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PAPER #3: Maya Deren

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The lady in the window. When speaking of the experimental director one has no option but to include the rare species of female film makers when invoking the name; Maya Deren. Maya was no one pony show, she indulged in almost every class of art which exist, including choreography, dance, poetry, writing and photography. She used all of these background skills to focus her prowess on the cinema. Unlike her contemporaries Godard and Eisenstein; Mayas’ film style was loose and unchained to the strict lessons the industry attempts to instill. Most of her films were considered to be feminist quality works, only getting playability through that means.

Eleanora Solomonovna Derenkovsky began her journey when her parents were forced to relocate to the U.S. from the pressures of the anti-semitist movement in the Ukraine. Transplanted into the great New York City she started her college life at Syracuse University where she aligned herself on the political fronts. Maya soon left Syracuse to start her undergraduate degree in 1936 at the New York University. Once again she transferred to the Smith College where she completed her Master’s Degree in English Literature and symbolist poetry by 1939. Once her college life was completed Deren was offered the position of assistant to the most famous dancer and choreographer, Katherine Dunham. Maya absorbed the open lifestyle of a traveling nomad while traversing the U.S. touring and performing across the U.S. Once in the early 1940’s while in Los Angeles Deren was introduced to a Alexander Hammid, a Czech filmmaker whom was currently working in Hollywood. With the collaboration of Hammid, Deren produced a most remarkable experimental film named **Meshes of the Afternoon (1943).** This film was a dark mystery so say the least; the turning of the central characters from lovers to killers was a reflection of the uneasy times of the second World War period. To speak of reflections is a misnomer due to the hooded characters own mirrored face covers which only set the tensions to the audience as the players in the film.

Overtaken by the experience of filmmakingthe early 1940’s was a pivotal period in Derens’ life. She returned to New York and married Hammid, the man that inspired her transformation. Deren had switched her career motif from dance to film; changed her name to Maya (a name which had the meaning ‘illusion’, or ‘mother’ and mostly ‘messenger of the Gods’ in Greek”. Now that Deren had a new moniker it was time for her second film release **At Land (1944)**. Deren again proves herself as a both innovator and social commentator. With, At Land; the main character is again played by Maya and does not hold off on the juxtaposition between society and natural freedoms. The scene with the dinner party is most effective in relaying these sociological extremes. Derens’ next three films were just as prominent and “experimental” as her first with ***The Private Life of a Cat (1945) {with Stan Brakhage}).* A Study in Choreography for the Camera (1945), Ritual In Transfigured Time (1946),** and **In Meditation on Violence (1948).** By 1947 Deren won the Cannes Film Festival’s Grand Prix Internationale. The same year she was also awarded a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

In all three of these films Deren uses a playfulness with space and camera position to cast a tangibility to the cameras perspective. Almost as if she wants the camera to become a person. In opposition to the last three films Mayas’ next work **The Very Eye of Night (1958)** was by far both a difficult production and her most misunderstood creation. Made in concert with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School; Deren called this production her ‘ballet of night’ focused on the spectacle rather than the narrative, it was ‘odd’ to speak of experiment.

Deren’s independent exhibitions inspired Amos Vogel’s formation of Cinema 16, a film society that promoted and exhibited experimental films in New York. Nichols argues that, “Deren acted the role of cinematic Prometheus, stealing the fire of the Hollywood gods for those whom the gods refused to recognize.” Deren was a prolific speaker. She would setup viewings of some of her older films and gave speeches as to the motivations and innovations she made use of throughout her film making. In 1943 Deren collaborated with Marcel Duchamp to produce a film called **Witch’s Cradle**, a choreographed set of movements between the figure (played by Duchamp) and the camera. Witch’s Cradle remains unfinished, the film recalling Duchamp’s difficulty with completion.

One of Derens’ last works was a study in VooDoo In 1985. Deren’s third husband Teiji Ito and his new wife Cherel assembled and edited the 18,000 feet of Haitian footage that had remained incomplete since Deren’s death. The footage was spliced together to form an anthropological structure and a voice-over narration was added to clarify the details of the ceremonies. Upon its release, critics expressed reservations that the film was at odds with Deren’s style and contrasted with her original conception of the film.

By the early 1960’s Maya Deren was gone at the age of 41. Speculations concerning the details of her death begin with Stan Brakhage who, in his book **Film at Wit’s End**, speculates that Deren’s death was punishment for her intimate involvement in the Haitian Voudoun ritual. In Martina Kudlacek’s recent video **In The Mirror of Maya Deren**, this notion is coldly dispelled with the dreadful assertion that Deren died of a cerebral hemorrhage due to a combination of malnutrition and a predilection for amphetamines and sleeping pills.

**Notes:**

In 1943 Solomon Deren (Mayas’ father) died and left Maya a small inheritance with which she purchased a second-hand Bolex 16mm camera, which she and Hamid used to make the film Meshes of the Afternoon.

Maya Deren was a key figure in the development of the ‘New American Cinema’. Her influence extends to contemporary filmmakers like David Lynch, whose film Lost Highway (1997) pays homage to Meshes of the Afternoon in his experimentation with narration.

**Sources:**

In The Mirror of Maya Deren (2001) Dir: Martina Kudlacek

Maya Deren Biography from Answers.com

"The Life of Maya Deren," Zeitgeist Films, (January 20, 2003).

<http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/current/mayaderen/mayaderenbio.html>

**Filmography:**

Witch’s Cradle (1943)

Dir: Maya Deren. Cast: Marcel Duchamp, B&W (incomplete)

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943)

Dir: Maya Deren, Alexander Hammid. Screenplay: Maya Deren. Cast: Maya Deren, Alexander Hammid. Music: Teiji Ito. B&W.

At Land (1944)

Dir: Maya Deren. Cast: John Cage, Maya Deren, Alexander Hammid. B&W.

A Study in Choreography for the Camera (1945)

Dir: Maya Deren. Cast: Talley Beatty. 3 mins, silent, B&W.

Ritual in Transfigured Time (1946)

Dir: Maya Deren. Cast: Rita Christiani, Maya Deren. 14 mins, B&W, silent

Meditation on Violence (1948)

Dir: Maya Deren. Cast: Chao Li Chi. Music: Teiji Ito.

The Very Eye of Night (1958)

Dir: Maya Deren. Assistant director: Harrison Starr III. Screenplay: Maya Deren. Music: Teiji Ito.

Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti (1985)

Original footage shot by Deren (1947-1954). Reconstruction by Teiji & Cherel Ito.

Films about Maya Deren:

Invocation: Maya Deren (1987) Dir: Jo Ann Kaplan

In The Mirror of Maya Deren (2001) Dir: Martina Kudlacek