

Introduction

In 1998 I left Marlboro College, and in 2005 I came back. I spent the years in between learning about film: how to make it, how to think about it, how to teach it, and how to draw people into it. First I studied filmmaking in London for three years, at a no-frills school that promoted workmanlike skill and solid technique. It was seemingly custom-designed for the future independent – we were taught to be competent in every aspect of production and left to our own artistic devices. My crew specialized in science fiction horror films with titles like *Apart* and *The Third Hand*. We made those films because they were fun, and we loved to see how much we could accomplish on our tiny budgets. We liked to think that underneath the crust of latex and methylcellulose slime we were saying something meaningful, but even if we weren't, we'd have made the films anyway. Even the worst parts of the process were thrilling (though we were usually too exhausted to look thrilled). I became confident in my technical abilities, I developed a love of collaboration, and I came to appreciate film on a new, deeper level.

Upon my return to Memphis, which is not my hometown but which fills the role well enough, the local film commission directed me to a group of guys who had just formed a “DV co-operative” in town. I became a regular at the Memphis Digital Arts (MeDiA) Co-op not long after it began, and started to lead workshops there a few months later. I volunteered for a seasonal internship at the Hot Springs Documentary

Film Institute, a few hours' drive from Memphis, handling print traffic for their annual festival and handling the thousand small tasks inevitably cropped up. I was hip-deep in the non-profit end of film culture and loving it, but also fearful that I was risking my glorious indie-wood future by staying in the South.

So I and a friend from London left our homes to seek our fortunes together in Los Angeles. I got a couple of PA jobs on a series of Denny's commercials, while maintaining unpaid internships with two documentary producers and doing odd jobs in the industry to stay afloat. The work went well, better than I'd have ever hoped. The living situation did not. The untenable arrangements in my personal life reached a tipping point a few months after I arrived, and shortly after New Year's Day, 2003, I spent my last hundred dollars on a bus ticket back to Memphis.

In retrospect, I've come to regard that "failure" as a stroke of luck. I was eager to prove myself in the industry, but my passion still lay in non-mainstream film; I was torn between what I wanted to do and what I felt I was "supposed" to do. My failure in the LA-based film industry, however, wasn't the result of any professional shortcoming, which helped me salvage my dignity. "You could hack in Hollywood," fate seemed to say to me, "but you won't."

So I returned to Memphis and the Co-op, where I took up an official position as the workshop co-ordinator. I spent the next year teaching the general public about the nuts and bolts of film and filmmaking: how to use a camera, how to handle lights and microphones, how to format a screenplay, how to edit on a computer. As an

organization, we also staged screenings of local films, non-mainstream shorts and features, and repertory films. We held panel discussions and casual lecture series, and we provided low-cost access to basic filmmaking tools to our members and the public. We were low-key DV revolutionaries, proclaiming the inevitable rise of a new, proud, democratic cinema to anyone who dropped by.

After a couple of years of hard work and little to show for it, I began to suspect that things were perhaps not that simple. All but one of the original founders had fallen away, and those of us who were left were courting burn-out. Our work seemed to yield few results, and we were increasingly relying on trial and error to discover which approaches worked and which did not. It was difficult to get people to come to screenings, difficult to keep them engaged in the workshops, and frustrating to constantly feel as though we were re-inventing the wheel. We were operating an arthouse theater, but few of us had ever been to one before. We knew that there was a great tradition behind us, but we didn't know how to get in touch with it. We knew that independence wasn't just about Miramax and Sundance, but we didn't have any other standard against which to judge our success. We needed role models and mentors, but in spite of our supposed connectedness to the world outside Memphis, we felt very alone in our work.

We handled our frustrations in different ways. One of us went off and made his own films, another dropped out and moved the country, and I personally decided that it was time to gather up my seven years' worth of accumulated thoughts and attempt to

get them down on paper. I came back to Vermont and my long-neglected bachelor's degree, hoping to find answers to questions that I hadn't yet quite formulated in my mind. The impetus behind this undertaking was the inescapable sense that everything was about to change, and that those who best understood the dynamics of that change would be those who would benefit the most from it. There would be enormous opportunity for those who knew how to find it, and I thought it would be wise to sit down for a year to get my bearings before heading out across terra incognita. The first pages I wrote were more like a manifesto than an academic paper, a product of the frustrations of the work from which I had just retreated. I turned next to those influences that had been predominant in my film life in recent years, writing about British director Mike Leigh and the Dogme 95 phenomenon. Finally I returned to Maya Deren, an influence rooted in my original Plan work at Marlboro. And I discovered that after seven years away, she had become more relevant to my artistic and intellectual concerns than ever. Deren, in turn, led me to Cinema 16 and Amos Vogel, who will doubtless stand in good stead as models for my future work in the field of film culture.

This project, then, is the culmination of ten years of experience, which taken as a whole represents the first major phase of my cinematic life. I am no longer presumptuous enough to think that I know what final shape my career will take; I'm happy to let it play out on its own terms, and I look forward to some surprises. But I feel reaffirmed in my sense that my best work is ahead of me, and that I have a valuable contribution to make. I've reached the end of a thoughtful year without many more

answers than I had when I began, but I have found my questions – and that, I think, is probably even better. I also leave with the reassurance of knowing that, having taken the time to explore my artistic roots, I have made allies of my cinematic ancestors, and they will guide me along the trail as I head off towards whatever comes next.

An Anagram on the Ideas of Maya Deren

One of the greatest frustrations I've found in nearly a decade of studying film is that it seems no matter how voraciously I watch, there are always more important films to see. Film history is a web of intricate interconnections, a vast network of influences and innovations, borrowed techniques and devices, resonances, references, and similarities. Each important film, every cinematic movement, and each individual filmmaker is just one node among thousands, with connections to other films, other movements, and other filmmakers branching off in every direction. So the act of selecting one specific filmmaker on which to focus my attention often feels like as much a negative act as a positive one; every moment I spend here is a moment in which something else is being neglected.

And yet, over time, I also find myself traversing some regions of this web more than others. Some places are left virtually unexplored (my knowledge of westerns, war movies and gangster films is appallingly weak), while others become my personal cinematic stomping grounds. This phenomenon is the one that leads me to Maya Deren. It's not that she's more important or more innovative than the hundreds of other filmmakers to whom she's connected in the web of film history. Rather, from this vantage point, I can mostly clearly perceive my current location: where I've been, where I am, where I'd like to go.

As a filmmaker, my artistic ideals are not hers, although many of my interests are. Like her, I'm interested in the workings of the visual language of film; I'm curious about the ways in which ideas of ritual can be applied to the medium; and I'm convinced that independence is of greater value than the trappings of industrial success. She also serves as a useful entry point to the area of non-narrative film; I don't enjoy a natural talent for finding ready meaning in most avant-garde film, but in the case of Maya Deren I find that I have enough common ground in some areas her work that it helps me to follow her logic in others.

Finally, Maya Deren serves as one of the most interesting role models of both independence and of the role of women in cinema. Knowing that even someone as indomitable as Deren found making her way in such a male-dominated world often difficult and frustrating makes my own occasional frustrations seem less of a personal battle. Independence is often the only route available to those whose artistic vision doesn't intersect with the interests of the industry, and those people who, for whatever reason, cannot fit comfortably in the dominant industry culture. Maya Deren, who fell into both categories, demonstrated that one's "flaws" can be exactly those qualities that make one's work valuable.

A note on structure:

Maya Deren presented her longest published work, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film*, in the form of an “anagram,” a series of nine short chapters that were thematically connected on multiple levels. As she explains in her foreword to that work:

“An anagram is a combination of letters in such a relationship that each and every one is simultaneously an element in more than one linear series... 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.”¹

This structural method is too tempting to not try out, especially considering the often associative nature of Deren’s own ideas. Thus, this paper begins with a brief biography of Maya Deren, and from there follows according to the anagrammatic structure illustrated here:

	1 PURPOSE	2 PRACTICE	3 FORM
A ART	The Role of Film Art	Deren’s Haitian Footage	Poetics and Ritual
B INDEPENDENCE	The Necessity of Independence	Using What You Have	Independent Film Activism
C TECHNIQUE	The Creative Use Of Reality	Cinematic Magic	Common Motifs

¹Maya Deren, “An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film,” in *Essential Deren*, Bruce R. McPherson, ed.(Kingston, New York, McPherson and Company, 2005), 36

A lot of overlap exists between the nine separate “letters” that make up this anagram. The greatest strength of Deren’s preferred structure is that it allows concepts that are interrelated, but which don’t necessarily bear any chronological or linear relationship to each other, to be considered without imposing an artificial order or hierarchy of ideas. They are loosely organized according Deren’s own concept of “horizontal and vertical” axes, which she describes thus:

[Vertical structure is] an investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and depth, so that you have poetry concerned... not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or means. ... [Horizontal] drama... is concerned with the development... within a very small situation from feeling to feeling...

“Perhaps it would be made most clear if you take a Shakespearean work that combines two movements. In Shakespeare, you have the drama moving forward on a “horizontal” plane of development, of one circumstance – one action – leading to another, and this delineates the character. Every once [in] a while, however, he arrives of the action where he wants to illuminate the meaning [of] this moment of drama, and at that moment he... investigates it “vertically”... so that you have a horizontal development with vertical investigations...²

... the general idea being that horizontally-related ideas bear a linear (or otherwise concrete) relationship, whereas vertically-related ideas are singular and subjective. Alternately, we could refer back to Deren’s adopted religion, Vodoun; every Vodoun ritual begins with the invocation of Papa Legba, the loa of the crossroads. The crossroads itself represents the intersection between the everyday world – the horizontal – and the spirit world in which

² Maya Deren, “Poetry and Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Chairman, Willard Mass. Organized by Amos Vogel” (October 28, 1953), in *The Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York, Praeger, 1970), 171-86.

reside the lo – the vertical. The crossroads becomes the place where reality can be transcended, access to a higher plane is possible, and real art can be created.

My interpretation of Deren’s vertical and horizontal axes is only a loose one – in this case, the horizontal axis is made of a linear creative process that begins with a Purpose, is rendered through Practice, and results in a final Form; on the vertical axis I’ve plotted the concepts of Art, Independence, and Technique, which are deeply inter-related but which remain distinctly individual. The horizontal-vertical axis concept isn’t one that Deren specifically used to order her own anagram, but it provided me both a little extra structure upon which to order my thoughts, and an excuse to try out one of Deren’s less obvious ideas. (At the symposium where Deren made the above statements, Dylan Thomas dismissed the idea by saying he was “all for horizontal and vertical” or “up and down;” Arthur Miller added, “to hell with that horizontal and vertical, it doesn’t mean anything.”)³

³Bill Nichols, “Introduction,” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, Bill Nichols, ed. (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001), 8.

Maya Deren was born Eleanora Derenkovskaya (also written “Derenkowsky”) in Kiev, Ukraine on May 29, 1917. Her mother named her after Eleanora Duse , a celebrated Italian actress.⁴ Her father Solomon was a successful psychiatrist, but also a devoted Trotskyist. The political controversy surrounding Trotsky, combined with a series of anti-Semitic programs in the Ukraine led to the family’s emigration to the United States in 1922 when Eleanora was five years old. An uncle had preceded the family and settled in Syracuse, New York, anglicizing his name to “Deren” upon his arrival. The rest of the family followed suit and Eleanora Derenkovskaya became Eleanora Deren.⁵

She attended high school at an international school in Geneva, Switzerland, and entered Syracuse University at sixteen. During her later years at university, she became an activist in Trotskyist socialist groups on campus, specifically the Young People’s Socialist League⁶. She married a fellow socialist activist, Gregory Bardacke, at 18. Within a year, however, she left the YPSL and moved to New York City, divorced Bardacke, and eventually went on to take an MA in English literature at Smith College at the age of 22.⁷ She then spent several years working in New York in various secretarial and literary capacities, eventually

⁴Catherine M. Soussloff, “Maya Deren Herself” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols, 120.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Bruce R. McPherson, *Essential Deren*, ed. (Kingston, New York, McPherson and Co., 2005), 8.

⁷Bill Nichols, “Introduction,” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001), 3.

gaining a job as a secretary and assistant with the Katherine Dunham dance troupe.

Dunham's work gave her her first introduction to Haitian culture while strengthening her interest in dance. Dunham lauded her ability to interact with people, but Deren's propensity to quietly – or not so quietly – dance along with the performances from the wings presented some minor problems.⁸

While in Los Angeles traveling with Dunham's touring production of *Cabin in the Sky* in 1942, Eleanora met a Czech émigré filmmaker named Alexander Hackenschmied, also known as Alexander or Sasha Hammid. She had already developed an interest in film as a medium and had formed strong opinions on the subject, and Hammid was introduced to her as someone who would “probably agree with [her].”⁹ They married almost immediately and settled in Los Angeles where Eleanora Deren began learning the rudiments of filmmaking from Hammid. Her artistic working relationship with her husband quickly bore fruit in the form of her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, made in 1943. It was around that time that Deren asked Hammid to find a new name for her. After much consideration, he settled on “Maya,” a name that bore several associations but which most specifically referred to a Hindu word meaning “illusion.” It has been argued that in taking a new name, Eleanora Deren “created” the artist Maya Deren, and that in fact her persona changed (or was more fully revealed) to match her name.¹⁰

Deren and Hammid returned to New York City and settled in Greenwich Village, which remained Deren's home for the rest of her life. After several years they divorced

⁸Martina Kudláček, Director. In *The Mirror of Maya Deren*, 2001.

⁹Maya Deren, “Magic is New,” *Essential Deren*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, New York, McPherson and Co., 2005), 203.

¹⁰Catherine M. Soussloff, “Maya Deren Herself,” 121.

amicably. Deren went on to take a third husband, Japanese-American percussionist Teiji Ito, whom according to legend she found sleeping in the back of a movie theater.¹¹ Deren became a fixture on the intellectual arts scene, consorting with cultural figures like Anaïs Nin (who appears in one of Deren's films, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*), Marcel Duchamp (with whom she collaborated on *Witch's Cradle*, uncompleted), Amos Vogel, Parker Tyler, John Cage and Jonas Mekas. During the period from 1943 - 48, Deren enjoyed a burst of cinematic creativity, directing five of her six completed films and working on several others. She also wrote and published her longest treatise on cinematic art *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film*, published as a chapbook in 1946.

That same year, she received a Guggenheim grant – the first ever awarded to a filmmaker – and used that money to finance a series of extended trips to Haiti. She had become intrigued by Haitian Vodoun while working with Dunham, and her plan was to investigate and document Haitian Vodoun ritual and dance on film. Over the course of her time in Haiti she shot roughly 18,000 feet of film. Theories about her intentions for the footage abound, but it wasn't until well after her death that her third husband, Teiji Ito, and his then-wife Cherel Ito, took Deren's footage from Haiti and assembled it into a very good (if rather conventional) anthropological documentary. Conversely, Deren's own most significant product from her time in Haiti was not a film but a book, *Divine Horsemen: the Voodoo Gods of Haiti*, still one of the most astute and widely-respected anthropological works on the religion. Deren was hardly inclined to maintain a distant perspective on the religion, choosing instead to immerse herself in it. By all accounts she was readily accepted into her local

¹¹Jane Brakhage Wodening, "Maya Deren" in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, Bill Nichols, ed., 180.

Vodoun community, and quickly became a Vodoun “priestess,” a feat which she managed in a period of time so brief it was literally incredible. She even claimed an experience with spiritual possession, one of the central events in Vodoun ritual, and according to tradition the hardest to achieve.

Upon returning to New York, Deren became deeply active in support for independent filmmaking, giving frequent lectures, writing columns and essays for film publications, and founding the Creative Film Foundation, which was intended to support and reward independent filmmakers. Her self-presented screenings and lectures allegedly inspired Amos Vogel to found Cinema 16 based on her model. Deren, however, was putting more of her energy into getting her previous work seen than into producing new work. She produced new work only occasionally through the late 40s and early 50s; her final completed film was *The Very Eye of Night*, produced with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School and released sometime between 1952 and 1955. Other projects were planned, and some even begun, but after 1955 Deren never finished another film.

Deren’s creative life from 1955 until her death in 1961 remains obscure. She continued to write and publish, and she mentored the young Stan Brakhage during this time, but she didn’t produce any more work of any significance herself. This lack of new growth could be attributable to unfavorable cultural currents; the film community was moving in an entirely different direction from Deren, becoming entranced by new cinematic forms concerned primarily with realism. John Cassavetes exemplified this movement in dramatic film, as did the “direct cinema” movement in documentary film. Both represented the polar opposite of Deren’s cinematic philosophy.

Another likely culprit was simple drug addiction. Deren had begun injecting

amphetamines in an effort to overcome introversion and to enable her to engage in the artistic community with her legendary boldness. She was supplied by Dr. Max Jacobsen, the same “Dr. Feelgood” who supplied John F. Kennedy and Tennessee Williams, who apparently charged her hugely inflated sums for his concoction of “vitamins, hormones and enzymes.” If she knew the real contents of the vials she bought from him, she never acknowledged it publicly.

It’s possible that amphetamine abuse may have been the primary culprit in her notoriously combustible temperament, particularly given stories like one told by Stan Brakhage’s wife, Jane. Deren had been asked to officiate at a friend's wedding in her capacity as a Vodoun priestess, but upon her arrival she was denied the necessary ritual space and objects. Feeling slighted, Deren --a petite woman by any standard -- hurled a refrigerator across a room in a rage.¹² Brakhage, who also attended the wedding and witnessed the incident, attributed this superhuman feat of strength to spiritual possession, just as he later attributed her death to a Vodoun curse.¹³ It seems just as likely, though, that her bizarre behavior and unexpected strength were the product of an amphetamine high.

The combination of Deren's amphetamine use and chronic malnutrition culminated in a cerebral hemorrhage in 1961. She spent a night in a coma with Teiji at her side, and died the next morning at the age of 44. After her death, her work sank into obscurity for a number of years. Jonas Mekas, the founder of Anthology Film Archives in New York and the curator of all of Deren’s cinematic work, became as infatuated with direct cinema and the *nouvelle vague* as the rest of the film community, and Deren’s self-described “classicist” style – never

¹²Jane Brakhage Wodening, “Maya Deren” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001), 182.

¹³Martina Kudláček, *Director In The Mirror of Maya Deren*, 2001.

an entirely comfortable fit in her artistic milieu – fell out of vogue. Deren’s films and writings were mostly forgotten for more than a decade; it wasn’t until a generation of feminist filmmakers rekindled interest in her work that her films were rediscovered.

1A

Maya Deren had an immense creative advantage over many filmmakers of the American avant-garde of her day: she had strong ideas of what the ultimate role of her art should be. To Deren, the role of the modern artist was exactly analogous to that of the shaman or artist in “primitive society”

-- to provide, on behalf of the rest of their society, a clear statement of the nature of their shared reality. This cultural expression would then enable others to better understand their place in that reality. She reasoned that it was especially crucial in modern society that this process be entirely and explicitly conscious. Given that modern society is purely a product of human intelligence and creation, the artist’s creative process must be equally direct and conscious in speaking to modern man’s situation.

Thus, any refusal to deal with art on a strictly conscious basis was an essential failure of the artist to live up to her obligations. She rejected many of the predominant artistic forms of her time: surrealism, focusing as it does on the subconscious; naturalism, which seeks to faithfully reproduce reality; realism, which prefers the “everyday” as its favored subject matter; and abstract expressionism, with its emphasis on random and reactive elements as a core part of its process. Deren considered herself a classicist in the formal rather than thematic sense. She valued direct, mindful creation, the removal of random chance from the artistic

process, and the use of a medium to its own best potential.

Furthermore, Deren believed strongly that art should not be a medium for personal expression, but should instead aspire to a depersonalized, general, “selfless” kind of expression that’s equally self-identifiable to all people in the society. She referred to this quality as “ritualistic.” The implication behind the term was that, like any other ritual, her films were specifically designed to assist others in understanding their world, as opposed to helping herself or others to understand her world.

To Deren, this intent regarding form was not merely an artistic imperative, but had a basis in social ethics and morality. An artist who refused to consciously create, instead relying heavily upon external occurrences or even upon the mechanical nature of the medium itself, was shirking her duty to the society that granted her the role of artist. This opinion landed her in direct opposition to much of the artistic milieu of her time. It led to a public difference of opinion with her associate Jonas Mekas (immortalized in the pages of the *Village Voice*), and placed her outside the dominant artistic trends during the end of her life and after her death. But it was also this sense of artistic imperative which caused her to so forcefully explore the boundaries of her medium, believing as she did that film was among the most exciting and useful art forms for her purposes:

The history of art is the history of man and of his universe and of the moral relationship between them. Whatever the instrument, the artist sought to re-create the abstract, invisible forces and relationships of the cosmos, in the intimate, immediate forms of his art, where the problems might be experienced and perhaps be resolved in miniature. It is not presumptuous to suggest that cinema, as an art instrument especially capable of recreating relativistic relationships on a plane of intimate experience, is of profound importance. It stands, today, in the great need of the creative contributions of whosoever respects the fabulous potentialities of its destiny.¹⁴

¹⁴ Maya Deren, “Anagram” in *Essential Deren*, Bruce R. McPherson, ed., 109

2A

In the 1950s, funded by a Guggenheim grant, Maya Deren made a series of four trips to Haiti as part of a cinematic and ethnographic study of Haitian Vodoun. Over the course of those trips she shot nearly 20,000 feet of 16mm footage, recorded some fifty hours of sound, and wrote a full-length study of the religion from the inside.

Deren's work in Haiti proved to be the fullest culmination of all her work, combining her conception of ritual with her interest in dance. The project forced her to challenge her own belief that film art should always be the product of conscious creation. In the past she had generally dismissed documentary film as an invalid artistic form on the basis that it was too reactive, but her Haitian footage was essentially documentary in nature. Furthermore, her embrace of direct participation with her subject was in blatant opposition to the ideals of anthropological and ethnographic film at that time, which demanded objectivity and non-involvement. By filming in Haiti, she placed herself in a difficult situation.

How she might have ultimately addressed this set of problems is unfortunately unknowable since she never edited the film she shot there. It's tempting to speculate that this failure to complete the project, in spite of a number of productive years prior to her death in which to do so, was a direct result of her having backed herself into a theoretical corner. It's possible that her situation left her unable to adequately address the needs of the ritual and its participants, of the ethnographic community, and of her own artistic and formal ideals in a single film – at least, not without fundamentally betraying at least one of those elements in the process.

She relieved some of this artistic tension by branching out into an entirely different

medium and writing a book instead. The work is a complete account of her personal religious journey through Vodoun, as well as an anthropological study of the religion and its practitioners. She continued to consider herself a practitioner of Vodoun even after her final return to the United States, although by some accounts not a strictly “correct” one – her habit of naming her cats after Vodoun loa was one that would have been highly offensive to many native practitioners of the religion.

In any case, it seems apparent that the Haitian footage represents Deren’s own most vigorous attempt to challenge her own art, and simultaneously her most significant artistic failure. In managing to bring together all the disparate elements of her artistic life, she posed herself an unsovable riddle: her art would no longer fit inside her artistic philosophy. That she was unable to reconcile this inner conflict during her lifetime was her one great creative tragedy. She made several attempts to re-package the footage to make it commercially attractive for television, and she became something of an advocate for the religion. She could regularly be heard speaking on radio and television, attempting to clarify the nature of Vodoun for the American public, though more often in her capacity as an author than as a filmmaker.¹⁵

3A

As a member of the classicist school of film theory, Maya Deren’s core assumption regarding film art was that it should be medium-specific. Like other major film innovators – Eisenstein, Vertov, and Bazin among them – she believed that the highest order of film art was that which built upon the unique abilities

¹⁵ Moira Sullivan, “Deren’s Ethnographic Representation of Haiti” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, Bill Nichols, ed., 225-6

of the medium. This philosophy asserts that each medium has its own “proper” expressive style, its own specific set of capabilities which it possesses to a greater degree than any other medium. For example, film differs from painting or from still photography in that it possesses, in addition to a two-dimensional plane of vision, a third, temporal dimension, and thus reaches its “truest” form when time becomes a meaningful element in the art work.

Deren emphasized temporal and spatial distortions specifically because they were entirely unique to film. The bending of space and time is a common, even universal motif in Deren’s films. *At Land* features cross-cutting techniques that allow a female figure to climb from beach to banquet table; *The Very Eye of Night* takes place in the horizon-less blackness of space. Deren’s work was directly led by the special attributes of film. She considered it to be an artistic and ethical imperative to use those attributes to their maximum effectiveness, and through her diligence she contributed enormously to the growing body of knowledge of the unique visual language of film.

The classicist approach to film theory has been largely dismissed as unnecessarily rigid, as it fails to address those artistic elements that are not the sole quarter of any one medium. But it inspired filmmakers like Deren to work toward the discovery and definition of the special nature of film language and to push beyond the comfortable conventions of other mediums. Deren refused to be content with the dramatic conventions of theater, with the spatial conventions of dance, or with the visual conventions of painting. By inspiring this search for film’s true nature, Deren’s classicism made a hugely valuable contribution to cinema.

Deren also made contributions to other art forms through her films. As a dancer, she was among the first to conceive of an entirely new kind of choreography that would enable

the nature of dance to be effectively communicated through film. She broke away from the previous conventions of dance in film – usually a matter of placing the camera in a clear spot and allowing a dance performance to unfold normally on stage. Instead, she worked to free the dancer through film, allowing him to move in ways he could not physically move in reality: sustaining leaps and turns for longer periods of time, creating movement across time and space, and staging movement not only of the body alone but also of the body in relation to the camera. Her major works in this mode were *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, and *Meditation on Violence*. In the first, dancer Talley Beatty moves in impossible ways, leaping across time and space and landing perfectly on his toes. In the second, Deren slows and stops dancers in mid-spin, demonstrating the carefully-balanced poses and micro-gestures hidden in the larger dance. In the last, a martial artist demonstrates a form Deren describes as “so perfectly balanced” that its motions look the same forwards and backwards – and she proves it by showing the motions first as they are naturally performed, and then in reverse. Except for the movement of a sash swinging from the performer's waist, the shift is imperceptible

1B Maya Deren was what modern filmmakers call “fiercely independent.” Her independence was borne partly of necessity and partly of ideology. Like many fierce independents both before and after her, she viewed the film industry in general and Hollywood in particular as a place of mutual disdain – Hollywood did not want the kind of films she made, and she wanted no part of the Hollywood way of making films. She was convinced that true art, unfettered by the necessity of easy entertainment value and profitability, was impossible in the industrial milieu. Furthermore,

she argued, total physical, financial, and artistic independence was the greatest possible stimulus for the creative filmmaker:

One of the most attractive elements in such an adventure for the amateur is that it has neither obligations nor dangers. He is his own boss. He is free to decide what he wants to do, and how to go about doing it, whose example to follow, and what advice to ignore. And if, by some chance, it doesn't come out as well as he expected, he is the only one who even knows that it didn't work; there are no penalties to pay, no harangue to listen to, and no job to lose. This freedom, which is the first asset of the amateur, is the premise upon which everything else is built. And for this reason, I personally have guarded it closely and have chosen to remain an amateur.¹⁶

She explains elsewhere that in using the term “amateur” she is invoking the Latin root, *amator* or “lover,” as her real meaning.¹⁷ She explored the same apparent paradox that drives the independent movement today, namely the idea that the restriction of means has a way of provoking greater creativity and innovation than do all the toys in Hollywood. Whole movements have been formed around this idea. Prominent directors with the complete industrial arsenal at their command voluntarily, even enthusiastically submit to stringent restrictions, using rules to transform themselves into struggling, impoverished independents (if only for a single film.) Lars von Trier founded Dogme 95 on exactly this premise, and he and the rest of the “Dogme brotherhood” clearly found the experience a liberating one. Maya Deren, on the other hand, advocated independence as a personal artistic philosophy rather than a way to knock loose one’s calcified creativity. She suggested at one point in her career that there was a need for “chamber films,” or small independent productions, to be made as a counterpoint to the full orchestra of Hollywood. She viewed her own work in that context, as something entirely separate from the film industry.

¹⁶Maya Deren, “Adventures in Creative Film-Making” in *Essential Deren*, Bruce R. McPherson, ed. (Kingston, New York, McPherson and Co., 2005), 165.

¹⁷Maya Deren, “Amateur versus Professional” in *Essential Deren*, Bruce R. McPherson, ed., 17

Deren's independence did not end with film production, though. In later years she undertook the even more difficult task of independently screening and distributing her work. She traveled, she gave lectures, and she wrote essays and editorials, always presenting screenings of her films as she went. Throughout her career she refused to accept private money with which to produce her films out of the fear that it would compromise her independence. In the end, she never made much money from them at all, either before or after they were made. It is the risk all independents take, then as now.

2B Deren enjoyed very few practical resources in her work. Every film she ever made was shot on the same 16mm hand-wound Bolex camera she bought with money she inherited after her father's death; she never used a tripod, never used lights, and never used synchronized sound. Indeed, initially she never used sound at all – the only film intended from the outset to be accompanied by a musical score was her last, *The Very Eye of Night*. She enlisted her friends as both cast and crew, often “acting” in her films herself, admitting all along that she was hardly an actress.

And this is exactly how she wanted things. She argued emphatically against the use of artificial camera supports on the basis that the human body was the ultimate camera support device:

Don't forget that no tripod has yet been built which is as miraculously versatile in movement as the complex system of supports, joints, muscles and nerves which is the human body, which, with a bit of practice, makes possible the enormous variety of camera angles and visual action. You have all this, and a brain too, in one neat, compact, mobile package.¹⁸

¹⁸Maya Deren, “Amateur versus Professional,” *Essential Deren*, McPherson, ed., 18.

She railed against the bloat of the film industry as both a waste of resources and a psychological impediment to doing the actual work of making a film – “[talented people]... assume the prerequisite of an elaborate budget to provide for much film, complex studio sets, intricate equipment,” thus preventing themselves from realizing their work.¹⁹ She lamented the tendency of filmmakers using tripods to set up the shot in a way that was comfortable for the tripod rather than useful for the film.²⁰ She believed that the use of non-actors in her cast

3B was necessary to her vision, moving the focus of the performance away from the individual to the general; the people in her films were not characters but figures, intended to represent not the particular identity but rather the concept of a person.

Like all filmmakers who thrive inside the limitations of independence, Deren made a point of exploring the full potential of every resource at her command. The impossibility of shooting on a set led her to ground her films in real locations and to make maximum visual use of those locations, both separately and in relation to each other. She explored the full potential of the camera itself, and shot her films in places and in settings that would have been difficult, even impossible if she’d had to deal with the immobility and intrusiveness of a full crew.

To simply know that a camera is portable is one thing, and not very much; but to appreciate the fact that it is portable leads you to wish to make meaningful use of that fact... your camera, then is not only a means, but also a muse and can lead you, like a siren, into creative adventure in your medium.²¹

A number of independent film groups owe their existence, directly or indirectly, to Maya

¹⁹Maya Deren, “Magic is New,” *Essential Deren*, McPherson, ed., 200.

²⁰Maya Deren, “Adventures in Creative Filmmaking” in *Essential Deren*, McPherson, ed., 172.

²¹*Ibid.*, 185.

Deren. She was an outspoken proponent of independent filmmaking, always arguing that the filmmaker would enjoy greater freedom by sacrificing the unnecessary accessories of industry-based filmmaking and instead relying upon that which they already possessed. She recognized, however, through a great deal of personal struggle and want, that the path of the independent filmmaker was by no means an easy one to travel. In an effort to make the journey easier in some small way, she borrowed from her experience as a socialist activist to found the Creative Film Foundation, created to recognize and reward independent avant-garde filmmaking. Its award winners included Stan Brakhage, Sara Kathryn Arledge, Robert Breer and Shirley Clarke.²² She also argued that film needed greater support from the arts community, given that it was a costly medium with which to work. Hollywood offered the ready-made financial support of the film industry, but made real artistic creation all but impossible. Deren campaigned actively for funding, and received the first Guggenheim grant ever given to a filmmaker.

In 1946, Deren booked the Greenwich Village Provincetown Playhouse and produced a major exhibition of her own work entitled “Three Abandoned Films.” The lineup included *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land*, and *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*. She called her films “abandoned” in reference to the Paul Valéry quotation that “a work of art is never completed, but merely abandoned.”²³ One of the attendees of this event was Amos Vogel, and he was so impressed by Deren’s effort to have her films seen that he founded New York’s famous Cinema 16 based partly on her model. It went on to become one of the most influential private film societies in American history, serving as a focal point for the

²²Bill Nichols, “Introduction” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, Bill Nichols, ed., 5.

²³Maya Deren, “Film Program for “Three Abandoned Films,” in *Essential Deren*, Bruce R. McPherson, ed., 247.

burgeoning American art cinema scene until 1963.²⁴

10 Deren also lectured and wrote extensively, and in her writings she often addressed the independent, amateur filmmaker specifically. It was there that she placed her hopes for the ultimate realization of cinema as an art form, believing Hollywood insufficient for the job. In her last years, she was abandoned by the currents of independent filmmaking -- documentary film was beginning its own development in the wake of film journalism in World War II. Deren, deeply skeptical of the artistic value of documentary, considered the work of documentarians to be more a matter of recording than creating. Even so, her understanding of documentary film related mostly to the aforementioned WWII journalism variety; she didn't live long enough to be exposed to the subjective forms of the genre that began to emerge in the 60s. Whether she would have been convinced at that point is uncertain -- she viewed "realistic" approaches to narrative film with much the same skepticism -- but she might have come to afford it a higher status than that of a simple technical exercise.

Deren's place in film history remained tenuous for a time after her death, but she is now credited as one of the first filmmakers to choose independence for its own sake rather than because it was the only option open to her. In that sense, she was a major cinematic pioneer, and enjoyed a quiet influence over many of the most creative and innovative films made in the United States in the years after her death.

The creative transformation of reality was a major element of much of Deren's work.

Necessity forces filmmakers to make use of the raw substance of reality; that which doesn't

²⁴"Cinema 16" Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_16 (April 2005)

exist can't be filmed. But it is because of film's deep basis in reality that manipulation of that reality is so artistically interesting. Film reality allows the viewer to experience a version of his world that is otherwise impossible to perceive.

Deren recognized that the key to the effective manipulation of reality through film was the relationship of the viewer to the film. The illusion of motion in a film originates in the viewer's mind, not in the projector or on the screen. That movement is the product of the direct interface of technology and the human mind on a very literal level. Deren exploited that relationship as fully as she could. She relied upon the need on the part of the viewer to create relationships between images and to accept as “real” that which they saw in photographic form on the screen. She used film language to explore alternate forms of logic within her films – for example, the logic of dreams in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the logic of social interaction and motion in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, and the logic of space in *The Very Eye of Night*.

She always discouraged symbolic readings of her films, as well as any reading that was inspired by non-filmic structures. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a woman, having fallen asleep, dreams of a tall, black-robed figure, played by Sasha Hammid, who has a mirror in place of a face. She follows the figure around her home as the everyday objects that surround her in her waking life begin to take on ominous overtones. Stairways extend themselves and pitch beneath her, objects fall out of reach. She is approached by a man, presumably her lover (also played by Hammid) in an interaction bearing hints of sex and violence. The film is left open-ended, but with a suggestion of death. It's very easy to place *Meshes of the Afternoon* in a Freudian psychoanalytic context, and thus to interpret it as a simple work about the nature of the relationship between a woman and her husband. Given that the film was made by Deren

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and Hammid immediately following their marriage, and includes many objects which, according to Freud, are sexual symbols – a knife, a key, a flower, a doorway, a window – it’s almost too easy to read the film in those terms, and very difficult not to do so. But Deren insisted, even in the case of *Meshes*, that straight symbolism was of no interest to her. She argued that in her films actual symbolism was irrelevant – the objects she showed onscreen weren't intended to represent anything, necessarily. Rather, she said, the film was “concerned with the inner realities of an individual and with the way in which the sub-conscious will develop, interpret, and elaborate an apparently simple and casual occurrence into a critical emotional experience.”²⁵ The subject of the film, then, was the psychological process which produces symbolism, not the symbolism itself. To this end, the primary figure in the film enters into a dream state, and Deren explores the logic of dreams through the cinematic manipulation of reality.

In *At Land*, there is a sequence in which a female figure traverses a landscape of sand dunes: she disappears behind one, then reappears a few seconds later from behind a much more distant one. She walks a bit further and disappears again, only to re-appear far from where she began. In *A Study of Choreography for Film*, the same dancer appears four times in four different postures in a single slow pan. Maya Deren was fascinated by the ways in which the motion picture camera could by its very nature make impossible movements “real,” and by extension make reality seem dream-like: “I had always been impatient with what I felt was a criminal neglect [in the cinema] of [its] potent magic power.”²⁶ Comparisons to the work of Georges Méliès have been made, and she shares several common motifs with him: the disappearance and re-appearance of objects, the multiplication of a single figure within a film,

²⁵ Maya Deren, “Manifestos and Program Notes” in *Essential Deren*, Bruce R. McPherson, ed., 246.

²⁶ Lucy Fischer, “The Eye for Magic: Maya and Méliès” in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, Bill Nichols, ed., 186.

and the use of negative images and superimposition.²⁷

Deren saw this potential as one of the major features that film possessed uniquely. These kinds of visual tricks were impossible in theater, where the action was live; impossible in photography, where the third dimension of time was not available; and impossible in literature where the concreteness of a visual image was absent. Her exploration of film's special, specific language naturally led her to those artistic elements which only became possible in film, and one of her avowed desires was to make as much of this potential as she could.

The technique she used to create the compression of space in *At Land* is simple enough: the camera runs while an action is being performed; once the action is completed, the camera is stopped and its exact position is maintained while the subject moves to a new place. Then the camera rolls again for the next action. On screen, the two actions, separated in reality by unseen time and movement, appear to be inseparable. The trick is almost as old as cinema itself, and yet when done well it can be extremely convincing. It is one of the few genuinely new innovations brought about by film as a medium, and as such bears a special significance.

In a variation on this method, the second action in the sequence takes place not only after an invisible pause, but also at a different speed. An action is completed and the camera motor is turned off. Then the motor's speed setting is adjusted and a second action takes place. When projected normally, the second action appears to happen in the same physical space, but in a different temporal space. Deren used the trick in her film *Ritual in Transfigured Time* to create a scene in which a girl, running at normal speed, is pursued closely by a dancer leaping after her in gravity-defying slow-motion. The physical setting remains the same, so

²⁷Ibid.

that the transition to a different speed is imperceptible to the viewer. The dancer appears to be moving through normal space in an impossible way. The final effect is uncanny.

Deren used these techniques and others to produce some of the most effective and compelling dream images in film. She recognized that dreams possess not only a strangeness of imagery – unconvincing when reproduced on screen alone – but also their own logic, in which temporal and spatial relationships are malleable. This was the quality she most actively pursued, and she quickly discovered that film was uniquely capable of creating and reflecting it when combined with genuine creativity.

3C

Throughout Deren’s whole body of work, a few distinct motifs appear over and over again. Several of these are apparent, already fully-realized, in her very first work, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. At least one of her common motifs has direct parallels to her anthropological work in Haiti. Deren always

discouraged viewers of her films from interpreting them in terms of symbolism, but when the same visual idea appears again and again across years of work, the urge to decode the pattern is understandable.

The single most striking motif in Deren’s work is that of a kind of splintered identity. It appears first in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, in which the woman in the film (played by Deren) separates through dreaming into three separate versions of herself; each stage in the dream produces another Deren, and at one point they all gather around a table. The split identity appears again in her next film, *At Land*, in which a beached “mermaid” moves through an ever-changing space, from beach to banquet hall/jungle to country road (where she runs across a man whose face changes repeatedly as they walk together) to rocky shore to beach

again. At the end of her journey she visually backtracks, and reveals that at each step of the way a version of herself has been left behind, having failed to progress to the subsequent stage. The motif was presented in a slightly different way in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, in which the primary female figure is played by two women, Maya Deren and Rita Christiani. Compare this idea to her later fascination with Haitian Vodoun, which ritually centers on a kind of dual identity – the soul of the practitioner is joined and outwardly replaced by a possessing loa, creating a merging of identities as opposed to Deren’s split. There are also possible resonances with Deren’s own re-naming of herself at the beginning of her cinematic career, and in the apparent difference between her inwardly shy persona and her outward social boldness.

Deren was also fascinated by the way in which cinema was uniquely able to compress the passage of space and time. The image of a figure beginning a movement in one visual space and completing it in another appears in virtually every one of Deren’s films. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a knife-wielding woman with mirrored eyes steps from carpet to beach to pavement to grass to carpet in only a few steps. In *At Land*, a woman climbs the root of a driftwood tree up to a banquet table, then drags herself along it by way of a dense, jungle-like forest. In *A Study in Choreography for Camera* a dancer picks a foot up in a forest and puts it down again in a room. In *Ritual in Transfigured Time* a woman is pursued by a dancer who appears to close the space between them with uncanny speed. And in *Meditation on Violence*, a martial artist jumps from a featureless space to the roof of a building in a single move. Her final film, *The Very Eye of Night*, takes this concept in an entirely new direction as Deren experiments with the visual absence of gravity, her “celestial bodies” moving through a starlit void in such a way that literal space and time become irrelevant.

Early on in her career, Deren also played with the disappearance and transfiguration of objects. Slow-motion was a favorite visual device, allowing the viewer to detect the micro-movements that made up larger actions. This was taken to its extreme in the form of freeze-frames, in which still images would bear the traits of the motions from which they came.

Maya Deren was the very model of a vibrant, independent American filmmaker. She emerged from her original medium to take on a new, modern art form, embracing technology and technique to create a body of work that has made a lasting contribution to cinema. Throughout her too-brief career, she pushed at the limits of film, digging to its bedrock, seeking the core truths of the medium and always putting the art first. She disavowed dependence in all its forms, continually questioned the rules and assumptions of film art, and remained dedicated to her own vision in the face of rejection and indifference. She worked on an ethic of complete self-sufficiency, and in doing so encouraged others to sustain their own independence.

Her work remains obscure in the most visible strata of the independent film movement, but her personal and artistic principles are as relevant as they have ever been. American cinema could only be improved through the popular rediscovery of Deren's work and theory – we could not ask for a better role model to guide us through the transition ahead. We have the benefits of digital technology within easy reach and an era of immense opportunity upon us. If we can hold Deren's ideals in our minds as we find our way across the unfamiliar ground before us, we might yet achieve the bold, inspired American cinema of which we have all dreamt.

Maya Deren Filmography:

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) with Alexander Hammid, music by Teiji Ito added 1959

At Land (1944) photographed by Hella Heyman and Alexander Hammid

A Study in Choreography for Camera (1945) with Talley Beatty

Ritual in Transfigured Time (1946) with Frank Westbrook and Rita Christiani

Meditation on Violence (1948) performance by Chao-li Chi, music by Teiji Ito

The Very Eye of Night (1952-55) with Metropolitan Opera Ballet School and Antony Tudor,
music by Teiji Ito

Unfinished:

The Witches' Cradle (1943) with Marcel Duchamp and Pajorita Matta

Medusa (1949) with Jean Erdman

Haitian Film Footage (1947-55), assembled by Teiji and Cherel Ito as Divine Horsemen: The
Living Gods of Haiti

Season of Strangers (1959)

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