing. So I began to do this thing I do of giving myself a class every day, and trying to experiment and push further….I would do what I knew, and then push beyond that, and see what else I could find.\(^{193}\)

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\(^{190}\) Ibid.

\(^{191}\) “American Document with Four Scenes from the Dance Martha Graham,” *Theatre Arts* 26, no. 9 (Sept, 1942) quoted in Anderson.

\(^{192}\) Vaughan, 26. Xenia described Merce’s dance as “more marvelous than ever and has a beautiful solo in the new dance.” Letter from Xenia Cage to Doris Dennison, April 6, 1942. Series I, box 2, folder 6. John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library.

\(^{193}\) Vaughan, 26
Cunningham began taking classes with the American Ballet Theatre the year before and began to experiment with techniques drawn from ballet and popular dance. *Credo* in many ways embodies his experimental drive, merging ballet, modern and vernacular forms, pushing beyond what he knew of Graham technique and the speaking roles he had in her dance-dramas.

**The Psychological Dance-Drama**

One of the most important precursors to *Credo* is Graham’s *Letter to the World*, one of her first dances to use a script and structured like a play with acts and scenes. The dance was a deeply psychological portrait of Emily Dickinson that merged dance, music and text to portray the double-sided dimensions of Dickinson’s personality—the spinster and the romantic. These two archetypes exposed what Graham called Dickinson’s “inner landscape.”

Graham cast Erdman to represent one facet of Dickinson’s personality:

> It was Jean [Erdman] who first spoke the poetry of Emily Dickinson in my ballet *Letter to the World*. I conceived of two Emilys, dressed alike in white, who opened the ballet, each one entering from the opposite side of the stage. Throughout the dance the Emily who spoke would witness the other Emily, myself, who danced the inner landscapes of the poetry. The first lines as we faced each other were, “I’m nobody! Who are you? Are you nobody, too? Then there’s the pair of us.”

*Letter* unfolds as series of flashbacks, moving forward and backward in time and between Dickinson’s unconscious and conscious lives. A similar chronology is alluded to in the scenario for *Credo*, which takes place over three generations and with the characters entering in and out of periods of fantasy. Further more, the use of the doubled characters in *Letter* likely inspired the doubled characterization of the Husband and Wife.

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194 Ibid., 89.
of Credo.

Of all Graham’s dance-dramas, Credo most resembles the complex relationship between husband and wife depicted in Punch and The Judy, one of Graham’s most popular dances. Punch is a tragic-comedy about marriage, exploring three perennial problems: “The problem of the home, the problem of the ‘other woman,’ and the problem of the political bandwagon.”

The brief program note taken from Edward Gordon Craig (‘Tom Fool’) describes the mythological figures that appear and the drama’s basis as a conflict between reality and dreams:

Punch and The Judy concerns man and woman. The text is squabble and scuffle. The Three Fates are any three women who direct the lives of others. The Three Heroes are the idealists. Pegasus is that force which enables us to imagine or to escape or to realize.

Erdman danced the role of one of the Fates and read excerpts from Tom Fool while Cunningham was the leaping Pegasus. “The Judy,” played by Graham, becomes engrossed in a dream in which Pegasus carries her away. The Fates bring her back to reality. The work ends with “The Judy” disconnected from reality. For her, the fantasy was the dream. Despite the seriousness of the scenario, Graham injected humor throughout. “When we hit the bottom of things we often find a laugh there. . . . It is a laugh that comes as a result of knowing everything and still refusing to be taken by despair.”

Recalling renaissance puppet shows and the commedia dell’arte, the critic Margaret Lloyd summarized the drama:

Punch reclines peacefully on the couch. The Judy daydreams at her fantastic window-piece. She casts a baleful glance at her sleeping spouse and with a flick of the wrist expresses her opinion of him. With the entrance of the child, a brat who has to be coaxed and scolded rocked and spanked, the first round of fighting starts. The Judy, bored with domesticity, seeks refuge in an interlude with Pegasus, a figment of romance whose

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196 Kriegsman, 221.
197 Ibid., 222.
The art director, Arch Lauterer, described *Punch* as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* personifying the battle of the sexes and Judy’s rage at being repeatedly abandoned by her “giddy husband.” Judy’s rage, ignited by her absent husband, is reminiscent of *Credo*’s “Ghoul’s Rage,” whose anger is also incited by a lazy, philandering (and likely drunk) husband.

The ideas present in *Credo*, including marital conflict, choreography, satiric tone, and the exploration of the boundary between private fantasy and public reality come into focus when viewed in the context of Graham’s dances and Greenhood’s *Bargain*. Bennington in many ways served as an ideal laboratory for the creation of *Credo* before its premiere in New York City in October 1942.

**Boundary Crossing Between Art and Life**

A large amount of archival and biographical information is presented in this chapter in order to reveal the myriad factors that influenced the creation of *Credo*, including personal relationships, artistic influences, patrons, mentors, peers, creative setting, and other factors. This approach is necessary as *Credo* is a combination of not one but three individual perspectives. Both Erdman and Cunningham choreographed *Credo* at Bennington, thus both their ideas are reflected in dance. At the same time, Cage composed *Credo* in a completely different setting in New York City, surrounded by

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199 Ibid., 223.
Duchamp and other expatriate artists. The creation of *Credo* is itself a fascinating narrative of different artistic perspectives, historical circumstances, and settings.

What connects these various narratives to *Credo*? The theme of boundary crossing between art and life, personal and public, reality and fantasy is one pervasive theme. Cage and Xenia participate in a surrealist game at Guggenheim’s in which their intimate selves are exposed to public scrutiny; Erdman includes in her choreography notes for *Credo* a diagram of the “Hero’s Journey,” which articulates the movement between reality and a supernatural world where seemingly insurmountable conflicts are confronted; Cage observes Duchamp’s spirit of detachment during a period of emotional strife at Guggenheim’s while Cunningham and Erdman’s participate in Martha Graham’s dance works that explore themes of artistic awakening and the movement between fantasy and reality (*Letter to the World*) and a satire on marriage (*Punch and The Judy*). These themes of spiritual awakening and boundary crossing also form the foundation of much of Joseph Campbell’s work in comparative mythology found in his book *A Hero With A Thousand Faces*, which was being written in 1942. Campbell’s involvement in Graham’s work, and as a mentor to Cunningham, Cage and Xenia, not to mention his intimate connection to Erdman, suggests the significance of his role in the project.

The notion of boundary crossing in *Credo* is first observed in the character names. As doubled figures, Husband/Shadow and Wife/Ghoul’s Rage move between an imaginary private space and their public persona.\(^{200}\) Within this scenario, Erdman explores the two archetypes of woman as both destructive and nurturing while Cunningham moves between his public role as Husband toward his private “shadow” persona, a term which alludes to both the radio program “The Shadow” and to C. G. Erdman.

\(^{200}\) The private/public duality will be explored in subsequent chapters.
Jung’s notion of the shadow area within the psyche, where our deepest fears, regrets, and painful experiences reside.\(^{201}\) With this in mind, we begin to understand how music, script and dance combine to illuminate the development of these doubled characters. On the one hand, the interaction between Husband and Wife is fraught with conflict giving the drama a tragic tone. However, as the characters shift toward their inner personas, the tone slides toward the comic, as when Husband/Shadow enters his “cowboy” fantasy. Binding these two dramatic positions is the drama’s satiric tone.

**Critical Reception: New York and Chicago**

Critical reception of *Credo* was mixed. The *Dance Observer* presented (and reviewed) the New York premiere in October 20-21, 1942 at the Studio Theatre. The review offers insight into how *Credo* operated on multiple levels as a tragic-comedy and the way the music supported the drama:

To begin with the most audacious number on the program, Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham sprang on the audience a “suburban idyll” entitled *Credo in Us*, a brochure on bourgeois marriage resourcefully composed and danced to the hilt. The invention was fine; there were effective shifts in form and a constant sense of knowing what the dance was about. The wit and the satire frequently went deeper to something of pathos, if not the tragic. The duet was punctuated with fragments of phrases wrung from the lips of the dancers, and had for its accompaniment quite a score, composed by John Cage for piano (struck both outside and in), a percussion ensemble that included some neatly tuned kitchen pots and pans, and radio bits of what sounded like something by Brahms. The background it gave to the dance was admirably apropos and made musical sense, too.\(^{202}\)

In contrast, the Chicago review was entirely negative, taking aim at the titles of the works and Cage’s score.

“Isn’t it amazing,” observed one member of the Arts club audience last night, “that youngsters will get up and do this sort of thing in public without imagining that there has

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to be an idea behind it?” This is, I am afraid, a fair summary of the dance recital of Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham, two youthful offshoots of Martha Graham’s group; and it is much too mild a comment upon the insistent vacuity of John Cage’s accompanying percussive music.

It takes a heap of choreography to make a dance recital an entertainment. And when dancers call their compositions “In the Name of the Holocaust” and “Forever and Sunsmell” and “Credo in Us” they have taken nine counts before the curtain ever goes up. Last night Miss Erdman and Mr. Cunningham took the 10th count when they attempted to realize these pretentious titles by creating halting pastiches of conventional Martha Graham studio materials which had little stamp of originality and even less warmth of communication.203

The critic, despite his curmudgeonly tone, relates aspects of Cunningham and Erdman’s choreography back to Graham, though notes that their work lacked her communicative warmth.

Of course, both dancers are skilled executants, for they have thoroughly mastered the tools of the trade as Miss Graham teaches them. … They are valuable and even exciting performers. But they have not even begun to understand the responsibilities of the creative dance composer.

Returning to the music, I find I have not been quite fair in mentioning only Mr. Cage, for Lou Harrison and Louis Horst shared in the composition of the empty, reiterative, nonmelodic, amorphous thumpings and pluckings that forced their way upon the unwilling ear. Will modern dancers please either stop employing music altogether, or else begin to show some respect for the fact, demonstrated perennially by ballet, that music need not be devoid of content in order to serve as satisfactory dance accompaniment?”

To the critic, Cage’s “amorphous thumpings and pluckings” were disruptive gestures that were devoid of “content.” “Content” is likely the critic’s code for pitch, melody, and harmony. Instead, Cage upends convention and turns to percussion noise, random radio sounds, recordings and borrowed music precisely to be disruptive and to signify the gritty reality of marriage exposed in the drama.

Chapter Two
Elements of a Musical Collage

“The wit and the satire frequently went deeper to something of pathos, if not the tragic.”
--Gregory Tucker, review of Credo in Us, 1942

Cage’s score for Credo is a collage of disparate musical styles, “found” percussion sounds, recordings of “classical” masterpieces, and random radio sounds. Cage specifies that the radio/phonograph operator should “avoid news programs during national emergencies” and “use some classic: e.g. Beethoven, Sibelius, Shostakovich, or Tchaikovsky” for the phonograph. Cage calls for an “orchestra” of tin cans, two gongs, timpani (later changed to tom-toms), an electric buzzer, phonograph, radio, and “string” piano. This chapter examines Cage’s score for Credo within the context of his history working with dancers and the development of his compositional language.

Cage’s score is an integral aspect of the dramatic narrative by using a complex mix of everyday noises, borrowed popular music, and percussion sounds to amplify changes in action, mood, and setting. Cage uses texture primarily to articulate the large-scale structure of Credo, which is divided into four “Façades” that frame three “Progressions” that reflect the sequence of the dance solos and duets.

First Façade—First Progression [Husband’s solo set to a Cowboy tune]
Second Façade—Second Progression [Wife’s solo set to a tom tom rhythm]
Third Façade —Third Progression [Duet set to a boogie-woogie]
Coda Façade

2 John Cage, Credo in Us, ms. score, NYPL. Cage adds Dvořák in the revised version in October 1942.
A brief synopsis of the drama establishes a context for an analysis of Cage’s score. Husband/Shadow and Wife/Ghoul’s Rage live in a rural western home. They have lost their money. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, the Husband/Shadow is characterized as weak and mechanical and Wife/Ghoul’s Rage as nurturing and violent. The Husband is portrayed as a worthless drunk and lost in a cowboy fantasy (First Progression) while Wife/Ghoul’s Rage seethes with anger. However, she is also lost in her own fantasy world, though one with violent consequences, culminating in her “dance of death” (Second Progression). There is a brief reconciliation before the final duet set to a boogie-woogie (Third Progression). The mood of despair returns in the coda façade as the couple leaves the stage and the bombastic percussion texture returns, climaxing in a haze of machine-gun-like sounds along with a radio, which is left playing as the curtain falls.

Cage’s score reflects the tension between surface and substance in Credo. On the surface, music and sound combine to underscore the setting, character development, and dramatic action. Beneath the surface though, Cage’s score reveals a fascinating array of techniques, including leitmotifs used to underscore character development and the use of texture to signal moods of interiority and exteriority. Cage uses a collage texture of everyday sounds—tin cans, buzzer and radio—to underscore moments of exteriority in the Façade sections, which feature brief solo dances and duets for Husband and Wife. In contrast, Cage uses a solo piano texture for the fantasy sections in the Progressions, which include the first two solo dances as well as the final duet.
In order to better understand Cage’s compositional choices, we turn to a brief history of his work with dancers and studies with Schoenberg beginning in the mid-1930s.

**Cage’s Work with Modern Dance**

Cage’s work with choreographers and dancers had a profound impact on his development as a composer. This was the case for many composers in the twentieth century, as William Schuman observed: “It is not an exaggeration, I believe, to claim that the great patron of twentieth century music has been the art of dance.” Few others benefited more from this historical situation than Cage, who began composing for dance partly out of necessity to get commissions during the Great Depression. “Modern dancers,” he observed, have always been insatiable consumers of modern music.

The evolution of Cage’s work with choreographers intersects with his studies with Arnold Schoenberg at the University of California, Los Angeles. Cage begins working with dancers at UCLA in 1935, where Cage accompanies dance classes. His first dance scores were presented through the physical education department. In 1937, Cage served as the composer for the University's modern dance group. In addition, he taught percussion at the Virginia Hall Johnson School of Dance in Beverly Hills. In 1938, he developed a course, titled “Musical Accompaniments for Rhythmic Expression,” at

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5 Nicholls, John Cage, 20.
6 For more on Cage’s studies with Schoenberg, see Michael Hicks, “John Cage’s Studies with Schoenberg,” *American Music* 8/2 (Summer, 1990): 125-140.
7 Paul van Emmerik, “A John Cage Compendium,” www.xs4all.nl/, accessed 5/2/2008, 5. Dance became integrated into university curriculums in the 1930s through physical education programs rather than fine arts departments. Many of Cage’s dance scores from this period are lost.
UCLA, and later worked with the choreographer Marian Van Tuyl (1907-1987) at Mills College.

In contrast to his schedule working with dancers, Cage was immersed in his studies with Schoenberg. Cage had initially approached Schoenberg for composition lessons in 1934. Schoenberg asked if he had enough money to pay his fee. Cage, who told this story many times throughout his life, responded:

I told him that there wasn’t any question of affording it, because I couldn’t pay him anything at all. He then asked me whether I was willing to devote my life to music, and I said I was. “In that case, I will teach you free of charge.”

In the spring of 1935, Cage enrolled in Schoenberg’s analysis class, which covered eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works. David Bernstein observes that Schoenberg focused on the expression of musical ideas and not on any particular compositional style—a consistent approach in both his courses and writings. Years later he explained, “please do not expect modernistic music. If students tell me they want me to teach them to write music I always answer, I teach only music.”

According to anecdotal evidence, Cage appears to have been an active and respected member of the class. The composer Gerald Strang recalled in his course notes from December 3, 1935, a discussion between Cage, himself, and Schoenberg during which Cage correctly identifies the motive of the Rondo from Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in D.
Schoenberg used musical analysis as a way to present “universal” musical ideas that would be useful in his students. Pauline Alderman, a Schoenberg student, recalled that he constantly focused on “the musical logic of every motivic usage.”

Schoenberg viewed the motive as an integral part of the “musical idea.” In a departure from past practices, Schoenberg did not regard the motive as a generative seed for a single work.

It will be noted that this departs from the usual understanding of the motive as germ of the piece out of which it grows. For if this conception were correct, only one single piece could arise from one motive. As is well known, such is not the case. I consider the motive the building material that can assume and realize all forms.

Bernstein interprets Schoenberg’s idea that the motive could have “more than a single compositional realization” as a “significant departure from the determinism often associated with “organicist aesthetics;” an idea that served as an important point of “aesthetic convergence for Schoenberg and Cage.” The point of this convergence centered on the role of variation and repetition within the work, one which is evident in Cage’s handling of both rhythmic and melodic motives in *Credo*.

Schoenberg discussed several types of repetition and variation in his courses. According to Strang: “repetition . . . was achieved without change. . . variation (i.e., by changing the “setting” [range], harmony, or rhythm, and through developing variation.” Variation in other words was a type of repetition, an idea that Cage adopted in his early works:

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12 Leonard Stein course notes, September 9, 1936, quoted in Bernstein, 19.
15 Bernstein, 21.
16 Gerald Strang’s class notes dated June 20, 1935, quoted in Bernstein, 22.
In all my pieces coming between 1935 and 1940, I had Schoenberg’s lessons in mind; since he had taught me that a variation was in fact a repetition, I hardly saw the usefulness of variation, and I accumulated repetitions. All of my early works for percussion, and also my compositions for piano, contain systematically repeated groups of sounds or durations.\(^\text{17}\)

In contrast to these works, Cage appears to rediscover a more nuanced view of variation in *Credo*, which incorporates extensive motivic variation, which will be discussed in analysis part of this chapter.

While Cage exhibited a deep understanding of Schoenberg’s teachings as a student, he began to have doubts about his abilities during in Schoenberg’s advanced analysis course. Cage confessed his doubts about his abilities to his former teacher Adolph Weiss: “I cannot get away from my own consciousness of having done nothing of value. . . . I have already practically condemned myself. I begin to feel that I ‘tamper’ with music, unrightfully.”\(^\text{18}\) Cage repeatedly told Schoenberg that he had “no feeling for harmony.”\(^\text{19}\) Cage soon dropped out of Schoenberg’s courses and prepared to leave Los Angeles.

Cage remained devoted to Schoenberg’s teachings over the next several years. In 1940, Cage wrote that modern music must bear “a definite relation to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system.” He even proposed a “sound row” for the organization of sounds.\(^\text{20}\) As he continued to compose for percussion and dance, Cage began to develop a systematic approach to dealing with unpitched percussion and the often “chaotic dance counts” (the combination of steps used in a dance work) used by choreographers. Cage


\(^{18}\) Cage’s letter to Adolph Weiss is transcribed in William George, “Adolph Weiss” (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1971), quoted in Michael Hicks, “John Cage’s Studies with Schoenberg,” 130.

\(^{19}\) Ibid. See also Calvin Tompkins, “Profiles,” in John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 114.

\(^{20}\) Cage, quoted in Hicks, 130.
observed that these “counts” were “nearly always, from a musical point of view, totally lacking in organization: three measures of 4/4 followed by one measure of 5, 22 beats in a new tempo, a pause, and to measures of 7/8.”

Cage claimed that these challenges led to the adoption of rhythm and duration as the basis of a time-based structure, which allowed for the composer and choreographer to work independently.

In the summer of 1937, Cage met Lou Harrison (1917-2003), who was also experimenting with percussion and working with dancers at the time.

Cage and Xenia move to Seattle in the spring of 1938. In the fall, Cage joined the faculty at Cornish, where he works as a composer and accompanist for Bonnie Bird’s (1914-1995) dance classes and teaches “Creative Composition and Percussion Instruments.”

Cage’s compositional approach benefits from his continued engagement with choreographers, experience working with new technology in the Cornish radio lab, and the establishment of his west coast percussion ensemble. It is also at Cornish, where Cage meets an ideal artistic partner in Merce Cunningham. Like Cage, Cunningham was curious and philosophical, drawn to discussions with artists outside his chosen discipline.

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21 John Cage, “A Composer’s Confessions,” John Cage: Writer, 33. Structural rhythm is similar to the rhythmic methods developed in the micro-macrocosmic system.
22 Ibid.
23 Nicholls, John Cage, 21
25 Emmerik, 6. Bird had trained with Martha Graham and became an internationally acclaimed teacher.
27 Cage also met the artists Mark Tobey (1890-1967) and Morris Graves (1910-2001), who became supporters of his work in Seattle.
It was difficult for me at that time (1939) to talk with dancers. Not that I don’t like them. They would mainly talk about the way somebody did something: they didn’t like this or didn’t like that, it always had to do with personalities. It’s like gossip. That’s entertaining and I like it too, but I also wanted to talk about ideas and there wasn’t anybody I could talk with except John. 28

Cage explored a new range of musical possibilities in his Cornish dance scores, some of which featured Cunningham, including the *Imaginary Landscape* and *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* (both 1939). 29 In *Credo*, Cage brings together many of the compositional ideas developed during his time at Cornish, including the motivic approach to writing for percussion (*First Construction in Metal*), use of electronic sounds, and embrace of a collage aesthetic (*Marriage at the Eiffel Tower*). Cage’s collaborative approach to working with choreographers is examined next.

### “Grace and Clarity,” and Other Writings on Dance

Cage’s early writings resemble on dance resemble the avant-garde manifestos of the Futurists and Dadaists. In the “Four Statements on The Dance,” reflect his ideas on writing for dance, which are incorporated into the composition of *Credo*, Cage calls for an end to the traditional co-dependent relationship between music and dance, observing that music should not only describe the dance nor should the dance merely imitate the music: “choreographers have made the music identical with the dance but not cooperative with it.” 30 The antidote, Cage suggests, is for dance and music to be written at the same time based on the same rhythmic structure (dance counts). For Cage, structure—length of time, divided into sub-sections, phrases, solos and duets—marks the start of the

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29 The Cornish production of Jean Cocteau’s *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* is discussed in chapter three.
30 Ibid., 88.
collaboration and the point of departure for the creation of movement and music. Only then will the music, Cage concludes, “be more than an accompaniment; it will be an integral part of the dance.”\textsuperscript{31} Cage used this approach for the composition \textit{Credo}, in part, because he was unable to be at Bennington to work directly with Cunningham and Erdman. As such \textit{Credo} is based on Cunningham and Erdman’s dance “counts” and, in addition, Cunningham’s script, which is handwritten into the manuscript score.

Cage’s next essay, “Grace and Clarity” (1944), builds on the idea of rationally planned structures, which Cage labeled as “clarity.” “Clarity is cold, mathematical, inhuman, but basic and earthy.”\textsuperscript{32} In contrast “grace” is free and irrational, corresponding with Cage’s concept of form as an organic unfolding of ideas: “Grace is warm, incalculable, human, opposed to clarity, and like the air.”\textsuperscript{33} This yin/yang relationship, Cage reveals, is found in the finest dramas, poetry, dance, and music. They are “endlessly, and life-givingly, opposed to each other.”\textsuperscript{34} Cage’s uses jazz as an analogy for the subtle interplay between structure and content, describing how jazz musicians play around meter and melody by continually “anticipating and delaying” phrases to generate the tension that makes “hot jazz hot.”\textsuperscript{35} Surprisingly, Cage also cites classic ballet, perhaps influenced by Cunningham’s work at the American Ballet Theatre in the early-1940s. Despite his belief that the narratives of most ballets are irrelevant to modern life, Cage admires the interplay between the highly structured techniques and the story, however banal. “Good or bad, with or without meaning, well dressed or not, the ballet is

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} John Cage, \textit{Silence}, 91. Many of Cage’s writings are descriptions of his past compositions; therefore I read “Grace and Clarity” as, in part, an explanation for dance scores, like \textit{Credo in Us}.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. 92.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
always clear in its rhythmic structure. Phrases begin and end in such a way that anyone in the audience knows when they begin and end and breathes accordingly.”

Cage’s concept of grace and clarity operates in the time-based arts like a background code, which Cage described as lying “beneath, over and above, physical and personal particularities” of a work. This aesthetic—specifically the structural aspect—is lacking in modern dance in the 1930s and ‘40s, which Cage believed was based on a cult of personality: “its strength having been and being the personal property of Hanya Holm, Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, and Humphrey-Weisman.” He concludes by bringing the audience into his equation, arguing that in order for modern dance to be useful to society, it must clarify its rhythmic structure so that the audience can follow its form.

In Credo, the sequence of Façades and Progressions illustrate Cage’s objective of projecting the structure of the music and dance to the audience.

**New Sounds and Rationally Controlled Structures**

The Imaginary Landscape (1939) provides a useful example of Cage’s approach to developing a shared structure for music and dance and experimentation with electronic sounds. The Cornish radio studio served as Cage’s first “electronic music studio.” Here he produced a score using a combination of muted piano, large Chinese cymbal and two variable-speed turntables playing Victor frequency records (one of sliding tones and the other of single pitch drones). Cage used a pre-planned structure of four sections, each

37 Ibid., 93.
38 Ibid.
made up of fifteen measures, which were divided into three/five measure groups (3x5). In between each section, there is an interlude that adds a measure with each occurrence to create an additive sequence: $15+1; 15+2; 15+3$.\(^{40}\) Cage’s structure is used both to support the amorphous musical content of sliding tones, cymbal rolls, and “string” piano motives and link the dance counts to the music.

What is striking about the debut performance is that the music was performed in the Cornish radio studio and broadcast to the theatre next door, where it was used to accompany Bonnie Bird’s abstract dance. The nineteen-year-old Merce Cunningham was part of the troupe of dancers that moved among and hid behind large, mobile black shapes set against a black backdrop to create the illusion of floating, dismembered bodies. Cunningham recalled: “The question arose as to what would be the nature of an audience’s response to seeing only isolated parts of dancers’ bodies moving in a time-free spatial conversation.”\(^{41}\) Bird explained her approach in an interview: “I discovered I could do things like create a body that covered the whole stage. . . . You would see a head, Merce’s head, way up, and then sliding down the side while two sets of legs walked down the stage. It was fascinating. And I would have the rectangle interrupt the two, and they'd skitter away. Or you'd see only hands moving in space.”\(^{42}\)

Cage further refines his mathematical approach to structure with the creation of the micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure, which he used in several percussion works, including the three Constructions for percussion (1939-1941), as well as for some dance works for prepared piano. The premise of the micro-macrocosmic form is to link the

\(^{41}\) Program note for a performance of Imaginary Landscape at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in London, quoted in Vaughan, 28.
\(^{42}\) Bonnie Bird interview.
largest elements of a work’s structure proportionally to the smallest based on a shared number series.\textsuperscript{43} For example, Cage’s First Construction in Metal (1939) is based on the number sixteen, which is divided the series (4, 3, 2, 3, and 4). This series governs the large-scale sections, the work’s macro-structure (sections) and micro-section (phrases).\textsuperscript{44} Thus, the first section is based on 4 phrases (made up of 4+3+2+3+4 measures) followed by the second section made up of 3 phrases, etc. Cage’s structures reflect his interest in Varèse’s “organization of sound” and Russolo’s futurist noise/sound aesthetic.\textsuperscript{45} In “A Composer’s Confessions,” Cage claimed that his approach had nothing to do with the desire for self-expression, but simply had to do with the organization of materials. I recognized that expression of two kinds, that arising from the personality of the composer and that arising from the nature and context of the materials, was inevitable, but I felt its emanation was stronger and more sensible when not consciously striven for, but simply allowed to arise naturally.\textsuperscript{46}

Cage’s carefully crafted structures were essentially designed in part to support a wide range of expression and content, from novel electronic sounds to lyrical melodic lines for the prepared piano. Expressiveness is not a word commonly associated with Cage’s work, though in the 1940s Cage began to compose pieces that he describes as “intentionally expressive.”\textsuperscript{47} Many were written for the prepared piano or for piano/percussion combinations, as in Credo and Amores (1943). Cage invented the prepared piano in 1940 at Cornish for a solo dance by Sylvia Fort called Bacchanale.\textsuperscript{48} After learning that the theater was too small to fit Cage’s percussion ensemble, he began

\textsuperscript{44}For a graphic display of this process, see James Pritchett, 17.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46}John Cage, “A Composer’s Confessions,” quoted in Pritchett, 18.
\textsuperscript{48}See Tamara Levitz, “Sylvia Fort’s Africanist Modernism: Cage’s Gestic Music: The Story of Bacchanale,” The South Atlantic Quarterly 104:1 (Winter 2005), 124. Satie is perhaps the first composer to begin inserting material into the piano. See Le piège de Méduse (1913).
tinkering with a nearby piano by inserting various materials (screws, erasers, bolts) in between the strings. The experiment yielded a seemingly infinite array of percussive knocks, pings, rattles and gamelan-like sounds. Cage subsequently used the prepared piano for several dance works by Cunningham, Erdman, Hanya Holm, and Pearl Primus, among others during the 1940s.

Several of these prepared piano pieces from the 1940s reflect his personal difficulties and fragile emotional state brought on by the disintegration of his marriage to Xenia. Works like *A Valentine Out of Season* are muted and subtle and melancholic. His carefully ornamented melodies, often with a simple accompaniment, stand in contrast to his large-scale percussion works. James Pritchett notes the stylistic contrast: “it may seem strange to use the term ‘lyrical,’ it is quite appropriate in describing Cage’s prepared piano works and in isolating the essential stylistic difference between these and his percussion compositions.”

In *Credo*, Cage draws on both the expressive piano style along with the experimental electronic and percussion textures developed in the “Construction” and *Imaginary Landscape* series. In addition, Cage combines both determined compositional techniques along with indeterminate radio and phonograph elements. In many ways, *Credo* is not a completely “determined” and not purely “indeterminate,” but a combination of both. As such, *Credo* stands at an important moment in Cage’s creative development as it anticipates his later adoption of indeterminacy and chance operations.

Virgil Thomson captures Cage’s evolving collage aesthetic in the article “Cage

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49 These personal issues will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

50 Ibid.
and the Collage of Noises.” In the percussion music, Thomson observed, Cage’s “ultimate aim was to produce a homogenized chaos that would carry no program, no plot, no reminders of the history of beauty and no personal statement.” However, regarding the prepared-piano works and other wartime works, Thomson noted that Cage “does not hesitate, as in Amores (1943), to describe things personally experienced, in this case a lover’s triangle.” Thomson here refers to Cage, Xenia, and Cunningham’s ménage à trois, discussed in chapter one.

In a 1945 article titled “Expressive Percussion,” Thomson praised Cage for extending Schoenberg’s harmonic ideas to their “logical conclusion” by replacing pitch with noise, which Thomson described as “a gamut of pings, plucks, and delicate thuds that is both varied and expressive.” Thomson further singles out Cage’s development of rhythm as the most advanced of any living composer. But it is his observation of how Cage uses sound and rhythm for “expressive purposes” in order to “intensify communication” that that supports a reading of Credo that links Cage’s compositional choices with dramatic action.

His continuity devices are chiefly those of the Schoenberg school. There are themes and sometimes melodies, even, though these are limited, when they have real pitch, to the range of a fourth, thus avoiding the tonal effect of dominant and tonic. All these appear in augmentation, diminution, inversion, fragmentation, and the various kinds of canon. That these procedures do not take over a piece and become its subject, or game, is due to Cage’s genius as a musician. He writes music for expressive purposes; and the novelty of his timbres, the logic of his discourse, are used to intensify communication, not as ends in

52 Ibid., 478.
55 Ibid.
themselves. His work represents . . . not only the most advanced methods now in use anywhere but original expression and poetic quality. And this has been proved now through all the classical occasions—theatre, ballet, song, orchestral composition, and chamber music.\textsuperscript{56}

In the early-1940s, Cage began experimenting with presenting two oppositional ideas. His expressive writing is defined by stark, dramatic contrasts. For example, a quiet chant-like melody in the first part of his prepared-piano work \textit{In the Name of the Holocaust} is followed by forearm clusters and pounding chords in the second part. In \textit{Credo} and \textit{Amores}, the dramatic contrast is expressed by the alternation between dense percussion textures and solo piano. During World War Two, Cage began to associate these contrasts in texture to extramusical ideas: quiet sounds became equated with love, friendship and intimacy and loud sounds with destruction, war, governments, and corporations.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, Cage employs these shifts in texture in \textit{Credo} in part to amplify the dramatic action and the tension between husband and wife.

\textbf{Integrating Opposites: Cage’s Approach to Composition}

Cage’s approach to composition as a process of “integrating opposites” is a central facet of \textit{Credo}.

Composition, then, I viewed ten years ago, as an activity integrating opposites, the rational and the irrational, bringing about, ideally, a freely moving continuity within a strict division of parts, the sounds, their combination and succession being either logically related or arbitrarily chosen.\textsuperscript{58}

In \textit{Credo}, the integration of opposites begins with the opposition of determinate music with indeterminate elements. The determined music is defined by a rationally constructed

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{57} John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” in \textit{Silence}, 117. \\
\end{flushright}
structure overlaid with a tightly integrated web of rhythmic and melodic motives. In contrast are the random radio sounds and phonograph recordings. To be clear, Cage constrains these elements by specifying dynamics, duration and placement within the score. Nonetheless, content is left open to the performer’s choice and the randomness of what happens to be playing over the radio airwaves.

The most recent theoretical attempt to understand Cage’s oppositional aesthetics during the 1940s comes from theorist/composer Thomas DeLio. His analytical approach to Amores (1943), a work similar to Credo, is grounded in modernist poetics and the opposition between organic and inorganic form.\(^59\) DeLio draws on Marjorie Perloff’s delineation of two streams of modernism: the Symbolist (T.S. Eliot and Charles Baudelaire) evolving from Romantic notions of organic form, and the anti-Symbolist (Arthur Rimbaud and Gertrude Stein), characterized by an inorganic or indeterminate approach.\(^60\) The organic is characterized by a clear interdependency between form, content and artistic intention: “The artwork becomes an image of the individual; its form and process one with the self.”\(^61\) Conversely, the inorganic severs the link between artist and work in order to more directly conjure the phenomena of everyday experience.

Traditionally these two approaches have been separated in modernist studies. DeLio, however, argues that they should be considered together, contending that their coexistence and interdependence is a “central paradigm” of modernism and a key element in Cage’s Amores. DeLio finds Cage’s drawing together of oppositional material “as a


\(^{60}\) Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1983), quoted in DeLio, 1

\(^{61}\) DeLio, 4.
vortex in that it draws vastly different, seemingly unrelated ideas together.” DeLio uses Ezra Pound’s term “vortex,” defined as “the point of maximum energy,” to capture the dynamism of Cage’s oppositional aesthetic.

Cage’s use of both determined and indeterminate elements in *Credo* may then be interpreted as a fusion of subjective (organic, determined) and objective (inorganic, random, and connected to the everyday world) modes of expression. This dialectical approach in part reflects the movement between a subjective or interior musical space and an objective everyday reality within *Credo*. This pattern within the score becomes clear when viewed in the context of the script and dance.

**Fantasy and Reality in *Credo***

Cunningham’s scenario and script and Cage’s score depict each character’s slide between a private fantasy world and everyday reality. Cage uses texture to depict these two spheres, where reality is articulated using an array of everyday sounds from “found” percussion, buzzer, and a radio and phonograph. In contrast, fantasy is signaled by the solo piano. Cage also uses Wagnerian-style *leitmotifs* to signal each character: Husband/Shadow has a four-note motive and Wife/Ghoul’s Rage the “Indian” tom-tom rhythm. In the score, the shift between interiority and exteriority takes place in the sections labeled “Progressions” and “Façades.”

The very definition of “Façade” is fitting for *Credo’s* ironic tone: “the front part of anything: often used figuratively, with implications of an imposing appearance

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62 DeLio, 15.
concealing something inferior.” The “Façades” are characterized by a percussive texture of polyrhythms, layered ostinati and hemiolas, as well as random radio sounds and atonal piano writing. This texture is also used to create an unsettled tension and emotional angst. In contrast, the “Progressions” are moments of reflection through the use of a solo piano to signal interiority.

The Form and Content in Credo

Cage’s score for Credo reveals both an unexpected logic and a frustrating chaos.65 For example, Cage’s usual systematic control of structure using the micro-macrocosmic form, common in many of his scores from this period, is absent; the structure adheres to no formal plan. On the other hand, there is a surprising cohesiveness in Cage’s use of thematic material, specifically the use of motivic repetition and variation to underscore recurring themes within the drama. Nonetheless, any attempt to propose an overarching thematic, tonal, or formal unity for Credo ignores the inclusion of the random radio and phonograph sounds, which subvert any implied “unity” within in the work. It is precisely this tension between the “composed” and indeterminate elements of the work that contribute to Credo’s vibrant theatrical narrative.

Credo is composed “within the phraseology of the dance” and based on Erdman and Cunningham’s step counts.66 Cunningham and Erdman worked out the parameters of their dance shortly after arriving in Bennington for the summer program. Cage recalled,

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65 Cage’s original dance score is referenced in this analysis. However, the musical examples are drawn from Cage’s typeset score published by C. F. Peters as most of the musical examples are identical to the original score. The major differences between the two scores involve the use and placement of the radio and phonograph and the length of specific sections. For example, the Progression Two is longer in Cage’s original score.
66 John Cage, John Cage: Writer, 8.
“Merce and Jean gave me the time lengths and tempi and so forth, and I just wrote to fit with what they had done.”67 The first page of the manuscript notes the tempo at “(half-note = 108  approx.) (whole note=count in dance).”68

Cage delineated structure in Credo by using rhythm to signal cadences and section changes for the dancers, in part by stretching and contracting meter. Cage's method of rhythmic cadences is drawn in part from Cowell's rhythmic technique described in New Musical Resources. Cowell developed a system of relationships between rhythm, meter, and harmony as a way to create a broader sense of dissonance and consonance. For example, a major triad expresses the proportion 6: 5: 4, which can be articulated as a rhythmic "triad" consisting of simultaneous polyrhythms of 6 against 5 against 4. Cage uses a series of such cadences throughout Credo, though most are dissonant cadence, some combining a 8:7:5 proportion (m. 33). Cage also alters the technique by using a solo instrument in which the cadences are expressed in a linear rather than horizontal fashion.69 For example, Cage approaches a cadence by moving from sextuplets to triplets to quintuplets to quarter notes (7-6-5-4, figure 7) to give the illusion of slowing down.

![Figure 7: Cadential figure, piano (bass clef), Second Progression, mm. 52-55](image)

67 David Vaughan, Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years (New York: Aperture, 1997), 27
68 John Cage Collection, NYPLPA, manuscript draft of Credo, JPB 94-24 folder 70.
69 David Bernstein, “Music I; to the late 1940s,” Cambridge Companion to John Cage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 75. The process used in Credo likely falls outside of Cowell’s strict definition of the technique, nonetheless Cage’s adaptation appears to be related the same processes he used in the Second Construction at key cadential points.
Cage also accelerates toward the cadence by moving from quintuplets to triplets to eighths and also mixes these patterns, accelerating, slowing down, then accelerating again (3-7-6, figure 8).

![Figure 8: Cadence figure, piano, First Progression, mm. 21-24](image)

**First Façade**

The first Façade opens with the radio blaring fortissimo (in the suite version, Cage suggests either the radio or phonograph). The radio introduces leads to a to a twelve-bar introduction for tin cans and gongs, playing ostinato patterns, and angular, atonal figures in the piano. Cage uses this collage texture in each of the four façades to reflect a sense of anxiety and tension between Wife/Ghoul’s Rage and Husband/Shadow.

Cage builds these Façade textures using motivic patterns and their variations (figure 9 and 10), many of which appear in Cage’s other percussion works, including *Double Music* (1941), *Amores* (1943), *She Is Asleep* (1943) and the three *Constructions* (1939, 1940, 1941), as well as the radio drama, *The City Wears a Slouch Hat* (1942).70

![Figure 9: Motive one, m. 1](image) ![Figure 10: Motivic variation, m. 35](image)

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70 For a study of Cage’s motivic usage see David Bernstein, “Music I: to the late 1940s,” in *Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, 63-77.
Within these motives, Cage varies the placement of rests, the grouping of eighth notes as well as the instrumentation and dynamics to create variations. Cage also uses motives in a polyrhythmic context (e.g. within a quintuplet, figure 11) or by substituting rhythms within the motive (e.g. a triplet replacing two eighth notes, figure 12). Cage’s motivic variation technique generates a continuously shifting rhythmic texture. Cage also uses these motives at the same time, often combining the quintuplet variation with the motive one or triplet variation to generate metric tension.

Cage also splits motives into cells to create new rhythmic patterns, often generating metrical tension between two or more meters simultaneously. For example, in figure 13, Cage uses a cell to suggest a 3/8 meter against the written 2/2 meter.

Cage’s tutti textures in the Façade sections use cross rhythms, polyrhythms, multiple meters, motivic fragmentation and motive variation against a background of random radio sounds. This creates a cacophony of sound and metrical tension (figure 13),
that signify exteriority, in contrast to the moments of interiority in the Progressions.

Figure 14: Musical example, Façade One, mm. 57-62; Note the main motive is presented in the muted gongs (percussion one, m. 65), while the tin cans (percussion 2, mm. 68-69) enter into a 5/4 meter versus the piano in 6/4 (mm. 65-68).

Cage’s Façade texture is a prelude to the first lines of the drama, “Shadow’s in a gimlet haze/These things were in Ghoul’s rage.” Husband/Shadow enters dancing with “mechanical” and “dehumanized” movement.71 Cage underscores this moment with Husband/Shadow’s leitmotif in figure 15, which appears in varied from in the Façades, cowboy song and boogie-woogie sections.

Figure 15: Mechanistic piano motive, Façade One, mm. 12-14

Occupying a narrow range between G³ and middle-C, this motive signals the entrances of the mechanized Husband/Shadow. The repeating eighth note pattern,

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71 Ibid.
interrupted by the octave leap (m. 14), suggests a mechanistic feel. The motive is inverted in measure 28 (figure 16) and retains this profile through the rest of the work.

![Mechanistic piano motive inverted](image1)

**Figure 16:** Mechanistic piano motive inverted, Façade One, mm. 19-20 (only two bars shown of fourteen)

Wife/Ghoul’s Rage’s entrance is prefaced by the “Indian” tom-tom, which serves as her *leitmotif* (see figure 16). This use of a Native-American trope to signify the female is a complex gesture linked to a resurgent interest in Native-American culture among the New York avant-garde and trends in Western film, both of which will be discussed in chapter three.\(^{72}\) On the surface, however, the dramatic contrast in *leitmotifs* establishes the opposition between the feminine as human and male as machine.

!["Indian" tom tom motive](image2)

**Figure 17:** "Indian" tom tom motive, Façade one, mm 72-73.

The “Indian” tom tom rhythm underscores Erdman’s description of her character as a “violent she-devil,” a description that conjures a primitive, violent figure. The implications of Cage’s choice will be discussed in chapter three.

\(^{72}\) Jean Erdman, Choreography notes, 1942, NYPLPA, Jean Erdman Papers, box 27, folder 1.
Progression One: Cowboy Solo

The “First Progression” is a solo dance for Husband/Shadow set to a cowboy song for solo “string” piano. The pianist mutes the strings inside the piano to create a timbre that resembles the sound of a guitar (see Figure 17). In contrast to the percussive texture of the First Façade, the Progression features a quiet, single-line melody that spans a range of a major ninth.

![Figure 18: Cowboy song, First Progression, mm, 1-7, with pick up.](image)

On the surface, the cowboy song reflects the drama’s setting “Westward Ho!” It also signals numerous other western ideas—the Gold Rush and the western wheat fields—referenced in the scenario and script. The song moves between complete phrases and repeating fragments, an effect that evokes a sense of disorientation and confusion as the melodic momentum is periodically interrupted by a repeating motive that halts the forward motion, perhaps a musical metaphor of Husband/Shadow’s drunkenness? Further, the radio sounds appear before and after the solo, which creates an allusion of a radio drama, perhaps suggesting that Husband/Shadow is lost in a western fantasy.

Cage integrates Husband/Shadow’s letimotif into the end of the cowboy song. The

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73Cowboy songs were transcribed in several anthologies, including N. H. Thorp, *Song of the Cowboy* (1908) and John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910; enl. 1938); The Lomax was consulted for this study. After examining all of the songs in the book, I found none that directly reflected the melodic profile of Cage’s cowboy song.

74*Credo* scenario provided courtesy of the Bennington College Library Archive.
motive is here transformed into a pick-up figure without the seventh-degree (Figure 18) and rhythmically augmented to quarter notes within a repeated hemiola pattern (3:4).

The cowboy melody, absent of seventh and fourth scale degrees, recalls the modal quality found in many Cowboy songs collected in anthologies in the early-twentieth century. Many of these songs depict cowboy life and are cast in a ballad form with melodies drawn from nineteenth-century folk music. These songs were romanticized by Tin Pan Alley songwriters and later popularized on radio and in Hollywood films by such singing cowboys as Gene Autry, Roy Rodgers, Tex Ritter, and others.

The usage of a cowboy song for Husband/Shadow’s solo dance conjures a wealth of cultural associations: masculinity, independence, freedom, openness, lawlessness, and migration, ideas that will be discussed more fully in chapter three. Within the drama, however, the song serves as a musical metaphor of a fantasy world beyond the repressive strictures of domestic life, one that conjures countless Western films and radio programs from the 1930s and ‘40s.

The cowboy fantasy is interrupted by the return of the clamorous percussion texture, which frames five brief speeches describing Husband/Shadow’s sexual exploits, described as, “arrowhead picking,” “dalliances,” “jerking” and “braking.” Interspersed are jazz bass lines played by the piano. The use of jazz as an indicator of moral degeneracy counterpointed with Cunningham’s script reflects a long history in American
popular music that is closely tied to race, class and generational identity. Jazz is used in *Credo* perhaps to conjure dance halls, taverns or barrelhouses.\(^{75}\) The coordination of cowboy and jazz music with the script and scenario promotes an evocative metaphor of Husband/Shadow’s restless yearning to leave his home, or in his words, “civilization western.”\(^ {76}\)

**Façade Two**

Façade Two is brief (47 measures) and serves as a preface for Ghoul’s Rage’s solo dance. Characterized by a rapid alternation between a music and spoken text. The Indian tom tom *leitmotif* is pervasive throughout and signals the shift to Wife/Ghoul’s Rage’s fantasy world, though one built from her own unpleasant memories, “And she tilted eyes at number of memories/Oh, bad too that kept peering up.” Cage uses the phonograph playing “classical” recordings for the first time in the dance to frames Ghoul’s Rage’s solo dance.

**Second Progression**

The solo dance begins with an eerie continuation of the tom-tom *leitmotif* with occasional interruptions from the tin cans and piano, and opens with the line: “Guilted cultures fit for a queen/Unequivocally.”\(^ {77}\) Cunningham’s play on words, “Guilded/Guilted” culture and “queen” suggest that she is entering in to a fantasy about royalty or high-class life, which Cage evocatively reinforces with a recording of a “classical” masterpiece.

\(^{75}\) Cage
\(^{76}\) Cunningham script.
\(^{77}\) Ibid.
Cage scores the climactic “dance of death,” with a borrowed chord from the final “danse sacrale” section of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913), a point in the ballet when the virgin is sacrificed. Cage uses one of the repeated octatonic chord sets centered on a D-tonality (See figure 20). While not a direct quotation (though close), Cage approximates Stravinsky’s passage by combining a D-minor chord with a D-flat 6/4, and, in place of the mixed-meter profile, used a repeating hemiola pattern (figure 20). The Stravinsky chord is drawn from the string section of the “danse sacrale” section, the dance of death dance for the chosen virgin. The parallel between the two “dance of death” moments is compelling as it is rare to find Cage drawing on a borrowed musical element to underscore a specific moment in the dance.78

The Stravinsky chord in question is part of a repeating figure in the string section. A comparison of the two chords reveals the close relationship. In Stravinsky’s score, the celli play a D-A, which is identical to Cage’s bass figure in the piano. The violas play a C#-G#, which Cage spells using an enharmonic spelling, D-flat-A-flat. The second violins play C#-D-C#, again Cage uses a D-flat, though does not include the D in this register. The first violins play D-flat-F-D-flat, which Cage also includes, though without the D in the upper register.79

78 Cage’s *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* (1939) and *Fads and Fancies* at the Academy (1940) use borrowed material that may or may not have been intended for a specific moment in the dance.

Ghoul’s symbolic death is amplified by the 81 repetitions of the chord (hereafter called the “death chord”). This marks the cathartic climax of Credo.

This reference leads to a range of interpretations that will be discussed in chapter three. On first glance, however, it is unclear if the first critics or audiences were aware of the reference. Indeed, few scholars have noted the reference to Stravinsky. However, it could have been intended as an inside joke. Xenia and Campbell most likely understood the reference as they had listened to a phonograph recording of the Rite together in Sitka,

80 See footnote 78.
Alaska in 1932 (see chapter one).\(^8^1\) Cage may have also been prompted to use the quote based on Erdman’s reference to her solo dance as a “dance of death.”\(^8^2\)

**Third Façade**

The Third Façade is brief and opens with the percussive texture of tin cans, radio and buzzer, along with Husband/Shadow’s *leitmotif*. Cage brings back the musical texture of the First Façade to accompany the Husband/Shadow’s robotic movements. Cunningham’s script reflects a moment of reconciliation: “And his fainted Rage de Ghoul—it was she too he thought with memories.”\(^8^3\) Here again, Cage uses the recording of a “classical masterpiece” to signal nostalgia before the final speech: “But credo in us was Ghoul’s Rage motto and la vie bid them well to use it.”\(^8^4\)

**Third Progression**

The third Progression is dominated by jazz. The introduction to the boogie-woogie style dance is a 22-bar blues scored as an ascending progression of root position chords in parallel motion, starting on C\(^2\) moving up the C-major scale stepwise, two octaves to C\(^4\). Overlaying this progression is a simple jazz melody that ascends with the harmony (see figure 22).

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81 Larsen, 206.
82 Jean Erdman interview with David Patterson, May 15, 1993. Erdman and Cage had an interesting collaborative relationship that often involved the inclusion of borrowed music selected by Erdman for her dances. The most dramatic example is the *Imaginary Landscape No. 5* (1952). Erdman demonstrated her initial ideas for Cage by improvising to jazz records. When she finished, Cage asked to borrow her forty-plus records, which he transferred to magnetic tape, and then, with the help of David Tudor and the guidance of the *I Ching*, cut and pasted fragments onto eight separate tracks for his first collage tape work.
83 Cunningham, Credo script.
84 Ibid.
The boogie-woogie begins with the fortissimo entry of a bass line, a simplified version of most boogie-woogie bass lines, using a two-note eighth-note figure (See figure 23). The right hand plays various jazz riffs, hemiola figures, and syncopated vamps.

After the boogie-woogie rhythm stops, there is a return of a melodic fragment from the cowboy song, though with an added “blue note” (see Figure 24 and 25). The return of this music linked to Husband/Shadow’s earlier solo dance, reinforces the change of context from a rural western scene to an urban jazz scene (perhaps reflecting Cunningham’s journey from Washington to New York). From a compositional perspective, this recurring fragment reflects the high level of integration between music and the dramatic narrative.
The transformation of the cowboy song into a jazz melody is reinforced with the return of Husband/Shadow’s *leitmotif* in a jazz idiom. The *leitmotif* first appears in the boogie-woogie with the addition of a raised fifth (G♯, see figure 26). It is then transformed through rhythmic variation into a syncopated rhythm, free from its “straight” eighth note guise. This sets up a virtuosic riff as the motive explodes out of its narrow range up to a high E-flat, where it lingers before rolling through a virtuosic jazz solo (figure 28).

![Figure 24: First Progression: Cowboy song; N.B.: motivic gesture.](image)

![Figure 25: Third Progression, Boogie-Woogie, N.B: motivic variation of Figure 22.](image)

![Figure 26: Husband leitmotif as boogie-woogie gesture, Third Progression](image)
For the first time, we hear the Husband’s leitmotif as part of an extended musical phrase. It is open and alive, suddenly free, no longer confined and stuttering. We may imagine Cunningham here executing one of his classic leaps, flying across the stage, as a liberated man.

At the end of the boogie-woogie, the motive returns to its narrow range and is reduced rhythmically to a hemiola suggesting a ¾ feel (Figure 29), then further compressed to a 3/8 feel (Figure 30), where, like the cowboy tune, it fades away, signaling the end of the fantasy. This contraction leads back to the feeling of pathos heard at the opening.
The Coda Façade opens with the return of the “death chord,” this time an elongated dotted half-note chord. The sense of violence increases dramatically when one set of tin cans plays a fortissimo quintuplet grouping while the other plays an eighth-note sextuplet pattern on a single tin can to create a machine-gun effect while the piano plays the “death” over and over. At the end, all of the instruments fade out, except the radio, which is left sounding until, as Cage specifies, the curtain closes..

This analysis reveals an important aspect of Cage’s compositional technique that has been overlooked in the past. Cage uses Schoenberg’s concept of “continual variation” to illustrate how a motive can move far beyond its original appearance to new levels of expression, as Cage describes:

> The whole notion of twelve-tone music is that of continual variation. That marvelous notion of Schoenberg’s that as the development continues, the variations can become more far reaching. That’s a good idea; it is analogous to that desire on the part of Ives, to have a music that makes us stretch our ears.  

Cage transforms Husband/Shadow’s *leitmotif* in ways that reflect the development of his character. Furthermore, this example of Cage’s compositional method is remarkable for its efficiency. In *Credo*, a single motive and its variations are used to underscore the dramatic arc of the drama from repression to liberation and back again.

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Irrational Content: Mechanical-Music

The radio, for *Credo*’s first audience, was the most recognizable and disorienting element of the score, as Erdman recalled:

> there were places in the score, [where Cage] used a radio and Sandy was playing umpteen drums, and Tacked piano and a door bell. Well in the first place the audience, when the radio would go on, the audience would go shh, shh! They didn’t realize that it was part of the music, and the doorbell upset everybody because this was in a theater where you are not supposed to have a doorbell.  

Aside from provoking the audience into a state of confusion, both the radio and phonograph generate a wide range of ideas for the audience. A Beethoven symphony creates a sense of high culture or a concert hall. The radio may evoke a news program or favorite radio drama. Cage was aware of the drawbacks of using a radio and cautions the operator to “avoid news programs during national or international emergencies.”

Cage clearly wanted to avoid a public panic, especially during WWII, when newscasts drew people to the radio for news from the front.

For the phonograph part, Cage notes in the score, “Phonograph: Use some classic: e.g. Beethoven, Sibelius, or Shostakovich or Tchaikovsky.” Shostakovich may have been included in Cage’s list as he was featured in numerous newspaper headlines in the U.S. during the summer of 1942, in anticipation of the premiere of the Seventh “Lenningrad” Symphony by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Orchestra. Cage lists only European and Russian examples as “classical masterpieces.” Cage was ambivalent toward the dominance of European art music played by American orchestras.

Joseph Horowitz, in his study on classical music in America, writes, “Compared to classical music in its European homeland, classical music in the United Sates is a

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86 Jean Erdman interview with David Patterson, May 15, 1993.
87 *Credo in Us* ms. score, 1
mutant transplant. Deep roots were not importable, nor in the main were they newly cultivated.”89 Fueled by the rise of the phonograph and recording stars, Horowitz continues, “after World War I [classical music] was mainly about the act of performance: not composers, but world-famous symphonic and operatic institutions, and celebrated conductors and instrumentalists, were its validating signatures. But, absent a vital national repertoire, they were irredeemably Eurocentric.”90 Horowitz uses the phrase “validating signature,” to denote the role of classical music in America. This is exactly how Cage uses the phonograph to reflect Wife/Ghoul’s rage’s sense of fantasy of wealth and, perhaps, high class sophistication.

There is an earlier example of Cage using classical “masterworks” in the context of marriage. For the 1939 Cornish production of Jean Cocteau’s *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower*, Cage composes the “Wedding March: Rubbish Music,” using quotations from Mendelssohn and Wagner’s wedding marches, as well as music by Dvořák, Rachmaninof, and Massenet (this will be discussed in chapter three). Cage clearly signals his satiric mode using the subtitle “rubbish music.”91 This work will be discussed further in chapter three.

The phonograph alone remains a powerful symbol of sophisticated taste. Popular culture reinforced the idea of the phonograph and classical music, in particular, as a civilizing technology. Advertisements in magazines like *Ladies’ Home Journal, Collier’s, Saturday Evening Post*, and *Vanity Fair* featured classical music stars like Enrico Caruso (1873-1921), one of the first best selling recording artists of the twentieth

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90 Ibid.
century, listening to a Victrola record of himself singing. In others, the setting is a royal
ballroom with visitors dressed in evening wear, tuxedos and gowns, preparing to dance
the waltz around a lone phonograph placed in the middle of the room, with the caption:
“The best friend of a hostess is the Victrola.”\textsuperscript{92} These full color ads, some two-page
spreads, used catchy slogans, “The stage of the world in your home,” “The ideal drawing-
room entertainer,” and “the Highest Class Talking Machine” to highlight the social and
cultural virtues of the phonograph. A writer in 1930 commented that the phonograph
“should not be thought of as a mere entertainment device, but as a cultural adjunct to
every home that would dare call itself civilized.”\textsuperscript{93}

Connecting the civilizing aspects of the phonograph with European art music
linked it with cultural sophistication not available to Americans. Phonographs were a
quick and inexpensive way to access this elevated music. A\textit{Collier’s} ad notes that a
phonograph “can be had for as little as $10.” As musicologist Mark Katz points out, “The
ad masterfully articulates a classic American belief: that everyone can have the very
best.”\textsuperscript{94}

These advertisements exploit the pervasive desire of middle-class Americans to
participate in the culture of the upper class, no doubt reflecting the fantasy of climbing
the social ladder to become a full-fledged member of the upper class. Sociologist Pierre
Bourdieu argues that art and “cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and

\textsuperscript{92} Victor Talking Machine Company advertisement originally published in \textit{Collier’s} 4 October 1913, in
Mark Katz, \textit{Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music} (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 2004), 58.
\textsuperscript{93} Katz, 57.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.”95 The lower and middle-classes can be made “higher,” “purer,” and “better,” through listening to “good” music, though knowing the difference only reinforces the distinction between social classes.

We may read Cage’s use of the phonograph in conjunction with Wife/Ghoul’s Rage fantasy of being wealthy in light of the popular discourse surrounding the phonograph as an education device to help middle-class listeners develop sophisticated taste. The perpetuation of these class stereotypes also came through music education courses, as Cage recounted of his own experience:

I remember when I was in grammar school, the people used to put the needle down on the record for just a few seconds and then pick it up and we all had to tell who had written it, and then when [the composer] died and so forth—things were getting confused because you couldn’t tell whether the sounds were men, or the men were sounds (we spoke in fact of those sounds—if we got a star for it, we said Beethoven or Mozart or Haydn instead of saying what the sounds [were]…instead of listening to the sounds really).96

Cage’s confusion is evocative of the music education business in the America. Phonograph companies like Victor made musical education an issue of national importance, writing in the preface of one music appreciation book for children: “If America is ever to become a great nation musically, as she has become commercially and politically, it must come through educating everybody to know and love good music.”97

Cage however remained detached from recorded music, arguing that music is a living process and recordings mere objects presenting a mere illusion of “live” music.

I don’t like recordings because they turn music into an object, and music is actually a

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process that’s never twice the same. If you turn it into an object, then you have the kind of musical experience that resulted, for example, in the amusing remark of a child... I was present when Stravinsky conducted one of his early pieces for orchestra, one of the ballets; and after it was finished, the child turned to his father—they were sitting in front of me—and he said, ‘That isn’t the way it goes.’ I told that story to someone else recently, and he knew of a child who turned to his father and said, ‘Why don’t they turn the record over? And play the other side?’

The phonograph, as a machine, reproduces a copy of a “live” piece of music; the recording is fundamentally removed from the “aura” of the original, a situation that Walter Benjamin discusses in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Cage echoes this idea in his “Lecture on Nothing” (1950), when he states: “The phonograph is a thing, not a musical instrument. A thing leads to other things, whereas a musical instrument leads to nothing.” Benjamin and Cage’s description of the phonograph reflect the dramatic tension in Credo between machine and human. Is it possible that Cage deliberately set up this dichotomy between music made by machines versus music made by humans as a reflection of the drama’s overarching conflict—Husband/Shadow’s mechanistic state?

Cage uses the “classical music” to effectively evoke the “façade” of domestic order. This linkage of classical music and “order” echoes the satiric tone of the scenario: “They are happied husband and wifed. They have harmonious postures. They Façade their frappant ways across a sacred spot.” The puns, building on ballet and music terms, amplify the pretentiousness of the scene. However, when the classical music returns at the end of the Third Façade, after the cathartic breakdown of husband and wife, the illusion of order and high-class taste has been stripped away revealing the seething

98 Ibid., 241.
100 John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” in Silence, 125
101 Cunningham, Credo in Us scenario, Bennington 1942. Definition of Frappant: frappe, derived from French: Cold, frigid; dance move in ballet, whipping the legs forward and back and side to side.
angst beneath the surface.

Cage’s use of the phonograph as a musical resource likely comes from those European composers creating *grammophonmusik*, music composed specifically for phonographs in the early 1920s.\(^{102}\) Cage’s first exposure to *grammophonmusik* comes at a Berlin concert he attends in the early-1930s, as part of the “Neue Musik Berlin Festival.”\(^{103}\) There he hears works by Paul Hindemith (two *Trickaufnahmen*, “trick recordings”) and Ernst Toch’s *Fuge aus der Geographie*,\(^{104}\) the original version of the *Geographical Fugue*, which inspired Cage’s spoken word movement, “Story,” from *Living Room Music* (1941).\(^{105}\)

Cage was also likely familiar with László Moholy-Nagy’s (1895-1946) writings on the phonograph while teaching with him at Mills College in 1938, and later, at the School of Design in Chicago, from 1941-1942.\(^{106}\) As with Moholy-Nagy’s experiments with photocollage using light to create abstract images, he similarly advocated using the phonograph as a way of to create new compositions.\(^{107}\) Along these lines, Cage notes, “The only lively thing that will happen with a record is if somehow you would use it to make something which it isn’t. If you could for instance make another piece of music

\(^{102}\) Katz, 45.
\(^{103}\) Nicholls, *John Cage*, 24.
\(^{104}\) Ibid., 113. Cage later acknowledged his interest in these early experiments when he met Toch’s grandson and said that his grandfather was “onto some good stuff back there in Berlin. And then he went and squandered it all on more string quartets.” See Lawrence Weschler, “My Grandfather’s Tale,” *Atlantic Monthly* 278, no. 6 (December 1996): 96.
\(^{107}\) See László Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction” (1922) and “New Form in Music: Potentialities of the Phonograph” (1923) in *Audio Culture*, Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2006), 331.
with a record…that I would find interesting.”

Cage’s idea to use the phonograph as a musical instrument may have originated in the Dada experiments of the 1920s. Stephen Wolpe’s Dada Cabaret performance in 1920, featured eight gramophones playing at the same time, though at different speeds:

I had eight gramophones…at my disposal. And these were lovely record players, because one could regulate their speed. … [Y]ou could play a Beethoven Symphony very, very, slow, and very quick at the same time that you could mix it with a popular tune. You could have a waltz, then you could have a funeral march. So I put things together in what one would call today a multifocal way….The concept of simultaneities is one of the most truly fascinating things.

Cage may have heard about this concert from Mohly-Nagy or from any of the exiled artists with whom he was acquainted in New York.

In this light, Credo in part reflects aspects of Dada’s anti-bourgeois agenda. Therefore, Cage’s juxtaposition of classical masterpieces with a buzzer and “found” percussion noises may be interpreted as a symbolic attack on bourgeois values. As Cage breaks the high-art illusion by interrupting a Beethoven symphony with the noise of everyday tin cans, he shatters the façade of order associated with classical music. This attack recalls the manifestos of Futurism and Dada calling for the destruction of traditional institutions in order to create a radical break with the past. Writing in 1916, Marcel Janco (1895-1984) reflects this Dada position: “We had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again . . . by shocking the bourgeois, demolishing his idea of art, attacking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order.”

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108 Ibid., 45
110 Katz, 108.
111 Irene E. Hofmann. “Documents of Dada and Surrealism: Dada and Surrealist Journals in the Mary
Cage’s use of the phonograph reflects the spirit of Dada in its subversive role within the drama.

This chapter reveals insight into the detailed relationship between music and drama. Cage draws on techniques learned from Cowell and Schoenberg to illustrate the nuances of character development and *Credo*’s diverse settings. Using a system of motivic variation and contrasting textures, Cage underscores an expressive range from fearful angst to barrelhouse bliss. Compositional techniques, however, only tell half the story as Cage draws on the “classical” phonograph elements to reinforce the middle-class setting and to appropriately underscore Wife/Ghoul’s Rage pervasive status anxiety. The overarching insight in this chapter therefore is that Cage merges determinate compositional techniques with indeterminate elements as a way to precisely depict the dramatic scenario. As such, the strong linkage between music and dance offers insight into the connection between Cage’s experimental approaches to composition and his work with choreographers.

Chapter Three

“I believe in us”

One of the most striking aspects of *Credo* is Cage’s prolific use of musical references and noise, from folk song and jazz to recordings and buzzers. As discussed in Chapter two, these sounds support and amplify the dramatic action. They are also essential elements used in the depiction of each character’s role and subsequent development as they shift from their public personas as “husband” and “wife” into their fantasy guises of “Shadow” and “Ghoul’s rage.” Cage underscores this shift in his music through changes in texture, timbre and structure. Perhaps most importantly, he references to existing music to signal elements of the story.

These musical references open up the work to a wealth of allusions for the audience. A cowboy song brings to mind rural images of men on horses herding cattle or Westerns featuring singing cowboys. A boogie-woogie tune might conjure urban images of dancing at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. Recorded sounds also have a place in the score: a doorbell signals the arrival of guests or an interruption, and a phonograph playing Beethoven may conjure high-class sophistication. Cage’s playful use of these diverse references recalls his earlier revision of one of the most experimental works of the generation that preceded him; namely, Jean Cocteau’s *Les mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921).

**Marriage, Cocteau and Les Six**
Cage and Cunningham’s re-interpretation *The Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* was premiered at Cornish in 1939. *Credo* is in many way indebted to the spirit of Cocteau’s humorous scenario. Both works satirize the institution of marriage, use punning narration and sound effects, while employing the structure of the variety show: Cocteau’s *Les mariés* is draws on the French music hall tradition and *Credo* on the conventions of American vaudeville. After reading Cocteau’s libretto for *Les mariés*, Cage initiated a production of the work at Cornish in collaboration with Bonnie Bird, the dance instructor. Bird recalled Cage’s excitement when he learned that music for the original production was created collaboratively by *Les SIX* (Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, and Arthur Honegger): “but look, it says that it should be a pastiche, that it’s not to be serious and everyone worked on this.”

Cocteau described *Les mariés* as a *pièce-ballet* (dance with spoken script); it was produced in Paris by Rolf de Maré, whose Ballets Suédois was the main rival of the Ballets Russes between 1920-25. De Maré, an avid art collector who became a ballet director in part to cultivate connections between the visual arts and dance, explained his goal to merge the two art forms: "I have hoped that something of the beauty that can be found in these paintings that can be recreated in dance.” He hired the finest artists to create the sets for a string of highly successful avant-garde productions, including *The Skating Rink*, inspired by Charlie Chaplin’s 1916 film *The Rink*, (setting by Ferdinand Léger with music by Arthur Honegger, 1922); *La création du monde* (with a cubist set depicting an African jungle by Fernand Léger and music by Darius Milhaud, 1923); and

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Relâche (with a Dada-inspired set by Francis Picabia that featured spotlights directed at the audience, music by Erik Satie, and a film, Entr'acte, by René Clair, 1924, that was projected at intermission).

Les mariés helped establish the Ballets Suédois’ avant-garde approach by integrating popular culture, technology, and everyday elements into the ballet. Cocteau’s goal, stated in his preface to the published text of the ballet, was to “rehabilitate the commonplace”:

The poet must extricate objects and feelings from their veils and their mists, to show them suddenly, so naked and so alive that a man can scarcely recognize them. They strike him then with their youth, as if they had never become old, official things. This is the case with commonplaces, old, powerful, and universally admitted, in the way masterpieces are, but whose beauty and originality no longer surprise us, because we are used to them. In our spectacle, I rehabilitate the commonplace.3

This “commonplace” was translated into the music, décor, and characters, beginning with the narrators costumed as phonographs, as Cocteau noted: "To the right and the left of the stage the human phonographs, like an antique chorus, like the compère and commère of the music-hall stage, describe, without the least sounding like “literature,” the absurd action which is unfolded, danced, and pantomimed between them.”4 The banter of the phonographs included satiric commentary on Parisian life, including a comment that “The Eiffel Tower used to be ‘queen of Paris’ but is now a ‘telegraph girl,’” and recalled not only the music-hall but also radio dramas.5 This punning narrative tone is also evident in Credo, where the characters describe their emotional upheaval with a similar ironic detachment.

3 Cocteau quoted in Albright, 280.
4 Cocteau quoted in Felicia McCarren, Dancing Machine: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 114
5 McCarren, 115.
The set for *Les mariés*, by Irène Lagut, featured a giant camera lens through which the characters entered and exited the stage. Jean Hugo costumed a range of stock characters--the bride, groom, the bathing beauty, lion, ostrich, and cyclist--in turn-of-the-century fashions, like those found in popular magazines, postcards, and catalogs, including a full-body swimsuit for the bathing beauty. The score, created by members of *Les Six*, included popular dance styles and parodies of a funeral march, fugue, and wedding march. The choreography, by Jean Börlin, incorporated movement from everyday life and vernacular idioms, which Lynn Garafola suggests came at Cocteau’s direction: "The work’s few dances all derived from this world of familiar pastimes, the polka for the Trouville bathing beauty. . . the quadrille and wedding march for the guests, and the two-step for the ‘telegrams,’ who looked like Tiller girls."

The revival of *Marriage* at Cornish was a small-scale production, though one that followed in the satiric spirit of Cocteau’s original, as Bird described:

> Take the most conventional ritual of middle class society in France, which was the wedding breakfast, and place it on the Eiffel Tower, which is the most conventional thing to do when you're visiting Paris. And then to spoof, in a series of little episode, art dealers, religious people, highly decorated generals who make pompous speeches.

Cage contributed to the script by writing (or more likely translating) the “pompous” speech for the General, played by Cunningham. After the General’s speech, in accordance with Cocteau’s vision, the Lion ate the General.

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6 Albright, 280  
7 Ibid., 279.  
8 Ibid. 287.  
9 Lynn Garafola, *Legacies of Twentieth Century Dance* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 118  
11 Ibid.
Cage also followed (in spirit) the process of composition used by *Les Six* by asking Henry Cowell and George Frederick McCay (from the University of Washington) to compose sections of the score. Cowell contributed the opening, closing, and several other segments via mail from San Quentin prison, where he was serving time for spurious charges of child molestation. The musical segments for *Marriage* follow an abridged version of Cocteau’s eclectic scenario:

You are on the 1st platform of the Eiffel Tower (Cowell) - Wedding march: Rubbish music (Cage) - Everybody is deeply moved - Bravo (after Trouville Bathing Beauty) – Massacre (Cage) - Photographer’s case - After child - Radio grams - Radiograms (cont.) pt.2 - Lion - Help it's biting me! - Dirge, funeral march & eulogy - 3 o'clock and that ostrich isn’t back yet - Quadrille (Cage)- Oof, what a dance! - Return of the ostrich - But who are these two gentlemen who have just come in time to upset the photographer again? - Just in time - The dealer and collector leave the Eiffel Tower - Wedding march (exit) - Closing time! (after exit) - Toccata.

Cage’s episodes for *Marriage* anticipate the tone of satire and prevalent use of musical borrowings found in *Credo*. For example, Cage uses such folk melodies as “Yankee Doodle,” and “Turkey in the Straw.” In the Wedding March (subtitled “Rubbish Music”), he uses a mix of references, including Mendelssohn and Wagner’s wedding marches (*Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Lohengrin*), and excerpts from Dvořák’s *Humoresque*, the opening of Rachmaninoff’s *C# minor prelude* and Massenet’s *Aragonaise*. He also composed interludes for a toy orchestra of fife, trombone, ratchet, harmonica, toy piano, tom-tom, snare drum, siren, and various whistles: a ‘yellow green whistle,’ and a ‘flat whistle,’ [a police whistle, and a slide whistle]. The pervasive satire of *Credo* is also

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13 The score for *Marriage* exists only in manuscript form at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
evident in *Marriage*; a conclusion supported by his humorous description of a Quadrile as a “barn dance” and another episode as a “massacre for piano 4 hands.”\(^{17}\)

Cage and Cunningham’s satiric depiction of a wedding party in *Marriage* echoes the theme of marriage in *Credo*. The connection between the two works goes beyond the practice of musical borrowing, variety show format, and use of popular folk melodies; it reflects a shared bond between Cunningham and Cage.

**Personal Confession through Musical Reference**

The exploration of possible interpersonal references encoded in the musical borrowings within *Credo* is prompted by Cage’s first interpretation of the title, as “I believe in us.” Such an investigation requires a brief overview of Cage, Cunningham and Xenia’s relationship in 1942. Queer theorist Jonathan Katz has also made a case for a personal reading of the title in his 1999 essay “John Cage’s Queer Silence,” in which he notes, “Its title [*Credo*] is the first acknowledgement of their [Cage and Cunningham] personal and professional partnership that animated so much of their subsequent work. . . . *Credo in Us*, born of their new independent life together, marked the public emergence of the relationship as muse.\(^{18}\) But the situation in reality was far more complex: Cage, Xenia and Cunningham lived together briefly after the premiere of *Credo* in August 1942, and Xenia was very much a part of their lives for the next two years. Nonetheless, the period in question was fraught with marital tension as Cage deepened his relationship with Cunningham.


In Kenneth Silverman’s recent biography of Cage, he notes that Cage and Cunningham had carried on a yearlong affair beginning around the time of the February 1943 MoMA concert. When Xenia found out a year later, she was deeply hurt: “I . . . tried like the devil to accept and understand . . . then I’d go to pieces and blow up and we’d both say mean things.”¹⁹ She eventually left Cage in February 1944, and moved back to Guggenheim’s Hale House. While it is possible that Cage and Cunningham had begun their involvement earlier in 1942, while working on Credo, there is little evidence support this assertion. What we do know is that all three were integrally involved in the creative work of Credo. Whether Credo is a creed or complaint about their personal difficulties remains an open question.

The goal of this chapter is not to exclusively dwell on the Cage-Cunningham-Xenia trio, but to also view Cage’s musical borrowings, and their cultural significance, from the perspective of the audience.

The Cowboy As Cultural Icon

The cowboy song is for string piano, an experimental technique, which involves the player dampening the strings with one hand and striking the keys with the other in order to create a guitar-like sound. On the surface, the appropriation of a cowboy song may be understood as a simple background soundtrack for the drama’s western setting. Yet the cowboy song also reflects a complex range of cultural meanings derived from folk tales, literature and the Western radio and film dramas of 1930s and 40s.

¹⁹ Xenia Cage letter to Ed Ricketts, 8 March 1944, quoted in Silverman, 62.
The cowboy song conjures multiple images of freedom, the open plain, and, men living closely together outside the boundaries of society. Within the *Credo* scenario, the song suggests that Husband/Shadow is fantasizing about life on the trail. We may imagine him absorbed in a Cowboy show, like Gene Autry’s *Miracle Ranch*, an idea reinforced by Cage’s use of radio sounds. The change to a single melody suggests Husband/Shadow’s inner-voice, a voice of subjective loneliness signaling an altered consciousness or fantasy world. Linda Hutcheon observes this interiority in opera where music has “been likened to [characters’] unverbalized subconscious … their music represents their inner lives.” The solo cowboy music used for the solo dance does speak for Husband/Shadow’s psychic fantasy of life on the trail. Nonetheless, it is the listener who brings the awareness of a subjective state, as Lawrence Kramer points out in his theory of musical narratology in film music. Music “invokes a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms, tone colors, and changes in dynamics.” This is true for *Credo* with the dramatic shift from noisy percussion textures to pensive piano solos. It is only in the progressions, as the piano plays alone, when listeners have an opportunity to contemplate what they are hearing without the distraction of a collage texture. Kramer further distinguishes interiority, specifically in piano writing, as a unique interplay between treble and bass, confined within a narrow range, as another way to suggests an “internal monologue.” Similarly, interiority is signaled in all three of Cage’s

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progressions for solo piano as the piano shifts from the atonal melodic lines and dissonant block chords spread across a wide range in the Façades to the predominately monophonic or homophonic texture of the progressions.\textsuperscript{23}

This use of subjective interiority has been an integral part of Western music for centuries. Though interiority is strongly associated with Romantic music, particularly the nineteenth century genres of opera, symphony, and concerto, Susan McClary finds that the representations of interiority were common in the sixteenth century Italian madrigal.\textsuperscript{24} She connects this trend in music with representations of “inwardness” in English literature, noting that this subjectivity is not a simple contrast between private and public, but rather functions as a nuanced depiction of the self “as already ambivalent and self-divided.”\textsuperscript{25} This sense of a divided self characterizes Husband/Shadow’s dilemma: his eagerness to escape from his wife and role of husband and desire to enter into the “homosocial” world of men. Cunningham’s “Shadow” name also signifies invisibility, perhaps a reference to the popular radio thriller “The Shadow,” who recites the lines in every program, “Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows.” As discussed earlier, the “shadow” may also refer to Jung’s concept of the shadow area, that part of our psyche where our deepest fears and anxieties reside. This combination of an unseen shadow and cowboy image reinforces the sense of the split self, in which Husband//Shadow is divided between private homosexual desire and the public position as a heterosexual Husband.

\textsuperscript{23} Note that the piano range in the façade sections covers over four octaves while the range in progression one is confined to one and a half.
\textsuperscript{24} Susan McClary, \textit{Modal Subjectivities: Self-Fashionining in the Italian Madrigal} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16. Representations of selfhood in the madrigal, McClary argues, come through a precise, systematic use of modality.”
Cage’s cowboy reverie represents what literary scholar Eve Sedgwick calls the phenomenon of homosociality, which she ascribed to social bonds, formed between groups of the same sex. While existing on a continuum with homosexuality, Sedgwick observes that homosocial bonding in Western literature is often forged through a rivalry between men over a woman who mediates their relationship and deflects any taint of homoeroticism.\(^\text{26}\) This triangle scenario was also a prevalent theme in Western films as exemplified by the “Pocahontas” figure,\(^\text{27}\) the noble Indian woman who aids a white hero against the wishes of her people and is either sacrificed by the white settlers or alienated from her own people.\(^\text{28}\)

Cunningham, Cage, and Xenia were also in a similar “triangle” scenario; Xenia herself was half-Tlinget, a descendent of the indigenous people of Southeast Alaska, where she was raised. Cage, in a 1991 interview with Thomas Hines, revealed that at the time of Credo, he and Xenia had an open marriage and that both were attracted to Cunningham. While they were together as a “ménage à trois,” Cage realized he “was more attracted to Cunningham than to Xenia.”\(^\text{29}\)

Sedgwick’s conceptual framework moves beyond the either/or position of gay/straight, adding nuance to an interpretation of Credo as reflecting a continuum of sexuality, moving from the heterosexual (Husband) to the homosocial (Cowboy). To summarize: The cowboy song may represent the husband’s fantasy of being with other men (homosocial); The Native-American war-dance for Erdman represents the feminine

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\(^{27}\) See Michael Marsden and Jack Nachbar, “The Indian in the Movies,” in History of Indian-White Relations, quoted in Michael Pisani, Imagining Native America in Music (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 295.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Hines, 99, n. 60
obstacle to this desire; and the boogie-woogie (progression three) represents a liberation from the narrow confines of heterosexuality. While this reading seems reductive, it provides one way of seeing the work through the prism of personal biography suggested in Katz’s interpretation.

Cage’s cowboy song is followed by an Indian tom tom reference, recalling the battle between cowboys and Indians recounted in innumerable dime novels, radio broadcasts, and Western films. Cage uses these genre markers as an efficient soundtrack for the husband and wife conflict. More than underscoring, however, Cage’s paraphrasing of the Cowboy song (it ends with a fade out) amplifies Cunningham’s poetic references to the Western setting and, perhaps, to his own feelings for Cunningham. Hutcheon argues that paraphrase can be “useful in considering the ontological shift that can happen in adaptations of an actual person’s life into a reimagined, fictional form.” Is it then possible to read Cage and Cunningham’s cowboy solo as a projection of their fantasy life together? This may become clear when considering the complex status of cowboy in popular culture.

The evolution of the cowboy as a major heterosexual cultural symbol began in the nineteenth century. William Cody (1846-1917) helped ignite the public’s imagination of the West through his “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” show, which began in 1883 and toured the world until the start of World War I. Concurrently, Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham published The Buffalo Bill dime novels, which also popularized Cody’s vision of the West. Both drew on stereotypes of the Old West, specifically the cowboy and Indian battle. Cody included his own memories of the Indian Wars into his show,

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30 Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 17. Paraphrase, “A free rendering or amplification of a passage that is verbal but, by extension, musical as well.”

31 Ibid.
reconstructing the moment when the Fifth Cavalry avenge Custer. According to Cody, he engaged, shot and scalped the Cheyenne leader Yellow Hand, an episode reenacted in the show’s finale when Bill declares, "First scalp for Custer!" The show, melding history and drama contributed to the myth of the cowboy (and Indian) in the Wild West, one that became codified in the early-twentieth century. It is this stereotypical conflict between cowboy and Indian that serves as the symbolic battle between husband and wife in Credo in Us.

In 1900, Owen Wister’s western novel The Virginian sold 50,000 copies in the first two months of publication. In 1903, Edwin S. Porter’s silent film, The Great Train Robbery (1903), wherein the visual depiction of pistols being shot caused women to cover their ears, ushered in the Western film genre. Westerns grew in popularity with the advent of sound film. Often set between the end of the Civil War and the Battle of Wounded Knee, most Westerns portrayed the collision between primitive and modern life through the conflict between “Indians” and White settlers.

Also, popular Western dramas on the radio featured singing cowboys like Gene Autry, Roy Rodgers and Tex Ritter. Later, in film, Autry broke from the traditional outdoor image of the cowboy, wearing colorful outfits and yodeling a cowboy tune. His image was “as far removed from the actual man of the frontier as to rival any fairy tale.” Music had always been an important aspect of Cowboy life, but with the rise of the cowboy as cultural icon, their image changed as dramatically as their outfits. John Lomax’s (1897-1948) Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads (1910) shaped the repertoire of the singing cowboy. Reprinted several times, Cowboy Songs opens with a dedicatory letter by Theodore Roosevelt praising Lomax for unearthing the “lost songs of the prairie.” Cowboy Songs grew in popularity with each recording and radio broadcast featuring tunes from the book sung by such artists as Carl T. Sprague (“The original singing cowboy”), Harry “Haywire Mac” McLintock,” and John I. White. White, an important historian of cowboy music, found that cowboys had been singing songs like “Whoopie To Yi Yo” (“Get Along Little Dogies”) and “Home on the Range,” since the late-nineteenth century, but it was not until these songs were published in Lomax’s book that they became widely known, recorded and broadcast on the radio.

Cowboy songs were often heard on radio barn dance programs, programs that offered urban listeners especially a nostalgic return to a simpler bygone age out in the country. The cowboy was an integral element in this transaction:

What the cowboy added was the notion of freedom; the small-town farmer or mechanic or shop worker could, in imagination, enjoy an old-fashioned barn dance as an escape

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32 Louis S. Warren, Buffalo Bill’s America: William Cody and the Wild West Show (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), xii. In the show, Cody would wave “the original scalp” at the finale.
34 Fenster, 264
36 John Tuska quoted in Fenster, 273-274.
37 Mark Fenster, “Preparing the Audience, Informing the Performers: John A. Lomax and Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads,” American Music 17/3 (Autumn, 1989), 262
39 Fenster, 272. See also John I. White, Git Along Little Dogies (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).
from the labors of the day, but the cowboy in the theater of the mind could simply saddle up and ride off into an imaginary sunset.\textsuperscript{40}

Early collections of cowboy songs tended to censor out overt sexual references. One Cowhand told Lomax that "in the singing about camp, a cowboy would often cut loose with a song too vile to repeat; great cheers and hurrays would usually follow and there would be calls for more."\textsuperscript{41} Robert Hine points out that many folklorists and historians whitewashed the cowboy’s “earthly and ribald humor.”\textsuperscript{42} Such songs offer a more realistic image of the cowboy’s desires out on the range, like this song sung at a stag dance:

Says a dancing young beauty, ‘Will you have a cigar?’
You are a cowpuncher, and this I do know,
Your muscles are hard from your head to your toe.’
She twisted my mustache, she smoothed down my hair,
My ellick grew hard; it did, I declare.’ 43

One observer noted in 1885, “There were no maidens to add the feminine charm to the occasion,” remembering that some of the cowboys agreed to dress in “female attire.”\textsuperscript{44} Armistad Maupin even speculated that cowboy dances were where the hankie code—for leader and led—may have originated.\textsuperscript{45} The references to gender crossing draw on both the accounts of folklorists and on themes drawn from western dime novels, reflecting, as Chris Packard argues, the “cowboy’s historical queerness.”

Particularly in Westerns produced before 1900, references to lusty passions appear regularly, when the cowboy is on the trail with his partners, if one knows how to look for them. In fact, in the often all-male world of the literary West, homoerotic affection holds a favored position. A cowboy’s partner, after all, is his one emotional attachment, aside

\textsuperscript{43} Hine, 313.
\textsuperscript{45} John Gill, \textit{Queer Noises}, 82.
from his horse, and he will die to preserve that attachment. Affection for women destroys cowboy *comunitas* and produces children, and both are unwanted hindrances to those who wish to ride the range freely.  

The tension between the cowboy as queer subject and symbol of American masculinity is reflected in *Credo*. It is clear in the scenario and script that, as a married, heterosexual man, Husband/Shadow seeks to escape his role as a domesticated “machine.” Domestic life is anathema to the cowboy, as Slotkin explains: “Cowboys held distinctive cultural values. These values and their way of life set them apart from others in society. In some cases, they occupied a unique legal status—that of rural outlaws or vagrants.”  

Hiram Perez goes a step further, observing that cowboys are “migrant, homosocial, communal, anti-industrial,” a threat to the American way of life.  

This outsider status is reinforced by the sublime landscape in which the cowboy travels. Cunningham’s setting and punning references to the “vastern western plainte” coupled with Cage’s song generates a visual image of the wilderness for the audience:

When fully developed, the mythic space of a genre invests even the sketchiest characterization or setting with resonance …with its own spatial architecture, manners, folkways, and politics…a pseudo-historical setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture’s myth/ideological tradition. …This is particularly true of the Western, whose roots go deeper into the American cultural past than those of any other movie genre.  

Further, Cunningham and Cage draw on the myth of manifest destiny to represent shifts in time and space (both physical and psychological) signaled in the scenario and script (e.g. the references to the gold rush). Hutcheon points out that from an audience

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perspective, a narrator has the power to move through “time and space and sometimes to venture inside the minds of characters. To show a story, as in movies, ballets, radio and stage plays, musicals and operas, involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time.” The sense of moving from the present back to the nineteenth century is reinforced by Cunningham’s setting designation as “Three Generations” in the scenario and Cage’s setting of the cowboy song as a solo (most cowboy music in the nineteenth century was accompanied by single instrument, either a guitar or fiddle).

Is the cowboy tune a reference to Cage and Cunningham’s desire to be together? A clue may be found in the way Cage’s reference intersects with Cunningham’s scenario and script. Cage wrote Credo while living in New York with Xenia. Cunningham, meanwhile, was creating the dance in Vermont with Erdman. As explored in chapter one, Cage had Cunningham’s script (as it is written in the score) along with a set of dance “counts.” Cage’s score may be interpreted as composed in response to Cunningham’s words, an interpretation informed specifically by Cage’s use of popular styles to accompany the text. While on the surface, the drama conjures a cowboy out West; on a personal level it may signal Cage’s readiness to deepen his relationship with Cunningham.

Indian Tom Tom Trope and the Feminine “Dance of Death”

50 Hutcheon, Theory of Adaptation, 12
51 The singing styles and arrangements of singing cowboys on radio and screen changed to reflect more the style of Tin Pan alley than the “authentic” cowboy out on the trail. Gene Autry’s first starring role was in Tumbling Tumbleweeds (1934) and, by 1937, he was the most popular Western film star. Autry broke from the traditional masculine image of cowboy and, according to the film historian Jon Tuska, “was, in his magnificent outfits, yodeling a pop tune . . . an image as far removed from the actual man of the frontier as to rival any fairy tale.” Fenster, 273-274. See also Peter Stanfield, “Dixie Cowboys and Blue Yodels: The Strange History of the Singing Cowboy,” in Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western, ed. (London: Buscombe and Pearson, 1998).
In opposition to the cowboy song comes the Indian tom tom reference. Serving as the *leitmotif* for Wife/Ghoul’s rage, the Tom Tom trope opens the Second Progression, which marks the start of Wife/Ghoul’s “dance of death.” This “Indian” reference, in opposition to the cowboy song, completes the Western setting and serves as a potent metaphor of marital tension.

Where did the tom tom reference come from? Michael Pisani, in his book *Imagining Native America in Music* describes how this tom-tom rhythm and other references, like the use of augmented fourths (which we also hear in *Credo*, in descending chromatic figures) evolved as symbols representing Native Americans in concert-, theater- and film scores. As film studios cast white actors to depict Indians in Westerns, particularly in roles that involved relationships between an Indian woman and a white man, music had to make these racially ambiguous relationships explicit. This explains in part why Western film scores at this time drew so heavily on the “standard references of nineteenth-century Indianism.”

One such reference is the tom-tom rhythm, the pulsing drumming figure of equal beats with the first and third accented, used effectively in countless theatre- and film-scores to depict an impending Indian attack. This reference is part of what Claudia Gorbman refers to as a “small inventory of stable and unambiguous musical conventions” used in westerns that arose around the same time as the Indian wars of the late-nineteenth century (1870-1918). These references entered popular culture through

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52 Michael Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, 292. For a discussion on music used for Indian characters in film, see also Claudia Gorbman, “Scoring the Indian.”

53 Pisani, 298.
melodramas and shows, like “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.”

Cage was likely borrowing references he heard on the radio and in movies, though he also had access to an important academic source in Seattle, the anthropologist Dr. Ralph Gundlach, who also played in Cage’s percussion ensemble, was married to the choreographer Bonnie Bird, and appeared in the production of Marriage at the Eiffel Tower.

Dr. Gundlach specialized in Native-American music. His research involved recording and comparing the war-chants of different tribes from around the West. His article, “A quantitative analysis of Indian music,” published in The American Journal of Psychology in 1932, argued that tribes, though geographically separated, shared a common musical language. For example a Sioux war dance was not much different than an Apache one. Whether drawn from film, radio, or Gundlach’s article, it is clear that Cage intended tom tom reference to signify not only a Native-American, but also one in the context of a battle.

This reference underscores the first part of Wife/Ghoul’s Rage’s ecstatic dance of death. Her circular motion, depicted in a drawing made in her choreograph notes, recalls the image of Native American’s dancing around a fire. In Erdman’s detailed analysis of her character she comments, “it is women who make war. The ‘she-devil,’ a malicious woman, is part of the larger cycle of violence.” Erdman’s characterization and Cage’s musical reference bank on gender and primitivist stereotypes—the hysterical woman here linked with a savage “Indian.” Erdman’s description of her character draws on a trend in modernism which viewed the Native American as a noble savage unfettered by the trappings of modern industrial life.

54 Ibid.
Interest in Native American art grew among the New York avant-garde in the 1940s, including Max Ernst and Jackson Pollock (another frequent visitor to Guggenheim’s Hale House), whose art was inspired by Pacific Northwest Totem poles and Navajo sand paintings and the writings of Jung. Ernst had also traveled to Navajo reservations in 1941. There may also be personal resonances for the Native-American reference. Xenia, as mentioned, was half-Tlinget, part of a fierce tribe that dominates the north Pacific coast of Alaska. Also, Xenia and Cage also visited Navajo and Hopi reservations in Arizona where they visited on their way to Chicago in 1940. Xenia describes a Navajo scene in a letter:

Most of the time we spent wandering … off the main highways going to Indian Pueblos and remote villages.” Cage seemed to relish the experience. Xenia recalled that there were “Indians driving along in wagons and sneering at you and John being visiting—King Olaf—waving and smiling and nodding and grinning at every passing Navajo—burro—Hopi—cow and baby.

Xenia’s description of the Native’s dance captures the setting:

The dancers at Gallup were enough to set me weeping—after such lovely simplicity and beauty I wonder why people torture themselves doing Graham technique. And the Navajo singing is the most beautiful sound I ever heard. And the most unearthly….with their campfires all around and the smell of burning pinon wood—like church incense.

Cunningham, too, was fascinated by Pacific Northwest Native dancers, as was his teacher Bonnie Bird and many of his fellow dancers at Cornish who, with the help of

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56 Henry Adams, Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 316
57 This rhythm appears frequently in Tlingit dancing. The author was a member of the Kiksadi clan of Gajaheen dancers in Sitka, Alaska in the early-1970s.
58 Letter from Xenia Cage to Doris Dennison, August 25, 1941, Series I, box 2. folder 6, John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library.
59 Ibid. The religious references throughout the passage reflect the meaningfulness of the experience for Xenia. The comment about Graham technique encapsulates a central theme of Credo, the contrast between authentic and artificial performance. Xenia and Cage believed Graham’s works were burdened with theatrical artifice, the desperate need to tell a story, even if the story paradoxically was meant to explore the psychological drama of the psyche. Graham had a long-held belief that the movements of the body revealed the intentions of the mind revealing deep truths incommunicable in other ways. For Xenia, the simple Indian dances surpassed Graham’s quest for authentic expression.
anthropologist Joyce Wike, observed Swinomish dances while students at Cornish in 1938. Cunningham’s solo dance, *Totem Ancestor* (1942), is also based on his memories of Northwest native dancers as a child in Washington. Cunningham was also in New York at a time when the Museum of Modern Art’s groundbreaking exhibition, "Indian Art of the United States," curated by René d'Harnoncourt in 1941. The exhibition included “a full-scale re-creation of a wall of Southwestern pictographs, artifacts and contemporary native art and fashion, as well as live demonstrations by Native American sand painters and dancers.”

While Cage was writing *Credo*, he and Xenia were living with Max Ernst. Ernst at the time was visiting the Museum of Natural History in New York to see Native American Art and visiting galleries to buy totem poles—one twenty feet high—and Hopi and Zuni dolls and masks. Ernst’s interest in Native American art soon grew into an interest for Xenia. As discussed in Chapter One, Xenia’s brief affair with Ernst developed to the point where Guggenheim had to intervene; a dramatic development took place while Cage was writing *Credo*. As we look further, Cage scores the remainder of the dance of death with a borrowed chord from Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, a powerful symbol sacrifice.

The coupling of *The Rite* with an Indian reference contributes to a scene of ritualistic primitivism. Albright, who describes *Le sacre* as the most famous of all Primitivist experiments with “the whole urgent complex of attraction and revulsion clearly on display, for the chief rite of spring is the collective execution of a virgin,”

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60 Vaughan, 27.
62 Albright, 236.
makes an interesting connection between American Indian dance and *Le sacre’s* choreography: “Almost every spectator had some reservations about Nijinsky’s choreography, which seemed more appropriate to the American Indian wild-west shows that Nijinsky had seen in his childhood than to the Parisian ballet.”63 This connection between Nijinsky and Cage’s American Indian reference likely only a coincidence though one wonders if Cage or Cunningham knew the choreography of *Le sacre*? Cunningham would have been familiar with more modern ballet techniques as he participated in a performance of *Petrouchka* with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in February 1939.64

Cage may have selected *The Rite of Spring* because Xenia adored it. She in fact listened to it for the first time with Campbell on a boat docked in Sitka, Alaska in 1932 (see chapter one). Perhaps Cage used the Indian tom tom reference and the Stravinsky quotation together as a transparent symbol of sacrifice, one that Xenia and Campbell would have recognized. This overarching mood of sacrifice and the powerful interplay between music, poetry, and dance opens up to another level of meaning when compared to the reference of the sacrificial Indian maiden in Western films in the late-1930s and early-1940s.

**Sacrificial Indian Maiden**

The Western genre is based in part on a fusion of history and myth, as discussed in the segment on the cowboy song. The idea of America as a new Eden justified the

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63 Ibid., 237.
64 Vaughan, 17
conquest of the wilderness and the destruction of Native Americans.65 Fueled by the myth of Manifest Destiny, Westward expansion into Native territory led inevitably to the Indian Wars starting in 1622 with the Indian raid on Jamestown.66 Slotkin argues that Western culture cannot coexist with Native Americans because of “ineluctable political and social differences” inherent in “blood and culture.”67 The story of America transmitted through the Western in literature and later through radio and film is not complete without the story of the Indian told from the perspective of the conqueror.68 The Indian blocks the progress of white “civilization” and his final defeat marks the birth of the “exceptional nation.”69 Leslie A. Fiedler sums up the Western genre as the confrontation between a “transplanted WASP and a radically alien other, an Indian.” In film, this translates as a white hero “replacing the Indian either symbolically or physically, through violence,”70 often represented by the sacrifice of the Indian maiden.

The Native American woman is a powerful figure in history: Pocahontas (1607) or Sacagawea (1804) are remembered in part for selflessly helping white conquerors. In both history and fiction, the Indian maiden bridges the divide between Indian and white culture. Her role in the Western genre is often expendable, as a pawn to be bartered; the

65 The concept of America as an Edenic land, identified by R. W. B. Lewis, ties the European American hero who is free from history, family, and old European traditions, to the idea of the garden now open for exploration and exploitation. See R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 108 and 111.
66 Slotkin, 10-12. See also Slotkin’s Regeneration Through Violence, the first of three books examining the mythology of the American West. Coming from a literary perspective, Slotkin examines the literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, including Western dime novels, to illustrate how American culture developed out of the anxieties of Europeans confronting the frontier and the Native Americans that lived there.
67 Slotkin, 12
68 Armando Jose Prats, Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002),vx. Prats considers the paradox of how the representation of the Indian is used to shape national identity even as it undermines it.
69 Ibid., xv-xvi.
70 Leslie Fiedler, Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968) 24, quoted in
Indian chief’s daughter traded to a white man and as a sacrificial figure.\textsuperscript{71} This relationship, according to cultural historian M. Elise Marubbio, “symbolically validates subsuming her culture into his dominant one.” But this act of assimilation is itself destructive. Through this union, “she transgresses taboos against interracial mixing and must pay the price with her life.”\textsuperscript{72}

In the Westerns films of the early-1940s, the Indian maiden was transformed into a more complex figure, what Marubbio calls, the “Sexualized Maiden.”\textsuperscript{73} She is beautiful, of mixed-blood heritage of a white man and a Native woman, highly erotic, marginalized from white-European and Native society, and deadly to men,\textsuperscript{74} attributes that link her to the “femme fatale” figure popular in film Noir.\textsuperscript{75}

Her racial difference is conflated with her social difference, forming the foundation for her domination and sexual exploitation. Incorporating traits from another socially marginalized figure—the femme fatale—whose sexuality is deadly to the men she attacks. The combination of these character types creates a complex figure whose body carries the stigma of America’s psychological response to race, sex, and powerful women. The sacrifice of the Maiden is a result of her mixed-blood status, as a degenerate type, which justifies her death.\textsuperscript{76}

Erdman understood her character in similar terms, identifying Ghoul’s rage as an evil femme fatale figure or she-devil and women in general as responsible for war.\textsuperscript{77} As

\textsuperscript{71} Prats, xvi. Sonseeahray in \textit{Broken Arrow} dies freeing Tom Jeffords so he may reveal the plight of the Indian.

\textsuperscript{72} Marubbio, 7

\textsuperscript{73} Marubbio, 93. Such films as \textit{Northwest Mounted Police} (1940); \textit{My Darling Clementine} (1946), \textit{Duel in the Sun} (1946). Precursors to the Sexualized Maiden figure grow out of such films as \textit{The Squaw Man} (1931), and \textit{Laughing Boy} (1934).

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{75} The Femme fatale embodies socially based fears about the sexually aggressive woman. Mary Ann Doane describes the femme fatale in various film characters, the vamp, the diva (Italian film), and the femme fatale of 1940s film noir. She is an evil figure and is frequently killed. See also Mary Ann Doanne,\textit{ Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis}(New York: Routledge, 1991), 2-3

\textsuperscript{76} Marubbio, 90. Marubbio bases this description on Homi Bhabha’s work on stereotypes. See also Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question…Homi K. Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” \textit{Screen: Incorporating Screen Education} 24/6 (1983): 18-36.

\textsuperscript{77} Jean Erdman Papers, Box 27 Folder 1. New York Library for the Performing Arts.
in the Western, Erdman’s character is part beast and part seductress. In film, Cecil B. DeMille describes the Metis woman, Lupette, for his 1940 epic *Northwest Mounted Police* as both:

> I see a tough son of a bitch, you know, who is a half animal, and a magnificent one, crafty as hell, beautiful as hell, and unconsciously a terrible destroyer. I see a gorgeous black panther, something that is death, and yet anybody will go to it and stroke it and pet it and love it … Men are afraid of her.\(^7^8\)

Composed of racial and sexual stereotypes, the sexualized maiden symbolizes the social and cultural tensions toward miscegenation and gender, reflecting the changing roles of women in society brought on by the start of the World War II and the exodus of women from the home to wartime jobs.\(^7^9\) From an anxious heterosexual male perspective, perpetuated through the Western, the death of the Sexualized Maiden symbolically “relieves the community of a dangerous, tainting force.”\(^8^0\)

Closer to home, Xenia fits many of the stock character traits of the “Sexualized Maiden.” She was of mixed-blood, born to a Tlinget mother and a Russian father. She had a series of intense sexual relationships with various artists, including Edward Weston, Ed Ricketts, and Max Ernst. She also instilled an intense fear in Cage, who remarked after they were divorced that she “had a rather ‘barby’ wit . . . if I telephone her or write to her, I take my life in my hands.”\(^8^1\)

The similarities hardly merit the label “she-devil” or “Sexualized Maiden,” but the connection, however tenuous, may have existed in Cage’s mind. Cage was ultimately responsible for the musical characterization of the Husband as Cowboy and Wife as

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\(^7^9\) Ibid., 94.

\(^8^0\) Ibid., 90.

\(^8^1\) Thomas Hines, "Then Not Yet Cage,” Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), fn. 60, 99
Indian. In light of Cage’s ideas on musical composition as a combination of rationally determined structure (grounded in the mind) in relation to unconsciously derived material (grounded in the heart), a creative process informed by C. G. Jung’s ideas of the flow of unconscious material to the conscious mind via the activated imagination, we may see this symbolic sacrifice of his wife as originating in the deepest recesses of his psyche.82

**Boogie-Woogie as Liberation**

How do we get from Stravinsky to boogie-woogie? It may seem to be an odd juxtaposition, but it is one that Cage’s friend, the composer and critic William Russell, (1905-1992), made in a 1941 review of a recording by boogie-woogie pianist Meade Lux Lewis. Russell described Lewis’ “tonal, technical and instrumental resources” as comparable with Stravinsky’s use of similar effects in the *Rite of Spring*.83 Cage learned a lot about jazz from Russell, who was an active jazz musician and composer that included jazz elements and found objects (e.g. Jack Daniels bottle) into his earliest percussion works, including the *Three Dance Movements* (1933), which was published in Cowell’s *New Music Edition* (all-percussion issue in 1936). Cage programmed several of Russell’s works for his West coast percussion concerts.84 Williams was an excellent jazz critic. His writings were likely familiar to Cage’s during the period when his interest in jazz was growing in the late-1930s, writing in his 1939 essay “Goal New Music, New Dance:”

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“For interesting rhythms we have listened to jazz.”\textsuperscript{85} Shortly before \textit{Credo}, he composed \textit{Jazz Study} in 1941 and later \textit{Ad. Lib}, both works for piano.\textsuperscript{86}

In \textit{Credo}, the boogie-woogie signals a moment of liberation in the drama. Husband/Shadow and Wife/Ghoul’s Rage have awakened from their symbolic deaths and there is a sense of reconciliation in the script: “And his fainted Rage de Ghoul—it was she too he thought with memories.” The choice of a boogie-woogie has significant personal and historical implications that likely informed Cage’s use of the style at this moment. Most importantly, the style was experiencing a resurgence in popularity in the late-1930s in dance halls, films, recordings, and Broadway revues.

Boogie-woogie, a popular style of blues piano music from the 1920s, was characterized by a forceful, walking bass, often in broken octaves outlining a blues progression and punctuated by syncopated rhythms in the right hand and fragmented melodic style. Derived in part from walking bass lines used in ragtime, blues pianists like Romeo Nelson, Arthur Montana Taylor and Charles Avery adopted the heavy bass style and eight-bar blues progressions from barrelhouse pianists during the 1920s.\textsuperscript{87} Russell wrote extensively about boogie woogie in reviews and books and was most familiar with those boogie-woogie pianists living in Chicago in the late-1930s. He described boogie woogie as “the most pianistic of all jazz styles,” and his description of the style reflects many of the melodic elements found in Cage’s boogie woogie:

\begin{quote}
Melodically built of short scale-like figures, with many repeated notes and phrases emphasizing its economy of material, the Boogie Woogie style is nevertheless more chromatic than the ordinary blues. The most common motive seems to be a three-note.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{86} Letter from John Cage to Doris Dennison, October 26, 1941. Series 1, box 2, folder 6. John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library.
descending scale passage. Sometimes, however, the melody for an entire chorus will consist of one note played with great variety of rhythms and accents. The usual rhythm employed in this form of variation consists of a full chord in the right hand struck on the first beat. . . .The tremolo is a frequently used device. In heightening intensity, the tremolo has a percussive and rhythmic function rather than being used to simply sustain a tone.88

Russell also writes of the influence of “Pine Top” Smith who contributed to the growing popularity of boogie-woogie through the dance instructions given on his recording Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie (1928). He calls out, “when I say hold yourself y’all get ready to stop; when I say stop, don’t move; when I say “get it” everybody do the boogie woogie/when I say get it I want you to shake that thing ... when I say get it everybody mess around.”89 The sexually charged narration reaches a climax when Pine Top asks a woman in a red dress to come on stage and face the audience and “shake that thing.” The alteration between holding and dancing is reflected in the music. Holding is characterized block chords in the left-hand and a rhapsodic blues tune with trills and tremolos in the right-hand. The “boogie-woogie” dancing section features the walking bass. Cage’s boogie-woogie follows this general form with “holding sections” in the introduction and conclusion that frame the central “boogie-woogie” dance section.

Boogie-woogie fell out of fashion during the Great Depression, but by 1938, a revival was underway led by record producer John Hammond who released recordings by Meade ‘Lux’ Lewis, Albert Ammons, and the Count Basie Band.90 Cunningham arrived in New York just as boogie-woogie was coming into popularity after being picked up and recorded by the big bands, for example Tommy Dorsey’s “Boogie Woogie” (1938) and

90Ibid.
Count Basie’s “Basie Boogie” (1941). Boogie-woogie was also immortalized in the 1941 film *Blues In the Night* a film noir musical with a score by Harold Arlen with lyrics by Johnny Mercer and in paintings by Cage’s friends, including Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942) and Mark Tobey, *Broadway Boogie*, which is purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1942.91

**Cunningham Dancing at the Savoy**

Cunningham loved to go to Harlem to dance, which is where he likely first heard boogie-woogie. “I wanted to go to the Savoy Ballroom. You weren’t supposed to go, but I went anyway and it was marvelous. And I couldn’t not dance. So I went into a corner and I was dancing by myself, and after awhile I realized that there was a circle of people around me, watching. I got embarrassed and I quit.”92

Erdman’s notes allude to the fact that jazz releases Husband/Shadow from his mechanical prison. This suggests a re-birth—a sexual awakening. The musical shift from the rural oriented genres to an urban boogie-woogie also reinforces this sense of liberation. While Cage found “hot jazz” allowed him to think of rhythm and its relationship to structure in a more flexible way, for Cunningham, dancing to jazz represented liberation from the confines of Graham’s company. The sense of release expressed in *Credo* intersects with Cunningham’s description of dancing at the Savoy is clear, not only because it was taboo for a trained dancer to do so, but because of where he was dancing--Harlem.

91 Wulf Herzogenrath and Andreas Kreul, eds. *Sounds of the Inner Eye* (Bremen, Germany: Kunsthalle Bremen, 2002), 226
92 Vaughan, 23.
Gay Harlem

In a 2003 interview, Cunningham described his personal transformation as he moved from Seattle to New York in 1939:

Deborah Solomon: This was in the 1930's, and it must have been difficult to be a gay man in the cowboy-adoring West.
Cunningham: Not at all. I didn't even know what gay was. I didn't have any feelings about it. It wasn't until I came to New York that I began to realize that there was a difference. I arrived on a beautiful fall day and realized I was home.93

Solomon’s question encapsulates some of the powerful metaphors confronted in *Credo*, namely the collision of rural and urban themes signaled in Cage’s score by the use of a rural folk genre (cowboy song) in contrast to an urban genre (jazz). Solomon’s stereotype of Cunningham’s home out West as “cowboy-adoring” is as reductive as her question about his gay identity in the 1930s. But the stereotype is one exploited in *Credo*. One is either an outsider from the West—Cage, Cunningham and Erdman were consistently identified by their Western heritage throughout their careers—or an urban hipster. Nonetheless, Solomon’s interview captures an important aspect of Cunningham’s life; that he becomes aware of his homosexuality only after moving to New York in 1939.

Historian George Chauncey, in his book *Gay New York*, describes the white pastime of observing Harlem’s “negros” for their sense of rhythm, vocal quality, and “primitive, animal-like” movements.94 Banking on racial stereotypes, many of the clubs in Harlem, many white-owned, attempted to create the illusion of the Old South. “The Cotton Club, the Everglades, and other clubs adopted Southern names and styles motifs to evoke the history of black subordination and to emphasize the subordination of the

94 Ibid., 246-247.
African-American performers.\textsuperscript{95} The clubs catered to the white customers’ desire to feel they were “transgressing the conventional boundaries of race while resolutely confirming them.”\textsuperscript{96} As one of the few areas of New York where African-Americans and whites could share a meal together, Harlem became a safe haven for homosexuals as well.

Though Greenwich Village was New York’s main gay enclave, many white gay men traveled north to Harlem where the gay scene was more open and exciting. Ballrooms, drag shows, basement jazz clubs, and cabarets were places in Harlem where white gay men felt comfortable being openly gay. Where the Village had its poets and drag queens, Harlem was known for its speakeasies where men could dance together.\textsuperscript{97} Unlike other parts of New York, clubs in Harlem were open all night and some did not even open until midnight.\textsuperscript{98} Black gay men who had been denied access to segregated clubs and restaurants built a Harlem scene that, in terms of entertainment, surpassed the Village.\textsuperscript{99} Harlem’s nightlife grew during the Harlem Renaissance and by 1929, had become a tourist destination on par with Broadway.\textsuperscript{100}

Carl Van Vechten’s (1880-1964) novel \textit{Nigger Heaven} (1926) captured the nightlife of “the great black walled city” and served as an unofficial tourist guide for whites “slumming” in Harlem’s cabarets and clubs.\textsuperscript{101} Vechten captures the Dionysian spirit of the dance-hall:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. 246. Harlem was also a destination for European composers seeking “authentic” American Jazz. For example, Darius Milhaud visited Harlem in 1923, an experience which shaped his ballet composition \textit{La création du monde}. See Alex Ross, \textit{The Rest is Noise} (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007), 103-104.
\textsuperscript{101} Carl Van Vechten, \textit{Nigger Heaven}, seventh edition (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000)
\end{flushleft}
The dancing, moreover, had become wilder…The heat was overpowering. Collars, flowers, and frocks were wilting. … Occasionally a rich, mellow laugh rose over the soft moaning of the saxophone. Adora had thrown aside her cloak and was standing, her regal figure, shining with sequins, dominating the hall. Mary continued anxiously to inspect the faces of the dancers. Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of Ollie, and Ollie was dancing with Howard.¹⁰²

The climax of this scene is the sighting of men dancing with each other. Here, homosexuality, not inter-racial mixing, serves as the prime symbol of Harlem’s tolerant atmosphere.

Harlem’s gay clubs were situated around the Savoy Ballroom, the Cotton Club, Connie’s Inn, Small’s Paradise, and other clubs catering to an interracial audience.¹⁰³ Gay entertainers were also in the area at the Hobby Horse, Tillie’s Kitchen, and the Dishpan and sang songs with sophisticated double-entendres (echoing Cunningham’s poetry for Credo) specifically tailored for their gay clientele. Gladys Bentley, a popular lesbian entertainer, was known for changing the words to popular Broadway tunes by giving them an erotic edge, among other things changing the words to “Sweet Georgia Brown” into an “ode to the joys of anal intercourse.”¹⁰⁴

Jazz, Improvisation and Freedom

Boogie-woogie may have conjured Harlem’s nightlife and more broadly the transgression of established boundaries of race, dance, music, gender, and sexuality for its first New York audience. Cage and Cunningham suely understood these implications, and absorbed them into Credo.

¹⁰² Ibid., 162.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
Shortly before *Credo*, Cage composed *Jazz Study* for piano in 1941. Its syncopated walking-bass line and dramatic chordal outbursts suggest that Cage was listening jazz music at this time. Cunningham was frequenting the Village Vanguard; he recalled that one night, after midnight, he heard an impromptu set by Billie Holiday. “She sang for two hours. The rhythm was extraordinary, you never lost the words but the way she was sliding around the beat was astonishing.”

Writing in 1947, Duke Ellington equated jazz with a sense of vitality, as an expression of the present moment:

> What exactly is jazz? A matter of trick rhythms and blues-notes, and unorthodox harmonies? To my mind, jazz is simply the expression of an age, in music…just as romantic music represents a rebellion against fixed forms in favor of more personal utterance, so jazz continues the pattern of barrier-breaking and emerges as the freest musical expression we have yet seen. To me, then, jazz means simply freedom of musical speech!

“Rebellion,” “barrier-breaking,” “freedom”: Ellington’s words evoke a struggle for acceptance. If we read *Credo* as an artistic creed, then jazz is its rebel yell. Cage, Cunningham, and Erdman would take their interest in jazz a step further by embracing improvisation. On the program with *Credo in Us* at the premiere was *Ad Lib*, an improvised dance with a jazz-inspired piano score by Gregory Tucker. Erdman recalled that she was to dance to a blues theme and Merce to a fast theme. As she described the work, “It was exactly as though we were jazz musicians, with definite themes, so we both knew what each other’s movement themes were, and we knew how to

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105 Letter from John Cage to Dorris Dennison, October 26, 1941. Series 1, box 2, folder 6. John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library. This work has been either been unattributed to Cage or miss-dated. In a letter from October 26, 1941 to Doris Dennison, Cage notes, “Please send Liz the music I wrote for her: that Jazz Study (it’s at Mills).”

106 Vaughan, 23.


108 Cage provided a new version to replace the Tucker for the 1943 Chicago performance at the Arts Club of Chicago, February 14, 1943
Some dancers in the audience were scandalized, as it was one of the first performances they had seen to use improvised dance. As in *Credo*, Cage used different musical styles for each section of *Ad Lib*, including references to ragtime and blues, along with a recurring polytonal phrase reminiscent of Stravinsky.

In *Credo*, the use of jazz--expressed in the boogie-woogie--may also convey a personal message. Coming after the Western cowboy and Indian conflict, which may reflect Cage and Xenia’s failing marriage, the boogie-woogie’s urban connection to Harlem’s gay scene and jazz may be a metaphor for Cage and Cunningham’s break with their Western roots and the start of their life together in New York City. Encapsulated in this drama about a man’s desire to be free from his middle class life is a creed of artistic and personal freedom signified by jazz and the city: freedom from Martha Graham; freedom from Cage’s heterosexual life with Xenia; freedom from their middle-class background; and freedom from tradition. Nonetheless, as with all the progressions in *Credo*, the boogie-woogie is framed as a fantasy. After it fades away, the coda façade begins with a return of Stravinsky’s “death chord,” here augmented and fortissimo, repeating to the penultimate bar, a grim ending for a work of satire. Noting this dark aspect of *Credo*, critic George Tucker wrote, “the wit and the satire frequently went deeper to something of pathos, if not the tragic.”

From “us” to “U.S.”

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109 Vaughan, 23.
110 Ibid.
This chapter has focused on a biographical interpretation of *Credo* as prompted by Cage’s reading of the title as “I believe in us” and Katz’s assertion that the work is a reflection of Cage and Cunningham’s personal and professional relationship. These borrowings may also be read from the perspective of Cage’s patriotic yet satiric reading of the title, as “I believe in the U.S.” From this angle, *Credo* appears as an ironic commentary on the jingoistic use music present in many Americanist scores from 1942. In the music world, as many scholars have observed, the World War Two inspired an emphasis on national and patriotic themes and many composers turned to Native-American music, African-American spirituals, folk music, cowboy songs and jazz. These Americanist references were integral elements in several works from 1942, including works by Roy Harris, John Alden Carpenter, Morton Gould, and Aaron Copland, whose *Lincoln Portrait* includes quotations from the folksong “Springfield Mountain” and Stephen Foster’s “Camptown Races.” The musical borrowings that Cage uses for *Credo*, while similar to those used in many Americanist works from this period, are employed for entirely different purposes.

Cage expressed his views on these matters in his early writings on politics and music and in a review of the Chicago Symphony written for the cutting edge journal *Modern Music* in the spring of 1942. Cage’s first critique of Americanist music appears in a handwritten draft of the “Future of Music: Credo” from 1940, a rarely studied document housed in the John Cage collection at Northwestern University that is rife with

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113 Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1980), 188-198. The growth of patriotic works during the early-war years also came through two commissioning programs, one by the League of Composers and the other by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra resulting in some of the more familiar patriotic works from the period, including Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*. 
inflammatory annotations cut from the final draft. There are, he wrote in this document, “some composers today . . . writing music of a conventional nature, . . . with the purpose of helping to bring about a better state of society. When this better social order is achieved, their songs will have no more meaning than the ‘Star-spangled Banner’ has today.”\footnote{Handwritten draft of “The Future of Music: Credo,” is located at the John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library.}

The second is Cage’s review of Charles Wakefield Cadman’s (1881-1946) *Pennsylvania Symphony* (1939), amplifies his stance: “This has a variety of themes—of the forest or lurking Indian; of the pioneer, the river, the factory, the happy worker; and finally the American Theme. The only thing missing were moving pictures. It is sad to think how seriously the work must have been written, and how little of this seriousness comes off.”\footnote{“Chavez and the Chicago Drouth,” *Modern Music* 19 (May-June, 1942), 185-187; repr. in Kostelanetz 1970d, 62-64. Cage took a similar view of the next work, Radie Britan’s *Drouth*, noting the plaintive cowboy song “expressing the loneliness and desolation as he sees the land blown away. The strings did most of the blowing and sighing.”}

To Cage these borrowings were empty symbols drawn from past musical practices, a past Cage was interested in moving beyond in order to create a more socially meaningful music.\footnote{In a final thought in his handwritten draft of his “Credo” manifesto he writes: “We will then realize our need for the new music which will have been written by composers who didn’t help fight, but who were aware in a general way of, and sensitive to, the continual series of world events.”}

Cage’s ideas on the social use of music date back to a heated debate he had-in-print with Henry Cowell. In Cage’s article “Counterpoint” from 1934, he directly attacks abstract modernist music written by composers who he felt exhibited no interest in the economy or politics; instead he singles out Hindemith’s *Gebrauchsmusik* for its use-value for society.\footnote{John Cage “Counterpoint,” *Writings About John Cage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 17.} Henry Cowell rebutted Cage’s anti-modern stance in the same magazine with the article “Double Counterpoint,” arguing that Cage did not consider the
relationship of music to society as important, and explaining that the composer interested
in making change should do so through the use of new materials, instruments, and
structures.\textsuperscript{118} An avid experimentalist with a global perspective, Cowell had taken a firm
stand against the ideological use of music to support a nationalist agenda in 1933,
writing: “Nationalism in music has no purpose as an aim in itself. Music happily
transcends political and racial boundaries and is good or bad irrespective of the nation in
which it was composed.”\textsuperscript{119}

In the end, Cage followed Cowell, literally moving to New York City to work
with him at the New School. He embraced Cowell’s advice to use new musical resources
and structures to cultivate vibrant human connections through music. This goal is
reflected in Cage’s development of open structures to cultivate more substantial
interactions and responsibilities for performers. Cage’s works in this vein include \textit{Living
Room Music} from 1940, where the instrumentation is left indeterminate and performers
choose various household objects as their instruments; and \textit{Double Music} (1941), a
percussion quartet jointly composed by Cage and Lou Harrison, in which each composed
two parts according to a pre-established phrase structure. Cage discovered this
collaborative process facilitated a bonding between the two where: “The peculiarities of a
single personality disappear almost entirely and there comes into perception through the
music a natural friendliness, which has the aspect of a festival.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{118} Henry Cowell, “Double Counterpoint,” \textit{Writings About John Cage} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan
Press, 1993), 21
\textsuperscript{119} Henry Cowell, “Trends in American Music,” \textit{American Composers on American Music} (New York:
Frederick Ungar, 1962; originally published in 1933), 13.
\textsuperscript{120} Mina Yang, \textit{California Polyphony: Ethnic Voices, Musical Crossroads} (Urbana and Chicago: University
Cage’s use of the radio and phonograph in *Credo* reflect a continuation of the collaborative process begun in *Living Room Music*. The musical choices exercised by the operator shape the outcome of the work in profound ways. Using a Beethoven symphony impacts the work in a much different way than using Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony, which, like *Credo*, uses borrowed material drawn from American sources, like African-American spirituals. The operator may also choose to use Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 7*, “Leningrad,” a work that reflects the horrors of World War Two, specifically the Nazi bombardment of Leningrad—and, coincidently, was premiered in the U.S. during the summer of 1942, shortly before the debut of *Credo*. These selections establish a tone for the work that alters the context for the work. Cage’s tin cans heard in the context of the Shostakovich symphony may sound as an amplification of Shostakovich’s depiction of the war. Conversely, in the context of the Beethoven symphony, the tin cans may sound more like an attack on Beethoven. The choice of radio stations also shapes the outcome. Selecting a comedy program changes the tone of the drama in a ways that differ from a thriller or a variety show.
Chapter Four

Radio America

In sum, the collage is an awkward amalgamation of three unresolved elements (1) purely worldly elements, especially such fragments of dailiness as newspapers; (2) purely artistic elements such as line, color, and shape—the typical constituents of form; and (3) mixed or impure elements, or residual images of an imitated nature, ranging from the famous imitation wood grain and chair caning to traces of such domestic objects as clay pipes and such studio props as guitars. . . . The elements are already “relative” by reason of their displacement from the life-world in to the “artworld,” and by reason of their fragmentary state. . . . They are an experiment in time and space—which shows that the old idea of Modern art as an experiment concerned with articulating the fourth dimension has, for all its charming naïveté, a certain truth to it.1

-Donald Kuspit, art critic

Cage’s second interpretation of the title as, “I believe in the United States,” opens up questions about the how Credo relates to a wider national context. In a literal way, Cage’s use of the radio reflects the role of national broadcasting in shaping American culture in the 1940s. It is important to note that Cage’s original version of Credo included far more radio segments than the revised arrangement made for Henmar Press in 1960, which removed radio sections altogether or gave the player the option to choose either the radio or phonograph. However, in the original and considered in light of Cage’s title, we may interpret the radio as an integral aspect the collage texture and as a window on to an evolving sphere of American culture over the airwaves.

Credo’s other “collage” elements, yet to be discussed in the context of the dance-drama, include the “found” percussion sounds and buzzer. These sounds are heard

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primarily in the four “Façade” sections and are used in part to signal exteriority and thus frame the moments of interiority in the “Progressions.”

In many ways, Cage’s use of a collage aesthetic amplifies the distinction between moments of interiority and exteriority. This point is illustrated using Kusbit’s description of collage above to map Credo’s collage elements. First, Credo is replete with “worldly elements.” In place of newspaper clippings, so popular in the early collages of Picasso and Braque, Cage uses the radio, which for many in the 1940s had come to replace newspapers as their primary source of news. First, Cage’s tin cans, buzzer and radio recall the everyday sounds of any American home. Second, the “purely artistic” elements are demonstrated through Cage’s use of leitmotifs, motivic variation, timbre, texture, and structure (see chapter two) to underscore the drama and character development. Finally, the use of a “mixed or impure” fragment can be observed in Cage’s use of the buzzer, a common sound heard in offices and homes in the 1940s.

This one-to-one comparison between a visual description of collage and Cage’s sound brings us to the subject of dramatic context. In the theatre, the tin cans, radio and buzzer may be heard as simple props to signal the illusion of a doorbell or the sound of a radio in a middle-class home; whereas in the concert hall, we may hear these as part of an autonomous collage work. Yet this makes the assumption that Cunningham and Erdman’s dance-drama was merely a conventional play. In reality, it too was a complex collage of movement drawn from multiple sources presented in counterpoint with a poetic script and scenario that in its own right is a dense collage of disparate references.

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As Cage reacted to the dance and script, the use of a collage aesthetic served as an ideal container for Erdman and Cunningham’s independent artistic visions presented in *Credo*, which include Erdman’s myth-inspired approach, Cunningham’s Joycean script and scenario, along with his mix of mechanical and jazz-inspired movement.

This intersection between dance, poetry and music provided Cage an ideal opportunity to develop ideas drawn from the Futurists. Recall Cage’s first manifesto, “The Future of Music: Credo,” which opens, “I believe that the use of noise/to make music/will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments.” He concludes his essay with a description of how these new sounds would be used “for extra-musical purposes (theatre, dance, radio, film).”³ *Credo* provides an important case study, allowing insight into Cage’s use of these new sounds and sound effects, specifically the radio and phonograph, to underscore Cunningham and Erdman’s drama. While we have already explored Cage’s nuanced signaling of interiority through the use of texture and musical references in *Credo*, what remains to be illuminated are his methods for signaling exteriority through references to the everyday world. This is clearly a crucial element in a drama about two characters slipping between fantasy and reality.

**Signaling Exteriority in the Façades**

While Cage regarded sounds as autonomous entities, he also deployed them for expressive purposes. During World War II, he began using sounds intended to signal destruction, disintegration, and alienation. This practice was particularly apparent in four works from the spring and summer of 1942: *Imaginary Landscape No. 2* “March,”

Imaginary Landscape No. 3, The City Wears a Slouch Hat, and Credo. These four scores share a similar instrumentation of tin cans, gongs, phonograph, buzzer, and mechanically generated sounds. Cage explicitly linked these sounds to extramusical ideas:

Being involved in the complexities of a nation at war and a city in business-as-usual led me to know that there is a difference between large things and small things, between big organizations and two people alone in a room together. Two of my compositions....suggest this difference. ... The Third Imaginary Landscape, used complex rhythmic oppositions played on harsh sounding instruments combined with recordings of generator noises, sliding electrical sounds, insistent buzzers, thunderous crashes and roars, and a rhythmic structure whose numerical relationships suggest disintegration. The other Amores, was very quiet, and, my friends thought, pleasing to listen to.4

Cage’s description suggests the alternation between moments of quiet repose and loud chaotic noise in these works served as an indication of the shift between private intimacy and the external world. In his “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage offers another perspective on how this opposition developed: “Half-intellectually and half sentimentally, when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendship.”5

One example of this use of sound and texture is the Imaginary Landscape No. 2, “March,” composed in Chicago in April 1942. It uses a coil of wire, which is amplified using a phonograph needle as a contact microphone to create both rumbling and explosive sounds by striking or stroking it with different materials, like a fingernail or cloth. Other instruments include a buzzer and graduated tin cans, and metal wastebasket. The designation “March” is ironic, perhaps a reflection of Cage’s ambivalent feelings about World War II. After a cacophonous introduction, Cage teasingly introduces a quiet

march rhythm played on a tin can, a satiric take on the march genre and its military provenance.

In contrast to the satire of the second *Landscape*, the *Imaginary Landscape* No. 3, composed in February 1942, is a more direct expression of Cage’s feelings about the war, which he later described in an interview:

> When the Second World War came along, I talked to myself, what do I think of the Second World War? Well, I think it’s lousy. So I wrote a piece, *Imaginary Landscape No. 3*, which is perfectly hideous. What I meant by that is that the Second World War is perfectly hideous, and I meant incidentally that *Time, Life*, and Coca-Cola were also hideous, that anything that is big in this world is hideous.⁷

What is striking about Cage’s description is the close relationship between the content of his compositions and his feelings about the war and large corporations. To depict the threatening mood of the times, Cage deploys a battery of tin cans and muted gongs combined with an expanded electronic sound palette using an oscillator, variable speed turntables (playing frequency recordings that sound like sirens), a buzzer, and amplified coil. The work opens with a massive percussion and electronic noise texture followed by an eerie descending drone (using a recording of an electric generator whine), which sounds like an airplane about to crash. Cage returns to the electro-percussion texture in the final section, which concludes with an explosion of sound --created by striking the amplified coil--followed a long fade out. The overall effect, as Cage intended, is one of impending destruction. Cage achieves a similar effect in *Credo*’s coda Façade, which begins with a paroxysm of percussion noise followed by a long fade out of the radio playing alone.

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⁶ The order of the *Imaginary Landscapes* 2 and 3 is not chronological, as Cage had written an earlier version of the *Imaginary Landscape No. 2* for a dance by Bonnie Bird that was later withdrawn.

⁷ John Cage, Conversing with Cage, 59.
The City Wears a Slouch Hat

In the spring of 1942, Cage began work on a radio drama with the American novelist and poet Kenneth Patchen, author of *The Journal of Albion Midnight*. Cage first asked Henry Miller to do the project, but after learning that *The Tropic of Cancer* had been banned in America, he chose Patchen. Titled *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, it was made for CBS’s Columbia Workshop and broadcast nationally from Chicago’s WBVM in May 1942.8

Set in a dismal urban landscape, *City* featured an omniscient hero called “The Voice,” who had the combined superhuman abilities of “The Shadow” and “Superman.” “The Voice” can foresee the future, predicting, for example a car crash in which everyone dies, even a baby. He uses his superhuman powers to disarm criminals and to read minds, in order to discern who is lying and who is telling the truth. The drama shifts to different settings and times without warning, moving from a pastoral landscape by a river to an apartment in the city, and an island in the middle of the ocean.9

The thirty-minute drama is set in three sections. In the first part of the drama, “The Voice” wanders through the city encountering various unfortunate characters, including a beggar, victim, simpleton, thief, and a depressed woman about to commit suicide. The middle section shifts location to the countryside; here “The Voice” meditates in poetic verse on the problems he has seen in the city and dreams of a pastoral utopia, reciting a few lines from Christopher Marlowe’s poem, “The Passionate Shepherd to His

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9 *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, manuscript score, John Cage Trust, Bard Collage. The script printed here was transcribed from the original broadcast recording, *City Wears a Slouch Hat*, Cortical Foundation recording No. 14.
Love.” The final section takes place on a rock in the middle of the ocean, where “The Voice” meets a hermit who laments the fact that men and women do the same stupid things over and over, The work closes with scene in which a man beats his wife; this theme of male/female conflict recurs throughout the drama, and may have informed the theme of Credo.

Cage first completed a massive 250-page sound effects score for City a week before the broadcast. The engineers rejected it, objecting to the amount of time the work would require, and balking at its expense; apparently Cage required the use of compressed air, which cost five dollars a blast. Cage and Xenia worked night and day for a week to complete a replacement score, using percussion and pre-recorded sound effects, which is similar in instrumentation, structure and texture to the Imaginary Landscape No. 2 and No. 3. and Credo.

City was important primarily for introducing Cage to a national radio audience, though in advance advertising and in the final credits of the broadcast, it is clear that CBS considered Cage’s work on the project to be secondary to Patchen’s script. In City, Cage evokes the gloomy atmosphere of the city by using an extensive percussion orchestra of tin cans, muted gongs, woodblocks, water gong, cymbals, woodblocks, four thundersheets and an array of recorded sound effects (e.g. ocean sounds, car and traffic noises, airplane drones, fog horn, etc.). He employs various metallic percussion instruments, creating overlapping polyrhythmic patterns to generate metrical tension; a similar effect is used in the Façade sections of Credo. When the setting shifts to a more peaceful natural environment, like the riverbank, Cage uses a single, quiet foghorn. For

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10 Silverman, 61. Silverman describes the use of poetry by Christopher Marlowe and John Doane.
the island scene, Cage uses surging cymbals, thundersheets, and tam tams along with a recording of ocean sounds to create a single effect: the sounds of the sea in a storm.

The dramatic arc of City moves from despair (life in the city) to fantasy (dream of the country side) and redemption (baptism at sea), which is followed by a final moral conclusion addressed directly to the listening audience by “The Voice”:

I think we need more love in the world (pause) more understanding (pause) I want to know you (pause) I want to know what you feel. We were not meant to be strangers to each other. We have the same fears. The same hopes joys and sorrows. We must not be suspicious. We must learn to love each other. If one man fails to believe, then there can be no faith in the world. For all men are finally one man. You me. We cannot stand apart from each other. I am coming to your house with my hand outstretched. I am your friend. Do not be afraid of me.  

Credo includes a similar, though more compressed, narrative: despair (conflict between Husband and Wife)—fantasy—redemption (boogie woogie dance). This is where the similarity ends: Credo does not conclude with an uplifting moral like City, but returns to the gloomy mood of reality exhibited in the opening. After the broadcast, Cunningham sent Cage a congratulatory letter, “what exciting music! . . . extasis! . . . really triumphal.”  

Although its impossible to know for sure, it is possible that Cunningham may have borrowed elements from City for the Credo drama, including the use of poetic verse, disjointed shifts in time and space, as well as allusions to rural and pastoral settings.

Cage and the Radio

Cage observed the rise of radio as it grew from small regional stations toward national broadcasting between 1920 and the late-1930s. In effect, he witnessed the

12 Recording of The City Wears a Slouch Hat, Cortical 14.
13 Cunningham letter quoted in Silverman, 61.
moment when the American home went from a relatively quiet space to one filled with new voices, sounds, music, and newscasts from around the world. As a teenager, he started a radio show, a variety program sponsored by the Boy Scouts on KNX in Los Angeles, which aired on Friday afternoons and featured conversation about scouting, musical performances and singing, which Cage would accompany on the piano.14

A decade later, after the broadcast of City, Cage decided to go to New York in order to pursue a career as a radio composer. His reasons were simple: he had attempted to found an experimental music laboratory at Mills College,15 but failed to find sufficient funding, even after asking Ethel Ford, Diego Rivera and Leopold Stokowski for assistance.16 For Cage, the radio studio provided the necessary equipment for him to continue his quest for new sounds.

Cage described his vision for the continued experimentation with percussion and electronic sounds within the context of a radio studio in his article, “For More New Sounds,” written for the May-June 1942 issue of Modern Music. His goal was clear; he wished to create “hitherto unheard or even unimagined sounds” and develop “compact technological boxes, inside which all audible sounds, including noise, would be ready to come forth at the command of the composer.”17

Unfortunately, conditions in New York were not favorable for Cage. Even while he worked on City, CBS was cutting back its broadcasts of the “Radio Workshop” series due to cutbacks brought on by the start of WWII.18 In addition, when he arrived in New...
York, the American Federation of Musicians union (AFM) was preparing for its own “war” against the recording and radio industry in the run up to its strike on August 1, 1942. This strike was sparked in part by a sharp rise in the use of disc jockeys and recordings to provide radio content, thus displacing live musicians in radio studios around the country. Reducing things to simplest terms, the union and media framed the strike as a conflict between “live” (human) versus “canned” (recorded) music.\(^{19}\)

Cage’s juxtaposition of the radio with live musicians in *Credo* may reflect this growing tension in the music world leading up to the strike.\(^{20}\) From this perspective, we may consider whether Cage’s use of both mechanical and live music in *Credo* was intended as a symbolic gesture of this evolving conflict.

While Cage may prefer human performers, the use of the “mechanical” is integral in to his collage aesthetic and fundamental to his insistence on the equal value of all sounds, whether electronic or live. At stake is Cage’s ability to pose questions and make associations using the widest palette of sounds possible, sounds that would have symbolic, metaphoric, and political resonances. In this way, the use of the radio represents more than random sound, it promotes the idea of a new American frontier, a wireless landscape of sounds circulating in the air at the time of performance, whether in 1942, 1992, or the present day.

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\(^{20}\) Richard Kostelanetz, “John Cage and Richard Kostelanetz: A Conversation About Radio,” *The Musical Quarterly* 72/2, 1996, 225. Cage described the radio and phonograph as lacking a living quality, suggesting his allegiance with the AFM: “I've all along spoken against records at the same time that I've permitted their being made and have even encouraged it; but I've always said that a record is not faithful to the nature of music... I've always been a proper member of the musicians’ union, in favor of live music.”
The radio is heard at the beginning and close of the work, creating a frame that contextualizes the central sonic material. In addition, the radio is interpolated throughout the score to reinforce this framing and create the illusion of tuning in and tuning out. At another level, the Façades recreate the blurry zone of static, noise, and radio sounds that are heard between stations, while, in contrast, the Progressions that constitute the remainder of the work are tuned in and clear. In this sense, *Credo* may be viewed as a metaphor for radio broadcasting. By extension, the character’s fantasy world may be heard as the slippage into and out of popular programs, for example a Western (cowboy theme), noir thriller (Ghoul as “femme fatale”) and hit parade program (boogie-woogie).

**Boundary Crossing: Human Versus Machine**

Cunningham’s depiction of Husband/Shadow as a “machine” recalls the famous case of Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911), a German judge who believed he was a human radio, capable of receiving radio waves containing messages of mystical truth.  

Media historian Mark Roberts writes:

[Schreber] was naturally intensely aware of the fact that he had become a machine and horrified that he was one. His profound awareness is evident in the many colorful passages in the *Memoirs* that refer to his mechanization, his feeling—or as some would argue—his delusion—that he had become machinelike and was being “run” by someone or something.  

The Schreber case illuminated for many the delicate boundary between the human psyche and the radio. Listeners in radio’s early years believed they could hear the voices of the dead emanating from the static between stations, and many took literally the voices of newscasters and actors. Radio broadcasters in the 1930s and early-1940s cultivated this

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21 Schreber recorded his experience in his autobiography *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903)

22 “Wired: Schreber as Machine, Technophobe, and Virtualist (1996), quoted in Miller, 57
sense of intimacy, using the radio voice to speak directly to the listener, often using personal pronouns, “I” and “you,” to reinforce a familiar tone. This intimate mode is an essential element of “The Voice” in *City Wears a Slouch Hat*, for example.

In the 1930s, the audience was complicit in this intimate exchange, as media historian Edward Miller points out:

> Hearing a disembodied voice received and projected by a machine running on electricity—requires an affection toward the unseen voice that is also made possible only by the tacit agreement of the listener. The disembodied voice enters into the corpus of the listeners. This is an anonymous and intimate interaction, a backroom of sound.  

The sound of the voice over the radio did much to challenge the boundary between reality and the radio, particularly in radio dramas, where the line between fact and fiction was often blurred. Orson Welles famously exploited this ambiguity in his 1938 radio adaptation of the H.G. Welles classic *War of the Worlds*, setting off a panic when radio listeners believed the broadcast bulletins about a Martian attack on planet Earth.

Perhaps with *War of the Worlds* in mind, Cage stipulates in the manuscript for *Credo* that the radio operator must “avoid news programs.” While he later changed this to direct the performers to “avoid news programs during National emergencies,” the radio itself—no matter the content—complicated understandings of the work. As Erdman recalled of the début performance, the audience, “when the radio would go on, would go shh, shh! They didn’t realize that it was part of the music.” In short, the radio proved to be a more powerful expressive tool than even Cage could have predicted and served as an effective way to draw the audience into the drama.

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23 Miller, 3.
24 JPB 94-24 f. 70
Radio America

By the start of the war, the radio had become ubiquitous in the American home. 90% of Americans had a radio by 1942 and on average listened to three to four hours of programming a day.26 People turned on the radio to be entertained by radio dramas, variety shows and music, from jazz to hillbilly and classical. At regular intervals, commercials for products by corporate sponsors would air. In contrast, news bulletins would interrupt programs unexpectedly with the latest news from the war. In February 1942, a government-sponsored series titled This is War! broadcast on Saturday evenings for thirteen weeks and was heard by twenty-million Americans, or 20% of the population.27 The growth of national and international news coverage also brought Americans together through a shared knowledge that came via listening rather than reading. “Radio was a daily companion, a window onto the outside world, a trusted provider of news and information, and last, though certainly not least, a welcome distraction and entertainment medium.”28

“Radio America,” as Cleveland journalist Gertrude Berg colorfully observed, was the new frontier of national culture and identity:

I want to talk about the America I’ve discovered on the air—Radio America. Columbus discovered just a rock-ribbed continent, but if you want to discover the real heart and mind of America, you’ve got to look for it on the air! The programs of all the broadcasting companies are like mirrors held up to America’s soul. They reflect what people are asking to hear and wanting to know.29

26 Field and Lazarsfeld, The People Look at Radio in Horten, 2.
27 Gerd Horten, Radio Goes to War, 46
28 Ibid., 178
Such early utopian visions of radio foresaw the medium’s ability to link the nation in a common spoken language free of dialect, as a venue for democracy in which the public could participate more directly in political discourse, and as an educational tool. This was particularly in of the area of music appreciation, since the radio provided a mass audience of listeners access for the first time to classical music, which was popularized in nationally broadcast programs by performed by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra between 1937-1954. Already by the time those concerts started in 1937, Franklin Delano Roosevelt regarded the radio as an essential tool in educating Americans about the social, political, and historical dimensions of the Great Depression: “Five years of fierce discussion and debate, five years of information through the radio and moving picture have taken the whole nation to school in the nation’s business.”

Media scholars have sought to understand the role that radio played in shaping a nationalist American identity during the 1930s and 1940s, and it seems likely that Cage was attuned to this dynamic when composing Credo. The radio would thus be one of many markers of identity implicated in the score, which, as we have seen, evokes American musical archetypes, including the cowboy song and boogie-woogie. On a more subtle level, Credo explores the boundary between the imaginary world of radio and reality. Music, text and dance combine to evoke this liminal space generated in part by the opaque text, which resists easy comprehension, and the score, with its continuum of references and sounds, from the literal (Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony), to the iconic, (Indian tom tom rhythm), and the ambiguous (muted Asian gongs). In the midst of this

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sound collage, the audience member is ultimately responsible for locating meaning within the work.

**Indeterminacy versus Chance: A Critic’s Perspective**

The random radio sounds that arise in performances of *Credo* vary widely, as a brief survey of the radio material captured in various recordings of *Credo in Us* attests. In one, we hear an NPR news story about the first Gulf war in Iraq along with snippets of “Yesterday” by the Beatles, a WGBZ “The Buzz” call-in radio show, advertisements for car insurance (“How’s your driving record”), bits of “Axel F” by Harold Faltermeyer, Van Halen’s “Eruption,” and, in a recording from Europe, broadcasts in Finnish, and newscasts in French. In the context of collage, these “worldly elements,” bring the indeterminate and heterogeneous sounds of the outside world into the theater.  

Indeterminacy, for Cage, was all about the excitement of not knowing what was coming next, which he described as a state of mind:

In other words, I try, rather, to keep my curiosity and my awareness with regard to what’s happening open, and I try to arrange my composing means so that I won’t have any knowledge of what might happen. And that, by the way, is what you might call the technical difference between indeterminacy and chance operations. In the case of chance operations, one knows more or less the elements of the universe with which one is dealing, whereas in indeterminacy, I like to think (and perhaps I fool myself and pull the wool over my eyes) that I’m outside the circle of a known universe, and dealing with things that I literally don’t know anything about.  

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Cage’s use of indeterminacy shifts attention away from the idea of Credo as an expression of his will or as a unified artwork. As the critic Robert Palmer noted in a 1987 review in the New York Times of Credo, “in 1942 Mr. Cage was already including a radio in his ensemble of piano and percussion instruments. The durations during which the radio was audible were predetermined, but the content—what the radio actually picked up—was not. This was already a chance element.” Palmer concluded that in terms of sound, “the differences in compositional methods seemed of secondary importance.”

Palmer’s comment provokes an important insight. With Credo, Cage was engaged with “chance,” in its dictionary definition, as an “unpredictable occurrence that has no assignable cause,” nine years before he began working with indeterminacy and chance operations. What Palmer draws attention to is the sound of chance from the perspective of the audience. In this way, the random radio sounds of Credo are no different than those heard in the Imaginary Landscape No. 4 (1951).

More importantly, it is Cage’s use of the radio as part of a dance-drama, not simply as a prop, but as a way to articulate exteriority, frame the dramatic context, and articulate each character’s doubled persona. Credo is therefore a case study in how Cage’s thoughtful engagement with a scripted dance led to the inclusion of chance elements. In this respect, Credo changes our notion of how Cage came to develop chance procedures, and as such, provokes a reconsideration of this period of his creative development.

Recapitulation: Collage

Cage was drawn to artists who shared his fascination with the minutiae of experience,

including Erik Satie, James Joyce, Max Ernst, and Robert Rauschenberg, among others. As Marjorie Perloff and others have noted, collage became the dominant mode of expression in modernism, rapidly spreading across multiple art forms during the twentieth century, serving as an “important mode for representing a ‘reality’ no longer quite believed in and therefore all the more challenging.”

*Credo* explores one such blurry boundary between the radio and “real life,” posing questions about where human existence lies in relation to a technology-mediated reality. The boundary lines were as unclear in 1942 as they are today.

As we consider *Credo* within the larger arena of the “United States,” it is insightful to reference Cage’s essay, “Experimental Music in the United States,” in which he describes his collage aesthetic as “experimental” in order to differentiate his work from other European and American composers. Written in 1958, the essay looks back to the 1940s, when Stravinsky and Schoenberg dominated the American music scene. Cage identified the League of Composers as closely linked with Nadia Boulanger and Stravinsky and the International Society of Contemporary Music with Schoenberg.

Cage considered these organizations as too conservative, noting, “anything that was vividly experimental was discouraged.” In contrast, Cage attempts to articulate an experimental music that is not identified with the style of a particular composer: “But it is clear that ways must be discovered that allow noises and tones to be just noises and tones, not exponents subservient to Varèse’s imagination.” The solution was to link experimental music with the idea of “experimental action,” where the outcome of a work

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36 Ibid. 74.
37 Ibid. 69.
is unknown by using chance operations or indeterminacy. Cage associates this idea with modern art and collage in particular: “Implicit here, it seems to me, are principles familiar from modern painting and architecture: collage and space. What makes this action like Dada are the underlying philosophical views and the collagelike actions.”

Cage grounds his aesthetic in the philosophy of the visual avant-garde and identifies it with a collage aesthetic, which privileges multiplicity over unity. The proximity of Cage’s use of indeterminate elements in *Credo* and his meeting with Duchamp and Ernst suggests a possible connection to these more radical experiments.

Cage’s “experimental” approach is evident in the way he worked with dance, and art form that not only provided him with a creative outlet for his most radical ideas, but also shaped how those ideas evolved. For example, Cage develops a method that allowed the choreographer and composer to work independently using a pre-planned structure based on rhythm and duration. A second example is the re-invention of the prepared-piano, for a solo dance, *Bacchanale*, made for Sylvia Fort at Cornish in 1940. Cage initially wanted to create a percussion score for Fort’s Africa-themed dance, but there was not enough room in the theatre. Instead, he began experimenting with a piano by placing erasers, nuts, bolts, bolts with washers, screws, weather stripping, paper, and other material between the piano strings, in effect creating a one-person percussion ensemble that produced a seemingly-infinite variety of sounds from pings, knocks, gong-

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38 ibid. 70.
39 Instead, a new method was established where Cage created a rhythmic and phrase structure that fit to the tempo and dance counts to create a mutually agreed upon grid. In this way, once the structure was established, both choreographer and composer were free to create the content they wanted as long as they stayed within the parameters of the structure.
40 Satie did it first in the incidental music to *Le piège de Méduse*
like tones, and rattle noises. The third linkage of Cage’s experimental ideas to dance is his use of collage with its attendant indeterminate elements, an aesthetic position that would remain central to Cage’s work for the rest of his life.

Virgil Thomson and “Cage’s Collage of Noises”

No other critic knew Cage’s music and personality as well as Virgil Thomson. Thomson met Cage in 1934, and reviewed many of his New York concerts. He admired Cage’s compositions for radio and percussion, which he described as “almost random-sounding assemblages of sounds.” What attracted Thomson most, however, was Cage’s fearless attack on the musical status quo; as he put it, “[Cage] was distilling a clear-as-water musical moonshine without the stamp of any Establishment.”

Cage was part of Thomson’s inner-circle, and the two men shared a common acquaintance with Peggy Guggenheim. Cage and Thomson also had a mutual interest in the works of Gertrude Stein, Erik Satie, and other avant-garde artists. Thomson served as a mentor to Cage, providing him with important connections in New York, access to performance opportunities, fellowships and critical coverage. In return, Cage provided a detailed study of Thomson’s music for the book, *Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music*, which he co-authored with Kathleen Hoover in 1959. In short, Thomson brought a unique depth of understanding to his reviews of Cage’s works.

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41 Cage used the prepared-piano in the 1940s for several dance scores by Merce Cunningham (Totem Ancestor, A Valentine Out of Season, Root of Unfocus, Triple Paced. Three Dances [2 prep. Pnos]); Jean Erdman (Mysterious Adventure, Daughters of the Lonesome Isle), and Hanya Holm (Four Dances “What So Proudly We Hail), among others.


In his article, “Cage and the Collage of Noises,” Thomson locates the start of Cage’s embrace of a collage aesthetic in the late-1930s through his work with “non-musical” sounds:

Cage’s own music over the last thirty years, though not entirely free of interrelated pitches, has nevertheless followed a straighter line in its evolution toward an art of collage based on non-musical sounds than that of any other artist of his time. He seems to have known by instinct everything to avoid that might turn him aside from his goal and everything that could be of use toward achieving it. Precious little service, naturally, was to be expected out of music’s classical models.44

Thomson chose the term collage carefully as he knew of Cage’s deep connection to the art world. Cage’s work with percussion and prepared piano sounds, Thomson notes, served as the beginning of his engagement with a collage aesthetic. Thomson views collage as a unifying thread connecting Cage’s early works to the first “happening” at Black Mountain College in 1952, and on to the multimedia and dance works of the 1960s.

Thomson’s article focuses on HPSCHD (1969), Cage’s four and a half hour multimedia work, which was performed at the University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana in 1969. Cage used technology on a vast scale, calling for fifty-two tape machines, fifty-nine speakers, sixty-four slide-projectors, eight movie projectors using forty films, and seven harpsichords playing snippets of Mozart. Compared to Credo, HPSCHD is appears as the apotheosis of Cage’s collage aesthetic.

Conclusion

Cage continued to expand on his collage works for the rest of his life, from the

“happenings” of the 1950s, to the “musicircues” works of the 1960s and 1970s, and five part *Europeras* series of the 1980s and ‘90s. Cage and Cunningham advanced a collage aesthetic in works made for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, which also included the work of cutting-edge artists working in collage and assemblage. One such artist was Robert Rauchenberg, whose combines—three-dimensional works fusing household objects against a painted canvas, served as sets for the company. One set, inflected with comic strips, wallpaper, curtains, and painted panels served as the design for Cunningham’s *Minutiae* (1953). *Minutiae* is emblematic of Cunningham’s own collage approach as it is made up of movements drawn from watching people walking on the street outside Cunningham’s dance studio. Movements, Cunningham described, as:

“Fragments/repetitions: hobbling, crawling, walking, hops. . . . Fragmented hand, arm, shoulder and /or head movements.”

Along the way, Cage embraced new technologies in his works as a way to reflect the world around him. In the epic *Variations VII*, made between 1965 and 1966, for example, he collaborated with engineers from Bell Laboratories to develop an electronic systems specific the work. In *Variations VII*, he wanted to use only sounds that were emanating in the air around New York City during the time of the performance, an expansion of his use of the radio in *Credo* and the *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*. The telephone company used dedicated phone lines for phones that were going to be left off the hook in various parts of the city—the ASPCA dog shelter, Luchow’s Restaurant, the Aviary at the Zoo, New York Sanitation Department depot on the East River, the *New York Times* news room, Cunningham’s studio, and Terry Riley’s home (near the turtle tank). These sounds were broadcast throughout giant speakers at the 69th Regiment

45 Cunningham quoted in Vaughan, 84.
Armory, the location of the infamous art exhibition in 1913 that included Duchamp’s scandalous *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

Duchamp’s *Nude* and later *Bride Stripped Bare of Her Bachelors*, even serve as a potent metaphor for *Credo*, a work that is perpetually in process, never complete, and never heard the same way twice. Like Duchamp’s *Bride*, *Credo* is wedded to its moment, reflecting its surroundings—the *Bride* via the transparent glass, *Credo* via the radio.

Cage’s work offers a glimpse into the present place and time—it is a true *verismo* drama that is always relevant and capable of conjuring images, allusions and questions for the audience.

Cage adopts a collage aesthetic precisely for its ability to reflect the wondrous chaos of reality and for its departure from traditional notions of music as a unified artwork. Cage, I suspect, did not do this simply to shock. Beginning in his earliest writings, he demonstrates his interest in creating a socially meaningful music. With this in mind, Cage adopted two ideas from the avant-garde: All sounds (and noise) are equal; and art should be useful to society. In practice, Cage’s works were analogous to a medical inoculation. He brought the sounds of everyday life into the theater, so that audiences might find them less disturbing in real life: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.”

Cage followed the avant-garde agenda of breaking down the barrier between art and life, though for different ends. Instead of abandoning the nineteenth century concept of art, Cage sought to apply the mystical qualities of the art experience to everyday life;

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to treat even disturbing traffic noise with the same level of attention reserved for a
Beethoven symphony. Cage observes, “Formerly one was accustomed to thinking of art
as something better organized than life that could be used as an escape from life. The
changes that have taken place in this century, however, are such that art is not an escape
from life, but rather an introduction to it.” For Cage, Dada and collage provided a
valuable gateway between art and life. Cage created an incalculable range of experiences
in his collage works, from the dense multimedia performances to “silence.” Cage and
Cunningham would nurture a similar connection between everyday life and their works,
partly to stimulate the audience to create their own meanings and interpretations. It is
clear with Credo that this aspect of their aesthetic was evolving in 1942.

Credo at the Armory: February 2011

Credo was performed at the grand re-opening of the Park Avenue Armory in February
2011. The critic Zachary Woolfe wrote a moving review of the event, and singled out
Credo as the clear highlight of the evening. The historic setting shaped his perception of
the work as he noted that the tin cans, when heard in the context of the armory with its
military mystique, sounded like children playing soldiers.

The highlight was a riveting performance of John Cage’s early masterpiece “Credo in Us,” scored
for two percussionists, piano and a record player or radio. The piece is often considered sarcastic,
and the program notes emphasized its “pointed critique of American society.” But in the cavernous
armory its martial rhythms, beaten out on tin cans and with an electric buzzer, were less biting than
poignant: children playing soldiers, lighthearted and deadly serious.

Woolfe’s remarks on the relationship between the phonograph recordings “fracturing”
into the piano solos, which move from “jingoistic Americana to gentle elegy, from

47 Joel Eric Suben, interview with John Cage, 1984, excerpted in Conversing with Cage, 216
February 2011).
mournful to jazzy” reflect *Credo*’s multivalent position as a work that remains grounded in the past yet is reflective of its current time and place.

The score dryly suggests that the phonograph play “some classic: e.g., Dvorak, Beethoven, Sibelius or Shostakovich.” (“Credo” was composed in July 1942, the same month as NBC’s radio broadcast of Shostakovich’s new “Leningrad” Symphony, and you can’t help thinking that Cage was responding to that grandiosely propagandistic work.) The bombastic phonograph score keeps fracturing into solo passages, almost cadenzas, for the piano, melting from jingoistic Americana to gentle elegy, from mournful to jazzy, shifting moods navigated sensitively by Eighth Blackbird’s brilliant pianist, Lisa Kaplan.

What is interesting here is how the critic connects *Credo* to Shostakovich’s “Leningrad” symphony, a view that conveniently fits the military theme of the armory.49 Fascinating too is the idea that the phonograph is “bombastic” and “fracturing” works often reserved for percussion instruments. The machine here is clearly the enemy. Also, the critic’s assertion that the cowboy song is “jingoistic” suggests that the cowboy’s cultural significance has shifted, today the image of the cowboy might conjure President George W. Bush, whose brash “cowboy diplomacy” led the United States in to two wars.

Woolfe’s reading is insightful in that it reveals the work’s multidimensionality as a collage work. Perhaps in another setting, like a bar or club, he might consider the “us” version of the work. The review though captures *Credo*’s ability to remain relevant and

49 The story of Shostakovich’s “Leningrad” had all the intrigues of international espionage: The smuggling of the microfilmed score by spies via Tehran to the U.S., and the top-secret copying of the score and parts. But the legend of the work was cemented before its arrival by its apocryphal creation amid the ashes of a bombed out Leningrad. Shostakovich began writing the work after the German invasion while sitting on fire brigade duty near the Leningrad Conservatory. He dedicated the first three movements to the city of Leningrad and the final to victory. The Russian premiere was broadcast to millions of listeners throughout the country, including the troops at the front. At one Moscow performance, the audience refused to leave after air raid sirens signaled a coming wave of Luftwaffe bombing. “Koussevitzky Gets Shostakovich 7th,” New York Times, June 16, 1942. Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra premiered the “Leningrad” symphony on July 25 in a benefit concert for Russian War Relief at Radio City Music Hall. The program’s narrative was powerful and clear: The first movement represented an embattled Russia, the second, armed resistance, the third, a memorial to the dead, and the last, a vision of victory. “Shattering applause” greeted the climactic ending. Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra premiered the “Leningrad” symphony on July 25 in a benefit concert for Russian War Relief at Radio City Music Hall. The program’s narrative was powerful and clear: The first movement represented an embattled Russia, the second, armed resistance, the third, a memorial to the dead, and the last, a vision of victory. “Shattering applause” greeted the climactic ending.
modern, as well as intellectually stimulating and heartfelt at the same time. “Nearly 70, “Credo” sounds vividly contemporary, a model of what political works can be: subtle, impossible to pin down ideologically, spurs to thought rather than punch lines.”

When I first performed Credo in 1989, at Oberlin, I felt the work was at the forefront of the avant-garde; how else to explain a work filled with constant surprise at every rehearsal. I danced as I played the tin cans and soaked in the radio bits and the quotations from the “New World” symphony, and Jeremy Denk’s boogie-woogie.

Poised between satire and sincerity, pure noise and politics, “Credo in Us” left the rest of the program seeming obvious . . . . To the festival’s overarching question, “Credo” offered a clear if frustrating answer. Like all great music, it seems to be about everything and nothing: both powerful and powerless.

Credo is a work that shifts rapidly from moment to moment. It changes with our moods, setting, and zeitgeist of the time. Credo might at once conjure a dark political reading then, seconds later, it may ignite waves of laughter, perhaps after a radio advertisement for car insurance disrupts a Beethoven symphony. Few works can occupy such an open position to the world and inspire a wide range of emotions and ideas. Woolfe’s compelling review seems a fitting place to close this study. It appears now that Credo is finally receiving the praise it deserves in the world.
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