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Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren

by Maria Pramaggiore

Maya Deren's persona illustrates the similarities between practices of stardom in mainstream and alternative film, and Deren's use of film as a performative art highlights the relationship between film images and persona.

In his examination of the formative years of the Hollywood star system, Richard de Cordova calls for a "reassessment of the manufacturer's place" to balance a number of historical accounts which argue that public demand single-handedly fueled the creation of the star system.¹ Richard Dyer concurs with this approach, characterizing stars as commodities produced and circulated by a profit-making economic apparatus. Furthermore, in Dyer's view, stars embody and disseminate prevailing notions of what it means to be an individual.² De Cordova and Dyer consider the Hollywood manifestation of stardom but do not address the way star production functions in other contexts, such as that of avant-garde film.³ Although the concept of stardom may seem antithetical to the avant-garde, the practice of star making is not: Patricia Mellencamp writes that avant-garde film in the United States has always had a star system of its own, where "success was not measured by money, cars, houses and designer fashion, it was embodied in famous names and landmark films, and fueled by gossip."⁴ In keeping with Dyer and de Cordova's focus on the manufacture of stardom and following Mellencamp's characterization of stardom in the avant-garde, this essay examines one case of persona construction: that of Maya Deren, one of the most celebrated figures within alternative film culture.

Clearly Deren was not, and probably never will be, a mass culture figure in terms of name or image recognition. Nor was she a star product owned and marketed by a Hollywood studio. Nevertheless, Deren participated in a process of persona construction during the 1940s which looks surprisingly similar to the construction of mainstream film stars in that era. After her death in 1961, film scholars and filmmakers have carried on the work Deren began, celebrating her "legendary status" as the now-absent "Mother of the avant-garde"⁵ who gave "birth" to U.S. avant-garde film.⁶

By examining Deren's extratextually constructed persona in relation to her film performances, I hope to provide insight into the ways that commodity capitalism

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informs avant-garde culture, despite modernist claims to the autonomy of art. My analysis also suggests that specific meanings and practices of stardom may not differ greatly between dominant and marginal film cultures, primarily because ideologies of individualism that infuse mass culture also influence alternative practices.

In the U.S. avant-garde, for example, a filmmaker's personal relation to his or her films is the object of a great deal of interest much the same way that mainstream film actors are connected in some personal way to their films. In fact, directorial auteurism has always been the dominant paradigm of stardom in alternative cinema.⁷ Mellencamp comments, in somewhat ambivalent terms, that the growth of experimental film culture in the 1960s and 1970s depended upon the accessibility of the director through live appearances: "As the great film would reveal the hand of the artist, so could we meet him, in person. The 'personal' was both the glory and the pitfall of the movement, without a national structure of permanent exhibition . . . dependent on stalwart individuals."⁸ This reification of the artist obeys the modernist logic of authorship Roland Barthes lays to rest, arguing that the author is a convenient fiction which imposes "a limit on that text . . . [and] furnish[es] it with a final signified."⁹ Because avant-garde exhibition has been "clearly framed by presence and anecdote," Patricia Mellencamp cautions, the "personal appearance system . . . risk[s] placing 'meaning' totally within the author."¹⁰ Along similar lines, but placing less emphasis on the cult of the individual, Jim Peterson argues that avant-garde film viewers depend upon filmmakers' appearances at screenings because they provide explanations to an audience engaging in "problem solving" at cognitive and thematic levels.¹¹

Avant-garde film spectators, then, may expect that film viewing in itself will constitute an event, framed as it often is by the live appearance of the filmmaker.¹² Thus, the distinction between filmgoing as event and on-screen events may not be as definitive for avant-garde film culture as it has been for Hollywood cinema. Whereas de Cordova posits a shift in attention from exhibition as performance "toward . . . the performance of those who appeared in films"¹³ as one precondition for the emergence of the Hollywood star system, this shift may not accurately describe avant-garde cinema spectatorship. I am not suggesting that avant-garde spectators are necessarily resistant or critical, only that active viewing and expectations differ across mainstream and alternative contexts.¹⁴ Furthermore, on-screen performances and the live exhibition event converge through the figure of the filmmaker, the director/actor/star who often appears on screen and in person. Because the filmmaker serves as both director and actor, director-as-auteur and actor-as-auteur models are not mutually exclusive.

In this manner, avant-garde film culture, like mainstream cinema's star system, links stardom to historically specific notions of individualism. Unlike mainstream cinema, however, U.S. avant-garde cinema couches individualism in the specifically modernist vocabulary of the artist's role in—and alienation from—society.¹⁵ A filmmaker's live appearances confirm the status of the film object as art and the filmmaker's status as artist. In the process, historical and cultural ideas about the artist come to inform star discourses.

An examination of the ongoing construction of Maya Deren offers insight into the way stardom has operated in an avowedly oppositional subcultural context, that of experimental film culture in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. I analyze the manufacture of Deren's persona through live appearances at film screenings, film reviews and interviews, and the circulation of her photographic image and conclude that Deren's marketing strategy does not differentiate avant-garde film culture from mainstream film as much as might be expected, given the anti-Hollywood rhetoric of the U.S. avant-garde. I discuss the 1940s "trance" films *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) in terms of the relationship between Deren's performances and persona. I argue that Deren's promotional efforts helped create an image of the modernist artist-auteur (inflected by contemporary discourses of gender), whereas her multiplied and fragmented film protagonists refuse to "guarantee" textual meaning through persona. In fact, Deren's films, which draw heavily from her study of dance and ritual possession, explicitly deconstruct notions of individualism and engage an aesthetic of depersonalization. My concluding remarks point out that Deren's film performances and her marketing activities reflect an ethic of participation, an aesthetic and political practice which in some ways does link Deren's promotional work to her formal contributions to experimental cinema.

Marketing Persona. Maya Deren was an expert at manipulating images: although committed to exploring their aesthetic potential, she was no innocent when it came to exploiting their commercial appeal. In a 1945 letter to Sawyer Falk, her former mentor at Syracuse University, Deren suggested a media event to publicize a screening of *Meshes*: "if, by chance, you have made any stills, we could use them in the advertising and in whatever program we print. Add to this a picture of yourself which would, most likely, get into the downtown papers."¹⁶ Personalizing the event, marketing the film by publishing portraits of locals such as Falk and the film director herself, was characteristic of Deren's promotional strategy. She may have learned about such tactics as a writer for the *Syracuse Post-Standard* or as a publicity director at Syracuse University (two items listed on her 1941 résumé).¹⁷ Deren also had the opportunity to gain marketing experience as secretary, publicist, and sometime chauffeur to anthropologist and choreographer Katharine Dunham, with whom she toured just prior to making her first film in 1943. Millicent Hodson, coeditor of the first volume of *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, notes that "[Deren] used [a] photo on posters and flyers to publicize her screenings and film business. It heralded her arrival at colleges and museums as she traveled around the country, urging visual freedom from Hollywood and promoting independent production and distribution."¹⁸ The photograph Hodson refers to is the well-known frame enlargement from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a shot which has become an icon and visual mantra for aficionados of avant-garde film (figure 1).

The shot captures Deren in an apparent act of contemplation: standing at a window, she is literally caught in the act of looking through the glass. The camera's



Figure 1. Credit: Anthology Film Archives

soft focus is enhanced by the screening or veiling effect of the glass window, rendering an abstract, unblemished vision of Deren's face. Anaïs Nin, an acquaintance of Deren's, wrote of the shot: "When Sasha [Deren's second husband, Alexander Hammid] filmed her, as he loved her and found her beautiful, he caught a moment when Maya appeared behind a glass window, and, softened by the glass, she created a truly Botticelli effect."¹⁹

Nin's reference to Botticelli's *Primavera* brings the rhetoric of classical painting to bear on this portrait of Deren. The portrait's cultural work, however, was more akin to that of the photographs Hollywood studios circulated in the popular press to mythologize their star products. The film industry had perfected the use of photographs as promotional weapons as early as 1910,²⁰ and by the 1940s glamour photography was an industry of its own, with its own representational conventions.

Images of female glamour during the 1940s, for example, differed from the "cosmetic, refined" glamour embodied by Marlene Dietrich and Carole Lombard

because they emphasized “naturalness.”²¹ Naturalness was the term applied to photographs taken at locations, such as at the star’s home, on the set, or on tour with the USO, rather than in a studio. Natural shots appeared to be candid rather than posed compositions, although they too were posed.²² Deren’s enigmatic image from *Meshes* is poised between the pale Madonna of the *Primavera* and the dominant standards of 1940s glamour: although not candid, the shot appears to be a moment captured by, rather than posed for, the camera. Deren’s loose, informal hairstyle and simple clothing emphasize her “naturalness,” and her gesture at the window, despite her gracefully curved hands, appears to be an everyday gesture, not an actorly or exaggerated stance.

The visual rhetoric of “naturalness” encompasses Deren’s physical characteristics as well. Both classical painting and glamour photography associate female beauty with a regularity of female features, either prohibiting or masking racial and ethnic variability.²³ Deren’s prominent facial features are perhaps more suited to the code of 1940s naturalness than to the slinky artifice of the previous decade’s beauty queens—not least because, according to the press and Deren’s personal friends, her appearance and behavior were considered “ethnic,” “exotic,” and bohemian.

Deren’s friends’ and acquaintances’ comments regarding her appearance and personality emphasize “exotic” qualities underscored by her “ethnic” physical features, including her stocky physique, and her flair for the dramatic in clothing and behavior. Anaïs Nin called her “Maya, the Gypsy, the Ukrainian gypsy, with wild frizzy hair, like a halo around her face.”²⁴ Alexander Hammid told the coeditors of *The Legend*, “[Maya] had a great flair for Russian-like clothing. She sewed very well and she made her own fantasy clothes, kind of folksy, embroidery type.”²⁵ Third husband, Teiji Ito, remembered: “Maya was always a Russian. In Haiti she was a Russian. She was always dressed up, talking, speaking many languages and being a Russian.”²⁶ In her diary, Anaïs Nin emphasized a “primitive” quality about Deren’s face by first naming and then displacing Deren’s ethnicity entirely: “She was a Russian Jewess. Under the wealth of curly, wild hair, which she allowed to frame her face in a halo, she had pale-blue eyes and a primitive face. The mouth was wide and fleshy, the nose with a touch of South Sea-islander fullness.”²⁷ It is not surprising that these facial emblems of Deren’s “exoticism” and “primitivism” are not the features that invite comparison to the face of the woman in Botticelli’s painting. Instead, the glass has the effect of regularizing, perhaps “softening” Deren’s features. This abstraction, this flattening of Deren’s facial features may explain why the shot is likened to classical European art, why it worked so well as a promotional photograph in the United States from the mid-1940s onward, and why Deren used the shot to publicize her work.²⁸

Patricia Mellencamp and the coeditors of *The Legend of Maya Deren* question Deren’s choice of this particular photograph to represent herself. The coeditors conclude that Deren sought to preserve not her youth or beauty but “the transparency of the glass” because she saw “in many dimensions at once.”²⁹ Mellencamp, however, argues otherwise: “Deren knew about the gap between the

real and the appearance, the performer and the filmmaker, women and woman, the contradictions to which women are held.”³⁰ Her comment suggests that Deren’s promotional strategy was just that: unavoidably implicated in ideology and economics, specifically in terms of the marketing of women’s bodies in the Hollywood film industry and in U.S. culture generally. Although Deren was not owned by a Hollywood studio, she constructed herself, in part, in the vocabulary of the dominant cinema. Named for the actress Eleanora Duse, Eleanora (Maya) Deren created a persona by exploiting the public’s desire for particular kinds of images of women. A case in point is the photograph of Deren which appeared in *Glamour* in 1946 (figure 2). Here Deren does adopt a pose: hair swept back, arms behind her, smiling winsomely as she gazes off to her right, she assumes the posture of a glamour girl, even as the curves of her back and neck reveal a self-conscious stiffness. Deren’s “exotic” difference is hinted at through her beaded necklace, and her body is both framed and shielded from view by the chair back in a “peek-a-boo” rather than overtly exhibitionist fashion. This photograph, like the Botticelli, adheres to the visual codes of commodified female beauty, albeit in the historically specific vernacular of glamour photography rather than the supposedly timeless vocabulary of high art.

As this shot and the numerous other photographs which accompanied interviews and reviews of her films suggest, Deren’s persona capitalized upon her physical appearance and bohemian lifestyle as much as, if not more than, her technical explorations and rigorous film theory. An interview published in the *New York World-Telegram* on April 17, 1946, opens with the following statement: “A good deal of what Maya Deren says about her creative work in motion pictures sounds like long-hair double talk. But it is as agreeable to listen to as she is to look at.”³¹ The hook for a Louise Levitas review is Deren’s appearance: “Miss Deren, who you can see is as photogenic as this month’s Miss Subways, is a movie producer on a skinny shoestring.”³² A caption accompanying a photograph in *Esquire* in December 1946 reads: “Maya Deren experiments with motion pictures of the subconscious, but here is finite evidence that the lady herself is infinitely photogenic.”³³

Deren’s attractiveness was often linked to what critics described as her bohemian, Greenwich Village lifestyle. Manny Farber’s *New Republic* review (October 1946) refers to Deren as a “Greenwich Village purist who has the ambition, belief in her own genius, love for esthetic verbalizing, ginger and push of a whole colony of artists.”³⁴ Mary Braggiotti’s “Classicism on a Shoestring” (1946) leads with a description of Deren that conflates an aggressively coifed and passionate bohemian artist with woman as image: “A lot of people casually mention motion picture-making as an art. Down in Morton St., in Greenwich Village, lives a small-sized young woman with large gray eyes and an aggressive cloud of curly brown hair, whose belief in films as an art form amounts to a passion.”³⁵ Reviews that emphasize Deren as “agreeable to look at” may not directly undermine her status as an artist, yet they do shift the focus to her appearance. Clearly, the discourses of glamour girl, ambitious filmmaker/promoter, and bohemian artist clash with and inform each other in these extratextual discourses.



Figure 2. Credit: Anthology Film Archives

A number of reviewers relate Deren's film work to her poetry and dance, promoting her as a multifaceted modern artist. Deren herself actively sought to be identified as an artist and to define film as an art form: she excerpted these reviews in a four-page promotional brochure entitled "Cinema as an Independent Art Form."³⁶ Her assistant, Miriam Ashram, recalls: "A lot of her efforts had to do with how one separates oneself from the rest of the world. In her case, the rest of the

world meant the non-artists, that's all. . . . Self-sufficiency was the artist's pride—the idea that one's artistry should extend itself to every aspect of daily living.”³⁷ Deren embraced the dominant concepts defining the modern artist, including the necessity of living for one's art and the inevitable alienation from mainstream society.

Deren's portrait, her films, and her persona,³⁸ not for sale in any conventional way, were nevertheless products which fueled interest in and consumption of avant-garde film. Deren's picture personality enhanced her own “legendary” status, publicized experimental filmmaking as noncommercial, iconoclastic art making, and encouraged the serious contemplation of such films. Lauren Rabinovitz writes that “Deren became the best known representative of the postwar independent cinema discourse, perhaps because she herself was the object of attention as often as the films and ideas.”³⁹ These filmmaking and film-promoting activities consumed Deren's energies through the 1940s.

The difficulties of exhibiting and distributing experimental films during this period cannot be overestimated. Deren reportedly began screening her films on the wall in her New York apartment and, when friends of friends began asking to see them, she arranged theater showings and college and university screenings and sent out a rental price list to any organizations that might have an interest in experimental film. In January 1946, Deren “averaged 7 university or museum rentals of the film program per month” and lectured twice a month at screenings.⁴⁰ Ultimately, she arranged for the Provincetown Playhouse screening in February 1946 which made history in its own right and encouraged the development of other venues such as Amos Vogel's Cinema 16.

Deren not only developed exhibition channels but did so with what David Curtis calls a “dynamic approach to the screening of films by the film-makers themselves that led to a complete restructuring of non-theatrical distribution in the United States.”⁴¹ Deren's performance-based approach to exhibiting avant-garde film, while bound up in the economics of independent film distribution, also reflects a modernist aesthetics of presence wherein the author—in this case, the attractive, bohemian artist—adds an important layer of meaning to the text.

There is no doubt that the Botticelli photograph played a particular role in creating Deren's persona and perpetuating her singular status in avant-garde film history. After her death, Deren's “legend waned, almost to the point of obscurity,” write Hodson, Neiman, and Clark, yet the *Meshes* portrait “played a vital role in keeping the legend alive, appearing, so it seemed, every season.”⁴² That portrait also adorned the program for the 1994 Society for Cinema Studies conference, held at Deren's alma mater, Syracuse University. Another photograph of Deren (dancing and immersed in the ocean) is featured on the cover of Stan Brakhage's recent book,⁴³ and a shot of Deren behind her camera is one of the postcards Anthology Film Archives routinely sends out. Deren's image thus continues to circulate as a signifier of avant-garde film, although now primarily within film studies circles.

Certainly one must ask if Deren could have secured recognition for noncommercial filmmaking if she had not exploited her public's desire for a particular kind

of star—one whose glamorous exoticism was matched by her bohemian lifestyle and her ambition. It is important to remember that the period in which Deren's legend arose was a period in which visual artists such as Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol were celebrated for their public and private lives as well as for the works they produced. Furthermore, academic and popular film criticism seized upon the notion of auteurism during the 1950s, encouraging a cult of the film director in mainstream cinema that persists, although its intensity cannot rival the idolatry of the film actor.

Deren was by no means the first avant-garde filmmaker in the United States.⁴⁴ Yet, she has been designated experimental film's most prominent practitioner and, in the still-pervasive ideology of female domesticity, its "mother." Deren's status as the "mother" of avant-garde film, a comment Stan Brakhage credits to James Broughton, can be read as a trivialization of Deren's promotional work (merely motherly nurturance) and a conflation or displacement and domestication of her public efforts to the private sphere of familial relationships. The shift from bohemian artist to maternal figure suggests an anxiety of origins and, perhaps, a desire to embrace the oppositional stance Deren and others proclaimed for film artists without relinquishing traditional notions of gender.⁴⁵ Certainly her early death contributed to her unique location within the avant-garde as well. If absent mothers are figures of both resentment and reverence, then a dead mother whose much-circulated image resembles that of a classical Madonna is particularly likely to enjoy the latter.

Deren's participation in the circulation of her "Botticellied" image implicates her in the star-making apparatus of commodity capitalism, where images become commodities. The shot from *Meshes* operated and still operates as a fetishized commodity, but its cultural work differs from that of commercial cinema's artifacts in several crucial respects. Deren's marketing strategy was designed to encourage noncommercial filmmaking among artists, not to consolidate a financial empire. Deren helped to develop new perspectives on film art as she promoted her work at universities and museums. Certainly her legend is infused with notions of the importance and exoticism of the modern artist as alienated individual, notions that Deren herself shared. And certainly Deren's persona was and still is tied to her appearance and bohemian lifestyle.

It is not my purpose to indict Deren for participating in the process of persona construction; rather, I am interested in examining the contradictions that arise in the context of oppositional social practices. I am not surprised that some of Deren's promotional activities resemble those of the commercial film industry. The ideology of individualism, embodied in the ambitious and seductive star, artist, or auteur (or all three), captures the imagination of and speaks to the myriad desires of spectators and would-be practitioners and, in this manner, becomes mainstream and experimental cinema's most powerful tool of self-promotion.⁴⁶

Performance and Persona in Deren's Films. The particular meanings accruing to a star persona are drawn from film roles and extratextual discourses,

according to de Cordova. Deren's film performances, however, present more than merely a counterpoint to her promotional work. The film "roles" do not help to seamlessly construct a star persona; in fact, they contradict the assumptions upon which persona construction depends by undermining the self-containment and stability of the individual. Deren's film performances and experimental techniques deconstruct oppositions—interiority versus exteriority, surface versus depth, image versus reality—which help define the individual as self-sufficient, integrated, authentic, and stable.

Three of Deren's 1940s films, aptly named "trance" films by P. Adams Sitney,⁴⁷ explore the visual implications of simultaneously assuming the positions of object and subject, agent and action, observer and observed.⁴⁸ Deren's fragmentation and multiplication of her body in these films suggests more than a reversal of the subject-object dichotomy, however. In *Meshes, At Land*, and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren questions the artifice of the visually represented individual. The films manipulate images in the formal sense in which all films use images, but, more importantly, they are concerned with issues of mobility in relation to Deren and her images and with the camera's ability to capture, create, and participate in movement. Deren's persistent interest in dance and ritual, expressed most overtly in her book and unfinished film on Haitian religious practices, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*,⁴⁹ manifests itself in these films as an obsession with images of bodies in motion and an exploration of the implications of movement for the individual body.

Deren's interest in dance preceded her work in cinema. She toured the country with African American anthropologist, dancer, and choreographer Katharine Dunham in the early 1940s, in part because she was interested in collaborating with Dunham, whose master's thesis concerned ritual dance in Haiti. In her letter of introduction to Dunham, Deren writes of her "very deep feeling for the dance with some uncultivated talent" and of her desire to write a children's book on dance which would be "anthropological but not academic."⁵⁰

Catrina Neiman writes that Deren's film career "deflected" her study of Haiti.⁵¹ Deren published an article on religious possession in dancing in 1942. Alexander Hammid remembered her interest in possession, trance, and dance: "I think she must have had some notions about Haitian rituals which always involve dancing in a kind of trance-like state, that's also how the Bali dancing interested her, and that's where possession came in. A dancer, like a whirling dervish, working up motion and then extending it—the dancer seems to be possessed by another being."⁵²

Annette Michelson argues that Deren's socialist activities predisposed her toward collectivity; this, Michelson explains, is why she developed an aesthetics of anonymous ritual rather than of individualistic psychology.⁵³ It may be that Katharine Dunham's emphasis on "primitive" rhythms and collectivities in motion deepened Deren's interest in the relationship between movement and de-personalization.⁵⁴ Whatever the impetus, Deren's mannered acting, her use of repetitive, ritualized gestures in place of narrative continuity, and her fondness for matches on action that distribute movement across performers' bodies all

promote the sense of bodies subsumed by forces different from and larger than the individual will.

Deren's films treat movement as a force which mediates subjective and objective experience, as an event which is not independent of bodies but is independent of any one person's body. In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren joined "together a shot of one person beginning a movement and another 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 motional integrity of the movement itself, independent of its performer."⁵⁵ Movement and repetition—both that of the camera and of the actors—depersonalize her films and connect filmmaking to ritual:

I have called this new film ritual, not only because of the importance of the quality of movement . . . but because a ritual is characterized by the de-personalization of the individual. . . . The intent of such a 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."⁵⁶

This enlargement or extension beyond the individual is made possible because the camera can represent movement so that it no longer is associated with a single body. Deren's camera choreography renders movement in ways that reorganize subject and object categories.

In particular, Deren uses motion and choreography to animate: "if it can move, it lives. This most primitive, this most instinctive of all gestures: to make it move to make it live. So I had always been doing with my camera . . . nudging an ever-increasing area of the world, making it move, animating it, making it live."⁵⁷ To animate the world, Deren does not merely "add" a category of objects that move. Rather, the act of animation forces one to reconsider the entire structure of movement and the role and location of the individual object/body. In each of the three films I discuss, Deren unsettles traditional relationships between bodies and motion and questions the stability and cohesiveness of the individual, explicitly critiquing gender relations and the politics of image production in the process.

Meshes of the Afternoon. Deren's first film was a collaboration with her second husband, Czech filmmaker Alexander Hammid. As a result, *Meshes* bears a strong resemblance to Hammid's own first film, *Aimless Walk* (1930), particularly in terms of the iconography of the doubled self.⁵⁸

Meshes appears to record a woman taking an afternoon nap in a house whose interior becomes increasingly and surprisingly gothic, given that the dream takes place, in Manny Farber's words, "on a lazy California day in a stucco bungalow."⁵⁹ By depicting the dreamer's imaginative representations of herself and meshing those dream representations with the film's initial "reality," the film questions the stability of vision, the power of (self-) images, and the integrity of the individual. Deren acts as the dreaming protagonist whose body is both divided and multiplied; her movements are repeated, and certain inconsistencies arise which are incapable of recuperation in the figure of the initial dreamer. Deren's notes suggest that the

film “does not record an event which could be witnessed by *other* persons.”⁶⁰ But in fact, the point-of-view structure is such that no person within the film could witness all the events, not even the dreamer who appears to be the origin of the film’s events.

Repetition and symbolism displace narrative in *Meshes*. The use of spatial and temporal triples—in the stairway sequences and through the three dream doubles—ensures that the film conveys a mood of obsessive, ritualistic reiteration.⁶¹ A key falls out of Deren’s hand before she enters the house and reappears from a different location (e.g., her mouth) each time a dream double attempts to enter the house. Deren watches her double chase a robed, mirror-faced figure and enter the house three times; she and her dream doubles climb and fall down the stairs in pursuit of the figure. The three dream doubles confer over the dining room table, apparently determining which one will kill the dreamer. When the third double approaches Deren with a knife, the now-restless dreamer is awakened by the kiss of her male lover, played by Hammid.

We are encouraged to think the dream has ended when the lover hangs up the telephone Deren left off the hook prior to the dream. Yet, the dream is not over; for after she follows him upstairs to the bedroom, his sexual caress, which visually parallels her earlier autoerotic caress prior to her nap, incites her to slash him with a knife. Her gesture reveals that the space where his head appeared has become, or always was, a mirror—possibly the mirror face of the robed figure in which the woman has not been able to see her reflection. The mirror shatters: through a frame of broken mirror we see the ocean, and the next shot depicts shards of a mirror falling onto a sandy beach. In the final scene, the male lover enters the house to find the dreaming woman in her chair covered with seaweed and apparently dead. These final point-of-view shots are inconclusive, however: if the dreamer’s imaginative world seeped into the film’s “reality,” then viewers must also question the male lover’s “reality.”⁶²

P. Adams Sitney argues that the woman in *Meshes* “encounters objects and sights as if they were capable of revealing the erotic mystery of the self.”⁶³ Sitney is correct in observing that objects, vision, and the erotic are important to the film’s construction of a repressed and resistant female sexuality and subjectivity. Sitney’s is one of several excellent readings that provide insight into the film’s psycho-sexual tensions and suggest their source in the Deren-Hammid relationship.⁶⁴

My focus, however, is on the fact that objects and sights in this film, most importantly the protagonist’s sights of her fragmented and multiplied self, undermine vision as a sense which offers access to the truth of the individual. This process is not without gender implications, of course; the notion of woman as knowable through her image is one that the film takes issue with. Deren argued that photographic images always refer to other images but also constitute their own reality,⁶⁵ and her images emphasize that constructed, photographic reality at the expense of the referential reality of the subject-effect. The framing of Deren’s face by its own reflection in the Botticelli shot, for example, foregrounds that vision cannot guarantee one’s position—we see the face and its reflection as both objects and sub-

jects. Later in the film, an image of Deren's moving reflection in the knife blade echoes and answers the Botticelli shot by demythologizing and, in fact, deforming Deren's face.

Lauren Rabinovitz writes that in *Meshes* "the relation of subject to object is reversed: the woman becomes passive while the objects act aggressively."⁶⁶ Yet bodies and inanimate objects are not easily distinguishable as either subjects or objects in *Meshes*. Deren's treatment of the properties of subjects and objects thwart our expectations regarding the definitions of those categories. For example, the sequence in which the dreamer enters the house contains a shot of a knife falling out of a loaf of bread. The key the woman drops early in the film bounces down the outdoor steps in slow motion. Later, the woman is forced down the stairs several times and in several different ways. In each scene, an "object" falls down, yet each time the repetition of the act of falling is complicated by the peculiar behavior of the object itself. By virtue of the slow motion filming, the key seems to dance in the air, to be suspended in its rebound from each step, and to almost intentionally avoid capture by the hands that seek it. The dream figures, however, resist falling down the stairs; one grips the edges of the stairs, and another moves down and up the stairs, coming to rest in a variety of locations on the staircase in a series of disconnected shots. Inanimate objects like the key are fluid and mobile in this film, whereas the human bodies move stubbornly and appear gravity-bound.⁶⁷ The knife easily slides from the bread onto the table, yet it initiates the fall by an apparently self-induced pulling away from the density of the bread. In these moments, the behavior of the objects does not conform to expectations regarding the volitional nature of human bodies (which move according to the will of the subject) and things (which are objects acted upon by subjects).

Furthermore, the interplay of subjective and objective camera angles prohibits any clear distinction between the dreamer and the dreamed event, a confusion emphasized by the woman's apparent death at the end of the film. The camera's positioning varies from subjective (in the tunnel zoom shot that begins the dream sequence) to objective (we see the dreaming Deren from positions that are neither her optical point of view nor that of any of the doubles). Neither position, nor the combination of them, provides a stable ground from which to assess the dreamer's identity or even her bodily integrity. This ambiguous camerawork is signaled in the opening sequence, where the establishing shot of the street and house reveals the protagonist's body in shadow; viewers see her "whole" body only as a silhouette.

By investigating the problems of the individual body in terms of subject, object, singularity, and multiplication, *Meshes* makes it apparent that conventional films construct personas through single-bodied images, conventional point-of-view structures, and realist acting conventions. The film probes the relationship between the real (presumably the dreamer) and the role (the dream doubles), ultimately confounding the distinction between the two. Annette Kuhn writes: "In effecting a distance between assumed persona and real self, the practice of performance constructs a subject which is both fixed in the distinction between role and self and

at the same time, paradoxically, called into question in the very act of performance.”⁶⁸ The multiplied representation of the female protagonist produces a distinction between the dreamer (self) and the three dream doubles (roles), then calls that distinction into question. The use of Deren herself as dreaming and dreamed woman/women, the agency and autonomy of the dream doubles (they apparently succeed in doing violence to the dreamer), and the complex use of camera angles and editing confound the distinction between “role” and “self.” The film thus calls into question the continuity, stability, and location of the ostensible “self” or subject while at the same time confirming the power of images—and, importantly, women’s images of themselves—to produce their own realities.

At Land. The title of this 1944 film is a pun that reverses “at sea,” and the opening scene cites the final scene of *Meshes*: the ocean’s waves roll (in reversed-motion photography) as Deren’s body is washed up on the sand. In the scenario for *At Land*, Deren describes the woman’s relationship with the ocean in these terms: “She watches the sea desert her with inactive longing, accepting the sand which, as she dries off, slowly collects around her.”⁶⁹ Deren’s language reflects the reversed relationship between the human as active subject and the sea as passive object—the sea “deserts” the woman, and she inactively longs for it. As in *Meshes*, the woman confronts a hostile and uncaring environment, although the settings are not claustrophobic domestic spaces but are oceans, fields, and other public spaces. Unlike *Meshes*, where the protagonist is multiplied, embodied four times over, here she is single and decidedly solitary until the concluding sequence, often “pass[ing] invisibly among [the] people” in the film.⁷⁰

Repetitive motions and Deren’s body structure the film. The montage editing, organized around Deren’s body and her eyeline matches, juxtaposes vastly different locations but presents them as continuous. In a sense, Deren’s body performs the work of continuity editing because her body and the chess piece she pursues are the figures that create graphic and narrative connections among the scenes.⁷¹ Her body stretches across these spaces to create continuity, yet she is also fragmented because she occupies, and sutures together, impossible spaces.

After she emerges from the sea, Deren crawls from a piece of driftwood on the beach up to a table; eyeline matches suggest that her body occupies both spaces simultaneously. She crawls along the table, unnoticed by the people sitting at the table, and spots an unusual chess game. The chess pieces move themselves across the board. When a white piece moves itself off the board, she watches intently; like the key in *Meshes*, however, it escapes her, tumbling into a stream of water. Deren then encounters a man along a country road and enters a house in which a man lies in a bed and stares at her. A cat suddenly appears in her arms and leaps from them, initiating the motion which allows her to escape from the room. In the final scene, Deren returns to the beach and watches two women play chess. Deren steals the white queen as it is about to be conquered and runs down the beach in a series of shots edited so that Deren is seen looking at herself from several locations and so that she appears to make extremely rapid progress across vast sand dunes.

Body doubling and division occur not only in terms of Deren's body in the final sequence but also in the sequence where Deren encounters the man. Her first male companion, presented in two-shots with Deren and in close-ups, is Hammid. Through cuts, he metamorphoses into film critic Parker Tyler and then into composer John Cage. The man's transformation differs from Deren's self-multiplication in *Meshes*, however. In *Meshes*, Deren's subjective dream state motivates her fragmentation into dream doubles whose bodies are identical but who behave differently. In *At Land*, the multiplication of the male figure results in different male bodies but similar behavior. Like the *Meshes* dream doubles, each man appears slightly more hostile than the last, a trait emphasized near the end of the scene, when the final man walks too fast for Deren to keep up. The nature of the interaction with Deren, the physical movements, and the relative location of the seemingly generic man does not vary; what changes is the physical body which inhabits the location. Deren's body creates continuity in relation to the ever-changing man. The social relation between the men and the woman—expressed in physical proximity and facial expression—seems prearranged and scripted. From the perspective of the female protagonist in the film, the physical distinctiveness of each man is irrelevant. The "dance" that the woman performs with the series of men constitutes a ritualized relation, recalling the tension-charged relationship between the dreamer and her lover in *Meshes*.

In the film's final scene, Deren watches the women play chess on the beach, strokes their hair in a sensual gesture, and then steals the white queen as it is about to be taken. Her triumphant run down the beach seems to celebrate the capture of the queen and the escape from oppressive social, sexual, and aesthetic rules.⁷² The chess game may be a metaphor for the social positionality of males and females, of pawns and their superiors, but it also asserts the importance of location and movement in determining both social and aesthetic relations. Chess pieces obey a rigid hierarchy that determines their relative mobility, power, and importance. That Deren identifies with and/or desires a chess piece and rejects human contact is interesting in itself: it indicates that the (gendered and color-coded) definitions of subjectivity and objecthood depend upon who defines those terms and upon the social hierarchy which determines such relations.

Deren's identification with and desire for the white queen signifies a recognition that both of their identities are determined by gender, color, and position in a social hierarchy. The queen, despite her gender, is a powerful figure: the only female figure on the board, she is unique and, importantly, more mobile than even the king. What Deren claims for herself at the end of *At Land* is thus an identification with and possession of an object which is marked by gender yet singular in status and more powerful in her ability to move than the king, whose immobilization by the opponent ends the chess game. In *At Land*, Deren's possession of the queen ends the game and the film.

After her successful theft of the queen,⁷³ a series of shots of Deren in different spaces is cut together; the effect is of different aspects of the woman watching from different locations in space and time, unified for a moment by watching her own escape.

Deren's comments on the film's protagonist reveal the importance of the fragmentation and unity of that figure, who, "instead of undertaking the long voyage of search for adventure, finds instead that the universe itself has usurped the dynamic action which was once the prerogative of human will, and confronts her with a volatile and relentless metamorphosis in which her personal identity is the sole constancy."⁷⁴ Yet the woman's constancy is compromised by the techniques Deren uses to destabilize her as a coherent body which moves as a body should. In the program note for *At Land*, Deren calls attention to her body's enhanced physicality: "[in] the dune sequence . . . the camera stops, permitting the figure to move a considerable distance before photographing again (but the result looks continuous) . . . [this] results in a diminution in the size of the figure, which carries a strong emotional effect and is an event which could not possibly be translated out of cinematic terms into any other."⁷⁵ Here, Deren's moving body creates the illusion of continuity, the woman running down the beach, but also produces a "strong emotional effect" because it distorts spatial and temporal relations that normally govern human bodies. The film addresses the contradictions between singular body and plural subject, but it does not resolve them.

The whole, vibrant, moving Deren running down the beach at a pace faster than humanly possible does, however, offer a stark contrast to the immobile, seaweed-draped dreamer at the end of *Meshes*. The camera's more "objective" treatment (in contrast to the dream-motivated subjectivity of *Meshes*), Deren's fascination and alliance with objects, and her triumphant rejection of both heterosexual/social and homosexual/social relations all point toward the cult of the artist-individual. In other words, *At Land* rewrites the apparent self-destruction that concludes *Meshes* and valorizes the power of one woman's sexual and creative autonomy. The game of chess is about structured relations; each piece acquires its value from the rules of the game and is powerful only in relation to the movements of other pieces. In *At Land*, Deren seems to claim the queen's position and mobility and also to leave the game behind.

This film does not neglect the fact that a woman such as the radical individualist protagonist is produced by film, is embodied within particular relations of looking. The woman running down the beach is watched by others of herself. Her ability to look at herself many times over is not threatening, however, possibly because she is aware of and defies the strictures of the chess game, or, perhaps, because she occupies both subject and object position and new definitions of those terms are produced. If *Meshes* questions male-centered definitions of women and investigates women's internal self-representations, then *At Land* affirms the woman's right of access to the symbolic order, figured by the chess game, and her choice of positions within symbolic representation.

Ritual in Transfigured Time. In this film, Deren revisits themes of self-doubling, replacing thematic repetitions such as climbing the stairs or chasing the pawn with formal repetitions: specifically, the use of slow motion and the freeze-frame. *Ritual* explores the individual persona in the context of quotidian

rituals of social interaction and the mythic dimension of the masculine aesthetic tradition.

Deren uses editing to enable two distinct bodies to occupy a particular social position. Deren and dancer Rita Christiani meet as distinct beings and then mutually inhabit and move through the same spaces.⁷⁶ In the opening scenes of the film, Christiani watches Deren roll a ball of yarn with a partner who is hidden from view. After passing through an intermediate chamber to arrive in the room where Deren sits, Christiani discovers that the chair opposite Deren is empty. Christiani sits down in the chair and takes the place of the unseen former occupant. The camera moves to a medium close-up of Deren as her hands twist the yarn and as she tosses her head and smiles in conversation with Christiani. Deren is shot in slow motion, which emphasizes the fluid, dancelike quality of her gestures. The position from which Christiani first looked at Deren is shown in a reverse shot to be a doorway, guarded by a distinctly Cerberean Anais Nin.

Christiani passes through the threshold Nin guards and enters a room filled with party goers, who interact by flirting and dancing. Deren's camera breaks these activities down into their component gestures and renders them dancelike through slow motion and freeze-frames. Christiani's costume changes as she passes through the doorway; as she enters the party, she wears a black garment that suggests widow's weeds or a nun's garb. After several minutes of the party scene, during which Christiani stands out against the white party goers both because of her costume and her racial difference (she is the only African American woman in the scene), a cut transports Christiani, two other women, and dancer Frank Westbrook to an outdoor sculpture garden.

The three women dance together and then become involved in a game that resembles the children's game of Roman Statues. Westbrook dances with each of the women in turn and spins them off to dance on their own. As they begin their own dances, they are frozen by the camera and turn into statues in freeze-frames. Westbrook leaps onto a statue pedestal and momentarily becomes frozen himself, but he turns toward Christiani and begins a slow-motion and freeze-frame pursuit.

Christiani seems to understand the effect of the *danse macabre* with Westbrook and attempts to escape from this game of objectification into immobility. A tightly edited match on action editing sequence alternates shots of Christiani and Deren; as Christiani turns to flee, a cut inserts Deren's body finishing the gesture begun by Christiani. Their movements are continuous across two bodies. The two women are never photographed in the same frame, and they wear the same dress and shawl, encouraging the interpretation that they inhabit the same space and time. Their scene culminates with the women immersing themselves in the ocean, still in sequential match on action shots.

As they plunge into the sea, they are shot in negative, so that the dark dress becomes a white gown. Their movements in the water are detached from any ground, free of gravity's restrictions. The film ends with a shot of Christiani floating upward in the frame in the now-white gown. Once again, the use of ocean imagery invites comparison with *Meshes* and *At Land*. In the former, the freedom attained by

dream doubles—that they were capable of behaving in a manner at odds with the dreaming woman who created them—is only capable of being represented as the possible death of the dreamer at the hands of her mental “objects.” The active figures in *Meshes*, the doubles, are then left unaccounted for; if the dreamer is made inaccessible to representation, what is the status of her doubles? *At Land* foregrounds the rule-bound nature of social interaction, like *Ritual*. The protagonist embraces the inanimate queen and, implicitly, symbolic representation yet rejects the game by running down the beach along the ocean from which she emerged. In *Ritual*, the ocean can be read as a symbol of rebirth-in-motion as opposed to the immobilizing transformation of the Roman Statues game. This symbolism is heightened by the white bridal, initiate, or christening gown. The transformation also involves a breakdown in rules of representation—the switch to negative images—and the rules of individualism—Deren and Christiani are both same and different.

The transition to negative in this sequence calls up associations with the figuration of woman as lack in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁷⁷ *Ritual* can be read as refiguring this definition of woman as lack, not by reversing the image but because the negative has the potential for an alternative enactment of identity as a shared, but not identical, experience. In “Cinematography, the Creative Use of Reality,” Deren discusses negative images as more than simple reversals: “the photographic negative image is still another striking case in point. This is not a direct white-on-black statement but is understood as an inversion of values. When applied to a recognizable person or scene, it conveys a sense of critically qualitative change.”⁷⁸ Sameness and difference are cast as a dividedness of the body in *Meshes* and as an expansion of the individual body to partake of more impersonal, universal movements and gestures in *Ritual*. Deren does not develop an absolute equivalence between herself and Christiani through visual techniques, yet she forges an identification between the two through their bodies’ actions as they flout the stasis of statuesque art objects. Women’s images—both still and moving—are at stake in this film. Deren clearly makes a distinction between the art object’s immobility (the statues) and the woman/women’s shared motion in the water; in the process she reveals that film techniques permit objects and subjects to be differentiated through the manipulation of moving images in space and time.

Conclusion. Anaïs Nin wrote that Deren had ruined *Ritual in Transfigured Time* because she refused to develop individual characters: “The theme of interchangeable personalities is not clear, and I might even say that in destroying the characters, Maya destroyed the film. When gestures are broken at the party, heads cut off, it is not human beings who lose arms and heads but the film which loses its meaning. I feel this film is a failure.”⁷⁹ It is certainly true that Deren’s films do not regard the individual as immutable or sacrosanct. The three films in which Deren appears are all concerned with individual women, and yet all are unable to “guarantee” a singular position for the protagonist or a stable meaning for the text. In *Meshes*, the protagonist is multiplied by her own dreaming imagination. Her dreams produce a hall of mirrors that defies codification as internal or external, re-



Figure 3. Credit: Anthology Film Archives

ality or role. In *At Land*, Deren's body moves through and across impossible spaces and times, ultimately fleeing ritualized social interactions. At the moment of her individuation, however, the figure watches herself run along the beach from several vantage points. In *Ritual*, women escape from stasis, from male-defined aesthetic representation, into the ocean, enlarging their personalities beyond the boundaries of the individual body. By refusing to occupy the position of either subject

or object, Deren's protagonists stake out positions of "in-betweenness" and indeterminacy and thus intervene in the power hierarchy associated with looking relations as well as unsettling expectations regarding individualized characters with whom spectators might identify.

As with most star constructions, Deren also occupies an indeterminate position: she is both highly individualized and generic, inviting and refusing spectator identification. She is a highly individualized special case—partly because she has been canonized as the mother of avant-garde cinema. She is not a special case at all when we see that her legacy reproduces the myth of the exotic, uninhibited, and solitary artist at odds with her culture. One final image captures the contradictions of Deren's particular star persona: the unresolved tensions between performer and persona are signified by the juxtaposition of Deren's face, the artificial mannequin arm (which appears in the opening of *Meshes*), and the glass barrier, a metaphor for the camera lens or screen whose position between the real and the constructed determines how we see them both (figure 3). The doubling of Deren's right eye suggests the doubleness of occupying subject and object positions on either and both sides of the camera, the ambiguous nature of reflected images, and the camera's potential to exploit the unreliability of vision to create its own realities.

Finally, the modernist aesthetics of presence that has characterized avant-garde cinema has direct bearing on the relationship between performance and persona in Maya Deren's life and work. Her appearances at film screenings (which she referred to as performances) and the circulation of her images were essential to the construction of her persona, yet, paradoxically, her films question the idea of the individual that underwrote the activities that promoted the development of the avant-garde.

For Deren, film performances were never limited to the screen, and film was by its nature a performative art, enacting and creating a particular form of reality. In search of a theory of performative film, Peggy Phelan asserts that "rather than asking again what makes a good film performance, [we should ask,] how do films and videos become performative?"⁸⁰ One answer to that question is Deren's ethic of participation—visible in her textual engagement with destabilizing the subject-object opposition as well as in her Haitian footage, which must be the subject of another essay, and in her work promoting the growth of experimental film.

Notes

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1. Richard de Cordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 7.
2. Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 5, 8.
3. Here I follow in the footsteps, or perhaps I should say footnotes, of Patricia Mellencamp, William Wees, and Scott MacDonald, who all note that "avant-garde" is a problematic term. In *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Mellencamp discusses the uneasy relationship of "avant-garde" to modernism and postmodernism (xiv–xv). In *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Wees writes that "experimenting with the medium and opposing the dominant film industry suffice to make a filmmaker avant-garde—though I readily acknowledge that there are more rigorous ways of defining the term, just as there are other terms (for example, experimental, underground, visionary, personal, poetic, pure, free, independent, alternative) that have been applied to films I call avant-garde" (ix–x). In *Avant-garde Film: Motion Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), MacDonald notes the same slippage, remarking that this problem of definition "is evidence of the size and diversity of this particular area of film history, as well as of the ongoing debate about how to understand it. No one term seems entirely satisfactory—including *avant-garde film* . . . in general avant-garde filmmaking has been a derivation of the industry, a response to it in content and form" (15–16, emphasis in original). Like Mellencamp, Wees, and MacDonald, I use the term *avant-garde* to designate cinema practices that critically respond to and/or oppose dominant cinema in terms of form, content, and/or, I would add, production and exhibition.
4. Mellencamp, *Indiscretions*, xiii.
5. Quotation credited to James Broughton by Stan Brakhage in *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-garde Filmmakers* (New York: McPherson and Company, 1989), 13.
6. The case for Deren's role as "mother" of the avant-garde may have been made implicitly by P. Adams Sitney, whose *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde 1943–1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), begins in 1943 with the Deren/Hammid collaboration on *Meshes*. See Lauren Rabinowitz's *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943–71* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), for a discussion of the various New York artists working in experimental film.
7. In keeping with my argument that mainstream and alternative cinema practices are not always divergent, I should point out that director-stars are not uncommon in mainstream cinema, although the conflation of star and directorial persona has been much more limited: Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Clint Eastwood, Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen are the most obvious examples. It is interesting to speculate upon the increasing importance of the film director as star in the midst of the recent wave of independent studio hybrid films (e.g., Quentin Tarantino).
8. Mellencamp, *Indiscretions*, xiv.
9. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 147.
10. Mellencamp, *Indiscretions*, 9, 11.
11. See Peterson's provocative *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the Avant-garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.
12. In *Avant-garde Film: Motion Studies*, MacDonald argues that conventions of spectatorship are usually established before one sees an avant-garde film and that these films force us to question our habits of film viewing (1–2). This questioning may become an expectation of avant-garde film viewers that enhances the sense of the immediacy of avant-garde spectatorship. In other words, one difference between mainstream and

- avant-garde cinema viewing practices may be the conscious awareness that avant-garde film viewing constitutes a temporally and spatially immediate event/practice.
13. De Cordova, *Picture Personalities*, 29–30.
 14. See Judith Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3–4, for a discussion of the paradigm developed by 1970s film theorists that divided film spectatorship into an active or passive activity depending upon the context (mainstream or alternative).
 15. Prominent twentieth-century star-artists in the United States include abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock, author Norman Mailer, and Beat poet Allen Ginsberg. The countercultural stardom of these figures was dependent upon discourses about their public performances, their works, and their private lives. The conflation of star and artist is also evident in mainstream film culture in a limited way. For example, the discourse of method acting, which legitimized acting as a craft, rendered stars such as Marlon Brando both artists and actors.
 16. VeVe Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, eds., *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, vol. 1, part 2 (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1988), 254.
 17. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 1, 432.
 18. *Ibid.*, ix.
 19. Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1944–47*, ed. Gunther Stuhlman (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 76. Nin appeared in several of Deren's films, including *At Land* and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*.
 20. See de Cordova, *Picture Personalities*, 50–97.
 21. Paul Trent, *The Image Makers: Sixty Years of Hollywood Glamour* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 19.
 22. *Ibid.*, 21.
 23. Emphasis on particular features varies across historical periods and cultural locations and can be associated with dominant cultural concerns, for example, the importance placed on the sensuality of the protruding female belly during the Renaissance. The regularity of features characterizing both the glamour queens of the 1930s and the natural beauties of the 1940s may, in fact, have had a great deal to do with anxieties surrounding Americanness and ethnicity. For an excellent study of glamour photography in relation to women's spectatorship practices, see Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
 24. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 1, ix.
 25. *Ibid.*, xx.
 26. *Ibid.* Despite these references to her Russian origins, Deren's Jewishness, her tenure as national secretary of the Young People's Socialist League, and her membership in the Trotskyist wing of the Socialist party in the 1930s are rarely mentioned in contemporary or subsequent accounts of her life, possibly because of post-World War II anxieties concerning Communism and Jewish identity.
 27. Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1944–47*, 76.
 28. More than one acquaintance of hers has commented on Deren's ambivalence toward her Jewish heritage. Harry Roskolenko (Harry Ross) claims that Russian Jews who supported Trotskyist ideas did so in order to hide their Russian Jewish identity. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., "From an Interview with Harry Roskolenko," in *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 1, 332–39. In an interview Deren's personal assistant Miriam Ashram claims that Deren "ignored or denied any connection" to her Russian Jewish background. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 2, 441.
 29. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 1, xiv.
 30. Mellencamp, *Indiscretions*, 34.
 31. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 2, 230.

32. Louise Levitas, "How to Make Your Own Movies on a Shoestring," *P.M.*, 19 March 1946; reprinted in *ibid.*, 388–89.
33. *Esquire*, December 1946; reprinted in *ibid.*, vol. 1, part 1, 418.
34. Manny Farber, "Maya Deren's Films," *New Republic*, 28 October 1946, 555.
35. Mary Braggiotti, "Classicism on a Shoestring," *New York Post*, 28 October 1946; reprinted in Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 2, 408.
36. This brochure is reprinted in *ibid.*, 345–48.
37. *Ibid.*, 440.
38. What I am referring to as Deren's persona—the complex amalgamation of film performances, live appearances, press discussions, and the impressions those who knew her are left with—is perhaps the antiromantic version of what Hodson, Clark, and Neiman call Deren's "legend." Both terms imply Deren's control or participation. I choose persona because it is the term used by scholars who study the American star system to describe a star's deliberately packaged personality. The term "legend" implicitly romanticizes the filmmaker as modern artist.
39. Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance*, 49.
40. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 2, 367.
41. David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema* (New York: Universe Books, 1971), 50.
42. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 1, xv.
43. Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End*.
44. See Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance*, especially chapter 3, "Avant-garde Cinemas before World War II," for an account of a number of New York artists working in experimental film.
45. This transition from young artist to mother is undoubtedly due to the way youth and aging are (de-)gendered and (de-)sexualized. Women past a certain age, for example, are considered motherly whether they have children or not. Deren died at forty-four without having had children. It is also interesting to consider Broughton's comment in light of his characterization of his own parents as repressive, particularly in relation to sexuality, and his film *Mother's Day*. See Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End*, 67–89.
46. This phenomenon is not limited to the historical avant-garde. A discussion with experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer in early 1994 led to the conclusion that the desire for stars is operative in contemporary gay and lesbian film culture.
47. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 20.
48. These contradictions are made concrete in the Botticelli portrait from *Meshes*. Described by Leslie Satin as "draw[ing] attention to the fact of vision, of watching and being watched," the shot positions Deren as object of the camera's vision and as a subject who looks. Leslie Satin, "Movement and the Body in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*," *Women & Performance* 6, no. 2 (1993): 44.
49. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1991).
50. Maya Deren letter to Katharine Dunham, in Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 1, 431.
51. Catrina Neiman, "An Introduction to the Notebook of Maya Deren, 1947," *October* 14 (fall 1980): 4. Neiman may be countering Stan Brakhage's claim that Deren's interests in spirituality derailed her film career (*Film at Wit's End*, 111).
52. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., "Interview with Alexander Hammid," in *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 1, 410.
53. Annette Michelson, "On Reading Deren's Notebook," *October* 14 (fall 1980): 49–50.
54. See Joyce Aschenbrenner's "Katharine Dunham: Reflections on the Social and Political Contexts of Afro-American Dance," *Dance Research Annual XII* (New York: CORD Inc., 1981) for a view of Dunham's work in historical context and a discussion of her own use of the term "primitive."

55. Deren, "Film in Progress: Thematic Statement," *Film Culture* no. 39 (winter 1965): 12.
56. Deren, "Notes on Ritual and Ordeal," *Film Culture* no. 39 (winter 1965): 10.
57. Deren, "Letter to James Card," *Film Culture* no. 39 (winter 1965): 32.
58. See Thomas Valasek, "Alexander Hammid: A Survey of His Film-Making Career," *Film Culture* nos. 67–69 (1979): 250–322.
59. Farber, "Maya Deren's Films," 555.
60. Deren, "Program Notes on Three Early Films," *Film Culture* no. 39 (winter 1965): 1, my emphasis.
61. In other words, doubling can signify repetition, but three signifies a series.
62. The "unreliability" of the dreamer's "reality" is signaled in the first sequence inside the house, where she sees a knife pull itself out of a loaf of bread on the table: this scene takes place well in advance of the apparent dream sequence.
63. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 11.
64. Several excellent readings of *Meshes* emphasize the sexual dynamics within the domestic space, reminiscent of film noir's depiction of heterosexual union as threatening, and the woman's imprisonment. See Mellencamp, *Indiscretions*, 33–35; Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance*, 55–65; and Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 3–19. All these readings offer useful insights, but I focus here on the multiplication and fracturing of the protagonist and the animation of her domestic space.
65. See Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (winter 1960): 150–67; reprinted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 51–65.
66. Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance*, 62.
67. There are exceptions to this, for example, the flight through the curtains in the bedroom window, but these moments are overshadowed by the dense bodies struggling up and falling back down the stairs.
68. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 52.
69. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 2, 174.
70. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 22.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Catrina Neiman notes that Marcel Duchamp was a mentor of Deren and influenced her thinking about games, including chess, in relation to the construction of art ("An Introduction to the Notebook of Maya Deren, 1947," 7).
73. Shango initiation rites include a period of ritual theft, in which initiates are expected to steal small items (for example, food), signifying that they are not subject to the laws of society during this period. Judith Gleason, *Initiation of a Shango Priest*, screening and discussion at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, 9 February 1993.
74. Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," 63.
75. Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, eds., *The Legend*, vol. 1, part 2, 194.
76. Rita Christiani was a dancer Deren became acquainted with when she toured the United States with Katharine Dunham's dance group in the early 1940s.
77. See Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," chap. 2 in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
78. Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," 60.
79. Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1944–47*, 149.
80. Peggy Phelan, "Arresting Performances of Sexual and Racial Difference: Toward a Theory of Performative Film," *Women & Performance* 6, no. 2 (1993): 7.