

**Visionary Film:
The American
Avant-Garde 1943–2000,
Third Edition**

P. Adams Sitney

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Visionary
FILM

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*To the memory of Jay Leyda, Jacques Ledoux,
and Adam and Oliver Parry*

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Preface to the Third Edition

THE IDEA OF A THIRD edition of *Visionary Film* began in Paris, where in recent years the American avant-garde cinema has found an enthusiastic audience. Christian Lebrat, the publisher of Paris Experimental editions, proposed to translate the book, together with Pip Chodorov. They urged me to write a new chapter that would survey the field since the issue of the second edition.

In those twenty-one years the American avant-garde cinema has changed dramatically, above all, because of the great numbers of film-makers who continue to work in its inherited genres, to transform them, and to invent new ones. The films of the past two decades are so many and so varied that it would not be possible to discuss, even summarily, the best of them in one supplementary chapter. I have decided, instead, to delineate what I take to be the most important historical and morphological changes within the field. Even under that limitation I do not have the space to deal with individual films in the

detail they are afforded in the rest of the book. Even if I had succumbed to the powerful temptation to write only about the newer films of those artists I had previously treated, I could barely touch upon them. The work of Brakhage alone since 1978 would require at least three chapters for discussion on a scale consistent with the analysis of his work before that date. (I say three chapters simply because that is the number I have drafted in an unfinished book.)

I remain convinced that the most conspicuous absence in *Visionary Film* is the magnificent work of Marie Menken. However, I will not be able to remedy that until I have completed another book on which I have been working for some years. There I shall also attempt to correct my neglect of Ian Hugo's films. Of the film-makers who began to attract attention in the 1970s, Ernie Gehr and Robert Beavers, whom I discussed in the supplementary chapter of the second edition, continue to assert their preeminence with their films of the '80s and '90s. However, with the test of time, my failure to write about some of their contemporaries, particularly Warren Sonbert, Andrew Noren, James Benning, and Peter Hutton, grows more conspicuously short-sighted. Furthermore, although I had acknowledged the power of Yvonne Rainer's films in the second edition, I understood them to be outside of the central, visionary tradition within the avant-garde cinema. A recognition of their sources in Godard and Bergman influenced my judgment. But the directions many of the major avant-garde film-makers of the '80s and '90s explored have proven me wrong: Rainer was the most powerful new influence on a new generation of avant-garde film-makers who did not necessarily share her wariness of the pioneer generation and its culture. Films by James Benning, Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, and Marjorie Keller showed me how central she was and how her achievements were to be reintegrated within a tradition she sometimes disdained.

Lack of space is hardly my only reason for writing in the retrospective chapter largely about film-makers long established and many of whom appeared in the two earlier editions. I can no longer claim the familiarity with the scope of American avant-garde film production I had twenty-five years ago. Since then the tribe of professional observers has bifurcated in the face of such widespread film-making. Those most familiar with the new films of the past twenty years are the programmers and curators, virtually full-time viewers, of avant-garde showcases and museums in a few metropolitan centers. As a professor at Princeton University for the past twenty years, I worked necessarily within the second group, the critics and scholars who see (and teach) far fewer new films and who depend upon the advice and decisions of the programmers in a way that had not been essential twenty-five years before. In this respect, avant-garde film-making has mimicked the situation of the other arts where critics and scholars writing on poetry or painting could not be aware of all of the work published or shown. Readers seeking an appreciation of the achieve-

ments of the most important younger film-makers will have to look elsewhere.

The availability of videotapes of some of the films I had described in detail has allowed me to cut about a twelfth of the second edition by eliminating many elaborate descriptions. That space has been reclaimed by the reintroduction of the chapter on Gregory Markopoulos, thanks to Robert Beavers's generous permission to quote from the film-maker's theoretical writings.

I have liberally incorporated into the first few chapters of this edition passages from my "Introduction" to *The Avant-garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, which is no longer in print; for that text had benefited from the revisionary reflections I had inevitably had after *Visionary Film* was first published.

In rewriting the endnotes, I have tried to indicate fruitful directions viewers may turn for critical discussions that amplify or contest the interpretations I offer here. However, that apparatus is far from exhaustive. The bibliography of the avant-garde cinema in English continues to expand geometrically. I am particularly grateful to the scholars and critics who have noted errors in the earlier editions of this book. I have attempted to correct them here. However, I do not have space to respond to critics who have objected to my fundamental theses or critical methods, but to them too I owe a debt of thanks for stimulating my thought.¹

Owing to copyright restrictions, some non-cinematic art illustrations have been removed from this edition. Some readers may want to consult the first two editions or look up the following works in conjunction with the stills I have included. René Magritte's *La Clef des champs* (1936), *Le Domaine d'Arnheim* (1949), and *La Soir qui tombe* (1964, Menil Collection in Houston, which I had used originally) illustrate his imagery of shattered windows with the exterior image fixed on the shards of glass. These resonate with the sequence from *Meshes of the Afternoon* printed on p. 14. Again, Magritte's *La Condition humaine* (1933), *La Belle captive* (1947, 1948, and c. 1965), and *La Grande Marée* (1951) demonstrate the paradoxes of a frame, which I found relevant to *The Petrified Dog*, p. 60. Any of Willem de Kooning's many *Woman* paintings would provide a parallel to the image from *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*, p. 170, evoking the tension between iconography and broad painterly marks in Abstract Expressionist space. I had used his *Woman with a Green and Beige Background* (1966, now owned by the Grey Art Gallery at New York University). Similarly, Jackson Pollock's *Cut Out* (1948–1950, now owned by the Ohara Museum in Kurashiki, Japan) had paralleled the play of positive and negative space in the strip from *Dog Star Man: Part Three* on p. 207. Wassily Kandinsky's hard-edged abstractions from the 1920s bear a close resemblance to several of Harry Smith's so-called *Early Abstractions*, p. 244. A sequence of four collage pages from Max Ernst's picture novel, *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929), where such sequences are numerous, illustrated

the narrative and digressive quality Smith adopted in his long animated film, *No. 12*. Finally, I had rather arbitrarily chosen Joseph Cornell's *Medici Boy Box* (c. 1953, Fort Worth Museum) to stand next to the image of the woman looking out a window in *A Legend for Fountains*, p. 333, to illustrate the veil of glass Cornell put into play in most of his shadow boxes.

Princeton, N.J.
January 2002

P. A. S.

Preface to the First Edition

WHEN I FIRST CONCEIVED of this book in 1968, it was to have been a short collection of interpretations of a selected number of films made by American independent film-makers. At that time I was taking the International Exhibition of the New American Cinema to a number of European film archives and universities. In the repeated screenings of a large collection of films I was able to become very familiar with the works I wanted to interpret, and in my lectures on those occasions I had an opportunity to refine my ideas. Yet when it came to writing a book, two years later, that original plan expanded into this lengthy study.

The interpretation of individual films spread to the consideration of the whole career of their makers. Then the question of the relationship of one film-maker to another arose. Soon I found my work moving in a direction that could lead to a life-long enterprise, a history and analysis of the American avant-garde film in several volumes, continually to be revised to

encompass new films. At that point I had to clarify my aspirations and define my topic.

The earliest American films discussed here were called "film poems" or "experimental films" when they were first seen. Both names, like all the subsequent ones, are inaccurate and limiting. Of the two, the term "film poem" has the advantage of underlining a useful analogy: the relationship of the type of film discussed in this book to the commercial narrative cinema is in many ways like that of poetry to fiction in our times. The film-makers in question, like poets, produce their work without financial reward, often making great personal sacrifices to do so. The films themselves will always have a more limited audience than commercial features because they are so much more demanding. The analogy is also useful in that it does not put a value on the films in question. Poetry is not by essence better than prose. "Experimental" cinema, on the other hand, implies a tentative and secondary relationship to a more stable cinema.

Both terms fell out of use in the late fifties. In their places arose the "New American Cinema" on the model of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, and the "underground" film, in response to an increased social commitment on the part of certain newly emerging film-makers. Very few film-makers were ever satisfied with any of these labels. "Avant-garde" is itself unfortunate. On the one hand, it implies a privileged relationship to a norm which I do not wish to affirm, and on the other hand it has been used to describe thousands of films which fall outside the scope of this book, some of which are excellent and many of which are very bad. I have chosen to use the term "avant-garde" cinema throughout the book simply because it is the one name which is not associated with a particular phase of the thirty-year span I attempt to cover.

The precise relationship of the avant-garde cinema to American commercial film is one of radical otherness. They operate in different realms with next to no significant influence on each other. In the forties when the first generation of native independent film-makers learned their art, young people could not make films freely within the industry. A long apprenticeship was required and the division of functions (writer, producer, director, cameraman) was jealously protected. In reaction the young American film-makers turned to the European avant-garde tradition. But unlike the painters and poets who had made films in the twenties, they did not stop film-making after one or two efforts when they did not find commercial support. They continued to make films, responding to each other's work and to the forces that were active in American painting, poetry, and dance around them.

The commercial film industry was in fact so conservative that in France a new critical theory was developing in response to the loss of directorial authority in American films. The followers of André Bazin enunciated "*la politique des auteurs*," which sought out the stylistic constants in the films of directors who had to work under factory-like conditions. This critical method was later imported into America as the "au-

teur theory." However there have always been two independent strains in the theory of cinema. One goes back to the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg and includes the writings of other psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers such as Arnheim, Kracauer, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as Bazin, and has tried to understand what constitutes the whole cinematic experience. The other strain includes the theories of film-makers themselves from Delluc and Epstein in France through the great Soviet theoreticians Kuleshov, Vertov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein. They have sought the ideal essence of cinema, and their theories have been concerned with how films should be made. While French and American critics were propounding the auteur theory for the cinema of the forties and fifties, major theoretical writing was being produced by the film-makers within the American avant-garde. Deren, Brakhage, Markopoulos, and Kubelka were defining new potentials for the cinema.

American avant-garde film theory has received even less critical attention than the films. Therefore I have assumed the task of commenting on the major theoretical works of the period, and I have tried to analyze the theoretical stance of those film-makers who have responded in their films if not in their writings to these issues. The selection of film-makers to be discussed here has been guided as much by their commitment to the major theoretical concerns as by my original list of films to interpret.

Just as the chief works of French film theory must be seen in the light of Cubist and Surrealist thought, and Soviet theory in the context of formalism and constructivism, the preoccupations of the American avant-garde film-makers coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract Expressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics. Wherever possible, both in my interpretation of films and discussion of theory, I have attempted to trace the heritage of Romanticism. I have found this approach consistently more useful and more generative of a unified view of these films and film-makers than the Freudian hermeneutics and sexual analyses which have dominated much previous criticism of the American avant-garde film.

In the course of writing, historical patterns emerged which I have allowed to control the structure of the book. I have had to invent a series of terms—the trance film, the mythopoeic film, the structural film, and the participatory film—in order to describe this historical morphology. It is almost too obvious to point out that the film-makers themselves did not think in these categories when they made their films. Many of them will, of course, resist my categorizing them at all.

The thirty-year period which this book covers has seen vast changes in the incidental circumstances of avant-garde film-making and distribution. Many of the film-makers discussed here have been able to earn their living in the past few years as professors of film theory and film-making. This is a function of the increasing interest in this mode of film-making shown by the academic community. Hundreds of colleges now regularly screen avant-garde films; they have become an essential part of the pro-

gram of the nation's few film archives. Literally hundreds of new independent films are made and distributed every year. All this has occurred without any significant influence on the programming of commercial theaters.

Naturally the vast majority of independent films produced in any year are of very low quality, as is the year's poetry, painting, or music by and large. This book does not pretend to be exhaustive of American avant-garde film-making. Nor does it discuss the work of all the most famous and important film-makers. Major figures such as Ed Emshwiller, Stan VanDerBeek, Storm De Hirsch, and Shirley Clarke, to name a few, are not discussed here. This book attempts to isolate and describe the visionary strain within the complex manifold of the American avant-garde film.

New York
January 1974

P. A. S.

Acknowledgments

I BEGAN WRITING

Visionary Film in 1969 for a series of books on cinema conceived and edited by Annette Michelson. Even though its ultimate publication was not in that series, she has consistently encouraged and aided me in every stage of its production. I am deeply grateful for the advice she has given me concerning both the general structure and the details of the book.

Over the same span of time Ken Kelman has been a sounding board for many of the ideas and observations that I had during the time of writing the first edition. His responses are often reflected in this work. Willard Van Dyke and the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art invited me to give a series of lectures in the spring of 1971 where I was able to give the first public presentation of the central theses of the book.

I cannot imagine how this work would have been possible were it not for Anthology Film Archives. In its theater I was able to re-see numerous times the films discussed here, and its vast library of books and documents on the avant-garde cinema

was the foundation of my research. My assistants there, Caroline Angell and Kate Manheim, spent many hours helping me prepare detailed screening notes from which much of the book was written.

Cecily Coddington who typed most of the manuscript suggested many stylistic changes that were incorporated. Jonas Mekas and Steven Koch read and commented on the typed text. For their insights I am grateful. At Oxford University Press my editor, James Raimés, and Leona Capeless were uncommonly helpful common readers of this specialized book. My particular thanks go to Robert Pattison who worked with me through the more than seven hundred-page typescript with exceptional patience.

The more elaborate and complex stills reprinted here were made by Babette Mangolte; other illustrations were provided by Anthology Film Archives, the Stills Archive of the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art, and *Artforum* magazine. Tom Hopkins kindly helped me through the proofreading and Nora Manheim made the index. Georges Borchardt, my agent, helped me in numerous ways.

Julia Sitney, then my wife, convinced me, in 1968 on a train in Norway, that this book should be written. She was consistently encouraging, especially in my most desperate moments.

The intellectual debts of *The Visionary Film* are numerous. There were no times during the writing of it that I was not covetously reading or rereading articles and books by Maurice Blanchot, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man. But my debt to Harold Bloom must be singled out. While I was at my typewriter at least one of his books was always on my desk and in continual use.

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THE COLLABORATION OF Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid shortly after their marriage in 1942 recalls in its broad outline and its aspiration the earlier collaboration of Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel on *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). By a surrealist principle, Dali and Buñuel sought to combine images so that one would bear no logical or rational connection to the next. This principle was not original to the authors of *Un Chien Andalou*, although it never had so rigorous an application in cinema before them. Others, of course, had extended the mechanics of “the Exquisite Corpse” into literature and painting. The Exquisite Corpse, in its purest form, is drawn by a number of persons upon a piece of paper folded so that one can draw the head, another the neck and shoulders, another the trunk, and so on, without any one contributor’s seeing the work of the others. The unfolded paper reveals the synthetic, radically malformed figure—the Exquisite Corpse.

In his first autobiography Dali describes the effect of the film:

The film produced the effect that I wanted, and it plunged like a dagger into the heart of Paris as I had foretold. Our film ruined in a single evening ten years of pseudo-intellectual post-war advance-guardism.

That foul thing which is figuratively called abstract art fell at our feet, wounded to the death, never to rise again, after having seen “a girl’s eye cut by a razor blade”—this was how the film began. There was no longer room in Europe for the little maniacal lozenges of Monsieur Mondrian.¹

Perhaps in 1928 *Un Chien Andalou* looked as indecipherable and shocking as Dali’s account would suggest. I doubt it. Buñuel too has written a note on the film:

In the working out of the plot every idea of a rational, esthetic or other preoccupation with technical matters was rejected as irrelevant. The result is a film deliberately anti-plastic, anti-artistic, considered by traditional canons. The plot is the result of a CONSCIOUS *psychic automatism*, and, to that extent, it does not attempt to recount a dream, although it profits by a mechanism analogous to that of dreams.

The producer-director of the film, Buñuel, wrote the scenario in collaboration with the painter Dali. For it, both took their point of view from a dream image, which, in its turn, probed others by the same process until the whole took form as a continuity. It should be noted that when an image or idea appeared the collaborators discarded it immediately if it was derived from remembrance, or from their cultural pattern or if, simply, it had a conscious association with another earlier idea. They accepted only those representations as valid which, though they moved them profoundly, had no possible explanation. Naturally, they dispensed with the restraints of customary morality and of reason. The motivation of the images was, or meant to be, purely irrational! They are as mysterious and inexplicable to the two collaborators as to the spectator. NOTHING, in the film, SYMBOLIZES ANYTHING. The only method of investigation of the symbols would be, perhaps, psychoanalysis.²

What Dali and Buñuel achieved through this method of compiling a scenario was the liberation of their material from the demands of narrative continuity. Far from being puzzling, the film achieves the clarity of a dream. The extremity of the violence and the calculated abruptness of changes of time, place, and mood intensify the viewing experience without

satisfying the conventional narrative demands of cause and effect. The concentration on only two actors, male and female, and the insistence on tactile imagery set up a situation of identification that more randomly organized films do not have. The strength of the identification in the context of the abrupt dislocations and discontinuities provides us with a vivid metaphor for the dream experience. Had Dali and Buñuel set about to study their own dreams and clinically re-create a dream on film, they could not have surpassed *Un Chien Andalou*.

The film begins with a cliché and then a paroxysm of violence. After the title "Once Upon a Time," a man, played by Buñuel himself, slowly and carefully sharpens a straight razor and slices the eye of the heroine. The horror of this opening is intensified by an extended visual metaphor. As he is sharpening the razor, Buñuel looks with entranced madness at the moon just as a sliver of cloud is about to cross it. At the moment of cutting the eyeball, the film shows the cloud slicing across the moon's circle. The image is both a reflected horror and a relief: horrible in the precision with which it suggests the cutting of the eye, and a relief in that the viewer for a moment thinks that the metaphor has spared him the actual slicing. But immediately we see the razor finishing its work and the interior of the eye pouring out. The strategies of metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy by which the illusions of causality and simultaneity in the film are sustained become the structural models of the film's formal development. We are forced to see the metaphor of the moon, whose very tranquility evokes terrible violence, followed by an even more violent synecdoche.

The title which follows, "Eight Years Later," seems to promise a causal account. The action disappoints the expectation. A man dressed as a clown, with a striped box held by a thong around his neck, rides his bicycle through city streets. When he falls from it a young woman rushes out of her house, embraces him on the ground, and removes the box around his neck. Back in her room, she lays out the articles of his clothing and the box as if to reconstruct the man from these mute objects. But suddenly she sees that he is at the other end of the room, now dressed in a suit, and staring at the palm of his hand, out of which ants are crawling.

In a series of dissolves the ants become a woman's armpit, which in turn becomes a sea urchin and then the top of an androgynous head. The head belongs to a character who stands in the street where the bicyclist had fallen, poking a dismembered hand with a long stick. A crowd gathers around her like ants around the hole in the hand. The police intervene; they push back the crowd; and one of them picks up the hand, places it in the striped box, and gives it to her. As she clutches it to her breast, an automobile runs her down. The figure of synecdoche is at stake here. The film-makers create the illusion of ants emerging from the hand by means of a model shown in close-up. That illusion immediately engenders a hyperbolic series of metaphors, calling attention to the concept of metaphor. When they use the model hand as a prop in the street scene, it becomes a metaphor for a synecdoche. Similarly, the oozing eyes of the

dead donkeys in the scene that follows this reveal a possible source for the montage substitution on the earlier sliced eye.³

The young woman and the cyclist watch this episode from their upstairs window. He is excited to madness. As blood trickles from his mouth, he feels the bare breasts and buttocks of his companion. She tries to escape him, but he pursues her, pulling after him two grand pianos loaded with dead donkeys. She rushes into the next room and slams the door, but she catches his hand in the process. The palm, caught in the door and crawling with ants, horrifies her. Then she notices that he is in the same room with her, although he is now dressed in the clown suit and lying on the bed.

The next episode begins with the title "Around Three in the Morning." A new character, seen from the back for a long time, rushes in on them. He punishes the protagonist by throwing his collar, frills, box, and thong out the window and making him stand in the corner. The title "Sixteen Years Before" appears without a change of scene, but now the action is in slow motion. The features of the newly arrived man look remarkably like the protagonist's. He seems to be chastising the cyclist as he would a schoolboy. The books he gives him turn to guns in his hands. With them the cyclist shoots his tormentor, who falls, not in the room, but in an open field against the back of a naked woman. Strollers in the field are indifferent to his corpse.

Back in the room, the cyclist and the young woman again confront each other. He has lost his mouth. Hair grows in its place. Annoyed by what she sees, she looks under her arm to find the hair there missing. She sticks her tongue out at him, opens the door behind her and finds herself on a windy beach with a new man. They laugh at the remnants of the cyclist—his collar, box, and thong—washed up by the waves. Arm in arm they stroll away.

Finally there is the title "In the Spring" followed by a still shot of the central couple, buried in sand, blinded, and covered with insects.

I have passed over many details of this very intricate film. The outline presented here preserves the abrupt changes of location, the basic action, and all the titles. Let us postpone for a moment further comment on this film, in order to present *Meshes of the Afternoon* and lay the basis for a comparison.

The fifteen years between *Un Chien Andalou* and *Meshes of the Afternoon* were not without scattered avant-garde film production.⁴ In America, the outstanding works of this period sought their inspiration from Expressionism or from the achievements of still photography. The sort of dream narrative that the Dali-Buñuel film offered as a new cinematic possibility was not often explored.

Maya Deren's background had been literary and choric. She was born in Kiev in the year of the revolution, emigrated with her parents in 1922 to America, where her father, Dr. Solomon Deren, a psychiatrist, worked for and eventually directed the State Institute for the Feeble-minded in Syracuse, New York. After secondary schooling at the League of Nations

School in Geneva, Switzerland, she attended the University of Syracuse as a student of journalism until she married. She and her husband moved to New York, where they were both active in the Trotskyist movement. She took her Bachelor of Arts from New York University and divorced soon after.

During her first years in New York and until she began to make films, Maya Deren wrote poetry, but she was never satisfied with it. At the same time she developed an interest in modern dance. She was not a dancer herself—at least not a trained dancer. Her mother and friends recall the sudden, inspired, but undisciplined dances she would privately perform, especially in later years after her fieldwork in Haiti and her initiation into voodoo. In the early forties she conceived the idea of writing a theoretical book on modern dance and looked for a professional dancer to work with her. She interested Katherine Dunham in her project and traveled with her on her tour of 1940–1941. The book never materialized, but Katherine Dunham had introduced her to Alexander Hammid when her company was in Los Angeles. They married in 1942.

Alexander Hackenschmied, who later changed his name to Hammid, was a professional film-maker born in 1907 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, then working on a minor Hollywood project. He was well known in film-making circles as a cameraman, editor, and director. The best-known films he had worked on by that time were the documentaries *Zem Spieva* (*The Earth Sings*, 1933), *Crisis* (1938), *Lights Out in Europe* (1939), and *Forgotten Village* (1941).

They shot *Meshes of the Afternoon* in two and a half weeks in their own home with primitive 16mm equipment. They played in the film themselves. There was no script. They worked out the overall outline together and talked over the shooting details while making the film.

It has an intricate spiral structure based on the repetition, with variations, of the initial sequence of the film, and it has a double ending. In the opening shot a long, thin hand reaches down from the top of the screen to leave a flower on a road. A young woman, played by Maya Deren, walks along the road, picks up the flower, and glimpses the back of a figure turning the bend ahead of her.

She goes to the door of a house, knocks, tries the locked door, then takes out her key. She drops it and pursues it as it bounces in slow motion down the stairs. When she finally enters the house, the camera pans a disordered room and ends in a dolly up to the dining room table. There is a loaf of bread, with a knife in it, on top of the table, but as the camera approaches, the knife pops out.

She climbs the stairs, passing a telephone with the receiver off. In the upper bedroom the wind is blowing a curtain. She turns off an unattended record player and returns downstairs to relax in an easy chair by the window. She slowly caresses herself as a shot of her eye and the window are intercut until they are both clouded over. This is the basic movement of the film. In the initial presentation there are no full-figure shots. We see

first the shadow of the protagonist, then her hand picking up the flower. Within the house, the camera moves subjectively, imitating her field of vision and her movements. This is a clear-cut formulation of the idea of first person in cinema. In the initial sequence we only see what the heroine herself sees, including glimpses of her own body.

As this basic movement is repeated the transitions between the variations are fluid, so that the viewer finds himself in the midst of a recurrence before it is expected. The first person switches to third.

From the window in front of the easy chair, we can see the initial setting of the film, the road. Now a black figure, like a nun, with a mirror for a face, walks slowly in the same direction as the young woman had in the beginning. She is followed by the young woman again, who is running after her. As fast as she runs she cannot gain on the walking figure, so she gives up and climbs the stairs to the house. For the first time we see her face. She enters without a key and looks around the room, noticing the knife is now on the stairs where the telephone had been. She climbs up in slow motion, then slowly falls through a black gauze curtain into the bedroom. The phone is on the bed. She pulls down the covers, again revealing the knife, and sees the distorted image of her face reflected in its blade. She quickly pulls back the covers, replaces the receiver on the telephone, and glides backward through the veil down the stairs as the camera does a somersault to dislocate her motions in space. Once downstairs, she sees herself sleeping in an easy chair. With a long stretch she reaches across the room to turn off the phonograph next to her own sleeping figure.

The pace of the events accelerates with each variation. The terror increases as well. After turning off the record player, the second Maya Deren goes to the window from which she sees yet a third version of herself chasing the black figure, who again disappears beyond the bend. She presses her hand against the window and looks wonderingly. The third woman takes her key from her mouth and enters the house where she catches sight of the black figure again. She follows the figure up the stairs and sees it disappear (through stop-motion photography) after placing the flower on the bed. The knife is there too. A quick pan from it brings us back to the sleeper in the easy chair.

This time the camera looks out the window without the mediation of a woman through whose eyes or over whose shoulder the action is seen. We see the same pursuit and its frustrations. Again the key comes from the mouth, but this time it turns immediately into the knife in her hand. She passes through the unlocked door holding it. Within are two Maya Derens seated at the dining room table. She joins them, as a third, placing the key on the table. The first woman feels her own neck, reaches for the key, and holds it in her palm for a moment. The second does the same. The third reaches without feeling her neck; her palm is black; the key turns into the knife when she holds it. Wearing goggles, she rises from the table, holding the knife aggressively. We see her feet step on beach sand, grass,

mud, pavement, the rug—five shots in all. Then, as she is about to stab her sleeping self, the sleeper's eyes open to see a man who is waking her. They go upstairs. Just to reassure herself she glances at the table, which is perfectly in order. The man picks up the flower and puts the phone, which had been left on the stairs, back on its receiver.

Upstairs he lays the flower on the bed and she lies down beside it. His face is reflected in a shaving mirror. He sits next to her and caresses her body. The flower suddenly becomes the knife. She grabs it and stabs him in the face, which turns out to be a mirror. The glass breaks and falls, not to the floor, but on a beach. A wave approaches and touches it.

Without transition we see the same man walking on the original road. He picks up the flower, takes out his key, enters the house, and finds the young woman lying in the easy chair with a slit throat amid broken glass. That is the end.

“This film is concerned,” Maya Deren wrote,

with the interior experiences of an individual. It does not record an event which could be witnessed by other persons. Rather, 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. . . .

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. The very first sequence of the film concerns the incident, but the girl falls asleep and the dream consists of the manipulation of the elements of the incident. Everything which happens in the dream has its basis in a suggestion in the first sequence—the knife, the key, the repetition of stairs, the figure disappearing around the curve of the road. Part of the achievement of this film consists in the manner in which cinematic techniques are employed to give a malevolent vitality to inanimate objects. The film is culminated by a double-ending in which it would seem that the imagined achieved, for her, such force that it became reality.⁵

Until recently commentators on this film have tended to neglect the collaboration of Alexander Hammid, to consider him a technical assistant rather than an author.⁶ We should remember that he photographed the whole film. Maya Deren simply pushed the button on the camera for the two scenes in which he appeared. The general fluidity of the camera style, the free movements, and the surrealistic effects, from slow motion to the simultaneous appearance of three Maya Derens in the same shot, are his contribution. If *Mesher of the Afternoon* is, in the words of Parker Tyler, the most important critic of the American avant-garde film in the forties and fifties, “the death of her narcissistic youth,” it is also Hammid's portrait of his young wife.

Before he came to America and worked in the documentary tradition, Hammid had made some independent films. His first, *Bezucelna Prochazka* (*Aimless Walk*, 1930), is particularly relevant here. In that film, a young man observes himself in his daily activities. Hammid, unfamiliar with montage or superimposition techniques in this first film, created the effect of self-observation without montage by having the protagonist quickly run behind the camera and take up another position while the camera was panning between his two selves. His subsequent films display a professional handling of the materials and an awareness of the achievements of the Russian and British documentary schools.

The visual style of *Meshes of the Afternoon* is particularly smooth, with cutting on movements and elisions to extend the continuity of gesture and action. From the very opening, there is a constant alternation of perspectives from synecdochic representation of the action to subjective views of what the protagonist sees, usually through the moving camera. Although the rhetorical figure synecdoche, the part for the whole, is an essential characteristic of all cinema, where the act of framing a picture can bring into play a potential field outside of the frame of which the filmic image is a small part (e.g., any close-up of a part of the body), I refer in this book to the deliberate and extreme use of framing portions of an action as synecdochic. For instance, in the first cycle of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, there is no establishing shot, no view of the whole figure in her environment; toward the middle of the film, as the situation takes on more symbolic dimensions, the camera tends to compensate by stasis and wider views.

The transitions between cycles are subtly achieved. In the first transition between waking and sleeping, the film uses the wavy shadow over both the eye and the window. That sequence is interrupted by a view of the original road, where the black figure is about to appear. But before it does, there is a dolly back from the window, now masked by a cylindrical pipe which emphasizes the transition.

The division between the second and third cycles has the same fluidity. The first shots of the new cycle are cut in before the last of the old one is seen. In this case, after looking at the sleeper, the protagonist goes to the window to see herself running after the black figure. Even after she disappears around the bend and the pursuer begins to climb the stairs, we see another shot of the protagonist in the window, peering out, her hand pressed against the pane.

When we compare the image of Maya Deren, framed by the window where the reflections of trees blend with the mass of her hair, with the parallel image of Pierre Batcheff, sadistically watching the androgyne and the dismembered hand from his window in *Un Chien Andalou*, one contrast between the two films becomes clear. It is, in fact, a difference which obtains between the early American avant-garde "trance film" (as I will call this type of film in general) and its surrealist precursors. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the heroine undertakes an interior quest. She encounters

objects and sights as if they were capable of revealing the erotic mystery of the self. The surrealist cinema, on the other hand, depends upon the power of film to evoke a mad voyeurism and to imitate the very discontinuity, the horror, and the irrationality of the unconscious. Batcheff, leering out of the window, is an icon of repressed sexual energy. Deren, with her hands lightly pressed against the window pane, embodies the reflective experience, which is emphasized by the consistent imagery of mirrors in the film.

Mesher explicitly simulates the dream experience, first in the transition from waking to sleeping (the shadow covers the eye and the window at the end of the first cycle) and later in an ambiguous scene of waking. The film-makers have observed with accuracy the way in which the events and objects of the day become potent, then transfigured, in dreams as well as the way in which a dreamer may realize that she dreams and may dream that she wakes. They have telescoped the experience of an obsessive, recurrent series of dreams into a single one by substituting variations on the original dream for what would conventionally be complete transitions of subject within a single dream.

In the program notes for a screening of her complete works at the Bleecker Street Theater in 1960, Maya Deren warned, as was her custom, against a psychoanalytical reading of this film: "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 personalized psychological interpretation could impede the understanding of the film." Within the film itself, the double ending mitigates against interpretation, showing the makers' preference for sustaining the dream-like ambivalence over the formal neatness of a rounded sleep.

A comparison can be made between this film and *Un Chien Andalou*, while suspending any question of influence. The Deren-Hamid film consciously uses much of what was beyond the intention of Buñuel and Dali. Buñuel and Dali did not set out to create a film dream; the dream-like quality of their work derives from the strength of their sources, from the ferocity with which they dispelled the rational while keeping the structural components of narrative. They show us neither sleep nor waking, but simply a disjunctive, athenatic chain of situations with the same characters. The startling changes of place, the violence, the eroticism, the tactility, and above all the consistent use of surrealist imagery, suggest the dream experience.

Mesher of the Afternoon is not a surrealist film. It was made possible through a Freudian insight into the processes of the surrealist film-makers. Nor is it a Freudian film. Surrealism and Freud were the vehicles, either latent or conscious, behind the mechanics of the film. Thus some of its methods seem to derive from *Un Chien Andalou*. In the first place, both films have a "frame" and a double ending. In the case of the Dali-Buñuel film, the frame—the opening sequence of the eye slashing followed by the



(a)



(b)

(a) The window as a repressive barrier in Dali and Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*.
 (b) The window as a reflector of the self in Hammid and Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

title "Eight Years Later" as if a causal flashforward were about to occur—diverts the narrative. The two endings—the beach scene, followed by the title "In the Spring" and a still of the two figures grotesquely buried in the sand—likewise confound our expectations. Deren and Hammid also made imaginative use of the convention of a frame. Had their film ended with the scene of the woman awakened by the man, that frame would have fulfilled the standard function of dividing imagination from actuality. But the continuation of the violence of the dream, and its dislocations, in the scene between man and woman, which is suggestive of waking, then lapsing back into sleep, changes the film's dimension by its affirmation of dream over actuality.

Un Chien Andalou attempts to present us with a broken, violent, spatially and temporally unstable world, without final reference to a more conventional actuality. *Meshes of the Afternoon*, on the other hand, offers us an extended view of a mind in which there is a terrible ambivalence between stable actuality and subconscious violence. Many of the means of presenting this mind are the same as those of the earlier, more radical film. For instance, in *Un Chien Andalou* a door which we expect to open on a corridor opens on a windy beach, just as the broken glass from the mirror in *Meshes* falls not on the floor but on the lip of the ocean. In *Un Chien Andalou*, when the man is shot by a gun, he starts falling inside the apartment and ends in an open field with his hands clawing the back of a naked woman. The transition is smoothly made through the continuity of action. All through *Meshes* there is similar cutting on action across disjunctive spaces.

In the original shooting script for *Un Chien Andalou*, the man who enters the house to chastise the protagonist is his double:

At that instant the shot goes out of focus. The stranger moves in slow motion and we see that his features are identical

to those of the first man. They are the same person, except that the stranger is younger, more full of pathos, rather like the man must have been many years earlier.⁷

In the actual production, this identity is obscure. They are not played by the same actor, though their similarity and the dream-like structure of their confrontation do suggest the idea of a double.

This coincidence of the theme of the double can provide us with a clue to the real relationship between the two films. It is possible that neither Hammid nor Deren had seen the Dali-Buñuel film before they made theirs. They could have seen it; and they could have read Dali's book, published just a year before *Mesheres*, and learned of it indirectly. If she had seen it, Maya Deren does not mention it in her subsequent writings. In speaking of Surrealism she is not enthusiastic. However, in the construction of the scene in which the stabbed face turns out to be a mirror, they pay homage, perhaps unknowingly, to a motif of the painter René Magritte. In several of his paintings a broken window gazes out upon a void, while the illusory image that one had seen while looking through it lies shattered among the glass on the floor.

In all likelihood Deren and Hammid were more conscious of the influence, however indirect, of Orson Welles's then recent *Citizen Kane*, with its regular shifts of perspective, than of *Un Chien Andalou*. But regardless of the question of influence, it is true that the mechanics of *Un Chien Andalou* and of *Mesheres* result from a theoretical application of the principles of cinema to the experience of the dream. The theme of the double, an archetype in dreams, could find two completely different treatments in the two films, yet the abrupt changes of location, so common in dreams, have the same cinematic meaning for both sets of collaborators.

The difference between the films is instructive. *Un Chien Andalou* is filled with metaphors—the eye and the moon, a drink shaker as a doorbell, the sea urchin, and underarm hair—but *Mesheres* has none. Objects in the earlier film recur, especially the box of the clown figure, but without the symbolic dimensions of the knife, key, and flower in *Mesheres*, which accumulate their deadly charge through repeated use in slightly different circumstances.

Finally, the space of the two films is quite different. *Un Chien Andalou* takes place in a deep space with axial co-ordinates in all four lateral directions and up and down. The virtual space behind doors and walls is much used, as in most surrealist films. The space projected by *Mesheres of the Afternoon* is more rounded and linear, less cubic than the earlier film. There is little movement into or out from the space of the images. Actors tend to move across the screen. There is a sense of depth only when the hand-held camera is moved in the subjective shots.

The articulation of space in avant-garde films is often unconscious. The conscious decisions about movement, fixity of camera, choice of sets, imply an inflection of space that the film-maker is often unaware of. We



The surrealistic shattered image: Hammid in *Meshes of the Afternoon* before and after the knifing of the mirror.

can in fact often observe a common attitude toward space among film-makers who have deliberately tried to distinguish themselves from each other.

A fluid linear space is just one characteristic that this particular film shares with many of the American films which were to follow it. Another is the evocation of the dream state. And a final characteristic of many avant-garde films from this period (most of them trance films as well) is the film-maker's use of herself or himself as a protagonist. There are many reasons for this, and they vary with the film-maker. Obviously, there is a strong autobiographical element in these films. But beyond that, if the film-maker has neither the ability to command amateur actors to do precisely what she or he wants nor the money to hire trained actors, it is logical that she attempt to play the role herself, thus completely eliminating the process of "directing." There is also another, more subtle reason which accounts for the number of self-acted films, particularly at the beginning of the avant-garde film movement in America: 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 acting them. These were true psycho-dramas.

As psycho-drama, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is the inward exploration of both Deren and Hammid. The central theme of all the psycho-dramas that marked this stage of the American avant-garde cinema is the quest for sexual identity; in their film, unlike those that follow in this book, it is two people, the makers of the film, who participate in this quest. With the exception of the surrealistic film *Le Sang d'un Poète*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, the avant-garde film of the twenties had no psycho-drama, even in a rudimentary form. The explosion of erotic and irrational imagery that we encounter in many of these earlier films evokes the raw quality of the dream itself, not the mediation of the dreamer.

If we turn from the Dali-Buñuel collaboration to another, but somewhat less successful, example of the period, Man Ray's *Étoile de Mer* (1928), based on a poem by Robert Desnos, there are a number of remarkable coincidences of imagery and structure between it and *Meshes*. Yet the same essential difference of orientation obtains. *Étoile de Mer* opens with the encounter of a man and a woman on a road. They go to the woman's apartment, where she strips and he immediately bids her adieu. Twice again in the course of this elliptical and highly disjunctive film, the same man and woman encounter each other at the same spot. The last meeting might even be a dream, since it immediately follows a scene of her going to sleep.

Then consider the use of the image of the starfish in Man Ray's film. The hero first finds the glass-enclosed creature during his second meeting with the woman. Alone in his room, he contemplates it. Yet during two mysterious and completely unexplained scenes—one in which the woman mounts the stairs of her apartment brandishing a knife, another in which she steps barefoot from her bed onto the pages of a book—the starfish unexpectedly appears in the scene—on the staircase, and next to the bed—like the knife and the telephone of the Deren-Hammid film.

Most of *Étoile de Mer* is photographed through a stippled glass, which distorts its imagery and flattens its space. In the use of this distortion we see the first major difference from *Meshes*. The transitions between distorted and normal views are not psychologically motivated. They appear random, in fact. In *Meshes*, as I pointed out, the wavy field of vision indicated the transition to sleep. Like *Un Chien Andalou*, *Étoile de Mer* is full of metaphors, many of which are introduced by the titles which Desnos wrote. They are deliberately jarring. After an allusion to "les dents des femmes" we see a shot of the heroine's legs, not her teeth. In the central section of Man Ray's film all action seems to disappear, in order to be replaced by a series of verbal and visual similes comparing the starfish to the lines on the palm of a hand, to glass, and to fire. Narrative itself seems to exist within *Étoile de Mer* only to be fractured or foiled.⁸

The central tradition of the American avant-garde film begins with a dream unfolded within shifting perspectives. Much of the subsequent history of that tradition will move toward a metaphysics of cinematic perspective itself.

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Ritual and Nature

two

THE ELEMENTS OF

dream, ritual, dance, and sexual metaphor abound in the avant-garde films made in America in the late 1940s and early 1950s. For a time the dream generated a form of its own, occurring simultaneously in the films of several independent artists. I have called this the trance film. Its history is an extension of the initial discussions of the American avant-garde film in Parker Tyler's book *The Three Faces of the Film*.

In his captions to the illustrations for that volume, Tyler offers a brilliant and succinct analysis of the form and history of the genre. Under a still from Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* he writes:

The chief imaginative trend among Experimental or avant-garde filmmakers is action as a *dream* and the actor as a *somnambulist*. This film shot employs actual scratching on the reel to convey the magic of seeing while "dreaming awake"; the world in view becomes that of poetic action pure and simple: action without the

restraints of single level consciousness, everyday reason, and so-called realism.¹

Then, between stills from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Meshes of the Afternoon*, he writes:

Cesare, the Somnambulist of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, has been an arch symbol for subsequent avant-garde film-making, one of whose heroines is seen below. Art is the action which knits the passive dreamer, as it knits the passive spectator, to realms of experience beyond his conscious and unconscious control. In such realms, wild excitement is often found by way of the movies. But rarely, except in avant-garde films, does the strict pulse of beauty govern the engines of "wild excitement."²

If Cesare is the archetypal protagonist of the trance film, then the form of Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* is the model for its development. The trance film as it emerged in America has fairly strict boundaries. It deals with visionary experience. Its protagonists are somnambulists, priests, initiates of rituals, and the possessed, whose stylized movements the camera, with its slow and fast motions, can re-create so aptly. The protagonist wanders through a potent environment toward a climactic scene of self-realization. The stages of his progress are often marked by what he sees along his path rather than what he does. The landscapes, both natural and architectural, through which he passes are usually chosen with naïve aesthetic considerations, and they often intensify the texture of the film to the point of emphasizing a specific line of symbolism. It is part of the nature of the trance that the protagonist remains isolated from what he confronts; no interaction of characters is possible in these films. This extremely linear form has several pure examples: Curtis Harrington's *Fragment of Seeking* (1946) and *Picnic* (1948), Gregory Markopoulos's *Swain* (1950), Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), Stan Brakhage's *The Way to Shadow Garden* (1955), and Maya Deren's *At Land* (1944), her first film after *Meshes of the Afternoon*. The genre naturally has had many variations, transformations, and mixed uses. These I will discuss later.

At Land is the earliest of the pure American trance films. In it, the heroine, again played by Maya Deren, is washed out of the backward-rolling waves of the sea; she rises, crawls over logs and rocks until she finds herself in the middle of a banquet table, crawls down it without being noticed by the banqueters, and steals a chess figure from a board at the end of the table on which the pieces seem to move by themselves. The middle of the film records her pursuit of the chess man through other similar landscapes: beach, tree, rocks, and interiors. No one seems to notice her. At one point, she loses the chase and finds herself talking with a man who is constantly being replaced by other men. Then, finding another chess game in progress, she steals again. This time, as she flees with the

chess man, she is watched by images of herself from the rocks, the beach, the banquet, and the tree. In a series of dramatic temporal ellipses, she disappears among sand dunes.

Here is the classic trance film: the protagonist who passes invisibly among people; the dramatic landscapes; the climactic confrontation with one's self and one's past. *Meshes of the Afternoon* had some of these elements, but its intricate, coiled form gave a more personal, less archetypal tone to its narrative. The form of *At Land* is completely open. The camera is generally static. This time Hella Heyman photographed and Maya Deren set up the compositions. The principle of the editing, whereby every scene seems magically continuous with the previous, must have been planned in advance. For instance, as the protagonist crawls from the dead tree to the banquet table, we see her head disappear beyond the top of the frame in one scene, and in the next, now in the banquet hall, it rises from the bottom of the frame. As she pulls herself up into the hall, we see a final shot of the tree as her dangling leg passes through the top of the frame. This kind of montage must be provided for in advance, and, in fact, is the basis of the structure of this film.

In *Meshes*, Hammid and Deren had employed a number of montage illusions which created spatial elisions or temporal ellipses for the sake of the psychological reality which informed their vision. In *At Land*, Deren, now on her own, conceives from the beginning that the film should continually use these figures of cinematography as formal or stylistic devices. Indeed, they are essential principles of her film. She says as much in a letter to James Card:

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."³

Hammid remembers that the original conception of that scene in *Meshes* was specifically Maya Deren's.

Nevertheless, in her first solo film she is still very much under the influence of her collaborator. The denouement, in which the protagonist is seen by images of herself, comes right out of the center of the earlier film, which may derive from Hammid's own first film. The fluid, rounded space of *Meshes* is echoed in the linear style of *At Land*, with its soft cutting on motion and illusory elisions. But the rich texture of interlocking alternations of subjective camera and synecdochic framing of elaborate and dramatic pans, which *Meshes* owed to the creative involvement of Hammid, disappears here, as the photographer worked under the direction of the author-actress.

Trance films in general, and *At Land* in particular, tend to resist specific interpretation. In the case of *At Land*, one could point out the allusions to sexual encounter—the moustached man in bed, and the caressing of the girl's hair by the beach—or interpret the banquet scene in terms of the individual's resistance to the social organism, but it would be difficult to extend such an interpretation to all the actions of the film.

Deren is a good critic of her own work when she writes in her notes for this film:

The universe was once conceived almost as a vast preserve, landscaped for heroes, plotted to provide them the appropriate adventures. The rules were known and respected, the adversaries honorable, the oracles as articulate and as precise as the directives of a six-lane parkway. Errors of weakness or vanity led, with measured momentum, to the tragedy which resolved everything. Today the rules are ambiguous, the adversary is concealed in aliases, the oracles broadcast a babble of contradictions.

Adventure is no longer reserved for heroes and challengers. The universe itself imposes its challenges upon the meek and the brave indiscriminately. One does not so much act upon such a universe as re-act to its volatile variety. Struggling to preserve, in the midst of such relentless metamorphosis, a constancy of personal identity.⁴

As Maya Deren began to move more confidently from writing to film, her interest in form became clearer. She has left us six films. In each one

of them she explored a new formal option. I have already suggested that her interest in the overlapping of space and time arose as a result of the editing of *Meshes of the Afternoon*. That interest never flagged during her film career. In *At Land* she pursued an open-ended narrative form based on her initial discoveries. In her next film, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), she returned to her old interest in dance to make a completely new kind of film.

It is clear that even in the first two films her concern with dance was not suppressed. The plastic space of both films, which cutting on motion makes possible, is closely akin to the dancer's art of connecting motions.

Even before her collaboration with Hammid on *Meshes of the Afternoon*, she had spoken casually with dancers about recording ethnic dances on film. After the making of *Meshes* and her revelation that the space and time of film was a *made* space and time, a creative function and not a universal given, she was no longer interested in the camera as a simple recording device for the preservation of dances. *A Study in Choreography for Camera* was a dance film with equal participation by both arts. She subtitled it "Pas de Deux," referring to the one dancer and the one camera.

She did not herself appear in this film. Since she had no formal training, she enlisted the help of a dancer, Talley Beatty, as her one performer. The film they made is extraordinarily simple—a single gesture combining a run, a pirouette, and a leap. It lasts no more than three minutes.

The opening shots recall the climax of *At Land*; in both instances she used one pan movement of the camera to encompass several temporal ellipses. It is as if she were panning through time as well as over space. *At Land* climaxes with one sweeping shot, actually made up of a series of carefully joined shots, of herself walking away over sand dunes. As the camera in its leftward motion sees each successive dune, she crosses over the top and disappears on the other side. Thus in the evocation of a very short time (the time of moving the camera on its tripod) we see the illusions of long periods of time, the walking between dunes having been eliminated.

Choreography begins with a circular pan in a clearing in the woods. In making the one circle the camera periodically passes the dancer; at each encounter he is further along in his slow, up-stretching movement. At the end of this camera movement, he extends his foot out of the frame and brings it down in a different place; this time, inside a room. The dance continues through rooms, woods, and the courtyard of a museum until he begins a pirouette, which changes, without a stopping of the camera, from very slow motion to very fast. Then he leaps, slowly, very slowly, floating through the air, in several rising, then several descending shots, to land in a speculative pose back in the wood clearing.

The dance movement provides a continuity through a space that is severely telescoped and a time that is elongated. The film has a perfection which none of Maya Deren's other films ever achieved.

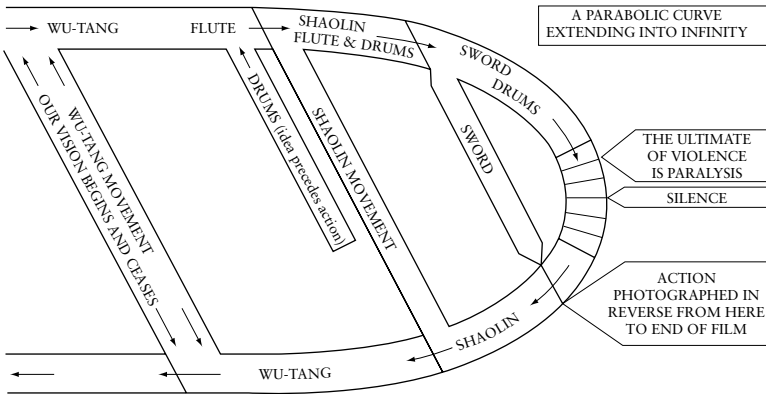
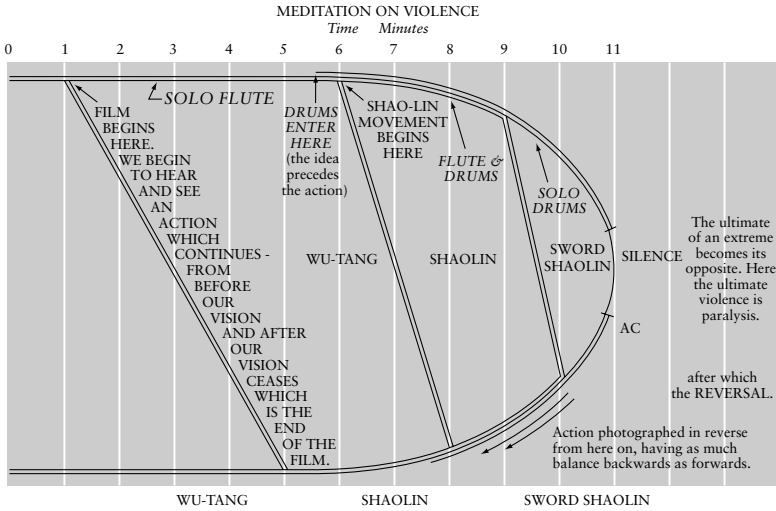
There are two aspects of this film that deserve consideration. One is formal, concerning the emergence of a new way of composing films; the other is synthetic, concerning the possible use of dance in film, and more broadly the problem of prestylization, which Erwin Panofsky, in his essay "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" (1934), identified as the failure of all films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (his example) which use aesthetic objects such as expressionistically painted sets or ballet movement instead of natural gestures and real scenes as raw material.

Choreography for Camera forecasts the shift from narrative to imagistic structures within the avant-garde film movement. Before it, there had been several ways of putting together such films. Narrative had been the most common. By this I do not mean simple story-telling, but abstracted narrative forms such as *Un Chien Andalou*, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and the trance films. Thematic composition was another possibility: the city symphonies, usually describing a day in the life of a city; or tone poems about a season, a place, or a form of matter, such as Steiner's *H₂O* about water patterns. The sophisticated thematic structures were extended metaphors—one thinks primarily of Léger's *Le Ballet Mécanique*, in which graphic abstraction, repetitive human actions, and machines in operation are synthesized into an image of a gigantic social supermachine.

Maya Deren introduced the possibility of isolating a single gesture as a complete film form. In its concentrated distillation of both the narrative and the thematic principles, this form comes to resemble the movement in poetry called Imagism, and for this reason I have elsewhere called a film using this device an imagist film.⁵ There I concentrated on pure examples and described the inevitable inflation of the simple gesture to contain more and more aesthetic matter. Kenneth Anger's *Eaux d'Artifice*, Charles Boultenhouse's *Handwritten*, and Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man: Part One* provided the examples.

In brief, all of these films describe a simple action like the leap of *Choreography*. In Anger's film it is the walk of a heroine through a baroque maze of fountains in pursuit of a flickering moth. Boultenhouse's film revolves around the slamming of a fist on a glass tabletop, and Brakhage's describes a man climbing a mountain. Each example represents a progressive stage of inflation, whereby lateral or foreign material is introduced around the essential action without completely disrupting its unity or continuity.

Maya Deren herself returned to the imagist film to make *Meditation on Violence* in 1948, and again just before she died when she conceived the idea of the haiku film. The structure of *Meditation on Violence* almost duplicates that of *Choreography for Camera* on a larger scale, with a proportionate loss of tension. Deren's own notes for the shooting of the film employ two parabolic arcs. Theoretically, the film describes in a single continuous movement three degrees of traditional Chinese boxing—Wu-tang, Shao-lin, and Shao-lin with a sword. A long sequence of the ballet-like, sinuous Wu-tang becomes the more erratic Shao-lin; then for two or



three minutes in the middle of the film there is an abrupt change to leaping sword movements, in the center of which, at the apogee of the leap, there is a long-held freeze-frame; finally we see the boxer move back through Shao-lin to the original Wu-tang. For each transition there is a change of background and filmic style. We see the Wu-tang against a curved, unbroken black wall; the Shao-lin takes place in a room with alternate black and white walls to emphasize its angularity. The montage, which had been very fluid with elided joining, becomes appropriately pronounced and angular. The sword play occurs outside, with jump cuts, slow motion, and the freeze-frame. The last portion of the film is printed in reverse motion, but the continuity of the movement disguises this from the spectator.

So much for its abstract plan. In the notes for this film, Maya Deren makes some extravagant intellectual claims for it, which are interesting because the film fails to live up to them:

The film consists not only of photographing these movements, but attempts an equivalent conversion, into filmic terms, of these metaphysical principles. The film begins in the middle of a movement and ends in the middle of a movement, so that the film is a period of vision upon life, with the life continuing before and after, into infinity. The rhythm of the negative-positive breathing is preserved in the rhythm at which the boxer approaches and recedes from the camera. Both the photography and the cutting of the Wu-Tang sections are deliberately smooth and flowing, so that no “striking” shots or abrupt cuts occur in these sections. This whole approach is further amplified in the diagram and notes. Moreover, it seemed significant that not only were these movements related to metaphysical principles (an inner concept) but that they were *training* movements—the self-contained *idea* of violence, not the actual act. Training is a physical meditation on violence. So, too, the film is a meditation. Its location is an inner space, not an outer place. And just as a meditation turns around an idea, goes forward, returns to examine it from another angle, so here the camera, in the WU-TANG section, revolves around the movements of the figure, returns to some previous movement to examine it from another angle altogether, to achieve a “cubism in time.”

However, meditations investigate extremes, and life, while ongoing and non-climactic in the infinite sense, contains within it varieties and waves of intensity. So this film, as a meditation, proceeded beyond the WU-TANG School, to examine where the SHAO-LIN concepts of aggression would lead. This school, called “exterior,” is based on exterior conditions of opportunity. Its emphasis is upon strength, impact, sudden rhythms, and the body is not treated as a whole. Rather, the sharp strength of the arms and legs is emphasized for independent action. The logical conclusion is to even *implement* this sharpness with a sword. And so, in the film, the increasing violence bursts into an extension: the arm sprouts a sword.

Even this is carried forward. The climax of this meditation on violence is a paralysis. From which point the return is a reversal. The movements are actually photographed in reverse from this point on.⁶

Meditation on Violence, from a theoretical point of view, is a film overloaded by its philosophical burden.

Maya Deren’s initial creative period extended from the completion of *Meshes of the Afternoon* in 1943 through the making of *At Land*, *Choreography for Camera*, and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, the discussion of which I have postponed for a few pages—three years of almost uninterrupted film production. At the end of that period she published a book of

theory, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film*, and left for Haiti, initially to make a film, but eventually to write her study of Haitian mythology, *Divine Horsemen. Meditation on Violence* was the first film she completed after this period. It bears the full burden of her theoretical and philosophical thought in the intervening years. It suffers, as does her subsequent film, *The Very Eye of Night*, released after a silence of ten years, from excessive stylization, both intellectual and graphical. Yet her aspiration to use film to imitate the process of the mind was exalted and certainly has been felt by other film-makers within the American can avant-garde sphere.

In her program notes she clarifies her attempt to represent mental processes cinematically:

The camera can create dance, movement and action which transcend geography and take place anywhere and everywhere; it can also, as in this film, be the meditating mind turned inwards upon the idea of movement, and this idea, being an abstraction, takes place nowhere or, as it were, in the very center of space.

There the inner eye meditates upon it at leisure, investigates its possibilities, considers first this aspect and angle, and that one, and once more reconsiders, as one might plumb and examine an image or an idea, turning it over and over in one's mind.⁷

The spectator is confronted with something more restricted than this. There is the boxer, moving before a painfully artificial black wall; then comes a change of boxing style before an equally contrived, angular set of walls, and ultimately, in open space, the boxer is costumed and leaping with a sword. In *Choreography for Camera*, speed was the key to the unity and tension of the image. By elongating the action in *Meditation on Violence*, the fusion of spaces, costumes, boxing modes, and cinematic styles dissolved; it fragmented into vague sections. In principle, such an elongation is not impossible. We shall see later how Stan Brakhage successfully elongated the imagist film in *Dog Star Man: Part One* without losing its essential tension.

In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, the film which immediately followed *Choreography*, Deren openly grappled with the problem of using dancers in a film. The result is her most complex film, and the one that most fully contains her achievements, her theories, and her failures.

Formally, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* is a radical extension of the trance film in the direction of a more complex form. That form, the architectonic film, which was to emerge in the early 1960s after other ambitious efforts, aspired toward myth and ritual.

The pure trance film has a single protagonist—all other human figures being distinctly background elements—and a linear development. *Ritual* has two principal figures (although ultimately the film reduces itself to the

initiation of a single persona, the female) and utilizes several others more dynamically than does the trance film. Despite the attempt at a continual and gradual movement from trance into dance, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* has three parts: an opening, a party, and a dance in the open air.

The images of this film, unlike any of her others, evoke traditional interpretations. They are not so much symbolic as archetypal, drawn primarily from the visual vocabulary of ancient mythology. The images of Norns, of Fates, and of Graces adorn a film which, in its center, describes a sexual rite of passage. In her notes Maya Deren called this rite the passage of the "widow into bride."

Beyond the classic images, we see the same enigmatic, obsessive totems of her other films. The confrontation of the self takes a new form here. In *Meshes of the Afternoon* we saw, through a camera trick, three simultaneous, juxtaposed images of the heroine in a single shot; in *At Land*, the editing of shots of her looking offscreen, followed by a shot of her in a different location as if filmed from the angle of vision of the previous glance, created the illusion of meeting with the self. Now, here, the self is composed of different bodies; their metamorphosis occurs through cutting on motion. The gesture begun by one is continued by the other. The result is an evocative ambivalence of identity and a sense of mysterious, perpetual metamorphosis.

The form of *Ritual in Transfigured Time* anticipates the even more complex architectonic films of Gregory Markopoulos and Stan Brakhage, in the early sixties, though it lacks their precision of proportions, and their overall evenness of execution. Because of her dedicated interest in form and her reluctance to repeat her previous achievements in that dimension, Deren tended to overextend her formal ambitions at times; as a result she came to cinematic forms earlier than she could handle them well.

Thus her first four films (including *Meshes of the Afternoon*) rehearse in general outline the subsequent evolution of forms within the American avant-garde cinema over the following two decades. Her summary of her achievements in the letter to James Card, previously excerpted, takes on a prophetic tone:

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.

And just as *Choreography* was an effort to isolate and celebrate the principle of the power of movement, which was contained in *At Land*, so I made, after *Ritual*, the film, *Meditation on Violence*, which tried to abstract the principle of ongoing metamorphosis and change which was in *Ritual*.⁸

I will show in this book how the trance film gradually developed into the architectonic, mythopoeic film, with a corresponding shift from Freudian preoccupations to those of Jung; and then how the decline of the mythological film was attended by the simultaneous rise of both the diary and the structural film. The latter are extensions of the imagist form in the direction of visual haiku, epiphanies, and diaries. They are static, epistemologically oriented films in which duration and structure determine, rather than follow, content.

In the opening scene of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, a woman, played by Maya Deren, stands in a double doorway. She passes from one of the two visible rooms into the other to get a scarf, then returns to the first room with a swatch of yarn. With her head she signals another woman, "the widow," in from the darkness. Like the first woman, the widow is dressed in black, but she is more mournful and she walks with her hand out before her like a somnambulist. She comes in and sits before her, making a ball from her yarn. The first woman, "the invoker," sings, laughs, and chants while she juggles the wool between her hands in gradually slower and slower motion. The widow, hypnotized and enchanted, continues to wind the wool in a ball.

With another turn of her head the invoker indicates that a third woman has entered the room by yet another door. We can call her "the initiator" or "the guide." She beckons the widow while at the same time the invoker hieratically raises her arms, dropping the yarn and thus releasing her from the spell. When the widow looks back, the invoker's chair is empty.

This opening episode is distinguished by compositions-in-depth of more sophistication than anywhere else in Maya Deren's films. A geometrical sense of the relative placement of the three women determines the editing sequence, which is accented by rapid alterations in the speed of recording, causing sudden shifts from slow to normal motion. The composition-in-depth and the handling of a large group of actors in the subsequent scene indicate an advance in Maya Deren's conception of cinematic form and in her powers as a director.

The form of the opening passage is that of the trance film; slow motion was one of its chief cinematic means of expression. In the party scene, the trance is replaced by a collective choreomania, as the entire crowd moves again and again in a half-dozen repetitive patterns; they stop short, suspended in a frozen frame. The means of achieving this effect were simple. Maya Deren printed several copies of a few complex movements, showing the wanderings of the guide, the hesitant movements of the widow, and

the pursuit of her by a young man, who presumably seeks to meet her. Then she simply repeated the very same shots at fixed intervals and punctuated them with the freezes. The result was the highly successful rendering of dance movement from elements outside the dance. It is this middle passage that makes one think that Maya Deren was openly trying to deal with the problem of the prestylization of dance in film, although she never acknowledged the problem as such in her writings.

When the young man meets the widow—they literally “bump into one another”—the scene cuts away to an open field in which the performers are posed, faces just about touching, exactly as they were at the party. They occupy the same portion of the film frame. Thus the transition is sudden and clean, even though the young man is no longer fully dressed but bare-chested, and the widow now has bare legs and feet.

Then they dance. Behind them three female figures from the party, resembling the Graces, dance before neo-classic columns. The guide is one of the Graces. The dance of the couple becomes one of flight and pursuit. As she runs, the widow turns into the invoker, then back again. In the transition there is a change of scarfs, from mourning black to bridal white.

It is the widow again who enters a gate to find her pursuer transformed into a statue on a pedestal. In slow motion with several freeze frames he gradually comes to life, and after some instantaneous petrifications in mid-air, he leaps to the ground. As the pursuit continues, the heroine runs full speed, while the young man follows in graceful ballet leaps in slow motion. Physically, the situation of *Meshes of the Afternoon* is here reversed, as the fleeing runner cannot make gains on the slow-motion pursuer.

They pass by the guide in their chase. Just as he reaches for her, there is a metamorphosis from widow to invoker, and she runs into the sea. As she sinks we see her in negative, her black gown now white while she changes again from invoker to widow, now prepared as a bride for the young man who has not followed her into the water.

Ritual in Transfigured Time is Maya Deren's great effort at synthesis. There is, on the one hand, the transformation of somnambulistic movement to repetitive, cyclic movement; that is, to dance. There is also the fusion of traditional mythological elements—the Graces, Pygmalion, the Fates—with private psycho-drama (the film-maker herself plays the invoker); and an attempt to present a complete ritual in terms of the camera techniques she had utilized in her earlier films—slow motion, freeze-frame, repetition of shots, and variations on continuity of identity and movement.

Its precursor, Jean Cocteau's first film *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930), bridged a transition from an avant-garde cinema centered in Paris to one dominated by Americans. Of all the independent films from Europe this one had the most influence on those who would revive the avant-garde cinema toward the end of the Second World War. Two aspects of Cocteau's film give it this privileged position: its manifestly reflexive theme, and its ritual. The film opens with an allegory of the relationship of the authorial persona to the temporality of cinematic representation. We see Cocteau,

surrounded by the klieg lights of a movie studio, blocking his face from the camera with a classical dramatic mask, which foreshadows the moment in the film when the film-maker will declare in a handwritten title that he is trapped in his own film; yet what we see of him then is still another mask, this time fashioned after his own profile. The declaration of the enigmatical distance between the authorial self and his mediating persona is coordinated with a bracketing device that affirms that the film transpires in no time, or in the instant between two photograms. We see a towering smokestack begin to crumble, an image reminiscent of many of the Lumière's one-shot films. At the end of the film the smokestack completes its fall. By bracketing his film this way, Cocteau wants the viewer to understand that his mythic ritual occurs in "transfigured time."

The events of *Le Sang d'un Poète* bear a general resemblance to the trance film: a single hero, the poet, finds that the painted mouth he wiped from a canvas continues to live in his hand. It talks to him; it stimulates him sexually as he runs his hand along his body. Finally, with great effort, he transfers the mouth to a statue, which comes alive. The metamorphosis of statue into muse is attended by an alteration of the space in which it occurs; for in this process the door and window of the poet's chamber disappear. His sole exit is through the mirror. So he plunges into a realm of fantastic tableaux which seem to exist solely for his inner education.

The Hôtel des Folies Dramatiques, which the poet explores after crossing the threshold of the mirror, is a series of rooms, accessible only to sight through the keyhole. In each, a principle of cinematic illusionism is illustrated with the naive exuberance of Méliès' films, which Cocteau must have first encountered in his childhood. The assassinated Mexican is revived in reverse motion; camera placement allows us to see a girl clinging to walls and ceiling; finally, a hermaphrodite is constructed of flesh, drawn lines, and a roto-relief in Duchamp's style so that it is not only an illusionary blending of male and female characteristics but a figure synthesized from the very arts which feed into cinematic representation. The myth of the poet that Cocteau elaborates moves freely among centuries and between childhood and maturity.

Back in the chamber, the poet destroys the statue and in so doing is changed into one himself. In the subsequent episode, a group of young students break up the statue to use as fatal ammunition in a snowball fight. Over the bleeding body of a slain student, the muse and the poet, both in the flesh, play a game of cards which culminates, again, in his suicide.

Parker Tyler has pointed out, again in the captions to the illustrations of *The Three Faces of the Film*, the persistence of the motif of the statue within the avant-garde film tradition. Willard Maas, a contemporary of Maya Deren who began making films in 1943 with his wife Marie Menken and the poet George Barker (*Geography of the Body*), invoked this motif on a grand scale in his most ambitious project, *Narcissus* (1956). The hero, played by his collaborator Ben Moore, wanders in desolation through an outdoor corridor formed by two rows of busts of the Roman emperors.



(a)

(a) The cinematic Pygmalion: The poet of Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* leaves the statue-muse. (b) He peeps through a keyhole in the *Hôtel des folies dramatiques*.

Unlike Cocteau's or Maya Deren's statues, these do not come alive, yet in Maas's film their animation is potential, and the pathos of that fragment of the trance derives from the refusal of the statues to live and advise.

Behind all the employments of the statue in the trance film, however obliquely, is the myth of Pygmalion. In his revival of that myth in the terms of a "magical" illusionism of cinema, Cocteau initiated a cinematic ritual that a whole generation of American film-makers felt sufficiently vital to restate in their own terms.

The temporal ambiguity that Cocteau postulated between any two consecutive frames of a continuous shot operated independent of the camera which photographed that shot. In Maya Deren's reworking of that suspended temporality, account would be taken of the status of the camera in cinematic metaphors of reflection. She did not do this as Vertov had done and as many would begin to do in the 1960s by introducing the film-making apparatus into the imagery of the film. Her early, and best, films dwell instead upon the temporal and spatial complexities of representing the self in cinema. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the window, as a metaphor for cinematic representation, has neither the amorphous presence of Man Ray's distorting lens or the barrier quality of the window in *Un Chien Andalou*; it is, rather, a mirror. For Deren, and subsequently for most of the American independent film-makers who followed her, film-making was essentially a reflexive activity.