

Maya Deren Experimental Films

Maya Deren | USA | Various | 76 minutes

In Brief

The collected shorts of Maya Deren the “Mother of the trance film” who worked completely outside the commercial film industry and made her own inner experience the center of her films. From the early 1940s until her death in 1961, Maya Deren evoked and exemplified the American avant-garde movement virtually by herself. The programme comprises: *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land*, *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, *Meditation on Violence* and *The Very Eye of Night*.

Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema

Maya Deren is recognizable as the woman with the enigmatic expression at the window, silently observing from within. Although her eyes indicate distrust, she is not desperate to escape her domestic space, but she is not entirely comfortable immured behind the glass. This image symbolizes some of Deren’s most significant initiatives in experimental cinema. In this still shot she establishes a silent connection with the eyes, suggesting the possibility for reverie or even hallucination. It foreshadows her experiments with superimposition and the juxtaposition of disparate spaces. It is an image that suggests the most compelling themes of her film work: dreaming, reflection, rhythm, vision, ritual and identity. Like Cindy Sherman’s film stills, this image represents a poignant and hesitant moment, but unlike the photographs, Deren’s still shot belongs within a dynamic, kinetic narrative.



Whilst she is first recognized by this image, what is little known is that Deren was also a dancer, choreographer, poet, writer and photographer. In the cinema she was a director, writer, cinematographer, editor, performer, entrepreneur and pioneer in experimental filmmaking in the United States. Like Jean-Luc Godard and Sergei Eisenstein, Maya Deren was both a film theorist and a filmmaker. Unlike these luminaries, Deren’s writing remains relatively obscure in film theory and her films are rarely screened outside of experimental or feminist film courses.

When she was born in Kiev in 1917 her mother named her Eleanora after the Italian actress Eleanora Duse. Deren’s mother Marie confessed that she crossed her legs and refused to give birth whilst her husband Solomon continued to refer to their baby as ‘him’. Marie recalls, “As soon as Dr Deren left, I started to deliver the baby”. (1) In 1922 the Derenkowsky family fled the threat of anti-semitism in the Ukraine, arriving in New York where they contracted and Anglicized their name to Deren. The family was discontent and frequently separated. As an adolescent Maya was sent to Geneva to attend The League of Nations International School whilst Marie Deren studied languages in Paris and Solomon Deren practiced psychology in New York.

As a young woman Eleanora Deren studied journalism and political science and became active in student politics at Syracuse University. Deren transferred to New York University where she was awarded her undergraduate degree in 1936. At Smith College she completed a Masters Degree in English Literature and symbolist poetry in 1939. After college Deren began working as an assistant to the famous dancer and choreographer, Katherine Dunham. Deren found inspiration and nomadic adventure with the innovative Katherine Dunham Dance Company, touring and performing across the US. It was in Los Angeles in 1941 that Deren met Alexander Hammid, a Czechoslovakian filmmaker working in Hollywood. In collaboration with Hammid, Deren produced her first and most remarkable experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

1943 was a year of transformation and consolidation for Deren. She returned to New York, married Hammid, transferred her primary focus from dance to film and changed her name to Maya. Her new name was particularly apt for a burgeoning filmmaker. Buddhists understand Maya to mean ‘illusion’, in Sanskrit it translates as ‘mother’ and in Greek mythology Maya is the messenger of the Gods.

Meshes of the Afternoon was produced in an environment of wartime volatility and this is reflected symbolically throughout its mise-en-scène. The title card suggesting that the film was ‘made in Hollywood’ is ironic, Deren sets her film within an LA setting, but it is the nightmare element of the dream factory that interests her most. The film establishes an atmosphere saturated in paranoia and distrust with lovers turning into killers and with the presence of a mysterious but fascinating hooded figure. As European émigrés, Deren and Hammid invest their film with an acute sense of restlessness and alienation. *Meshes of the Afternoon* reflects this uncanny estrangement in the doubling, tripling and quadrupling of its central character (played by Deren) and in its cyclic narrative, a structure that seems condemned to repetition. The hooded figure with the reflective face adds yet another dimension, reflecting back the identity of those who look into her eyes.

Thomas Schatz points to *Meshes* as the best known experimental film of the decade. He categorizes it as the first example of “the poetic psychodrama”, films bearing the impression of art cinema which were seen as “scandalous and radically artistic.” (2) He writes that the poetic psychodrama “emphasized a dreamlike quality, tackled questions of sexual identity, featured taboo or shocking images, and used editing to liberate spatio-temporal logic from the conventions of Hollywood realism.” (3)

Meshes of the Afternoon is shot as a silent film, there is no dialogue, communication between characters or diegetic sound. A record player plays silently. Whilst the disc revolves and the needle is engaged in the groove, there is no indication of the sound that it makes. Teiji Ito’s soundtrack makes *Meshes* appear like a music video before its time, the drumbeat is synchronized to movement and to the cut. When Deren takes one of her many short journeys along the path or up stairs, the sound of her steps is overlaid by Ito’s drumbeat metonymically standing in for and amplifying her movement. Inspired by Eisenstein’s notion of rhythmic montage, the editing and movement are accentuated by the rhythm of the soundtrack.

Rhythm is a defining element of all of Deren’s films, it arises from the play of repetition and variation which is integral to her experiments in narrative. *Meshes* deploys an innovative style of cutting on action where the protagonist steps over such disparate terrains as the beach, soil, grass and concrete. The rhythmic drumbeat and the repeated movement highlight her deliberate progress across these discontinuous spaces. As the central, consistent element, Ito’s soundtrack enables Deren’s temporal and spatial experimentation.

Rhythm also impacts significantly on spectatorship. The rhythm of the sound, movement and editing conspire to produce the effect of a trance film. *Meshes of the Afternoon*’s dream-like mise-en-scène, illogical narrative trajectory, fluid movement and ambient soundtrack invite a type of contemplative, perhaps even transcendental, involvement for the spectator.

Whilst *Meshes* engages the viewer, it also presents vision in crisis. The film is constructed from a myriad of eyeline matches and mismatches. The use of extreme angles to imply one character looking down on the dreamer, a type of spider’s point of view, foreshadows the dreamer’s death. Seen in reverse it could translate as the dreamer’s ‘out of body’ experience. Occasionally Deren’s point of view proves to be ineffectual, the reverse shot from the sleeping Deren is impossible. The fourth replica of Deren’s character wears bulbous goggles that can do nothing to enhance her vision.

The film sets up a nightmare vision. *Meshes* is a projection of the dreamer’s desires and fears. Deren’s point of view transforms into tunnel vision with her perspective funneled through a cylinder rounding out the edges of the frame. This nightmarish vision is intensified with the use of an obscure horizontal wipe, with a semi-opaque filter, mystifying the image and implying the beginning of the nightmare. In Deren’s nightmare progress is difficult, speed is varied and the emphasis on circularity results in an unnerving repetition. The hooded figure is perpetually out of range, all attempts to capture her prove futile. In domestic space, activity has been suspended. The phone is off the hook, the record player is playing, the knife has begun to slice through the bread. Deren writes, “everything that happens in the dream has its basis in a suggestion in the first sequence – the knife, the key, the repetition of the stairs, the figure disappearing around a curve in the road.” (4)

Deren is clearly influenced by Méliès’ magical editing style with objects transforming without warning. *Meshes* is also inclined towards the Gothic’s fascination with the instability of objects, uncanny visions and confusion surrounding the intentions of the male characters. The film is one of many made during the 1940s which asks: is the hero intending to kiss the heroine or to kill her?

P. Adams Sitney refutes the notion that Deren was the director of *Meshes of the Afternoon*. He argues that Hammid “photographed the whole film. Maya Deren simply pushed the button on the camera for the two scenes in which he appeared.” (5) Stan Brakhage also classifies *Meshes* as Hammid’s film. Deren’s biographers perceive the film as a collaboration, noting that Hammid provided the mechanical expertise to realize images born from Deren’s imagination. (6) What is undeniable is that *Meshes* establishes key themes and cinematic innovations that Deren continued to explore throughout her career as an experimental filmmaker.

Deren’s second experimental film, *At Land* (1944), reinforces her interest in the juxtaposition of anachronistic spaces and introduces a critique of social rituals. This film begins by reversing the natural rhythm with images of waves breaking and descending back into the sea. Starring again, Deren is seen climbing up a dead tree trunk on the beach, magically emerging onto a table where a formal dinner



party is in progress. This ‘civilized’ world ignores Deren as she crawls along their dinner table. By depicting herself as invisible to the diners, Deren highlights the myopia of the guests. The dinner sequence in *At Land* ends with an enchanted chess game. A pawn falls from the table and descends back into the dead wood on the beach, it falls over rocks, into the water and is washed away over the waterfalls. Chasing the pawn, Deren is restored to her original landscape.

With *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945) Deren’s 16mm Bolex becomes a performer equal in significance to the star of this film, Talley Beattey. In the opening sequence Deren’s camera rotates more than 360 degrees, scanning past the figure in movement. In this film Deren articulates the potential for transcendence through dance and ritual. The movement of the dancer does not always motivate the camera, so Deren’s visual expression remains free floating. The spaces linked in this film range from

the interior of a museum to the forest and courtyard. Deren writes, “The movement of the dancer creates a geography that never was. With a turn of the foot, he makes neighbors of distant places.” As Beatey spins, he appears to develop more than one face, forming an illusion of a totem pole.

Ritual in Transfigured Time (1946) silently follows Rita Christiani’s perspective as she enters an apartment to find Maya Deren immersed in the ritual of unwinding wool from a loom. Deren includes another expression of the external invading the internal with a strange wind that surrounds and entrances her as she becomes transported by the ritual. *Ritual in Transfigured Time* links the looming ritual with the ritual of the social greeting. Christiani enters a party, meets and greets, moving throughout the crowd like a dancer. Her movements become increasingly expressive and fluid, the ritual becomes a performance. Key themes in this film are the dread of rejection and the contrasting freedom of expression in the abandonment to the ritual.

In *Meditation on Violence* (1948) Deren’s camera is motivated by the movement of the performer, Chao Li Chi. This film is marked by a lack of dynamism and mobility that we have come to expect from Deren’s camera. It also obscures the distinction between violence and beauty. The shadows on the white wall behind Chi amplify the movement of the Wu Tang ritual. In *Meditation on Violence* Deren experiments with film time, reversing the film part way through producing a loop. Exhibited forwards and then backwards, the difference in the Wu Tang movements is almost imperceptible.

The Very Eye of Night (1958) was a collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School. The film was beset by problems in its production and carried with it a heavy weight of expectation. A shimmering constellation of stars established the background for negative images of figures resembling Greek Gods superimposed on and magically transported along the milky way. Deren called it her ‘ballet of night’, an ethereal dance within a nocturnal space that focused on the spectacle rather than the narrative. It collaborated on the soundtrack using tone blocks and bells, recalling the trance rhythm of *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Prioritizing enchantment over interpretation, *The Very Eye of Night* proved to be Deren’s most controversial and misunderstood film.

Deren is often referred to as the archetypal example of independence, a filmmaker who managed to avoid the institutional regulation of American cinema. Deren screened her films on her living room walls to interested audiences, occasionally exhibiting to critics like Manny Farber and James Agee. Her aim was to inspire a new generation of avant-garde filmmakers. Nichols writes,

The new American cinema of the 1950s took on the shape of an institutional reality that gave sustenance to the creative efforts of Hollis Frampton, Stan Brakhage, Paul Sharits, Robert Frank, Morris Engel and Jack Smith. Deren demonstrated how such artists could gain common recognition and participate in a shared framework of distribution, exhibition, and critical discourse. (7)

As an independent distributor Deren exhibited and presented lectures on her films across the United States, Cuba and Canada. In 1946 she booked the Village’s Provincetown Playhouse for a public exhibition. Deren titled the exhibition: ‘Three Abandoned Films – a showing of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land* & *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*’. Deren took the word ‘abandoned’ to refer to Guillaume Apollinaire’s observation that a work of art is never completed, just abandoned. Whilst the title was ironic, the exhibition was successful.

Deren’s independent exhibitions inspired Amos Vogel’s formation of Cinema 16, a film society that promoted and exhibited experimental films in New York. Nichols argues that, “Deren acted the role of cinematic Prometheus, stealing the fire of the Hollywood gods for those whom the gods refused to recognize.” (8) In the late 1950s Deren formed the Creative Film Foundation to reward the achievements of independent filmmakers. Her work led to the establishment of the first filmmaker’s Co-op in New York City.

Evasive and unclassifiable, Deren actively rejected categorization as a surrealist and refused the definition of her films as formalist or structuralist. Her affiliation with surrealism is undeniable. In 1943 Deren collaborated with Marcel Duchamp to produce a film called *Witch’s Cradle*, a choreographed set of movements between the figure (played by Duchamp) and the camera. The film was intended to be an exploration of the magical qualities of objects in Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century Gallery, a space where Duchamp also exhibited. *Witch’s Cradle* remains unfinished, the film recalling Duchamp’s difficulty with completion. Duchamp’s *Large Glass* or *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) collected dust in his studio for seven years until it was shattered in transit. Duchamp celebrated the accident as the final element allowing the art to be considered complete.

It is in Deren’s writing that her status as an innovator in film production and film theory is accentuated. In 1946 Deren wrote “*An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*” where she explained her approach to filmmaking. Her argument emphasizes filmmaking as a matrix where elements exist outside of the constraints of hierarchy, order or value. It is a utopian approach, comparable to the logic developed by the Russian Formalists, which stresses the influence of individual elements within the anagram.

In an anagram all the elements exist in a simultaneous relationship. Consequently, within it, nothing is first and nothing is last; nothing is future and nothing is past; nothing is old and nothing is new... Each element of an anagram is so related to the whole that no one of them may be changed



without affecting its series and so affecting the whole. And conversely the whole is so related to every part that whether one reads horizontally, vertically, diagonally or even in reverse, the logic of the whole is not disrupted, but remains intact. (9)

Deren also wrote “Cinematography: the creative use of reality” and an unpublished article entitled “Psychology of Fashion”. In 1953 Deren presented a paper entitled “Poetry and the Film” at a Cinema 16 Symposium. In this paper she argued that film works on two axes: the horizontal, including narrative, character and action, and the vertical, characterized by the more ephemeral elements of mood, tone and rhythm.

In 1947 Deren won the Cannes Film Festival’s Grand Prix Internationale. The same year she was also awarded a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (10) to begin research on the Voudoun (voodoo) ritual in Haitian culture. A book, recordings of the sounds of the rituals, and the beginnings of a film were the results of her extraordinary research. Deren recorded two albums of Voudoun music “Divine Horsemen” and “Meringues and Folk Ballads of Haiti”. In 1953 she published the definitive study of the Voudoun ritual: *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti*. Deren consulted with luminaries like Joseph Campbell and Gregory Bateson in her research and she shot more than 18,000 feet of footage during her three visits between 1947 and 1954. During her research Deren’s position became ambiguous. On one hand she was distanced from the project, a medium for the transmission of ideas, but she was also closely involved in the ritual. Her insights on the Voudoun ritual emerge from her participation in the ceremonies. On one of her trips to Haiti, Deren was initiated as a Voudoun priestess.

In 1985 Deren’s third husband Teiji Ito and his new wife Cherel assembled and edited the Haitian footage that had remained incomplete since Deren’s death. The footage was spliced together to form an anthropological structure and a voice-over narration was added to clarify the details of the ceremonies. Upon its release, critics expressed reservations that the film was at odds with Deren’s style and contrasted with her original conception of the film.

Maya Deren was a key figure in the development of the ‘New American Cinema’. Her influence extends to contemporary filmmakers like David Lynch, whose film *Lost Highway* (1997) pays homage to *Meshes of the Afternoon* in his experimentation with narration. Lynch adopts a similar spiraling narrative pattern, sets his film within an analogous location and establishes a mood of dread and paranoia, the result of constant surveillance. Both films focus on the nightmare as it is expressed in the elusive doubling of characters and in the incorporation of the “psychogenic fugue”, the evacuation and replacement of identities, something that was also central to the voodoo ritual.

Speculation surrounding Maya Deren is most rampant concerning the details of her death. Deren died in 1961, aged 44. The legend begins with Stan Brakhage who, in his book *Film at Wit’s End*, speculates that Deren’s death was punishment for her intimate involvement in the Haitian Voudoun ritual. In Martina Kudlacek’s recent video *In The Mirror of Maya Deren*, this notion is coldly dispelled with the dreadful assertion that Deren died of a cerebral hemorrhage due to a combination of malnutrition and a predilection for amphetamines and sleeping pills.

When she died Maya Deren’s ashes were scattered across the lively port side of Mount Fuji, in Japan.

Ito thought that this was the perfect resting place for a woman energized in life by ritual, dance, voodoo, music, poetry, writing and of course, experimental film. As a pioneer of American avant-garde cinema, Deren’s legacy is both abstract and tangible. Her innovations in filmmaking continue to fascinate aspiring experimental filmmakers. Her pioneering, uncompromising spirit enabled her to elude the institutional limitations that controlled filmmaking in 1940s American culture. Deren’s enduring quest to secure financial support for experimental filmmakers during her lifetime was finally answered with the establishment of a grant bearing her name. In 1986 the American Film Institute recognized Deren’s significant contribution to experimental filmmaking by creating the Maya Deren Award to act as an incentive and reward for the work of contemporary independent film and video makers.

And what more could I possibly ask as an artist than that your most precious visions, however rare, assume sometimes the forms of my images.

Wendy Haslem, www.sensesofcinema.com

Endnotes

- (1) VeVe Clark, Millicent Hodson, & Catrina Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren: a Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, vol 1., Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1984, p. xx
- (2) Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1999, p. 450 (Volume 6 of *History of the American Cinema* series, edited by Charles Harpole)
- (3) Schatz, p. 450
- (4) Maya Deren, “Notes, Essays, Letters”, *Film Culture*, 39, 1965, p. 1
- (5) P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde 1943-1978*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 10
- (6) Clarke, Hodson, Neiman, p. 77
- (7) Bill Nichols (ed.), *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p. 5
- (8) Nichols, p. 7
- (9) Deren quoted in Nichols, p. 6
- (10) Deren was in fact the first filmmaker ever to receive the fellowship for motion picture work. Films about Deren:

