

## マヤ・デレンの映画におけるフェミニズムの言説

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My films are less orthodox than the semi-documentary structure and style of films like *Pull My Daisy* and *Shadows*, which present unorthodox subject matter in an orthodox manner, and appeal to the latent Peeping Tom in the audience.

Maya Deren

Maya Deren, a filmmaker, theorist, lecturer, author, still photographer, and dancer, was a pioneer of American avant-garde cinema. She was the dominant figure of the so-called Post War Experimental Film Movement, and her films had a great impact on the development of the post-war avant-garde called the New Avant-Garde. She was the first woman and the first American to win the International Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in the category of avant-garde, and her films gained international recognition at various film festivals including Brussels, Edinburgh, and Australia. In addition to being a filmmaker, Deren also worked as an organizer and distributor. Creative Film Foundation, which she founded and headed, publicized new authors of independent films and opened the door for young filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage. Brakhage, who was an intimate friend of Deren's, stated in his "Open Letter to Deren" that just after her death James Broughton had proclaimed Deren as "the mother of us all."<sup>1</sup> Maya Deren was indeed the mother of American avant-garde cinema. Her contributions as filmmaker, theorist, and avant-garde activist/propagandist, to the developments of American avantgarde films and independent films can not be overlooked.

Despite her importance both as a filmmaker and theoretician, Maya Deren's films are not widely discussed. It seems that critics are almost unwilling to discuss her films, probably because Deren was a filmmaker who constantly wrote about her own films. However, Deren's writings should not defy the theoretical discussions her films richly

deserve.

Although Deren was one of the most influential woman in the history of cinema, there has been very little discussion about her being a woman filmmaker and there is some reluctance to call her a feminist. Even those who have written about her from a feminist perspective have difficulty in claiming her as such. In the pamphlet published for "A Film Tour RePresenting the Work of Maya Deren" (June 1983, England), Judith Higginbottom states, "In writing about Maya Deren I am seeking to rehabilitate her as a feminist film-maker (She certainly did not see herself as such)."<sup>2</sup> To me it doesn't matter whether or not Deren saw herself as a feminist; critics are free to interpret a work of art as feminist or any thing else even if the artist/author did not intend to. Although Deren never talked about the feminist aspects of her films and never claimed her work as feminist, some important developments of feminist ideology are explicitly present in her films. My intention here is not just "to welcome Deren into a history which recognises the work of women film-makers and importance and strength of their concerns when those concerns differ from those of male film-makers" (Higginbottom),<sup>3</sup> but to claim Maya Deren as a feminist film-maker and her films as feminist counter-cinema, and to examine how woman's discourse and desire construct a filmic enunciation in the work of Maya Deren.

There are several reasons why I see Maya Deren's films as feminist. First, Deren's films (I will discuss three films, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *AtLand*, and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. I will explain why I chose these films later) fit perfectly into the category of counter-cinema--the second among the seven types of described in "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," *Cahiers du Cinema*, October 1969--the film which attacks its "ideological assimilation" explicitly its content and which also attacks the traditional means of representation.<sup>4</sup> Some would argue that the content of these films are not "explicitly political," thus they fall into the type of films which have a radical form but don't have a progressive content. However, I would argue that in these films Deren clearly articulates a woman's voice and woman's discourse, and tries to grant women subjectivity by explicitly attacking the male dominant ideology in the patriarchal culture.

Secondly, Deren's theory supports the notion of feminist counter-cinema contended most strongly by such British feminist film critics as Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey. Feminist counter-cinema is film which attacks not only the sexist and bourgeois ideology in its content but also attacks the traditional code of representation. Claire Johnston argues in her 1973 article, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" (from *Notes on*

*Women's Cinema* ) :

Clearly, if we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of nonintervention is pure mystification-----the 'truth' of our oppression can not be captured on celluloid with the 'innocence of the camera': it has to be constructed / manufactured.-----

The danger of developing a cinema of nonintervention is that it promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis. Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of cinema/ the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected.<sup>5</sup>

Both Johnston and Mulvey spoke against the documentary style. This anti-realist stance was shared by the first issue of *Camera Obscura*, a feminist film journal.

Documentary, in particular, was often seen as an innocent form. We feel that most of these filmmakers fall into the trap of trying to employ an essentially male-oriented bourgeois notion of film-- the notion of film as a window of the world, and have simply chosen to shoot out of other windows than did most filmmakers before the women's movement.<sup>6</sup>

In her writings Deren repeatedly argues against the documentary form. In "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film" (in which she criticizes naturalism, realism, surrealism

and documentary among others, and argues for the creation of “mythical”-imaginative-new reality), she states:

I am distressed, for this reason, by the current tendency to exalt the documentary as the supreme achievement of film, which places it, by implication, in the category of an art form-----A work of art is primarily concerned with the effective creation of *an idea*, and involves a conscious manipulation of its material from intensely motivated point of view.

(emphasis by Deren)<sup>7</sup>

Deren’s argument against those who believe that the documentary is the most authentic film form is most severely stated in her columns in the *Village Voice*. In the *Voice* 7/21/60, she called the filmmakers of the “catch-as-catch-can and I hope the camera caught something” school of filming “amateur burglars.”<sup>8</sup> In the *Voice* 6/1/61, in which she criticized the stance of Jonas Mekas, Deren claimed that her films are less orthodox than films like *Pull My Daisy* and *Shadows* which use the sort of cinema-verite style to present an unorthodox subject matter.<sup>9</sup>

The theoretical similarities between Deren and the feminist film critics, such as Johnston and Mulvey, are striking. Johnston, claiming that feminist cinema must be a counter-cinema whose aims are to challenge dominant male bourgeois depiction of reality and to demystify the system of representation, was criticized by a fellow feminist film critic, E. Ann Kaplan for being “too rigid and categorical.”<sup>10</sup> Deren, as an avant-garde filmmaker who was deeply concerned with the perception and representation of reality, can be categorized as a feminist in the most rigorous sense.

Maya Deren’s own political ideology also supports the feminist reading of her films. Because of her somewhat mysterious image, people tend to ignore the political side of Deren and consider her and her films as non-political. However, Deren was a Trotskyist who was actively involved in the Trotskyist youth movement when she was a student in New York and married to her first husband. (In her notebook in 1947, Deren severely criticizes those anthropologists who don’t have a proper knowledge of political science,

especially of Marxism.<sup>11</sup>) Maya Deren was famous for her hatred for the rich. Her rage against the rich came not only from her life-long struggle with poverty but also from her background in Marxist studies. I would argue that her films (and her conviction and commitment to independent films) have a solid political foundation.

Moreover, Deren's interest in mythology and rituals are not without connections with Marxism. To Deren, "the ensemble dancing" of Balinese signals the sense of community, shared goals and collective experiences. In her search for "ritualistic form" and "mythical reality" through her filmmaking, Deren seems to have reconciled her interests in anthropology with her Marxism.

Finally, Maya Deren's mystic image itself has a feminist aspiration. In her notes (March 1, 1947), Deren analyzes the nature of witches and identifies herself with them. She writes, "It is only when one tries to make them (witches) surrender their own order that they put up a fight. It's a matter of not wanting to get pushed around."<sup>13</sup> She sees herself as a part of the race of Lilith (Adam's apocryphal mistress who, rather than abide by his rules, chooses to leave the garden of convention)<sup>14</sup> who, according to Deren, "has all the independence attributes of the witch."<sup>15</sup> She writes in the notes:

---if you carry enough of Lilith's blood in you, to abandon the normal order and partake of the deviant order when you see that it can sustain life in the person of a surviving deviant.<sup>16</sup>

Deren changed her name from name "Eleanora" to "Maya" when she was young. Changing her name was one of her earliest ritual acts, and it was not so much an act of adopting a mystical image, but rather, it was a proclamation of her refusal to accept the "natural" order and given reality. She was a woman who created her own identity out of the nature of her own reality.

In the forty-four years of her life time, Maya Deren completed six films and shot two unfinished films. (her last film, *Divine Horsemen* was completed by her third husband, Teiji Ito.) Deren's filmmaking career can be divided into three different periods. In the initial (and most prolific one), extending from 1943 to 1946, she made four films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). Among these films, *Choreography for Camera* is excluded from the discussion of this essay since it is essentially a film about dance movements.

*Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land*, and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* are related to each other by similar characteristics. For example, they all belong to the same period; they are the only films in which Deren herself appeared. But most of all, they are linked with each other by their feminist themes. We can see some important and consistent developments of feminist discourse in these films. In fact, the link between these films are so strong that they can be seen as a trilogy.

In these films, there is an obvious shift in thematic developments which can be described in many different terms: internal to external; particular to universal; individual to collective; psychological to social/political; personal to "ritual." In her letter to James Card, written in 1955, Deren explains the direction which was taken in her initial creative period:

And looking back, it is clear that the direction was away from a concern with the way things *feel*, and towards a concern with the way things *are*; away from personal psychology towards nerveless metaphysics. I mean metaphysics in the large sense--not as mysticism but beyond the physical in the way that a principle is an abstraction, beyond any of the particulars in which it is manifest.<sup>17</sup>

Then she goes on talking about individual films:

*MESHES* is, one might say, almost expressionist; it externalizes an inner world to the point where it is confounded with the external world. *AT LAND* has little to do with the inner world of the protagonist; it externalizes the hidden dynamic 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. *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.<sup>18</sup>

Deren revealed her direction and intention of her filmmaking in her writings, and the analysis of the shift she gave in her letter is also relevant to the feminist reading of her films.

In her letter to James Card, Deren emphasized her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* as being a point of departure (her intent was obviously to emphasize the fact that her filmmaking had progressed afterwards both technically and thematically). Indeed, *Meshes of the Afternoon* was a beginning from the feminist perspective; it represented the first phase of women's liberation. Deren launched into the area of women's liberation by expressing the hidden psychology of a woman. The film is filled with anguish, rage, fear and frustration inside of a woman whose desperate anger against her man is powerfully expressed through the images of nightmare. Deren writes in the program notes:

The film is concerned with the interior experiences of an individual-----it reproduces the way in which the sub-conscious of an individual will develop, interpret and elaborate an apparently simple and casual incident into a critical emotional experience.<sup>19</sup>

*Meshes of the Afternoon* has been widely considered as psychological and personal. One of the contributing factors of this view is probably the fact that Deren herself played the heroine and her husband, Alexander Hackenschmied (a. k. a. Sasha Hammid) played her husband/lover. Consequently, the film is also considered to be autobiographic. Deren, on the otherhand, strongly detested the psychoanalytic interpretation of the film (She

constantly criticized it in her writings), and the film's being labeled as "personal." Parker Tyler, a film critic/avant-garde propagandist and a friend of Deren's, was the one who totally believed in the private psychology of the film. He writes in his essay, "Maya Deren as Filmmaker," "instinctively, she was right in limiting her vision to personal myth."<sup>20</sup> However, Deren's own intention was far different from Tyler's interpretation. Her purpose of making *Meshes* was to portray an impersonal and "mythological" experience of the sub-conscious. Deren writes in "Chamber Films" :

The intent of this first film, as of subsequent films, is to create mythological experience. When it was made, however, there was no anticipation of a general audience and no experience of how the dominant cultural tendency towards personalized psychological interpretation could impede the understanding of the film.<sup>21</sup>

Deren, being aware of the limitations and level of success (in terms of expressing her real intention) of the first film, writes in the same essay, that Teiji Ito's music, which was added to the film in 1959, underscores and illuminates the original intent of the film because of its impersonal and mythological characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

Despite Deren's intention to create impersonal/mythological reality, the feminist theme in the film stays at a very personal and psychological level, since the film is basically about "the interior experience of an individual." As Deren did not yet turn her eyes on society and outside world, the film is just a starting point as a feminist film. However, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is still very important, since it represents the first phase of women's liberation: the awakening of woman's consciousness.

The film has a complex narrative structure with its use of dream, repetition, variation, double ending and repetitious reoccurrence of various symbolic objects. The symbols, such as the flower, key, knife, telephone, record, mirror, the repetition of stairs, and the blackfigure, are carefully interwoven in the structure of the film. Although Deren was known for her aversion to the Freudian symbolism associated with surrealism, she was aware of the importance of symbolic meaning in her films.<sup>23</sup> She writes in the program notes of *Meshes*:

This film-----is still based on a strong



literary-dramatic line as a core, and rests heavily upon the symbolic value of objects and situations.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of their relation to the narrative structure, some symbols are less important than others, but all symbols have significant associations with the film's feminist theme. For example, the off-the-hook telephone and still-turning record suggest, at the further connotative level, lack or absence of communication between sexes, and the extreme camera angling of the stairs shots (stairs is a popular symbol of instability, insecurity, and danger) emphasizes the growing anxiety, insecurity, fear and frustration inside a woman.

The film opens with a shot in which a thin long hand, holding a flower, reaches down from the top of the screen and places the flower on the road. Then we see a shadow of a woman, the heroine played by Deren. She walks along the road and picks up the flower, and glimpses a black figure disappearing around the curve of the road. She arrives at the house, knocks, tries the door and finds it locked. She takes out of her own key which slips from her hand and falls down the outside stairs in slow-motion. She runs after it and climbs the stairs again to enter the house. When she enters the room, she sees a loaf of bread with a knife in it on the table, and the knife pops out from the bread. She climbs the stairs, passing a telephone on the stairs, and turns off a record player in the bedroom upstairs. Then she returns downstairs, and settles in the chair by the window; she falls asleep. The sequence closes with close-up shots of her closing eye with which the shots of cloudy sky are intercut. In the next dream sequence, this is repeated in different manners.

The feminist theme doesn't emerge until, in the dream sequence, we finally get a full-shot of Deren's face. The sequence begins with a mirror-faced figure (now a tall woman) in black walking with the flower in her hand. The heroine (in dream #1) runs after her. Although the black figure walks slowly, she, who is running, can not catch up with her. She gives up and climbs the stairs to the house. (Here we see her face for the first time.) She enters the house, looks around, and finds objects in changed places. Now the knife is on the stairs. She goes upstairs, enters the bedroom through a gauze curtain. There is a telephone on the bed. She pulls down the covers to find the knife on the bed; she quickly pulls back the covers. Then she comes down the stairs with an unusual difficulty. (Camera dislocates her motion in space with extreme angles in slow-motion.) In the downstairs livingroom, she sees herself sleeping in the chair. Then, through the window, she watches

her other self (#2) chasing the black figure. This second one takes a key out of her mouth. When she enters the room, she sees the black figure climbing the stairs. She follows her to the bedroom where the black figure puts the flower on the bed. She again sees the knife on the bed, and she sees the black figure lying on the bed. Once again through the window, she sees another self (#3) repeating the same actions. Again, the key comes out of her mouth, but this time it immediately turns into the knife in her hand.

In the above sequence, we see the heroine's subconscious begin to emerge-----the process of self-realization. Here, the symbols and their relationships to the dramatic structure and thematic development are extremely important. The heroine (the first Deren in dream) sees her other self (the second) and the second Deren sees the third one through the window. Thus the window is used as a reflector of the self; the heroine sees her inner self and watches her subconscious grow. As the scene progresses, the level of sub/semi-consciousness increases. The first Deren unexpectedly finds the knife on the bed. This is her first encounter with her real (inner) self. The knife, like the window, works as the reflector of the self. She sees her distorted reflection in its blade; she quickly pulls back the covers over the knife. The act of hiding the knife suggests the shock and horror over the recognition and realization of the existence of her inner self.

The second Deren takes her key out of her mouth. Now she is ready to speak; she wants her enunciation, but still has a bit of hesitation. Once in the house, she confronts the black figure (who works as a guide and the motivator for the heroine's self-realization). The woman in black leads the heroine to the bedroom where she, the mirror-faced woman, places the flower that she has been carrying on the bed. The woman in black looks at the heroine, and the heroine shouts at her. She sees the knife on the bed. Then she sees the woman lying on the bed. Later in the climactic scene, the heroine lies on the bed just before she stabs her lover. The weapon is the flower-turned knife. Obviously, there is a certain parallel between these two scenes (e. g. woman lying on the bed; the flower and the knife on the bed). In this earlier bedroom scene, the woman in black challenges the heroine and encourages her revolt; she shows the heroine (or at least gives her a hint) how to revolt. The third Deren takes her key out of her mouth and makes it turn into the knife in her hand. Here, the subconscious becomes finally a consciousness.

In the following scene, the third Deren enters the room with the knife in her hand. There are two other selves sitting at the table, and the sleeping Deren in the chair as well. The third Deren places the knife on the table, which turns into the key. As she sits down, the

sleeping Deren opens her eyes and glances at the other three. The first Deren holds the key in her palm for a moment. The second one does the same. When the third one holds the key in her palm which is painted black, the key turns into the knife. Then she rises up from the table to go towards the sleeping Deren. As she rises up, we see five consecutive close-up shots of her feet on the beach sand, grass, mud, pavement, and the rug. As she is about to kill her sleeping self, she, the real one, wakes up to see her lover who is waking her up with the flower in his hand.

This attempted murder/suicide scene is very important, because it is the scene in which the heroine's consciousness is confirmed and transformed into a weapon against her oppressed self. The three images of the heroine draw the key (the consciousness) until it becomes the knife (the weapon), and as the third one rises up from the table to kill the sleeping self, we see the stride shots. Deren writes about the metaphorical meaning of the shots in her letter to James Card: "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,"<sup>25</sup>

A feminist analysis offers a similar reading of the shots: "you have to come a long way to realize your own oppression, and to kill a part of yourself which accepted that oppression in silence." The third image of the heroine tries to kill her *sleeping* self; at the end of the scene, she literally wakes herself up.

In the following climactic scene, the heroine's consciousness is transformed into an action, and the ultimate action takes place: her revolt against her lover, the main oppressor in her life, carried out as an act of murder.

He puts the receiver back on the phone and goes upstairs; she follows him. In the bedroom, he is standing beside the bed and his face is reflected in the shaving mirror---- (suggests male narcissism). She lies on the bed; he sits beside her and slowly caresses her chest. We see a close-up of her lips-- (emphasizes her sexuality). Suddenly, the flower, which is laid beside her on the bed, becomes the knife. It should be emphasized that just after he shows his interest in her (and treats her) as a sexual object, the flower (a symbol of femininity and female sexuality) turns into the knife which she uses as the weapon to kill him. Here the idea of women's objectification is severely criticized.

She grabs the knife and stabs him in the face which turns out to be a mirror. The mirror breaks and we see an image of the sea in the place of his face. The mirror glass falls on the lip of the ocean. Here, the critique of "woman as the other" is rendered with the impressive use of the mirror. By stabbing his face which happens to be a mirror, the heroine destroys

her reflector, her lover, through which she has recognized her own existence. So the murdering of the lover means her denial of her life as the reflection of the man. It is thus a strong refusal of her existence as the "other." Simone de Beauvoir, back in 1949, discussed her existentialist view of woman's lack of subjectivity in her book, *The Second Sex*, which is particularly relevant to the analysis of this scene. She argues:

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being---And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called "the sex," by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex--absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Absolute--She is the Other.<sup>26</sup>

The murder in the scene has two meanings at different levels. First, at the literal level, it is the killing of the man, the oppressor, who has exploited her sexuality. The second meaning is, the metaphorical one, added by the displacement of the man's face by the mirror, the killing of herself as the "other." Thus, the act of murder can be seen as suicide.

In the last scene, we see the heroine's lover walking on the road. He arrives at the house and finds her dead in the chair. The film ends with a shot of the heroine with a slit throat and a broken glass in her hand. The double ending of the film implies the same action/meaning as the one which is expressed in the end of the dream sequence: the killing of the oppressed self. Thus, although the ending of the film appears to be pessimistic, gloomy, and darkly self-destructive, and at a shallow level of reading, it can be read as a kind of regression, its true meaning is liberative, because it indicates the end of heroine's psychological and emotional submission to the man. Here, death works, in a profoundly metaphorical way, as emancipation. The heroine's death in *Meshes of the Afternoon* signals the end of her submissive state and the new beginning of her liberated self.

In Maya Deren's second film, *At Land*, the heroine's awareness is developed into the second phase of women's liberation; its concern has moved to the external world from the internal world. In another words, the personal/psychological revolt in *Meshes of the Afternoon* is transformed into the socially conscious one in *At Land*; the film has, unlike the previous film, various human relationships and activities in external society. Deren described *At Land* as "An individual's struggle to preserve personal identity in the volatile universe."<sup>27</sup> Clearly the central concern of the film is the conflicts ("the dynamic relationship" in Deren's words) between a woman and the outside world, the male-dominant society.

*At Land* begins where *Meshes of the Afternoon* ends. The woman washed out of the backward rolling wave of the sea in the very beginning of the film is, in a way, the same woman who died in the end of *Meshes of the Afternoon*. The heroine of *At Land* (played by Deren again) has just been born out of the sea. Here, it should be mentioned that in Deren's films, the imagery of the sea, the symbolic system of the female and the womb, is used to express death, birth, and rebirth. In *Meshes*, it is death; in *At Land*, it is birth and rebirth; in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, it is death and rebirth (transformation) that the sea represents. For Deren, the imagery of the sea signifies the mythical power of metamorphosis. Unlike *Meshes of the Afternoon*, in which we don't see the heroine's face till the second sequence, there are several full shots of the heroine, including four close-up shots of her face, in the beginning of *At Land*. This suggests that the heroine has already discovered her personal identity in the very beginning of the film; she is the liberated heroine of *Meshes* reborn out of the sea.

The heroine rises from the beach sands to go toward the dead tree on the shore. She begins to climb the tree and her climbing movement is intercut by the shots of a banquet scene. She crawls along the length of a banquet table without being noticed by the people around her. Her crawling on the table is also intercut with the shots of her walking through a jungle of vegetation. These intercutting shots are some of the most evocative visual images Maya Deren ever created, which happen to have a profound metaphorical meaning as well. Technically, this is the scene in which Deren's experiment in time and space is carried out most effectively. By relating two unrelated places by a continuous movement of the character, she succeeded in creating "the identity of movement which spans and transcends all time and place."<sup>28</sup>

Thematically, this juxtaposition scene is extremely important, since it perfectly renders

a feminist analysis of the mechanism of patriarchal culture. The juxtaposition of nature and civilization is in other words, the juxtaposition of “women’s world” and “men’s world.” But this “women’s world” is created and defined by men in order to exclude women from their culture. In patriarchal culture, women are defined as “nature,” while men are the “culture.” Thus, the juxtaposition here makes a strong comment on the way patriarchal culture manipulates women so as to confine them to the domain of nature, and ultimately represent women as “cultureless.” This scene is also a critique of the dominant representation / filmic language that often associates women with nature.

This criticism of the male-dominant society is carried out through the rest of the scene in which the heroine, totally invisible to others, crawls to reach the man who is playing chess with himself at the end of the table. The heroine’s desire to participate in the society is expressed through her fascination with chess, a popular symbolic system of power, domination and social institution. After the man leaves the table, she watches the chess pieces which move by themselves. She snatches a pawn, and the pawn falls from the table down through a hole in a rock formation on the beach; it keeps falling along over the rocks until she loses sight of it in a stream of water. Here, the pawn is directly reminiscent of the key in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, that falls down the outside stairs in the first sequence. In *At Land*, the pawn is the key object to symbolize the woman’s desire for social participation.

In the next scene, she is walking on the road, talking with a man who is constantly being replaced by other men. Here, the idea expressed in the previous banquet scene is repeated. It is now confirmed that the real antagonist in the film is--unlike *Meshes of of the Afternoon* in which the heroine’s anger is solely pointed at one particular man--not A man, but the society itself whose patriarchal ideology and male centered social system exploit and oppress women.

The man (the last of the series of four men with whom she has a conversation on the road), played by Alexander Hammid, leads her to a house where he enters through the front door and she enters through under the floor. Once in the house, she finds a moustached man in bed, covered by a white sheet just like the furniture around him. She looks at him in astonishment. She tries to get out of the house which seems to have numerous doors. The fifth door she opens leads her to the top of the beach rocks. This scene is an interesting social allegory: the woman is led by a man to a house; she follows the conventional rules of the society and enters her “domestic” place (the man is played by Deren’s husband, Hammid). In the house she finds a moustached man in bed, who is the symbolic figure of

patriarchy. She realizes this place is not what she wants. She tries to find the exit, but the house has too many doors. She struggles to get out of the situation which was forced upon her by men. Finally she opens the right door and goes back to the place she can be free, the place she was born, the sea shore.

Now standing on the top of a rock, she jumps towards another rock, then comes down on the beach. She walks over the sand dunes. Then she desperately, but with no real interest, picks up the stones on the beach. (Here, we feel her frustration; she is beginning to lose her patience.) Then she notices something truly interests her; she drops all the stones she has been gathering in her arms. She sees two women playing chess and talking to each other in a friendly fashion. She joins them. She caresses the other women's hair; they smile enchantedly. Then she steals the pawn from the game, and as she does so, she is watched by three women, including herself.

In this sequence, Deren breaks the social code of patriarchal culture by presenting a female-bonding ritual, the heroine's caressing of other women's hair. The social and sexual implications of this scene are markedly significant. In the patriarchal society, women are not allowed to have intimate relations with each other, while men are not only allowed to do so, but are also encouraged to have strong male bonds that will become the solid foundation of society. The patriarchal culture exploits women by denying female bonds, including friendships. It should be pointed out that the heroine finally acquires what she has been searching for, her independence and the right to social participation (signified by the pawn) that was denied in the earlier scene, through her encounter with other women who are already independent participants in society (signified by the chess game they are playing).

In the following sequence, we see her running "through the times that have both occurred before and are still occurring."<sup>29</sup> As she flees with the pawn, she is watched by images of herself from the earlier scenes in reverse order, images from the beach, the rock, the dunes, the vegetation jungle, the banquet table, and the dead tree. (In the banquet scene, we see the two images of herself looking at each other.) By recounting the process of the heroine's experiences, Deren emphasizes her change/progress and the significance of her newly acquired, still growing, social consciousness. In *At Land*, the heroine not only "struggles to preserve her personal identity," but also tries to establish her independence in society. The ending of the film, in which she walks over the sand dunes (disappearing, reappearing, and diminishing in size among the dunes), gives a sense of satisfaction, and

hopefully indicates a new beginning for women.

In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren develops both the stylistic and thematic elements of her previous films further to a point where she establishes her cinematic style, the 'ritualistic' form (She called her film 'classicist' which she included in the ritualist form) through which she renders a mythical reality. In "Anagram of Ideas on Art Form and Film," Deren states:

Above all, the ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole which, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endows its parts with a measure of its larger meaning.<sup>30</sup>

Deren also refers to the ritualistic form in "Chamber Films":

----just as ritual--which depersonalizes by the use of masks, voluminous garments, and homogeneous group movements--fuses all individual elements in to a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that, in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren expresses an idea of collective purpose and communal effort through its ritualistic form. (In *Ritual*, the film technique itself contains a meaning which can be political--e. g. "the movement created by the film instrument transcends the intentions and the movements of the individual characters."<sup>32</sup> --Deren) It is the film in which Deren's claim that "the form is meaning" is most effectively



executed, and it is also her most ambitious attempt to integrate her interest in anthropology and her political ideology.

The film opens with a woman (played by Deren) standing in a double doorway with a scarf in her hand. The woman moves away from the left doorway (one of two visible rooms) to the other and returns with a skein of woolen yarn. Then the second woman, “the widow” (played by Rita Christiani) enters the scene. She is a black woman dressed in black, wearing a scarf just like the first woman. She walks into the doorway on the right side with her hands out before her. She sits before the first woman and begins to make a ball from the yarn. The first woman cheerfully sings, laughs and chants in slow-motion. Then the widow notices the third woman, standing by another door. She beckons the widow; the first woman disappears. The widow walks towards the third woman.

In *At Land*, Deren introduced social and political information, such as class and patriarchy, by using symbolism and metaphor from a feminist/Marxist point-of-view. In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, she adds a new political and social dimension to her filmmaking by using a black woman for the role of heroine, thus inevitably introducing a racial issue (both political and anthropological) as the central focus of the film.

In presenting three women characters, Deren refers to Greek mythology. They are the Fates/the Graces, and they represent three different aspects of a woman, yet they are independent of each other. The link between the first woman and the widow is especially strong. They both dress in black; they both wear scarves, and most importantly, they work together: the widow winds the yarn from the first woman’s hands into a ball. Joined by the string, they work together for the same purpose. In *At Land*, the heroine encounters other women, but she never really interacts with them. Here in the opening sequence of *Ritual*, the solidarity between two women are established and emphasized by the act of winding the yarn, an archetypal female labor. The idea of solidarity among women is also reinforced in that the two women are two different aspects of the same woman. Here, gender transcends the racial difference.

In the next sequence, the widow enters a room, guided by the third woman into a party scene. She is wearing a cross and hood which later disappear. She hesitantly wanders through the crowd which move repeatedly in the same pattern. (The movements of the crowd are repeatedly suspended in a freeze-frame.) The other two women are also present in the scene. The third woman waves and smiles towards her. A young man (played by Frank Westbrook) notices the widow and pursues her. When they meet, coming face to face

like a dancing couple, the scene cuts away to an open landscape where they are posed exactly as they were at the party.

In this party sequence, Deren fully realizes her choreographic concepts of stylized movements. She created a dance movement out of non-dancing elements--the casual gesture and ordinary movements of the whole group of people. (The people at the party are all non-dancers except Christiani and Westbrook.) Their smiling, embracing and movements towards others are repeated, emphasized, and ultimately heightened into highly stylized dance movements. Deren writes about the scene:

Taking this general theme as the choreographic motif of a party sequence, I have joined together a shot of one person beginning a movement and other person continuing it and still another completing it. These shots are held together not by the constant identity of an individual performer, but by the emotional integrity of the movement itself, independent of its performer.<sup>30</sup>

Here, the movement itself becomes an idea, contributing to Deren's notion of depersonalized reality.

In the next sequence in an open field, the widow and the man dance together. (Their duet is a metaphor of sexual intercourse.) He is now bare to the waist and feet are bare, too. Behind them, three women (the Graces) are dancing; one of the Graces is the third woman. While the man is dancing with one of the Graces, the widow turns into the first woman, now wearing a white scarf. She looks at the man who is dancing with the third woman. The widow walks away alone. (She flees the sexual submission.) She comes to the gate, enters, and finds the man transformed into a statue. She is terrified at the sight of it. As she flees, the statue gradually comes to life in slow-motion with several freeze frames. He pursues the widow in ballet leaps in slow-motion, passing the third woman who is standing by the pillar. As she runs into the sea, the widow turns into the first woman who runs with hands lifted (just like the heroine in *At Land*). The man has now given up the chase; he just watches her sinking into the sea from behind the pillar. As she sinks into the water,

we see the widow in negative; her weed is now a white bridal gown. The metamorphosis from the widow into the bride is completed. The film ends with a close-up of her face.

In this last sequence, there are some significant implications from which we can draw some of the important feminist issues. First, the complex representation of the male dancer, who becomes the leading character in this sequence, can be read at one level as an critique of women's representation in cinema. He is partly represented in a way similar to that in which women often have been represented in dominant films, that is, as spectacle. First, he is a dancer (traditional female role) and also he is bare to the waist. His dance scene becomes a glorification of physical beauty, thus presenting his body (implies androgynity as well as masculinity) as spectacle. However, he never becomes the object of women's desire as women often do for men in dominant cinema, despite his superficial similarities to them. On the contrary, his appearance, which indicates narcissism and exhibitionism, emphasizes his status as a symbolic figure of male power. Thus the terror the heroine feels when she sees the statue of the man is two-fold. At one level, the statue signifies the oppressive authority of male domination, on the other, it signifies for her the vulnerable position of woman who easily becomes a silent object. Unlike the man who can pose as a statue and still remains in the position of power, she can not run a risk of becoming a spectacle, a being without language. Thus she tries to escape from the possible danger by running away from him.

In the following pursuit scene, in which the heroine runs full speed in fear, the notion of woman's colonization is emphasized by the fact that she is played by a black woman. Her fear of being caught by the man signals the profound resistance against the black women's colonization by white men. (Thus the scene also can be read as a criticism of the colonization of the third-world culture by white imperialism.) The kind of feminism claimed here is not just an individual emancipation but the de-colonization of all women.

*Ritual in Transfigured Time* is, due to the presence of the colonized culture (the black race), the most political and most anthropological film of the three films discussed here. It is also the most advanced and perfected feminist film of Deren's, for its political multiplicity and its profound integration of many different aspects of women's issues. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren argued for the psychological emancipation of women; in *At Land*, she demanded women's social participation. In *Ritual*, Deren brought all the psychological, biological/sexual, social, political, and cultural elements of women together, and contended for a kind of universal feminism which would bring all women together, despite class

or racial differences. The widow's metamorphosis into a bride in the end of *Ritual* can be read as the final transformation of a woman from the oppressed to the truly liberated (in comparison to the woman's rebirth out of the sea in the beginning of *At Land*), which is indeed a great "inversion towards life."<sup>34</sup>

Finally, it is important to examine the meaning and the mechanism of myth and ritual in her films. Deren uses the stylistic characteristics of myth as her basic techniques. Claude Levi-Strauss writes in "The Structural Study of Myth" :

--the question has often been raised why myths-----are so much addicted to duplication, triplication or quadruplication of the same sequence. If our hypotheses are accepted, the answer is obvious: repetition has as its function to make the structure of the myth apparent-----Thus, a myth exhibits a "slated" structure which seeps to the surface, if one may say so, through the repetition process.<sup>35</sup>

Repetition is probably the most frequently used technique in Deren's films. Moreover, the structural developments of her films are similar to those of myth. Levi-Strauss asserts:

Thus, myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has originated it is exhausted. Its growth is a continuous process whereas its structure remains discontinuous.<sup>36</sup>

Since myth is generally viewed as "depoliticized speech"<sup>37</sup> which supports bourgeois ideology, Deren's use of myth and her notion of mythical reality appear to be contradictory to the revolutionary nature of her films. In "Myth Today" Roland Barthes claims:

Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois-

ideology.<sup>38</sup>

It is true that myth, in its distortion and false representation of reality, generally supports the dominant order of capitalism and patriarchal society, and Barthes is right in claiming that “revolutionary language proper can not be mythical.<sup>39</sup>” So inevitably a question rises: why Deren’s films, which are mythical according to Deren, can be defined as counter-cinema that carries a revolutionary ideology.

It seems that Deren adopted the forms of myth and rituals and utilized them for her own purpose, in doing so, she simultaneously demystified the system of representation. For instance, her radical use of symbols challenges the dominant signifying system of patriarchal culture. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the flower is a key symbol which sets the tone of the film and closely associates with the action of the characters. In patriarchal culture, the flower is a signifier for “femininity;” yet in Deren’s film, it becomes the weapon against man. (In the climactic scene, the flower becomes the knife with which the heroine kills her lover.) Thus, Deren’s symbolic use of the flower not only questions the notion of “femininity,” but also attacks the dominant symbolic order in which woman stands as an empty signifier for the male culture.

Maya Deren did not see any contradiction between her interest in mythology/anthropology and her Marxist ideology. It is probably right to say that in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, she successfully combined the two ideologies whose world views are basically very different. Deren defined the concept of myth in her book on Haitian culture, *Divine Horsemen*, as “the fact of the mind made manifest in a fiction of matter.” She was aware of the fictional nature of myth, but she believed in the “fact of the mind” that she could recognize in it and that she could express through her filmmaking. The fact of the mind of Maya Deren, the message her films carried and through which she communicated, was not that of the patriarchal culture. She created her own myth which was oppositional and in that process, she succeeded in demystifying the myth of the dominant order.

Maya Deren’s films speak for women. It is an alternative voice; it is a woman’s voice; it is an essential voice that claims the “collective subjectivity”<sup>41</sup> of women. Her language is complex, it may even appear enigmatic, but when it is spoken against the male-dominant bourgeois culture, it is clear and determined enough to be recognized properly. Maya Deren, a pioneer of American avant-garde, was also a pioneer of feminist cinema, whose films deserve special attention and admiration from all of us who call ourselves feminist.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Stan Brakhage, "An Open Letter to Maya Deren," *Filmwise*, No. 3, p. 13.
- 2 Judith Higginbottom, "'---Sing in the Desert When the Throat Is Almost Too Dry For Speaking'," *Maya Deren*, (Exeter: South West Arts, 1983), p. 1.
- 3 Higginbottom, p. 2.
- 4 Janet Bergstrom, "Rereading the Work of Claire Johnston," *Camera Obscura*, No. 6 (1978), p. 21.
- 5 Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," *Notes on Women's Cinema*, (London: Screen, 1973), p. 28-29.
- 6 "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction," *Camera Obscura*, No. 1 (Fall 1976), p. 59.
- 7 Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, (New York: Arno Press & N. Y. Times, 1946). p. 33.
- 8 Maya Deren, "Notes, Essays, Letters," *Film Culture*, No. 39, (1965), p. 55.
- 9 Deren, *ibid.*
- 10 E. Ann Kaplan, "Aspects of British Feminist Film Theory: A Critical Evaluation of Texts by Claire Johnston and Pam Gook," *Jump Cut*, No. 12/13 (Dec. 30, 1976), p. 52.
- 11 Maya Deren, "From the Notebook of Maya Deren, 1947," *October*. No. p. 26.
- 12 Annette Michelson, "On Reading Deren's Notebook," *October*, No. p. 49-50.
- 13 Deren, Notebook, p. 34.
- 14 Catrina Neiman, "Art and Anthropology: The Crossroads," *October*. No. p. 15.
- 15 Deren, Notebook, p. 34.
- 16 Deren, *ibid.*
- 17 Maya Deren, "Notes, Essays, Letters." *Film Culture*, No. 39, (1965), p. 31.
- 18 Deren. *ibid.*
- 19 Deren, "Notes." p. 1.
- 20 Parker Tyler, "Maya Deren as Filmmaker," *Filmwise*, No. 2. p. 3.
- 21 Maya Deren, "Chamber Films," *Filmwise*, No. 2. p. 39.
- 22 Deren, *ibid.*
- 23 Although it is stated, in Anais Nin's diary (August, 1945), that Deren denied symbolic meanings in *Meshes*, Deren, in her own writing, repeatedly emphasized the significance of symbolism in her films. It seems to me that she detested the Freudian symbolism associated with personal psychoanalytic interpretation, but she valued the importance of symbolism

in general. In her essay, "Efficient" (*Movie Makers*, June .1945), she writes: "In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a number of inanimate objects were of considerable symbolic importance."

- 24 Deren, "Notes," p. 1.
- 25 Deren, "Notes," p. 30.
- 26 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. xviii.
- 27 Deren, "Chamber Films." p. 37-38.
- 28 Deren, "Notes," p. 30
- 29 Deren, "Notes," p. 2
- 30 Deren, *Anagram*, p. 20.
- 31 Deren, "Chamber Films," p. 38.
- 32 Maya Deren, "Ritual in Transfigured Time," *Dance, Screen, Stage*, (December 1946), p. 11-12.
- 33 Deren, "Ritual in Transfigured Time," p. 10.
- 34 Deren's words from "Chamber film."
- 35 Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *The Structuralists From Marx to Levi-Strauss*, ed. Richard and Fernande De George (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 193.
- 36 Levi-Strauss, *ibid.*
- 37 Barthes' words from "Myth Today."
- 38 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 142.
- 39 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," p. 146.
- 40 Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, (New York: Mcpherson & Co., 1953), p. 21
- 41 Deren's words from "A lecture at the Cleveland Museum of Art on April 6th, 1951" *Film Culture*, No. 29, p. 64.