# Seeing the Invisible: Maya Deren's Experiments in Cinematic Trance*

MASSIMILIANO MOLLONA

*The Slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar factories, which covered the North plains, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement. By hard experience they had learned that isolated efforts were doomed to failure and in the early months of 1791 in and around Le Cap they were organizing for revolution. Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and to practice the rites and talk; and now, since the revolution, to hear the political news and make their plans.*

—*C. L. R. James*

## I

In July 1791, the story goes, a small voodoo gathering in Santo Domingo sparked the Haitian Revolution, the first black anti-colonial revolution in history.[1] The glorious history of the "Republic of the black Jacobins"[2] was often celebrated by Surrealist artists in New York and Paris in their exposé of the decadent state of colonial powers in the aftermath of the Second World War. For instance, Haiti is central to André Breton's anti-colonial manifesto, Aimé Cesaire's idea of negritude, Rudy Burckhardt's lyric film symphonies, and Zora

* This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper presented at the conference "Maya Deren: 50 Years On," curated by Elinor Cleghorn at London BFI Southbank, in October 2011.

1. Voodoo is a syncretic religion based on the merging of West African beliefs, Arawak religion, and Catholicism.

2. See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (London: Penguin Books, 1938).

*OCTOBER 149, Summer 2014, pp. 159–180.* *© 2014 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

Neale Hurston's novels on creole culture. In New York, negritude did not have quite the same revolutionary appeal as in Paris, where Josephine Baker was hailed as a Surrealist goddess of "natural" beauty and power. But the electric Haitian voodoo performances of dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham attracted a diverse community of African-American artists, émigrés, intellectuals, and communist sympathizers in the off-limits clubs, cafés, and private parties in Harlem. In its uncontainable, carnivalesque power, open forms, and sexual energy, Haitian voodoo captured an attraction to the "primitive" that affected American intellectuals and popular culture alike. Before becoming a Hollywood star, Dunham, of mixed West African and Native American roots, traveled to Haiti to study voodoo rituals for an anthropology degree at the University of Chicago. Fusing American dance, European ballet, and voodoo movements, she became a symbol of the black diaspora. In a recent film interview, Dunham recalls how her young assistant (or "girl Friday," in the parlance of the time) Maya Deren was fascinated by Haitian dance and would use it to steal the show in rehearsals, public performances, and glitzy parties.[3] The daughter of Russian Jewish émigrés and Trotskyite activists, Deren was struck by the power of this syncretic dance, which blended different cultural backgrounds and formed political consciousnesses while always providing entertainment and energizing dinner parties and giving voice to invisible deities. In her experimental filmmaking, Deren infused this magnetic power of dance into cinema.

In the tradition of modernist cinema, Deren describes a centerless and splintered world, populated with fragmented individuals and constructed through multiple temporalities and fractured stories that reflect on their telling.[4] She explores the relationship between film and consciousness, using cinema as a magical technology for social change and revolution. Her radical innovation consisted in reworking this modernist method through an anthropological framework, in mixing, like a *bricoleur*, Western aesthetics with Haitian cosmology.

## II

The collaboration between avant-garde artists and anthropologists that took place in New York and Paris in the 1930s is an instance of what anthropologist James Clifford describes as "ethnographic surrealism."[5] This movement radically highlighted the contradictions and inequalities of industrial capitalism and was inspired by socialism and a "primitivist" fascination with tribal cultures.[6]

Anthropologists spend significant time in "the field" (at least one year); their method is that of participant observation, which means to take part in the funda-

3. Matina Kudlacek, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2002).
4. For a recent discussion of modernist cinema, see Ted Perry, *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2006).
5. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1988).
6. I allude to the movement in nineteenth-century art, which celebrated primal, ancestral, and regenerative values and forms.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

mental activities of the communities that they study: cooking food, working in fields or in factories, smoking or dancing, and sometimes even getting involved in religion or local politics.

There are two traditions of anthropology. Scientific anthropology—a residue of Victorian times—looks at tribal or non-Western societies as bounded, isolated, and unique. Its ethnographic method relies on the scientific measurement, collection, archiving, and comparison of cultures and their artifacts according to notions of "authenticity" based on race, blood, or biology. Film critic Fatimah Rony compares ethnography to "taxidermy": a process of mummification, objectification, and freezing of cultures in space and time.[7]

Challenging the scientific anthropological tradition, "ethnographic surrealism" emerged in Paris in the 1920s from the collaboration between anthropologists of the newly formed Institut d'ethnologie—Michel Leiris, Marcel Mauss, and Marcel Griaule—and Surrealist artists André Breton, Antonin Artaud, and Georges Bataille. Surrealist anthropology had a utopian rather than scientific agenda and aimed at a radical critique of modernity and capitalism based on the "double movement" of making the familiar strange and vice versa. Working through juxtapositions, it unmasked the "wild" nature of post–World War I Paris—showing the violence of its mechanized slaughterhouses, peasant folk masks, and the rules of bourgeois society—and at the same time made the "savage other" look familiar and civilized, showing how noncapitalist institutions—gift-giving, reciprocal exchanges, extended families, cooperative work, consensual associations—were more egalitarian and just than the corrupt institutions of the state, the church, the factory, the political party, and the patriarchal family that dominated industrial societies.

Defying ethnocentric moral dichotomies, ethnographic surrealism saw humans as situated in an unstable state of double consciousness: good *and* evil, selfish *and* generous, collectivist *and* individualist. As in Artaud's theater, where actors and nonactors mingle, it looked at human identity not as fixed or authentic but as emerging from the world of the dream, the realms of the erotic and the unconscious, and played out in strategic rituals and public performances. Unlike traditional social science, surrealist anthropology looks at other cultures aesthetically and sensuously: as living forms and patterns of movement and feeling that envelop the rich texture of life. This approach pursues not linear narratives but games, synchronicity, coincidence, and chance—the spaces in between, for example, the fixed choreography of the gods and human improvisation. As in the performances of Apollinaire, Cocteau, and Breton in the streets of Paris, Surrealist fieldwork was a type of public performance staged with the native other. The famous Dakar-Djibouti mission—an ethnographic expedition that took place between 1931 and 1933 and passed through thirteen African countries—was a col-

7. Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1996).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

lective theatrical endeavor in which ethnographers and natives acted in turn as sacred initiates, torturers, masochistic lovers, poets, hoarders, disciples, looters, liars, shamans, leaders, and initiates.[8] Embracing Artaud's "ethic of cruelty," the expedition was violent and brutal, both a performance and an exposé of the atrocity of colonialism. Its aim was not so much to gather scientific evidence or to collect already existing knowledge as to trigger a process of collective reflection and cultural production.[9]

Indeed, anthropology and performance share very similar sensitivities. In their fieldwork, anthropologists tune into hidden human choreographies and become empathically aware of the patterns of movement and feelings in which they and their subjects are embedded. Becoming part of such sensuous and material choreographic fields, they blur many boundaries—between insider and outsider, observer and participant, the individual and the collective, what is taken for granted and what can be questioned, the flow of reality and critical reflection upon it—and act as social catalysts, developing creative collaborations, public negotiations, and critical reflection on "the other."

With its focus on human consciousness, the relationship between the imaginary and the material world, the origin of movement, the consequences of actions, the value of collaboration, and the making and remaking of social scripts, the work of Maya Deren connects performance, art, and anthropology and resurrects the project of the modernist surrealist utopia in the context of post–World War II America.

## III

Deren received a Guggenheim fellowship to travel to Haiti in 1946. Her application included a cross-cultural comparison of Haitian and Balinese ritual and Western children's games linked through montage.

She applied for the grant after seeing the raw footage of what was to become the ethnographic film *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952), shot by anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in a remote Balinese village. The film condenses into twenty minutes a ritual that had lasted several hours. At the climax of the possession ritual, the film depicts a group of young girls being transformed into dangerous witches and men and women threatening to stab themselves with knives.

Annette Michelson has argued that the Balinese footage put Deren into direct contact with the dimension of the *ecstatic*.[10] In *Notebook* (1947), a selection of Deren's notes, essays, and letters, Deren writes of how she experienced the

8. James Clifford gives interesting insights into the artistic processes at play during the expedition. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 37.
9. The poetic conversation that anthropologist Marcel Griaule had with Ogotemmêli, a blind Dogon hunter, during his field trip in Mali in the 1930s is an example of such syncretism between performance and social science. Marcel Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli* (Paris: Fayard, 1975).
10. Annette Michelson, "On Reading Deren's Notebook," *October* 14 (Autumn 1980), p. 51.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

Balinese footage in a visceral, unmediated way, with a mixture of pain, "muscular impulses," and erotic attraction:

> The minute I began to put the Balinese film through the viewer, the fever begun [*sic*]. It is a feeling one cannot remember from before but can only have in an immediate sense. I mean, like pain, one remembers having had pain, and even the reaction to the pain, but the exact pain itself proper cannot be recreated by memory except rarely.
>
> Psychosomaticism is the re-creation in immediate terms of unrecollected memory. Anyway, here, suddenly, is the strange fever and excitement. Is it because in holding film in one's hand one holds life in one's hand? . . . the immediate physical contact with the film, the nearness of the image, the automatic muscular control of its speed—the fact that as I wound, my impulses and reactions towards the film translated themselves into muscular impulses and so to the film directly, with no machine—buttons, switches, etc.—between me and the film. All this seemed to me very important, especially in relation to a film which was not mine.[11]

Later she describes the viewing as "copulation."

In an emotionally charged correspondence with Bateson, Deren tells of how inspired she was by the Balinese images, particularly the way they revealed "evi-

11. Maya Deren, "From the Notebook of Maya Deren," *October* 14 (Autumn 1980), p. 2.

*Left: Maya Deren. Sidewalk chalk drawings. Ca. 1948.*
*Top: Deren.* Divine Horsemen. *1951.*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

*Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson.*
Trance and Dance in Bali. *1952.*

dence" of the sacred in the collective movements of the possessed. As a form of cinematic representation, the Balinese trance dance seems to have offered to Deren three insights:

*(a)* It showed the gap between action and inaction—a central trope of modernist cinema—through choreography, rather than through montage or the frozen image. Deren reflects on a sequence of the Balinese footage in which we see little girls in the act of becoming angels. They form a long row and act slowly in concert. The bodies in the front row move; the ones at the back stand still. This slow animation of human bodies created a chrono-photographic effect, a transfiguration of still photos into a dynamic film phrase. Deren had experimented with freezing people's movements in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. In *Notebook*, she writes: "This is the feeling that I was trying to get into the section [of *Ritual*] where the party freezes, then cut to Rita moving, then return to the party frozen. It's that feeling of suspended sameness between different shots and the suspended sameness within the shot, and when the movement ends it is not so much a completion as a suspension. . . . "[12] Thus the Balinese choreography produced stillness without

12. Deren, "From the Notebook of Maya Deren," p. 36.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

the heavy apparatus of the film technology and revealed an animating energy different from that of cinema.

*(b)* Balinese performance is based on defamiliarization rather than on identification.[13] It does not aim at representing reality, like documentary cinema, but conveys the illusion of reality. For Deren, Balinese actors are anonymous, inhuman, and without memory or consciousness. They are not "characters" or "persons" in the Western sense. They pertain to a different world from the world of the audience. The audience does not identity with them. Thus, the second cinematic effect of Balinese dance is to produce distance without the "shock effect" of montage and through a skillful fusion of reality and fiction.

*(c)* Finally, Balinese choreography combines chance and structure. Deren describes how in Bateson's footage, in the middle of a gripping performance, someone intervenes to fix the fallen tail of a masked figure squatting on the

13. Fried's notion of "theatricality" illuminates this point. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).

*Deren.* Ritual in Transfigured Time. *1946.*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

ground. The accident does not appear to cause any embarrassment among the spectators. For Deren this lack of embarrassment is a sign that "the exposure of falseness is the very condition of the Balinese theatrical." She continues: "Certainly the Balinese are skillful enough craftsmen to make the clothes stay together if they wanted to. This is almost, I think, a deliberate negligence, the creation of a condition in which a certain accident can occur."[14] From this theatrical instance, Deren understood how the random irruption of reality into the fictional plot could infuse it with a sense of the transient. Indeed, her films are also full of accidents: falling keys, chess pawns, and knives and phones left off hooks. They are traces of a presence that transcends and even threatens the film structure, inviting the audience to look beyond the film narrative.[15]

In conclusion, the Balinese footage showed Deren that dance or "human choreography" could expand the technical repertoire of cinema, creating distance, suspension, and chance through choreography rather than through montage. Deren wrote at the time that she intended to incorporate this anthropological and choreographic dimension into her cinema to create "a new branch of film."[16]

The film *Trance and Dance in Bali* that Deren watched with such enthusiasm was financed by the Committee for Research in Dementia Praecox as a comparative study of the impact of childrearing techniques on the development of schizophrenia.[17] For Bateson, Balinese culture was nonhierarchical, noncompetitive, and in a perpetual state of equilibrium because of "the way the mother-child relationship functioned."[18] Bateson argued that, lacking social release and climax as it did, Balinese culture was schizophrenic and sexually repressed. Thus for Bateson and Mead dance trance was therapeutic because it allowed the free play of the individual self and the public display of sexuality while keeping the edifice of Balinese culture intact. The terrifying sight of young women turned into witches—a projection of future motherhood—both threatened and restored the male ego. Bateson and Mead suggested that dance should be introduced among American children to reduce the incidence of schizophrenia because, in their view, the externalization of unconscious drives outside the body acted therapeutically.

In her fieldwork on the voodoo possession ritual in Haiti, Deren challenges Bateson and Mead's suggestion of dance as therapy along with their scientific episte-

14. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 36.
15. Turim reads these games and ludic structures in terms of Deren's open "ethics of form." Maureen Turim, "The Ethics of Form," in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California, 2001) pp. 77–102.
16. Ibid., p. 25.
17. Dementia praecox is how schizophrenia was previously known.
18. Gregory Bateson, "Bali: The Value System of a Steady State," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (London: Paladin, 1972), pp. 80–100.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

mology. Set in circular compounds, Haitian voodoo possession rituals are carefully choreographed interactions between priests (*hongun*), gods (*loa*), and the community. During the ritual, music is played, animals are sacrificed, and worshippers enter into a state of trance, during which they are sexually mounted by the gods. The community witnesses the worshippers being mounted and helps them recover from the exhaustion that follows. Each *loa* has its own drumbeat, personality, costume, symbol, and domain of spiritual revelation. In her beautifully written book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), Deren describes them in vivid detail. Ghede is the master of the abyss, the king and the clown, the corpse and the phallus. "As Lord of eroticism he embarrasses men with his lascivious sensual gestures, as God of the grave he terrifies them with evidence of the absolute insensate."[19] Erzulie—the goddess that mounted Deren in Haiti—is the goddess of the sea; the divinity of love, dream, and imagination; the lady of luxury. Deren writes: "She demands champagne and perfume with a delicate soprano voice and beguiling coquetry. She who is the most complimented, the most beloved, the most often wedded in the sacred marriage between devotees and divinity—she who is the goddess of Love—protests that she is not loved enough. She is the cosmic tantrum."[20]

In contrast to Bateson and Mead's focus on the therapeutic function of dance, Deren looks at voodoo dance as an artistic form and as a choreographed reenactment of Haitian religion. In the Haitian cosmos, humans have an invisible, immortal essence. At death this essence transforms itself first into the soul of the ancestor and then into the divine matter of the god. Each *loa*, each god, was once a human being. *Loas* are archetypes: mirror images of the humans, living in a mirrored surface. The metaphysical world is a cosmic mirror, inhabited by the immortal reflections of all those who have ever confronted it. The Haitian possession ritual is a ritual of mirroring and of temporal reversal. Gods travel backwards to the time when they were humans, and humans see themselves reflected in the eyes of the gods. The ritual celebrates this fusion of two worlds: the human and the divine, the subjective and the objective, the real and the imaginary, the mental and the physical.

In *Divine Horsemen*, Deren embraces the perspective of the Haitians while also demonstrating an impressive fluency in anthropological theory, turning the Balinese Freudian complex of sexuality, violence, and individualism inside out. In the voodoo ritual, we see not sexually repressed individuals struggling with alien spirits but a sacred energy connecting humans, sacrificial animals, and living gods through a sensuous choreography. In the Haitian world, objects, people, and gods are not self-contained, individualistic, and atomized entities with an inner psychology, intelligence, or volition, as in the Western worldview. They are material traces of collective dreams and forces, embodied fantasies, living archetypes.

19. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1953), p. 107.
20. Ibid., p. 142.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

*Deren.* Divine Horsemen. *1951.*

A non-Western form of human choreography, voodoo allowed social structures and identities to be fluid, paradoxical, and open, while at the same time producing a cohesive effect for the community.

Michelson argues that the depersonalization effect and the privileging of form over individual psychology in Deren's film is a consequence of her early involvement in communism and anthropology.[21] It is true that Deren's fascination with Haitian magic had roots in the political. The voodoo possession ritual brought Deren into contact with a world without the fixed psychology, rigid morality, and rational volition of the alienated subjects of industrial capitalism, one populated instead by fluid and contradictory characters—both rational and irrational, good and evil, selfish and altruistic.

In *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946) Deren laments the loss of magic in industrial societies ruled by Christian religion and science. The world of religion is fixed and hierarchical. Our bodies and actions belong to the gods. In the world of capitalism—another form of religion—we think that we are in full

21. Michelson, "On Reading Deren's Notebook," p. 142.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

control of our actions/bodies through the tools of science and technology. We are the gods. For Deren the Haitian world represented a space in between these poles of possessive individualism: impermanent, performative, and fluid. This is a space with an open choreography, one in which the power of the shaman grows out of creative improvisation, empathy, and virtuoso performances and where hierarchies are reversible: Gods depend on shamans for returning to life and shamans depend on the witnessing community for evidence of their power. For Deren, the "Haitian way of living" was infused with "grace"[22]: in people's fluid movements and colorful life-patterns, in the electric rhythm of their activities, and in the soft sound of their interactions. This thick, multisensory human choreography contrasted with the flat, disembodied life in industrial cities.

In her fascination with everyday fantasies, "sacred sociology," and the human unconscious, Deren embraces the project of surrealist anthropology of familiarizing "the other" and cannibalizing the familiar.[23] Her feeling of intimacy with the Haitian "natives" should be read against her ghostly filmic reflections on middle-class America in the form of split personalities, cruel actors, broken architectures, urban possession, and the savage ritual of the dinner party.[24]

22. Deren's idea of "grace" as both an aesthetic and social principle was probably inspired by her reading of Bateson's "Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (London: Paladin, 1972), pp. 101–129.
23. Annette Michelson, "On Reading Deren's Notebook," p. 50.
24. See, for instance, the ghostly dinner party in *Ritual in Transfigured Time.*

*Deren.* Ritual in Transfigured Time. *1946.*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

Deren's "trance films" in particular—*Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946)—mix art, magic, and social analysis, describing bourgeois rituals as being socially structured but also open to dreamlike reconfigurations. As for the Surrealists, Deren's films strove to bring back the unity of magic and science that the modern world had lost. But unlike the Surrealists, Deren operated in between spaces rather than through violent juxtapositions, and through unique and personalized performances rather than collective manifestos. Like the Amazonian shaman described by Lévi-Strauss or like Titian, the famous *hongun* that initiated Deren in Haiti, she translated the raw matter of life into universal archetypes, ghostly images, and shared feelings through a mixture of magic, amateur science, and virtuoso performances.

## IV

Deren belongs to the tradition of modernist cinema, a tradition rooted in the "magical" belief that films—made of immaterial phantoms, reflections, and optical illusions—can radically transform reality. All of Deren's work, and especially her "trance films," explores the relationship between the aesthetic, cognition, and consciousness and the modernist trope of cinema as a technology of enchantment turning the invisible, imaginary, and abstract into visible, material, and tactile forms. Moreover, Deren treated filmmaking as a magical technology of movement, infusing energy into inanimate objects and interrupting the flow of life and freezing human movement. Kracauer[25] discussed this trope in relation to the fluid motion of leaves, water, and clouds; Balazs[26] with regards to the infinitely absorbing landscape of the human face; Vertov[27] through living architectures; and Eisenstein with the choreographed movements of the crowd. Like Vertov and Moholy-Nagy, Deren believed in the revelatory power of cinematic techniques and saw cinema as a scientific as much as an aesthetic process.[28] But unlike them, she identified more with the skills of the voodoo priest than with those of the industrial worker. For instance, like Jean Epstein, Deren uses cinematic slow motion to create a sense of mysticism rather than to trigger political consciousness.

Deren's radical innovation consisted in reworking this modernist trope through an anthropological framework. Endorsing the point of view of the Haitians, Deren insists upon the intersection of fiction and reality rather than upon their juxtaposition (as with the Surrealists) or their dialectical relation (as in Eisenstein), and in so doing she erases the existing boundaries between documentary, commercial film, and visual art. She does so in two ways: through optical illusion and through performativity.

25. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University, 1960), p. 27.
26. *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter (New York: Oxford, 2009), p. 11.
27. Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*.
28. The suggestion that Dziga Vertov, László Moholy-Nagy, and Jean Epstein conceived of film as a powerful technology of social change is made by Michelson in her introduction to *Kino-Eye: The Writing of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), pp. xxxvii–xlv.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

### *Optical Illusion*

Deren's cinema is a technology of enchantment, a form of cinematic trance. It can be thought of as a hall or mirrors—like the Haitian cosmological mirror—that creates three optical effects: depersonalization, time reversal, and space crossing.

*Depersonalization*. The Haitian voodoo ritual, as I have described above, works like a mirror in which humans and gods see themselves reflected in one another. Gods become humans and humans are depersonalized as archetypes and images of the gods. Similarly, Deren depersonalizes her characters by splitting them into double or triple personalities, reflections on mirrors or windows, living shadows, mirroring gestures, multiple camera angles. Deren's characters are not *personae* in the Western sense of autonomous, individualistic, and self-contained beings.[29] They are fluid, multiple, and dismembered; they overflow the boundaries of the body and reveal themselves in body parts, landscapes, or objects. As with the possessed initiates in the voodoo ritual, Deren's actors have no individual agency or volition. What motivates them is the energy of the camera, which is akin to the sacred energy of the Haitian gods.

*Time reversal*. In Haitian cosmology the cosmic mirror—the world in between gods and humans—has an important temporal dimension. There is a time delay between when humans die and when they reach the surface of the mirror and

29. On the Western notion of persona, see Marcel Mauss, "The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History," in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 68 (1938).

*Mead and Bateson.* Trance and Dance in Bali. *1952.*

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

*Jo Ann Kaplan.* Invocation: Maya Deren. *1987.*

reveal themselves as gods. This time delay is due to the difficulty human beings have in forgetting. It is only when their death is forgotten that people become ancestors; it is only when ancestors have lost their humanity that they become archetypes and gods. This temporal interval, in which humans and their reflections travel from source to surface, is a dangerous moment in which the community faces the possibility of its own extinction. The Haitian possession ritual is an attempt to synchronize the time of gods and the time of humans. In the ritual, gods travel back in time towards their beginning as humans and humans travel forward towards their oblivion and their future state as gods. The cinema of Deren also works at the intersection of two temporal movements—a backward movement of remembering and regeneration, i.e., the perspective of the gods; and a forward movement of forgetting and oblivion, i.e., human time. The temporality of the former emerges in still images, slow and reverse motion, delays, repetitions, and edit-

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

ing that both fragments and magnifies human movements and shows characters—usually female—in the act of becoming. Human time, on the other hand, emerges in linear actions, close-ups, and editing that spatialize time. In a few instances, the time of the gods and that of humans overlap, as in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, where Deren and her actress Rita Cristiani together face death underwater, fused together into one overexposed white negative image, or at the end of *Meshes of the Afternoon* where the frozen features of the central male character are cut open by a sensuous ocean floating through the cracks of a broken mirror.

*Space-crossing*. Finally, the crossroads is the metaphor of the mirror's depth. In Haitian cosmology, the gods inhabit the vertical plane of the mirror—the abyss of the oceans, the underground, and the "higher skies," where gods live. Humans inhabit the horizontal plane of the Earth. The Haitian voodoo ritual works at the crossroads, at the intersection of the horizontal plane of the living and the vertical plane of the gods. Deren's cinema also operates at the axial crossing, intersecting the horizontal plane of narrative cinema and the vertical plane of art, observation, and abstraction, facts and fiction. It is especially the film edit that replicates this magic journey to the crossroads, breaking up the horizontal plane of film into multiple vertical intervals. These sharp cuts connect spaces that are not only distant from each other but also of a different scale and density: the ocean and the crowded dining table, the open field and the room, the human eye and a windy landscape. Deren herself appears in the film, leading the journey between sacred and profane spaces using cosmological entry points—trees, water, and clouds—well known to the Haitians.

In *At Land* (1944), she climbs up a tree trunk on a beach and emerges into a table in the middle of a formal dinner party. She then crawls horizontally along the dinner table, a threshold between the bourgeois and the natural worlds. Later she descends back into the natural world following a chess pawn, which has fallen into a river stream. These journeys have no hierarchy or sense of moral direction. In *Ritual in Transfigured Time* the gods reveal themselves as much in the violent choreography of the bourgeois dinner party as in the sacred winding of the yarn that precedes it. Deren's edits are not meant to create dialectical ruptures, as they are in Eisenstein. Intercutting incommensurable spaces, multiple crossings, parallel planes, and soft angles, they distill the essence of cinema in intricate weavings and delicate paper folds.

### *Performative Cinema*

Deren incorporated the ethnographic point of view in her films, but she was nonetheless very critical of the realist aesthetics of ethnographic films and documentaries based on observational styles, minimal editing, "indigenous" characters,

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

and authentic locations. As in Westernized portraits of tribal leaders, staged reenactments of working-class life, or close-ups of indigenous bodies, these depict cultures frozen in space and time, "mummified."

Deren's cinema is choreographic rather than ethnographic. It is not focused on the "micro" and "unedited" details of specific cultures, but in the broad sensuous choreography—the rhythms, sounds, and patterned shadows—that is shared across cultures, between Haiti and New York, street children and religious initiates, artists and the bourgeois.

Her films are performative in two ways. First, her "cine-trance"[30] blurs the boundaries between the film process, the ritual, and the real world, on the one hand, and between the choreographed movements of the actors and the choreographed movements of the camera on the other. The dreamlike quality of her cine-trance derives from this blurring of reality and performance. Secondly, her films are performative because they incorporate the primitive and magic worldview within the very film process. Like the Haitian priest, Deren as filmmaker was a performative leader, a shaman. Her films are spaces without fixed hierarchies and are open to creativity, reflection, and transfiguration. They present alternative political scenarios.

Criticizing ethnographic films and documentaries and their realistic aesthetics, Deren argues in *Anagram* that since every film involves the manipulation of reality, "there is not such a thing as a documentary film."[31] But she also believed that the film form ought to emerge from the context of, and not be detached from, reality. For instance, she was mesmerized by the "realist" style of Bateson and Mead's film: "For the quality of Balinese posture, attitudes, quietness, combined with the extremely long shots, end by giving everything almost a ritualistic character. . . . Nothing happens in the developmental sense, the shots keep lasting, the scene crosses some strange boundary from 'activity' into 'state' . . . the extremely disinterested length of these shots and the slow, easy pan is—whether it is so intended or not—a kind of Balinese subjective camera. One has the feeling that one is watching the way a Balinese watches, that kind of quiet, sustained staring, or rather gazing, since there is no intensity in it."[32] For Deren, in the magic context of Bali, the unedited everyday is magical.

Deren's performative filmmaking, combining ethnographic observation and formal abstraction, overcomes altogether the opposition between realism and fiction. As in the figure of the anagram, "vertical abstraction" and "horizontal description"[33] are equally weighed as dream and reality are woven together by the real performances of the characters, often Deren herself.

30. The word "cine-trance" is famously associated with anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch's controversial film *Les Maîtres fous* (1954), a mixture of surrealist theater, cinematic ritual, and ethnographic film.
31. Maya Deren, *Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (New York: Alicat Bookshop, 1946), p. 35.
32. Deren, "From the Notebook of Maya Deren," p. 39.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

Deren often frames this relation between vertical abstraction and horizontal description as a dialectics between photographs and film. For instance, she acknowledges that her *Study for Choreography for the Camera* (1945) is set up as a dialogue between photography "by which the reality—is recorded and revealed in its own terms—and editing—by which those elements of reality are reframed at an imaginative level creating a new reality."[34] In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren incorporates the tension between photography and film within the very film structure. Similarly, the dialogue between frozen photos and film, and between simultaneous and linear forms of consciousness, is the central trope of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). Freeze-frames halt the linear, horizontal logic of the characters (for instance, they immobilize the Dionysian movements of dancer Frank Westbrook) and open up a vertical dimension of infinite possibilities, including that the characters will die and—when the image recovers its motion—regenerate. This articulation of photography and film in *Ritual in Transfigured Time* replays the cinematic ritual of remembering and forgetting highlighted above. Connecting again to Haitian cosmology, freeze-frames are reflections of the gods' magical consciousness set in motion in the act of remembering. Films are traces of the material that humans assemble in a state of amnesia. Deren explores the photographic effect in her films through slow motion. "Slow-motion is the microscope of time," she argues in *Anagram*.[35] With Epstein, she sees slow motion as the camera's animistic power to magnify the microscopic, animate the inert, and reveal the play of forms.[36] The power of slow motion is evident at the beginning of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, when the fast-shaking movement of her head is slowed down, leaving the hair floating in a parallel world of water.

Deren's innovative filmmaking combines two kinds of movement—the movement of the actors and the movement of the camera—and two ways of looking: the perspective of the characters and the perspective of the artist. The former movement and ways of looking are inward, intimate, tactile, and analytical approximations towards reality. The latter are outward, abstract, creative, and disruptive shifts away from reality. Deren uses the camera to carve out a visual space for these two movements to coexist, like a sculptor who cuts up visual spaces for the physical reality to reveal itself. Combining the "hall of mirrors" and choreography—two well-known technologies of enchantment—Deren creates a hallucinatory utopia in which humans are freed from space and time, as well as their own bodies, and in which reality and dance merge.

33. In *Anagrams* Deren associates the horizontal dimension of cinema with real-time observation, and description and the vertical dimension with synchronous and anti-realistic abstraction. Deren, "From the Notebook of Maya Deren," p. 93.
34. Ibid., p. 40.
35. Ibid., p. 47.
36. Deren reflects on Epstein's inspiring ideas on slow motion in his *L'intelligence d'une machine* (Paris: Éditions Jacques Melot, 1946). Ibid., p 47.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

In its oscillations in time and space—between movement and stillness, memory and forgetting—the cinema of Deren has a rhythmical quality, resembling music. Indeed the beat of the drum is the divine energy that sets in motion the Haitian cosmos, conveys the polymorphic voices of the gods, and synchronizes the collective movements of the initiates. *Loas* are attracted to different rhythms, which they will dance accordingly: "The rounded roll of Yanvalou sends the body in a slow serpentine undulation; the impervious drive of Nago Chaud stiffens the spine into the tension of pride . . . the special tension of Petro, in which, instead of supporting the dancer, the beat seems to drive him before it."[37] Drums create polyrhythmic landscapes inhabited by gods in the act of dancing; they cut and "break" (like film edits) between action and inaction and mark "the spiritual heart of the cosmos."[38] Most of Deren's work is silent, but all of her images are woven together by a strong sense of rhythm and folded in a sensuous, musical membrane that transcends and expands the film form.

V

In depersonalizing and problematizing the Western individual, Deren turns this critique onto herself, reflecting on the marginal status of both women and artists in postwar America. Her films are self-ethnographies as much as they are ethnographies of middle-class America. Together with her multiple doubles and female companions she appears to have identities that are fluid and problematic, difficult to categorize, and in continuous transformation. For instance, in *Ritual in Transfigured Time,* Deren and her "double" Cristiani struggle against claustrophobic relationships, controlling male characters, and over-formal dinner etiquette and appear to move at the margins of bourgeois society. As in the fusing of the bodies of Cristiani and Deren at the end of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, in the erotic chess play among women in *At Land*, or in her autoerotic play in *Meshes*, Deren's women challenge the heterosexual logic of the nuclear family, endorsing instead bisexuality, promiscuous love, and erotic fantasy. Deren's self-deconstructions are often cruel, as in Artaud's Theater of Cruelty: We see her body heavily falling down a staircase, grotesquely transfixed in puppetlike movements, running in ridiculous fast motion, gasping for breath and drowning. Each self-transformation feels like a letting-go, a self-sacrifice, as at the end of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*.

For Maria Pramaggiore there is a conflict between Deren's decentering of the female subject and the way she crafted a commercialized public persona for herself in the style of Hollywood divas.[39] But this star persona was another cinematic transfiguration emerging from Deren's animistic cinema, which blurred the life of films and the life of people—friends, colleagues, partners, lovers, admirers, and protégés—and

37. Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, p. 236.
38. Ibid., p. 238.
39. Maria Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-garde: The Case of Maya Deren," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 17–40.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

overflowed the boundaries of the film form through public screenings, discussions, promotions, advertising, and alternative distributions. For Deren, the star system was a condition of the cruel logic of Western spectacle. In *Notebook* she reflects on how Western cinema is based on the viewer's identification with the actor. This identification is competitive because the viewer strives to outperform the "model," but nonetheless, "identification, the idea of becoming something else, is democratic" because it triggers self-improvement, change, and even social mobility.[40] On the contrary, in Balinese theater, as I described earlier, there is a hierarchical distance between the performer and the spectator. But as much as they inspire, film stars are consumed and emptied out—like sacred icons—by the fetishistic glance of the community.[41] Like the shamans, who are consumed by their social function and charismatic power, Deren "the film star" was made vulnerable by her power of inspiring dreams and fantasies. Rejecting the classical Western myth of femininity, Deren identified herself with Erzulie, the capricious and promiscuous goddess of love, creativity, and fantasy that mounted her during her fieldwork in Haiti. Because of their powerful imagination, Erzulie and Deren are eternally betrayed and wounded. Deren writes: "Erzulie is the loa of the impossible perfection which must remain unattainable. Man demands that she demands of him beyond his capacity. The condition of her divinity is his failure: he crowns her with his own betrayal. Hence she must weep, it could not be otherwise."[42]

## VI

Along with Michelson, I see Deren's fascination with Haitian culture as a political statement. Deren's politics were not radical, but revealed a melancholic reflection on the disruptive powers of humanity in the years following the Second World War.

In the Haitian voodoo ritual the community sees the possibility of its own extinction and survives the oblivion by collaborating with the gods in the making of new images and archetypes. Likewise Deren's films set up a space of reciprocity between humans and gods, where gods renounce their disruptive powers and humans overcome their natural imperfections by channeling the dark shadows and dehumanizing forces of the gods in the making of new images and archetypes.

As mediator between the world of images and the real world, between gods and humans, Deren struggled with the natural imperfections of the film medium. In spite of her craftsmanship in optical illusion, Deren experienced the film camera as a typically male, bulky technology, intrinsically limited in translating her unmediated visions.[43] At the end of *Divine Horsemen*, Deren describes how, while

40. Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-garde," p. 29.
41. On the sacred icon and the cult of cinematic identification, see Annette Michelson, "The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning: Prolegomena to the Analysis of a Textual System," *October* 52 (Spring 1990), pp. 16–52.
42. Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, p. 144.
43. In *Notebook*, she writes, "As artist, woman is her own medium, whereas men use the camera to impregnate something." Ibid., p. 2.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

being possessed by Erzulie, she sees "the pure white light of darkness."[44] Her description of this pure white light is a metaphor for her striving for the unmediated light of cinema. She writes, "How clear the world looks in this first total light. How purely form it is without, for a moment, the shadow of meaning. I see everything all at once, without the delays of succession, and each detail is equal and equally lucid before the sense of relative importance imposes the emphasis of eyes."[45] In her striving towards artistic perfection and towards conveying the unmediated vision of the gods, Deren was betrayed by the imperfection of the human medium. She writes: "The wound of Erzulie is perpetual: she is the dream impaled eternally upon the cosmic cross-road where the world of men and the world of divinity meet and it is through her pierced heart that man ascend and the divinity descend."[46]

Deren never completed her Haitian film.[47] There are two possible explanations.

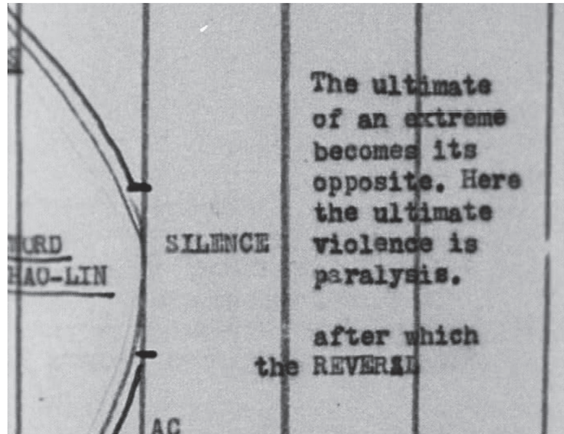
*(a) The unfolding of history.* Michelson suggests that Deren's Haitian project collapsed when she became aware of historical change in relation to the voodoo ritual, which made it too complex to fit into Deren's aesthetic project.[48] But history violently intruded on Deren's personal experience of Haiti too. In 1947, the year of her arrival, Haiti had just elected its first democratic constitutional assembly after a very long period of military dictatorship. This new democratic revolution raised hopes of emancipation among intellectuals and activists worldwide, including André Breton, who in 1946 gave an inspired anti-colonial speech to university students in a cinema in Port-au-Prince.[49] But Deren had to leave Haiti after a new military coup by a corrupt, pro-Western political elite. It is well known that, especially after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Deren was deeply critical of US foreign policy. It is possible that the Haitian project collapsed when the coup shattered her sense of identification with the marginal "natives" and fully revealed her status as colonizer.

*(b) The limitations of the film medium.* For Michelson, Eisenstein's Mexican project and Deren's Haitian fieldwork were motivated by a sense of alienation from Western society and by a search for a new sense of community grounded in the sacred. Both Eisenstein and Deren were interested in how films affect the senses via perception. In their ethnographic journeys, they searched for non-Western forms of representation with direct access to the *ecstatic*. This ecstatic was a radical political project, opened by

44. Ibid., p. 259.
45. Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, p. 261.
46. Ibid., p. 145.
47. The film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* was edited posthumously by Cheril and Teiji Ito in 197—paradoxically, in "ethnographic realist" style.
48 Michelson, "On Reading Deren's Notebook," p. 52.
49. René Depestre, one of the founders of the revolutionary Haitian journal *Le Ruche*, gives a detailed account of Breton's speech in René Depestre, *Pour la revolution pour la poesie* (Quebec, QC: Editions Lemeac, 1974), pp. 204–13.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

new cinematic dimensions, of transcendence of capitalist forms and limitations. Eisenstein found this "new dimension" in the *serape*, the striped blanket of the Mexican *indio*;[50] Deren found it in the Haitian "hall of mirrors." Before her Haitian fieldwork, she had used such halls of mirrors—and their temporal and spatial distortions—to reflect on the flatness of middle-class America.




*Kaplan.* Invocation: Maya Deren. *1987.*

But the mirror shattered when placed in front of its own source. If Bateson and Mead's observational technique matched the artifice of Balinese life, what kind of film would capture the multilayered fantasies—drawings, music, dance, and songs—and polyphonic voices of the Haitian gods? Unlike cinema, Haitian voodoo possession triggered "pure" representations traveling directly from source (gods) to surface (their human reflections) without technological mediation. The camera was not as powerful a medium in conveying the unmediated vision of the Haitian gods.[51] With their skillful spatial and temporal cinematic deconstructions, Deren and Eisenstein were reaching out for a "fourth dimension" in film,[52] opening spaces of higher consciousness. For both of them, the encounter with other aesthetic traditions that embraced the fourth dimension without the mediation of the camera was both revelatory and disruptive.

Deren's Haitian film lies in fragments: in the African-American songs and children's games in the streets of Harlem, in Broadway's vaudeville dances, in the desultory conversations of bourgeois dinner parties, and in the twenty thousand feet of 16mm film, one thousand stills, and fifty hours of audio recording that remain of her fieldwork.

In an influential article, anthropologist George Marcus argues that modernist cinema, especially in its deconstruction of spatial and temporal categories through montage, should be a source of inspiration for anthropologists to

50. Anne Nesbet describes Eisenstein's Mexican experience as an encounter with a two-dimensional pictorial world in which the psyche was revealed as an "external unconscious." Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (New York: Tauris, 2003) p. 129.
51. The Vertovian "kinetic icon" would not work in the polydimensional world of Haitian voodoo.
52. Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, pp. 48–75.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

embrace polyphony, dialogism, and bifocality.[53] The work of Deren shows how "other" aesthetic traditions can contribute to the "magic" of Western cinema. Besides, Deren's displacement from her Haitian encounter with living images and a cinematic choreography unmediated by the filmic apparatus shows how powerful images become when, departing from their original source or intention, they fluidly circulate across different human and nonhuman mediums.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/octo/article-pdf/doi/10.1162/OCTO_a_00188/1753798/octo_a_00188.pdf by guest on 07 September 2023

53. George Marcus, "The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage," in *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*, ed. Leslie Devereaux and Richard Hillman (Berkeley: University of California, 1995).