



**MAYA
DEREN**

MAYA DEREN

"Each film was built as a chamber and became a corridor, like a chain reaction. You know those puzzle games where if you draw a continuous line from one point to another, consecutively numbered, you end up with a picture? Well ... I finally drew those points and got a picture."

A Film Tour re-presenting the work of Maya Deren, June 1983

Organised by Exeter Film Workshop for SouthWest.Arts

Subsidised by the Arts Council of Great Britain

Published by SouthWest Arts

23 Southernhay East,

Exeter,

EX1 1QG.

June 1983

Printed by Devon Print Group

— 1917-1961 —

CONTENTS

- Judith Higginbottom "'...Sing in the desert when the throat is almost too dry for speaking.'" © 1983
- Biographical Details
- Maya Deren 'Statement of Principles' Reprinted in 'Women and Formal Film' from Film As Film (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979)
- P. Adams Sitney An extract from 'Tableau Historique' in Une Histoire du Cinema (Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1976)
- Filmography
- Selected Bibliography

"... Sing in the desert when the throat is almost too dry for speaking." ¹

some thoughts on the work of Maya Deren

Judith Higginbottom, Exeter May 1983

When I began to work with film I learnt a film 'history'. I learnt the 'history' of the avant-garde cinema. It was a history that was largely male: it was made up mostly of male film-makers and concerned itself with the issues which they considered important. For me it was an alienating history which I knew I could never be part of. But, incongruously, right at the beginning of that history, was a woman, Maya Deren. I read that her work "had signalled the birth of the American avant-garde." ² I read more about Maya Deren's work. (I had to read; Maya Deren's work is difficult to see; it isn't screened very often). The descriptions and analyses of her work did not inspire me to research any further. She was placed in film history as an inheritor of the surrealists; her films described as "psycho-dramas" and dismissed in a language I found it difficult to understand:

"Deren perceived the film image only as an indexical-iconic sign." ³

Nowhere in any of the writing about her work was there any suggestion that her gender might have informed and influenced her work. At the time I did not realise clearly enough that "history" represents only the point of view and interests of those who make it, and that the history we have (and this history, of course, goes on being made) is a patriarchal one:

"Men perceive the world from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth." ⁴

Of course the fact that a film-maker was female could not be regarded as important by the makers of a history which sees women as irrelevant and at best peripheral.

History defines and affects our present. I lost all interest in Maya Deren and her work. Later, when I saw At Land and Ritual in Transfigured Time I was amazed. It was as if for a long time I had been wishing that films like these existed. It seemed to me that there were vital concerns in Maya Deren's films which the film historians had failed to observe, and it was these concerns which were immediately relevant to me and to other women. These were questions not of the relationship of the work to the work of male contemporaries and earlier film-makers, nor of the way in which she constructed images and narratives, or of conventional film-theoretical concerns, but rather of the actual images and meanings in her work. There is, for me, not only a visual richness in Maya Deren's work, but also a richness of meaning and symbol which as a film-maker, and most particularly as a woman, I find relevant and challenging.

In writing about Maya Deren I am not seeking to write a film-theoretical discourse (this has been done elsewhere), nor to rehabilitate her as a feminist film-maker (she certainly did not see herself as such). Rather, I would like to

welcome her into a history which recognises the work of women film-makers and the importance and strengths of their concerns when those concerns differ from those of male film-makers; and to identify those issues in her work which, in addition to those already identified by film historians (and sometimes in opposition to them), are relevant to the experience of audiences in the 1980s, informed as we are by the politics and theories of feminism.

Maya Deren made most of her films in America in the 1940s. When she began to work with film there was no independent film movement and no strong women's movement. She worked completely outside the commercial film industry, at first using borrowed equipment. She scripted her own films, constructed shots, 'acted' in them, and edited them. Her work is unusual in that, at a time when there were very few women artists (and even less film-makers) and when those who did manage to work and gain recognition from the art-world did so by denying their gender, by not introducing any specifically female concerns or experience into their work, and by producing work indistinguishable from men's, she produced work at the centre of which was her own inner experience. The standpoint of her films could not possibly have been male, and most particularly in the films in which she herself appears, the central (female) character's psyche and sexuality are examined in a way outside normal contemporary patriarchal constraints, and in relation to wider myths and symbols. She never, in her films or in her writing, made any kind of an issue of her gender; rather she seems to have taken it for granted, and therefore when viewing her work one accepts her gender experience as its implicit basis.

There are many issues raised by Maya Deren's work which should receive consideration in any study of the history of women's films which time and space do not permit me to consider here; not least her work for the independent film movement in America and her position as catalyst of that movement,⁵ and also her extensive theoretical and technical writings. I would like to discuss here some of the imagery and symbolism in Maya Deren's work, as this has been neglected in earlier writings. In much of her work Maya Deren ventures into areas most frequently dealt with by myth and psychoanalytic theory. If myths are viewed as ways of expressing a culture's understanding of and insights into its own beliefs and structures and the ways in which it constructs personality and sexuality, rather than as religious beliefs, then an understanding of them can be a valuable insight into the culture that made them and the forces which define and direct individuals within that culture. Concepts of female personality and sexuality and descriptions and analyses of specifically feminine areas of experience expressed in many mythologies are now being re-examined in the light of feminist work and theory. Some have been found to be useful and positive; others reiterations of oppressive patriarchal definitions of women. Perhaps Maya Deren's use of archetypal images and symbols can enhance women's knowledge of their experience, sexualities and personalities.

I would like to discuss in particular three of Maya Deren's films: Meshes Of The Afternoon, At Land and Ritual In Transfigured Time. Maya Deren said of these three films:

"Meshes is, one might say, almost expressionist; it externalizes an inner world to the point where it is confounded with the external

one. At Land has little to do with the inner world of the protagonist, it externalizes the hidden dynamics of the external world, and here the drama results from the activity of the external world. It is as if I had moved from a concern with the life of a fish, to a concern with the sea which accounts for the character of the fish and its life. And Ritual pulls back even further, to a point of view from which the external world itself is but an element in the entire structure and scheme of metamorphosis: the sea itself changes because of the larger changes of the earth. Ritual is about the nature and process of change."⁶

Maya Deren herself appears in each of these films, in addition to scripting and editing them, and this is important because it anchors each film in her own personal experience. Writing about Meshes Of The Afternoon, P. Adams Sitney notes:

"... film becomes a process of self-realization. Many film-makers seem to have been unable to project the highly personal psychological drama that these films reveal into other characters' minds. They were realizing the themes of their films through making and editing them."⁷

But for Maya Deren, Meshes Of The Afternoon, and her later films, although springing from her own personal experience, were not merely concerned with this experience, but had a far wider meaning:

"The intent of this first film, as of the subsequent films, is to create a mythological experience. When it was made, however, there was no anticipation of the general audience and no experience of how the dominant cultural tendency toward personalised psychological interpretation would impede the understanding of the film."⁸

Much of the film made by women since the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s has been characterised by the visual presence of the maker in the work. We learnt that the personal is political and that our own personal experience is as valid as that of those men who make patriarchal art and history. Here then is the first link between Maya Deren's work and work that women are producing now: Maya Deren's own visual presence in her own work. Perhaps women work with their own images because they are only just beginning to find the space and time to examine themselves and their own experience and all the elements which make up their personalities and psyches. Perhaps too (in contrast to Sitney's view of 'self-realisation' quoted above) women do not wish to distance their ideas from themselves by projecting them onto 'characters', as this would give their work a totally different and inappropriate kind of authority. Rather, recognising the importance of personal experience where it has links with the experience of others, they seek to anchor their work in this experience. Maya Deren (in the quote above) understood the validity of her own experience very well.

Meshes Of The Afternoon has frequently been called a surrealist film:

"Meshes Of The Afternoon is a surrealist nightmare film." 9

Yet Maya Deren was at pains to point out the differences between her own work and that of the surrealists which she found

"... as deficient as realism in providing images of human consciousness." 10

For me the comparisons between Meshes Of The Afternoon and surrealist works, particularly Bunuel and Dali's Un Chien Andalou miss some important elements in the meaning of Meshes. Meshes Of The Afternoon is precisely not a 'surrealist nightmare film'. It is the careful exploration of the inner experiences of a woman revealed through dream; very different from the anti-rational violence and shock-tactics used by Dali and Bunuel in their attacks on repressive social and political institutions. The film uses objects as archetypal symbols in a very different way from Un Chien Andalou.

"Anyway, Meshes was the point of departure. There is a very, very short sequence in that film - right after the three images of the girl sit around the table and draw the key until it comes up knife - when the girl with the knife rises from the table to go towards the self which is sleeping in the chair. As the girl with the knife rises, there is a close-up of her foot as she begins striding. The first step is in sand (with suggestion of sea behind), the second stride (cut in) is in grass, third is on pavement, and the fourth is on the rug, and then the camera cuts up to her head with the hand with the knife descending towards the sleeping girl. What I meant when I planned that four stride sequence was that you have to come a long way - from the very beginning of time - to kill yourself, like the first life emerging from the primeval waters. Those four strides, in my intention, span all time. Now, I don't think it gets all that across - it's a real big idea if you start thinking about it, and it happens so quickly that all you get is a suggestion of a strange kind of distance traversed.... which is all right, and as much as the film required there. But the important thing for me is that, as I used to sit there and watch the film when it was projected for friends in those early days, that one short sequence always rang a bell or buzzed a buzzer in my head. It was like a crack letting the light of another world gleam through. I kept saying to myself, "The walls of this room are solid except right there. That leads to something. There's a door there leading to something. I've got to get it open because through there I can go through to someplace instead of leaving here by the same way that I came in." 11

The 'self' portrayed in Meshes Of The Afternoon is a very uncertain one, its fragmentation shown by the simultaneous presence of several different images

of the central character (Maya Deren herself). The death at the end of the film seems to indicate, rather than the actual death of the heroine, the death of one aspect of her personality.

Maya Deren's next film was At Land (1944). It has been called a trance film, and its meaning dismissed:

"Trance films in general, and At Land in particular, tend to resist specific interpretation."



At Land may in some ways be a trance film, but as Maya Deren herself said, it relates much more to the conflicts between its central character, again played by Maya Deren, and external society. At Land begins the process, carried much further in Ritual In Transfigured Time, of examining archetypal symbols which have been used to define the feminine. At the beginning, Maya Deren is washed up at the edge of a sea whose waves roll backwards; born out of the sea, at the end of the film she returns to it. She leaves the safety of the sea, a conventional symbol of the female and the womb, 12 and also of the subconscious inner world of dreams and imaginings, and is 'at land' in the external world. She climbs very deliberately over rocks and into a tree, and is then seen crawling slowly up the centre of a long banqueting table on either side of which sit men and women who have just finished eating. She is completely invisible to them; they continue smoking and chatting as she inches her way up the table. Here, then, is society, and the woman who was born out of the sea is an invisible outsider in it. At the head of the table two men are playing chess, a traditional and potent symbol of patriarchal processes of power and domination. She steals a pawn and then flees back into the landscape, her interior world, clutching the chess-piece, the symbol of the power of the external world. Perhaps the pawn, the lowliest piece in the game, also represents herself. She

loses the pawn and finds it again several times. She speaks with a man who becomes a series of different men; again representatives of society with which she is at odds. Then the images of the film are repeated in reverse order; she again steals a pawn from a chess game and as she does so is watched by images of herself from earlier scenes of the film. At the end of the film she walks slowly over a long series of sand dunes, returning eventually to the sea (from which she first came) in the far distance, like a gentle tide going out. Throughout the film she is invisible to the characters from the external world which she is trying to understand and come to terms with.

In At Land Maya Deren uses symbols, in particular the sea and certain kinds of landscape, which have frequently been associated with the feminine, but instead of using them to define a patriarchal notion of the feminine which is conventionally used to restrict women, she uses them to provide a very opening questioning of the feminine. She at once points out the conflicts between her own inner (female) experience and external society and also goes beyond that personal experience to raise wider questions about the nature of 'femaleness' and how it relates to and is in conflict with patriarchal society. At Land certainly has many layers of meaning but does not 'resist specific interpretation'.

Maya Deren said of Ritual In Transfigured Time

"Ritual is about the nature and process of change." 13

This film, for me, begins to express concepts of a female psyche and sexuality which run counter to the conventional ones. Most writers have recognised that the film is concerned with "a sexual rite of passage" and Maya Deren called this the transformation from "widow into bride". The film is rich in mythological references and symbolism. Frequently these references are taken out of their original context and the film-maker adds her own layers of meaning.

At the beginning of the film a woman (played by Maya Deren) stands in a double doorway which opens into two rooms. Here she is referring to myths from various cultures where goddesses/wise women, most notably the Roman goddess Cardea, stand on the threshold between past and future and are able to see into and affect both. The woman moves away into one of the rooms and returns with a skein of wool. She beckons and a second woman, called by Maya Deren "the widow" enters, dressed in black and walking as if in a trance, and begins to wind the wool from the first woman's hands into a ball. A third woman enters by another door. The group is now complete. Many myths describe a group of three women or goddesses, or a goddess with three different aspects, often representing the three phases of the lunar cycle. Amongst the most well known are the Fates and the Graces of Greek mythology, the Irish goddess Brigit, and the Near Eastern Ishtar or Astarte, both of whom had three different aspects. The analogy with the three Fates is particularly strong, as the Widow winding wool refers back to the Fates spinning, measuring and cutting the thread of life. The image of the woman spinning, weaving, knitting or winding thread is an archetypal one found in most cultures. In addition to depicting work that women in most cultures do, perhaps it describes a way of thinking and living quite

unlike the rational, "objective", patriarchal way of cause and effect; rather a weaving together of life's events, of mind, body, logic, and emotions into some kind of whole. It is certainly a powerful image; one which it is difficult to render harmless. The woman holding the skein of wool drops it, raising her arms above her head in a gesture found in art from very many different cultures and societies: paintings of Egyptian women giving birth have their arms raised in this gesture, as do Near Eastern carvings of priestesses of Astarte and other goddesses of the region (c. 3000-500 B.C.) and Cretan, Mycenaean and Archaic Greek representations of women. The gesture is always a triumphal one expressing strength.

The scene shifts to a party where a group of people are dancing. Here a small number of repeated shots are used, with slow-motion and freeze-frames, so that their dance consists of a small number of repeated gestures. The Widow wanders hesitantly through this dance, and the dancers are unconcerned at her presence, even though her appearance is very different from theirs. This scene is very reminiscent of the banquet scene in At Land and refers to the Widow's separateness from the rest of society (the dancers). Here, though, the dancers are far less threatening than the banqueters in At Land, and the Widow at times joins in the dance, unlike the central character in At Land, who does not interact with the banqueters. Often three female figures (again the Fates, the Graces, a triple goddess) are present together amongst the dancers. A young man follows the Widow through the dance. He confronts her and the scene changes to an open landscape where the Widow and the man dance. Behind them the three Fates/Graces/goddesses are again visible, also dancing. The Widow flees the sexual union implied by the dance with the man. After a long pursuit by the man, during which the man is transformed into a statue which periodically comes to life and dances, the Widow, just as she is about to be caught, leaps into the sea. As she does so, the film becomes negative, so that the Widow wearing black becomes a white 'Bride' (Deren's own explanation). The sea here has presumably the same meanings as it did in At Land. The woman has returned to the sea, the domain of instinct and the unconscious and the female. Perhaps she has married the sea; perhaps a part of herself has returned to it to be reborn. It seems that in Ritual In Transfigured Time all the different characters represent complementary and conflicting aspects of the personality which have to be reconciled with each other. Here then, the dancers at the party are not only external society but also the part of the central character's personality which is concerned with the external world. The young man who pursues her is also an aspect of herself, as is the wise woman with the wool.

The film can also be read as describing, not only in its events but in its very structure, the repeated cyclical nature of some aspects of female experience. The three Fates/Graces/Goddesses, as previously noted, refer to the lunar cycle which can be equated with women's menstrual cycles, as can the sea to which the Widow returns with its moon-governed tide cycles.

"Ritual is about the nature and process of change"; women's bodies continually remind them of cyclical change and renewal. These meanings are implicit in the film and can inform a feminist reading of it now.

All these areas which Maya Deren deals with are ones which women are beginning to re-examine, in film and other visual work and in their writing. Her awareness of these archetypal images and their values is relevant to film-makers now, particularly women working with questions of personal and sexual identity, and how these are defined and directed by the society we live in. I have identified a few of the many issues raised by Maya Deren's work here. Look at the work for yourself; there is a wealth of meaning there to be re-examined.

I would like to thank Lis Rhodes and Felicity Sparrow for their help and encouragement, and Lis for the generous loan of some of Maya Deren's original publications, and Helen James at Exeter College of Art and Design Library for her help with research.

Footnotes

1. Maya Deren: 'Statement of Principles', reprinted in Film As Film (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979)
2. Lucy Fisher in 'A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema' (American Federation of Arts, 1976)
3. Philip Drummond in Film As Film, *ibid.*
4. Simone de Beauvoir: The Second Sex (Penguin)
5. See P. Adams Sitney: Visionary Film (Oxford, 1974)
6. Maya Deren: letter to James Card, 1955, reprinted in Film Culture No.39 (Winter, 1965)
7. P. Adams Sitney, *ibid.*
8. Maya Deren, quoted by Sitney, *ibid.*
9. Sheldon Renan: Underground Film (Studio, 1967)
10. Maya Deren, quoted by Sitney, *ibid.*
11. Maya Deren, letter to James Card, *ibid.*
12. Andre Cirlot: A Dictionary of Symbols (Routledge, 1971)
13. Maya Deren: letter to James Card, *ibid.*

Some Biographical Details

Maya Deren was born in Kiev in 1917. Her father was a psychiatrist. (I can find no information about her mother) and she emigrated with her family to America in 1922. She was educated at the League of Nations school in Switzerland and at Syracuse and New York universities. She wrote poetry and was involved in modern dance, although she never had any formal dance training. While researching a book on modern dance she met Alexander Hammid whom she married in 1942. Hammid was a professional film-maker and worked with her on her first film, Meshes Of The Afternoon (1943), which they shot in two weeks in their own home using borrowed equipment. Five of her other films (At Land, A Study in Choreography for the Camera, Ritual In Transfigured Time, Meditation on Violence, and the uncompleted Witches Cradle) were made in the 1940s, and one other, The Very Eye of Night, followed in the 1950s. In 1947 she was awarded the first Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship for work in 'creative motion pictures' and went to Haiti to film Voodoo rituals and dances. During this visit she became very personally and emotionally involved in voodoo and this led to her writing a book on Haitian Voodoo, The Divine Horsemen which is still regarded as an important work on the subject. She worked on a film of the same name about Voodoo which she never completed but which was edited after her death by her ex-husband, Teiji Ito. Maya Deren was the first American avant-garde film-maker. She worked ceaselessly to organise and establish facilities and funding for the independent film movement which subsequently grew up in America. She founded the Creative Film Foundation and her work led ultimately to the establishment of the Film-makers Co-op in New York. She wrote numerous theoretical and technical articles for film magazines and in 1946 published a pamphlet: "Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film." She died following a brain haemorrhage in 1961.

Statement of Principles

Maya Deren

My films are for everyone. I include myself, for I believe that I am a part of, not apart from humanity; that nothing I may feel, think, perceive, experience, despise, desire or despair of is really unknowable to any other man.

I speak of man as a principle, not in the singular nor in the plural.

I reject the accountant mentality which would dismember such a complete miracle in order to apply to it the simple arithmetic of statistics - which would reduce this principle to parts, to power pluralities and status singularities, as if man were an animal or a machine whose meaning was either a function of his size and number - or as if he were a collector's item prized for its singular rarity.

I reject also that inversion of democracy which is detachment, that detachment which is expressed in the formula of equal but separate opinions - the vicious snobbery which tolerates and even welcomes the distinctions and divisions of

differences, the superficial equality which stalemates and arrests the discovery and development of unity.

I believe that, in every man, there is an area which speaks and hears in the poetic idiom... something in him which can still sing in the desert when the throat is almost too dry for speaking.

To insist on this capacity in all men, to address my films to this - that, to me, is the true democracy...

I feel that no man has a right to deny this in himself: nor any other man to accept such self debasement in another, under this guise of democratic privilege.

My films might be called metaphysical, referring to their thematic content. It has required milleniums of torturous evolution for nature to produce the intricate miracle which is man's mind. It is this which distinguishes him from all other living creatures, for he not only reacts to matter but can meditate upon its meaning. This metaphysical action of the mind has as much reality and importance as the material and physical activities of his body. My films are concerned with meanings - ideas and concepts - not with matter..

My films might be called poetic, referring to the attitude towards these meanings. If philosophy is concerned with understanding the meaning of reality, then poetry - and art in general - is a celebration, a singing of values and meanings. I refer also to the structure of the films - a logic of ideas and qualities, rather than of causes and events.

My films might be called choreographic, referring to the design and stylization of movement which confers ritual dimension upon functional motion - just as simple speech is made into song when affirmation of intensification on a higher level is intended.

My films might be called experimental, referring to the use of the medium itself. In these films, the camera is not an observant, recording eye in the customary fashion. The full dynamics and expressive potentials of the total medium are ardently dedicated to creating the most accurate metaphor for the meaning.

In setting out to communicate principles, rather than to relay particulars, and in creating a metaphor which is true to the idea rather than to the history of experience of any one of several individuals, I am addressing myself not to any particular group but to a special area and definite faculty in every or any man - to the part of him which creates myths, invents divinities, and ponders, for no practical purpose whatsoever, on the nature of things.

But man has many aspects - he is a many-faceted being - not a monotonous one-dimensional creature. He has many possibilities, many truths. The question is not, or should not be, whether he is tough or tender, and the question is only which truth is important at any given time.

This afternoon, in the supermarket, the important truth was the practical one; in the subway the important truth was, perhaps, toughness; while later, with the children, it was tenderness.

Tonight the important truth is the poetic one.

This is an area in which few men spend much time and in which no man can spend all of his time. But it is this, which is the area of art, which makes us human and without which we are, at best, intelligent beasts.

I am not greedy. I do not seek to possess the major portion of your days.

I am content if, on those rare occasions whose truth can be stated only by poetry, you will, perhaps, recall an image, even only the aura of my films.

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

Reprinted in 'Women and Formal Film'
from Film As Film (Arts Council of
Great Britain, 1979)

A translation of an extract from P. Adams Sitney "Tableau Historique"
in Une Histoire du Cinema (Pompidou Centre, 1976)

When Maya Deren re-worked this suspended temporality, she bore in mind the status of the camera within cinematographic metaphors on reflection. She did not proceed, as Vertov did and many others were on the point of doing during the '60s, by inserting film equipment in the images of the film. Her first films - and her best - instead deal with temporal and spatial complexities of the 'I' in the cinema. In Meshes of the Afternoon which she made with her husband...there is a moment when, once the heroine (played by herself) is asleep, she dreams that she sees herself. She stands before a large window, gazing on a brilliant Californian landscape, her hands resting on the glass. A counter shot taken from the exterior shows her hair enmeshed with the reflections of trees out of frame, her hands which define the barrier of the glass and her absorbed look, almost narcissistically turned toward the interior. The editing will establish that she is looking at herself, through the glass, re-enacting with a symbolic displacement the entrance into the house which preceded her sleep. Here, the window, in terms of a metaphor for cinematographic representation, has neither the anamorphic presence of the deforming lenses of Man Ray nor the quality of being a barrier as in the window of Chien Andalou; rather it functions as a mirror.

For Deren and, later on, for most of the American independent film-makers who were to follow her, cinema is essentially a reflexive activity. In many '40s films the reflexive relationship between the subjectivity of the author and the self represented in the film finds itself mediated simply by the fact that the film-maker goes to the other side of the camera and becomes her own principal actor. Deren proceeded in this way in three of her first four films. Nevertheless, more significant than this elementary transformation of fiction into psychodrama is the elaborated structure of metaphors as a means through which these films comment on the problematic status of their images and of their temporal structures. In Meshes of the Afternoon, the metaphor of the mirror possesses a whole morphology; the author pursues a black silhouette which we discover has a mirror for a face; at the culminating moment of the film, a knife, which had already appeared menacingly several times, reflects her face just before she plunges it into that of her lover; it turns out eventually that she has not perpetrated this violent attack by stabbing him in the flesh but in his reflection in another mirror. Throughout the works of Deren the cinematographic image has the fragility of a reflection in a mirror.

In At Land, the temporal status of the images is elaborated more meticulously. In this film, Deren represents herself as if projected onto the sand by the withdrawing sea. Once on the breakwater she begins an investigation, in several contrasting landscapes, ostensibly in search of a stable sexual identity. As she goes from one landscape to the next, the compositions and the allusions to a space off-frame are co-ordinated in such a way that these disparate spaces appear continuous. In fact, in Choreography a film in its entirety is born from this principle: the arabesques, the pirouettes, the jumps of the dancer, taking place in completely different spaces, are presented as a continuous gesture. Implicit in such spatial paradoxes is the admission of a temporal disjunction between the time of shooting and the time of presentation. In At Land, this disjunction becomes thematic towards the end of the film. There is a back-to-front recapitulation of the main scenes of the film and, within each, the look of the heroine is turned to

outside the frame. Between each of the repeated movements the author inserts a new shot, showing the same heroine in almost the same position which the camera should have occupied in order to take the preceding shot. Thus, a look turned out of frame links the two versions of the same spatial field in an illusionary exchange of looks. Here, she has not only inserted the metaphor of the mirror in a formal mechanism, but she has equally made apparent the temporary omniscience of the camera and opened the way for a final image which brings a culminating metaphor of the problematic of cinematographic representation. The shot begins with a pan of her feet running on the beach where we saw her at the beginning of the film; while the camera pans from her footstep to her silhouette, she crosses a distance much longer than she could have done during the time taken by the camera to pan. Here, by means of the elementary trick which consists of stopping the camera and re-starting it, the temporal instability of the filmic continuity in its most elementary form (within the shot) is demonstrated. In addition, the choice of images is significant. For a footprint constitutes an index (in the tricotomy of C.S. Pierce); that is to say it both signifies the passage of the runner and seems to have been produced by him (sic). The orifice left by a bullet constitutes another index. It is the same for photography. Photography and, consequently, film rarely escape completely from the seduction of the index: in other words to pose as a proposition, at an anterior moment, the phenomenological presence of a camera and its object. The ambiguity of this polarity and its problematic 'presence' in the past constitutes the very theme of the film At Land by Deren.

Maya Deren used to say of herself that she was a classicist, in order to distance her theoretical position at once from that of the Surrealists and those who espoused a graphic cinema (which was for her only a way of painting in film). For her, the essential contribution of cinema consisted in its temporal dimension. That meant, for her, accepting the conventions of spatial representations, fashioned by the demands of the lenses and of the traditional recording apparatuses as constituting the base itself of cinema. She wrote: "If cinema is to be considered as an equal among the other arts, it must cease to be content with recording realities which do not at all depend for their real existence on the instruments of shooting". For example "the objectivity and the clearness of the lense - its precise fidelity to the aspects and textures of physical material - constitutes the first contribution of the camera." Its other contributions, more fundamental, allow one to transfigure temporal structures.

Filmography

- Meshes Of The Afternoon / b/w silent 16mm 12 mins 1943
(UK distributor: Circles)
- At Land b/w silent 16mm 17 mins 1944
(UK distributor: Circles)
- A Study in Choreography for Camera b/w silent 16mm 20 mins 1945
(presently unavailable in UK)
- Choreography for Camera Out-takes b/w silent 16mm 16 mins 1945
(UK distributor: London Film-makers Co-op)
- Ritual in Transfigured Time b/w silent 16mm 20 mins 1946
(UK distributor: British Film Institute)
- Witches Cradle Out-takes b/w silent 16mm 10 mins,
uncompleted (UK distributor:
London Film-makers Co-op)
- Meditation on Violence b/w silent 16mm 18 mins 1948
(UK distributor: British Film Institute)
- The Very Eye of Night b/w sound 16mm 15 mins 1958
(unavailable in UK)
- Divine Horsemen b/w sound 16mm 50 mins
(completed after Deren's death
by Teijo Ito) (unavailable in UK)

Selected Bibliography

Maya Deren The Divine Horsemen (Thames & Hudson, 1953)

P. Adams Sitney Visionary Film (Oxford, 1974)

Catalogues:

A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema (American Federation of Arts, 1976)

Film As Film (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979)

Une Histoire du Cinema (Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1976)

Magazines:

"Film Culture" No. 39 (Maya Deren, notes, essays, letters) Winter 1965.