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Meshes of the Afternoon: A Model of Visual Thinking

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> The complexity of the camera creates, at times, the illusion of being almost itself a living intelligence which can inspire its manipulation on the explorative and creative level simultaneously.
> —Maya Deren[1]

Despite the serious expansion in the last few years of our knowledge of independent film artists working in the 1920s and 1930s, it is still difficult not to see Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) as a watershed moment in the history of the American avant-garde film. There are arguably three reasons to grant it a continued privileged status. One is that consciously or unconsciously, their work appears to sum up and synthesize elements of major films made in Europe around 1930, just before the combination of a worldwide depression and the advent of reactionary political movements on the continent would make conditions for influential avant-garde filmmaking exceedingly difficult. Along with other films made roughly at the same time, *Meshes* helped to reintroduce an interrupted or significantly curtailed tradition of creative film. Another is that Deren's filmmaking in the mid-forties would eventually lead to her rigorous project of articulating a film aesthetics, in both lectures and writing, designed to explain what was behind her own work and that of fellow practitioners. It seems clear that her films would play a major role in helping to define the direction of avant-garde filmmaking in the United States, because over and above her example as a practicing artist, she was a persuasive proselytizer for a species of film that was rarely met with sophisticated understanding. And lastly, it has to be said that *Meshes* is the product of a dynamic collaboration that brought two very different individuals together at a particularly propitious moment. On the one hand there was Deren's fierce

yet frustrated artistic ambition and the emotional crises she was enduring at the time, all inextricably bound up with her preternatural, analytical intellect. On the other hand were Hammid's modest, practical sensibility, real filmmaking experience, and a cinema enthusiast's knowledge of independent work. The result of these conflicting factors held in suspension is a rather remarkably complex and adept "first film" that needs no historical context or apology to explain the kind of power it still exerts over the sizable audience that has come to know and appreciate it.

P. Adams Sitney has persuasively demonstrated the formal and thematic aspects that *Meshes of the Afternoon* shares with three earlier, important works: Dali and Buñuel's *Un chien Andalou* (1928), Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* (1930), and Man Ray's *Étoile de mer* (1928).[2] In pronouncedly dreamlike terms, all four films contain a progressive continuity comprised of repetitions of symbolic events that can be superimposed, one on another, to provide, in effect, variations of a single narrative moment or dilemma. The apparent chronology of each film can be advantageously interpreted as existing in a timeless meditative space, which in real external terms may be a mere instant. This is best exemplified in a visual framing device in Cocteau's film. The film's story is initiated by a shot of a crumbling tower, an action that is then interrupted as the film begins. The shot returns at the end as the tower is allowed to complete its fall. Rhetorically speaking, the roughly fifty minutes of running time contained within this interrupted image, comprising the main body of the film, has taken place in a single imaginative flash of time. It is precisely this shared formal property that Deren was thinking of when she brought forth her notion of a "vertical attack" in the Cinema 16 symposium held in 1953, "Poetry and the Film":

> The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by "a poetic structure"), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a "vertical" investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means.[3]

Deren made this observation some ten years after making *Meshes*, but her distinction drives right to the heart of the conscious structure of her first film, a structure that is implicit in the earlier European films but not so consciously controlled or even logically delineated as in *Meshes*. Deren's visual meditations on the moment are so carefully mapped out they approach the status of a theoretical argument about cinematic parameters for thought and expression. At any rate, here is one factor in

how uncannily *Meshes* seems to derive from its predecessors and yet serves as a knowing, critical response.

Similarly, again as Sitney has pointed out, three of the films (excluding Cocteau's) deal with a complex, troubling erotic encounter between the members of a single heterosexual couple. Each of the sexual struggles can be seen as a kind of wrestling to the "death." Cocteau's film, also erotically charged, deals with a series of symbolic deaths that include at least two suicides. In that Deren and Hammid, too, indirectly treat suicide and share with Cocteau an interest in mirrors as a visual motif, a sense that they have quite knowingly borrowed elements from his earlier film seems inescapable. Yet Deren always denied having seen Cocteau's (or for that matter Buñuel and Dali's) films before making *Meshes*; and Hammid, a far more modest and less defensive figure, didn't think there was a conscious link either, although he has admitted to an interest in many early films that comprise a shared heritage: for example, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924).[4]

Alternative and parallel routes of influence exist; Buñuel was known to be an admirer of Keaton's work in particular and the cleverly depicted and intricate dreamscape of *Sherlock Jr.* must have been an influence on him—especially given the fact that *Sherlock Jr.* and *Un chien Andalou* (and of course, later, *Meshes*) contain "dream doubles" of the central protagonist. The fact that *Meshes* expands the doubling into presenting, at one point, four simultaneous versions of the central female character only adds once again to an inescapable impression that Deren and Hammid are consciously expanding and developing themes from earlier films. Perhaps Deren's friend, the poet and filmmaker Charles Boultenhouse, has best explained the film's connection with a past, which (at least from the testimony of the participants) in all likelihood was unconsciously or coincidentally appropriated despite a lot of surface evidence to the contrary:

There's no question that she was influenced by Cocteau and Dali and Buñuel. . . . Even if she had never seen their films. Things like that never make any difference. Influences happen, even when the artist can S-W-E-A-R to God he never saw this kind of thing before. Somehow we know that there is something secretive at work in the world, and you can still see that those vines are growing. But let's take the opposite point of view: let's assume that she wasn't influenced by them, that she thought everything up herself. Everything in *Meshes* is part of modern art: dream, fantasy, association, dissociation, fragmentation, hypnosis, whatever you want to call it—trance and so on—they're all elements in painting, ballet, in music and

so on. So it was part of the thing, part of a whole. It was international. The thing was that she made it absolutely personal.[5]

One important difference between *Meshes* and two of its European precursors, *Un chien Andalou* and *Blood of a Poet*, is the fact that *Meshes* has a more synthetic style of cutting and delineating space than the earlier films. The latter sometimes show an element of rather static theatricality in the way certain scenes are visually designed in an independent, dramatic mise en scène before the camera. This quality is especially true in the work of Cocteau, whose love of the theater, or at least theater as metaphor, shows quite literally in many instances; and it only makes sense that the surrealists, Buñuel and Dali, would be interested in deep-space compositions. By way of contrast, Deren and Hammid rely much more on editing within a scene. They employ subtle shifts between third person and point-of-view shots, for instance, in a manner that treats the varieties of spatial relations very much as a function of how each shot has been carefully framed and cut into the continuity. No doubt this is because their film is centered more squarely on the interior meditations of a single protagonist, or because the conditions of their production were far more modest (with a dependence on a hand-wound 16-millimeter camera).

While it is true that some of the continuity of *Un chien Andalou* and elements of one scene in particular in *Blood of a Poet*, namely the "Hôtel des folies dramatiques," anticipate Deren and Hammid's spatial cutting, by and large it is the cinematic depiction of space in *Meshes*, its brilliant architectonic development over the brief span of its compressed continuity, that carries the burden of meaning in the film. The avoidance of a relatively objective mise en scène, staged before the camera, connects the film more intimately to *Étoile de mer*, where the careful compositions and fragmented spatial continuity, a graphic sense of the image as opposed to a dramatic sense, might point to the fact that Man Ray was a still photographer before he tried his hand at filmmaking. Hammid, who also began as a still photographer, has recalled being interested in avant-garde photography, citing Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray himself.[6] As if to help confirm the role that an experience of still photography may have played in the shaping of the visual style of *Meshes*, the second part of the ambitious biography of Deren, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, contains a number of still photographs Deren took in the year just prior to making *Meshes*.

But she was also writing poetry in the same period, and it is insight into her frustrated literary endeavors and their connection to cinema that also point to the idiosyncratic "imagist" style of *Meshes*. In her

letter to the film archivist James Card, dating from the mid-fifties, Deren reflects back on the making of *Meshes*. I quote it at length because it is so characteristically eloquent and forceful in expression:

> *Meshes of the Afternoon* is my point of departure. I am not ashamed of it; for I think that, as a film, it stands up very well. From the point of view of my own development, I cannot but be gently proud that that first film—that point of departure—had such relatively solid footing. That is due to two major facts: first, to the fact that I had been a poet up until then, and the reason that I had not been a very good poet was because actually my mind worked in images which I had been trying to translate or describe in words; therefore, when I undertook cinema, I was relieved of the false step of translating images into words, and could work directly so that it was not like discovering a new medium so much as finally coming home into a world whose vocabulary, syntax, grammar, was my mother-tongue; which I understood, and thought in, but like a mute, had never spoken.[7]

By Deren's own testimony, her approach to cinematic imagery was not primarily to record a dramatic event, or even "analyze it" through a classical editing breakdown of a scene, but rather a continuity of cinematic images was analogous to a language construct, a string of images/words syntactically arranged to provide a grammatically coherent expression or meaning. Conscious or not, she is making an implicit and unavoidable connection to the montage theory and practice of the Soviet avant-garde, which placed an emphasis on the way an image could be consciously or intellectually transformed depending on the context of other images placed before and after it. This cinematic transformation of an image's meaning over time allows Deren's poetic/syntactical approach to grant some "breathing space" to those same images. Taken at face value, Deren's method, as expressed to Card, could be construed as naive and ultimately not really sensitive to the visual properties of the photographic image, which ultimately resist an easy language-to-image correspondence.

The letter continues in order to identify the second "major fact," filling in one last piece of the puzzle as to the film's advantageous origins. Virtually all writers have conceded that, especially given the evidence of Deren's later films (supported by Hammid's own testimony), in theme and central inspiration, *Meshes* is largely the work of Deren herself. Yet it *was* a collaboration, and Hammid, who presumably had both a superior knowledge of the medium than his partner and considerable practical experience, played a necessary role:

> The first speech of a mute is hoarse, ugly, virtually unintelligible. If *Meshes* is not that, it is because of the second fact, namely that Sasha Hammid

contributed the mechanics (and I use this in the largest sense) of that speech. It is because of him that O sounds like O, and not like A, that the sibilants hiss when they should, that the word emerges in a single whole and does not stutter. My debt to him for teaching me the mechanics of film expression, and, more than that, the principle of infinite pains, is enormous. I wish that all these young film-makers would have the luck for a similar apprenticeship.[8]

Deren sticks to the linguistic metaphor and suggests that Hammid was able to translate each of her visual ideas, through careful framing and control of action, into an efficient visual language that was utterly clear and functional. If we glance at the shot list of *Meshes,* a document that Deren put together in 1959 in order to aid her then husband, Teiji Ito, in the composing of a musical score for the film, we get an immediate understanding of just how each shot represents a single action or streamlined piece of visual information. The extremely concise shorthand description does considerable justice to its essential content, and the tight logic of the image continuity means in turn that the shot list on its own makes the kind of sense that would not be possible in a film in which the scenic activity before the camera had more of an independence all its own, or in which, through clumsy composition or control of action, the visual contour and function of a shot would be rendered more ambiguously. All is so precise, it must have taken a practiced hand to pull it off at the time *Meshes* was being shot. Here is the justly famous opening of the film:

1. MS Road: hand deposits flower, disappears.
2. MS Shadow of girl arrives, her hand picks up the flower.
3. MCU Flower dangling beside girl's legs walking.
4. MS Girl's shadow walking, stops, smells flower.
5. LS Distant figure disappearing around curve of road, pan back to girl's shadow arriving at & up stairs.
6. MCU Girl's shadow on door, hand knocks, tries door.
7. CU Hand gets key, misses, key bounces away.
8. CU Feet, key dropping on ground, bouncing away.
9. CU Hand, reaching for key, misses, key bounces away.
10a. MCU Key bouncing down stairs.
10b. MCU Key bouncing down stairs, followed by feet pursuing.
11. CU Hand finally catching key.
12. CU Feet going up the stairs again.
13. CU Hand with key unlocks door, pushes it open.

14. CU Girl's feet stepping into the room.
15. Long panned view around room, from newspapers on floor to table with coffee cup, knife in loaf of bread.[9]

The "girl" will momentarily take a nap in a chair by a window and the rest of the film will be a series of re-envisionings of these initial moments. As the variations unfold, the mere sighting of the "distant figure" will transform itself into an active, frustrated pursuit of an ambiguous, shrouded personage who within the associative scheme of the imagery may be an erotic other or perhaps the "girl" herself. But several things are instructive in just the opening sequence. On a straight narrative level, it is clear just how synthetic and continuous is the spatial articulation, a stylistic trait that distinguishes the film from its most obvious forebears. Having people and things precisely singled out but still very much in their place at the start of the film is a necessary condition for making sense of what follows. That is why Hammid's practical skills were indispensable. Even if this montage/syntactical style originated less in the visual translation of Deren's poetic method and more (as mentioned earlier) in the production conditions (that is, most significantly, the use of a hand-wound camera), this simple opening already shows remarkable intricacy and a hidden formal integrity that alludes to subsequent events down the line. All of the opening shots, even those that are not a close-up or a tight medium shot, but rather extended pans—numbers 5 and 15—have the character of a point-of-view shot. The action of smelling the flower seems to "cause" the dark figure to appear, the same figure, transformed, who will be associated with the flower later in the film. And of course, in a first-time viewing, we can hardly expect that the banal key, such a matter-of-fact detail that "asserts itself" as a mere common object when it is momentarily dropped and retrieved, will be developed as a symbol far beyond the disguised suggestion we see here.

Other than editing and shot composition, another profoundly cinematic characteristic established quickly is the way that despite the subjective, dreamlike aura, with its promise of highly charged emotional content, the pervading dramatic style is relentlessly anti-histrionic and matter-of-fact, almost as if the film were to begin as a realistic documentary of the everyday. This quality is true to the Freudian notion of the so-called dreamwork, in which highly charged impulses are purposely hidden behind seemingly unimportant events that carry no immediate emotional clue of what lies beneath. This cool surface can be said to make the film seem more ritualized and dreamlike.

More instructive is to be reminded of the dominance of the documentary mode of filmmaking not only during the war in the 1940s but also in the 1930s, when leftist documents (albeit of a highly tendentious variety) seemed the only dignified approach to film by many intellectuals—in counterdistinction to the synthetic Hollywood dreamscape. Remember that Hammid, by profession, was primarily a documentary filmmaker and Deren herself was an active leftist in the 1930s, the decade of her formative intellectual development. In her major theoretical statement of 1946, the chapbook *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film,* one could argue that the main source of her critical attention as far as film is concerned is in fact the documentary mode.

Herbert Kline, one of Hammid's filmmaking partners just prior to the period of *Meshes,* has attested to the fact that Deren's viewing habits before she became interested in making her own films were "off-beat films, foreign films, documentaries like Sasha [Hammid] and I made."[10] Deren's association with Hammid brought her consistently into contact with documentarists whom she would eventually engage in heated arguments about the documentary's claim to aesthetic seriousness as currently practiced. The vitriol in her rhetoric would make her an unpopular figure in such circles and is perhaps best illustrated in the ethical force of passages from *An Anagram* like the following:

> Surely the human tragedy of the war requires of those who presume to commemorate it—film-maker, writer, painter—a personal creative effort somehow commensurate in profundity and stature. Surely the vacant eyes and the desolated bodies of starved children, deserve and require, in the moral sense, something more than the maudlin clichés of the tourist camera or the skillful manipulations of a craftsman who brings to them the techniques developed for and suitable to the entertaining demonstration of the manufacture of a Ford car.[11]

Her need to respond to a heightened awareness of film's capacity for realism in the early 1940s, which was soon to emerge (contemporaneously with Deren's own film career) as Italian neorealism, is as powerful a factor in understanding the context of *Meshes* as is the European avant-garde of the late 1920s. With roughly fifteen years of a dominant sound film aesthetic underway, the medium of film looked different to Deren and Hammid in 1943 than it might have to their European precursors. This difference may be what documentary filmmaker and photographer Willard van Dyke had in mind when he tried to explain that although Deren's films were at first underestimated because they were mistakenly thought to be wholly derivative of the French avant-garde,

she had actually broken new and distinctive ground. Van Dyke's view was that the earlier film movement was based in painting and sculpture and Deren's works were "film-rooted and film-related." [12] Significantly, though they are vastly different filmmakers, at roughly the same time Robert Bresson would also struggle to find a highly controlled "first person" visual style that nevertheless took cognizance of and exploited the realist principles of the 1940s—"BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors)." [13]

Critical to my reading of the film is the idea that the events that the camera has recorded in the opening sequence, despite the visual texture of a synthetically edited, subjective space, are a series of matter-of-fact events that are observed as mere physical actions. A woman picks up a flower on a sidewalk outside her bungalow; she observes a dark figure turning a corner down the road; she turns into her entryway; tries the door; reaches for a key in a purse; drops the key; retrieves it; enters her bungalow; sees a series of events that are admittedly slightly strange but that are not particularly extraordinary—scattered newspapers, a kitchen knife falling out of a loaf of bread, a phone off the hook. She takes the tone arm off the record platter, and sits in a chair to take a nap. Although this last action will set in motion the dynamics of a dream state in which we will see and re-see the transformations of what has already occurred, Deren's continuity nevertheless commences with a needed grounding in reality—albeit a tenuous one. By comparison, Buñuel/Dali's and Cocteau's points of departure are more fantastical and histrionic; and with his employment of images shot through stippled glass and Robert Desnos's poetic intertitles, Man Ray's space is self-consciously presented as graphically composed and constructed of disparate material from the outset, whereas Deren's constructions are seamlessly stitched together within a unified time and space.

To understand the formal tension in *Meshes of the Afternoon* as somehow incorporating a grounding in the real—a statement that initially seems counterintuitive—one must have recourse to the conceptual framework that Deren herself supplied a few years later. This tension is largely dependent on the indexical status of a photographic image/sign—its unbreakable link to the reality before the camera that has left its "trace" by stamping its contour onto the photographic emulsion. In Deren's framework, no matter how much the cameraperson may control that image via framing, exposure, focus, or shutter speed, there is still some point at which the maker must give himself up to a not fully controllable real and let that real be captured by an essentially mechanized process, which is why she had admiration for Kodak's

slogan "You push the button, it does the rest."[14] And that is why she considered animated films, abstract or otherwise, not cinema at all but a form of painting. True film should not bypass the photographic process. She was not saying that cinematic shots are in any sense real, even when they are not carefully composed and edited into an artificial construct, but rather that within a single cinematic shot there are valuable, faint traces of the real that serve to supply a counteractive force to the artistic use to which those images are assigned:

> The invented event which is then introduced, though itself an artifice, borrows reality from the reality of the scene—from the natural blowing of the hair, the irregularity of the waves, the very texture of the stones and sand—in short, from all the uncontrolled, spontaneous elements which are the property of actuality itself. Only in photography—by the delicate manipulation which I call controlled accident—can natural phenomena be incorporated into our own creativity, to yield an image where the reality of a tree confers its truth upon the events we cause to transpire beneath it.[15]

The utter banality of the non-event of a woman simply returning home and entering her bungalow is accompanied by her interaction with everyday household objects that belong to the space they emerge in. Key, knife, newspaper, and telephone are visual components that (using Deren's own terms) confer their truth upon the events that follow. This initial pull of reality serves as an anchor and resistance to the subsequent series of formal, meditative, or dreamlike transformations that begin to attach meaning to those objects. Two commonly held critical responses to the film make this issue quite clear. One is the way sensitive viewers find the Teiji Ito score, added to the film fifteen years after its making, to be intrusive, forcing too early a dreamlike foreboding onto the course of events. Another is the slightly jarring introduction of the black-robed figure with a mirror face whose artifice seems theatrically contrived and arbitrary given the other more naturally placed elements in most of the film.

Deren's keen sense of tension—within the cinematic image itself or (as usually happens) between images—can work on a small or larger scale. On a small scale, the central event of the woman's return home is preceded by a prologue, a shot that emphasizes its purely emblematic status, as if indeed it were an actual word/image of the sort Deren discussed in her letter to James Card: an artificial arm drops an artificial flower directly down into a symmetrically and frontally composed film frame. The arm rises back up and just before it pulls out of the frame it simply disappears in a "jump cut"—a gesture that reminds the viewer

of the true insubstantiality of the image. This first shot composition has set in motion, as it were, the initial section of the film, which now entails a stylistic shift in that it is a carefully constructed series of shots seamlessly cut along almost classical narrative lines. Yet even here one odd note of spatial disruption exists: when the woman drops her key as she takes it from her purse, we see it bounce on the ground in slight slow motion and follow its path down the steps in a series of four subsequent shots that are rapidly cut and spatially ambiguous, until a fifth shot shows a hand picking the key back up in a manner that establishes a return to a clear spatial orientation. The point is that even in the first sequence, there are moments in the continuity that seem to want to jump out of the unified spatial framework of the narrative but for some reason aren't able to. The trace of the real pulls these images (or objects) back into place. The observation that we only slightly notice this disruption on a first screening of the film is wholly compatible with the way we are meant to perceive it. Barely present at first, these leaps out of the real will become increasingly disruptive as more aggressive cinematic strategies begin to act on the events. Suffice it to say that the mere isolating of the key in the shot sequence (a latent metonymy) has already launched it on its journey toward accruing a wholly metaphoric/symbolic meaning.

How these small-scale components make up a visual tension can better be seen in another example. Later in the film, in the first variation on the initial event, the woman spots a black-robed figure walking in front of her on the path leading to her house. We see shots of the woman trotting after the figure that are intercut with the figure walking away in slow motion. The simple crosscutting is an old Hollywood-style chase continuity that should logically lead to the woman rapidly being able to intercept the robed figure, especially because the former is running and the latter is walking in slow motion. But the woman loses ground, then gives up the chase, turns and enters her house. Again, compared to later montage strategies, this one is relatively subtle, but it dramatizes the formal contradiction between the vestigial truth of photographically portrayed events and the manipulation they undergo in the filmmaker's master scheme.

Each of what I am calling the small-scale montage gestures are intricately linked to the larger structure of the film, and this larger structure, in turn, represents a highly controlled progression of cinematic tropes. The fact that they can be seen within the framework of a carefully modulated development stems from the strictly conceived theme and variations structure of the whole film. The single moment of the woman's
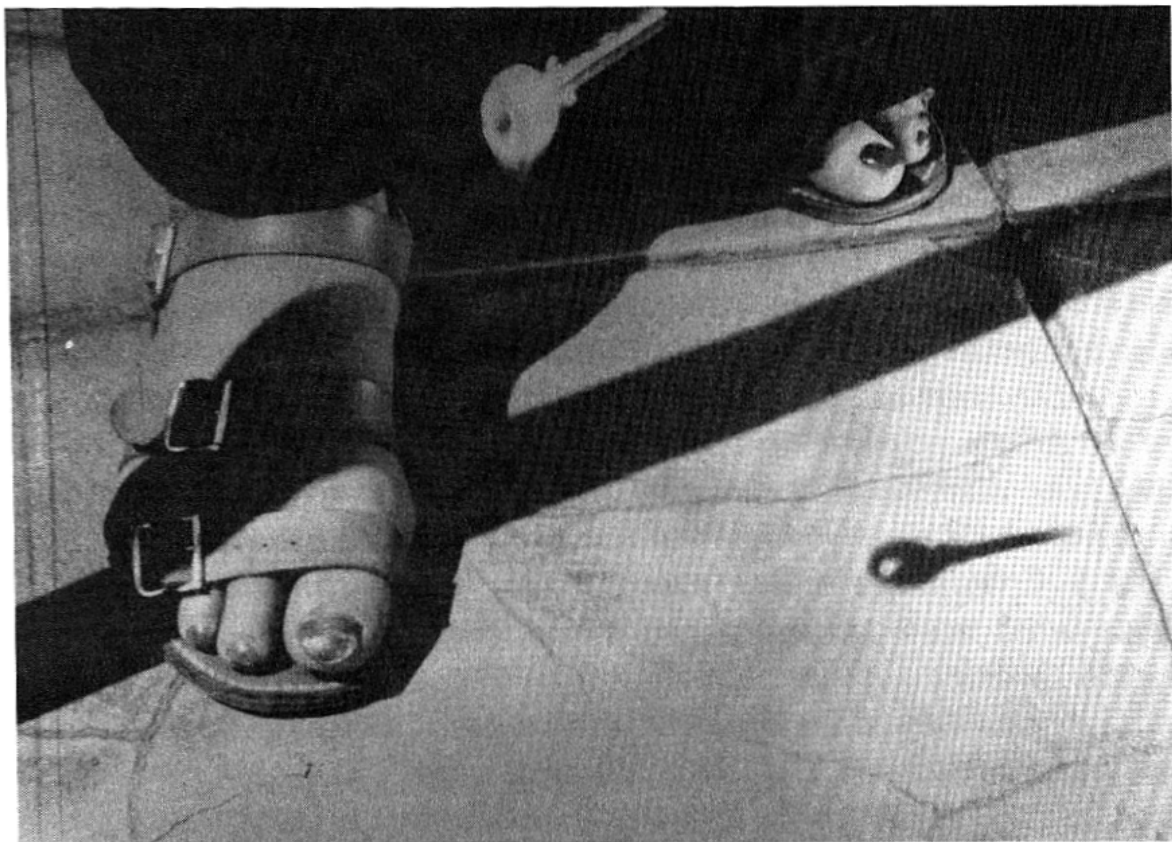
Figure 11. Frame enlargements, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943). The key is transformed from an everyday object, early in the film, to an arbitrary symbol later.
Courtesy Anthology Film Archives.

return home is meditated on in a "vertical attack" as we see a series of repetitions of that same event over and over. Giving the film a strong temporal and spatial unity, each repetition employs the same set of limited images: knife, key, chair, window, mirror. The montage structure keeps threatening to break apart this unity in more and more successful ways as the images begin to carry the weight of the "ramifications," presumably determined by the central protagonist's thoughts and feelings. Gradually, the central objects of the film are wholly taken out of the real space they were first seen in, and through formal manipulation become planted in a purely cinematic space that has been synthesized by its own, eventually radical means—the technical strategies at the artists' command. The employment of these formal strategies now represents an act of meditation or interpretation that directly imposes significance onto what are otherwise those meaningless objects that are simply found "accidentally" in the real.

The best way of demonstrating this overall architectonic structure is to isolate a few visual elements by way of analysis and see how they are transformed as the film progresses. The door key is both the easiest to follow and the single object whose transformations perhaps most profoundly reveal the complex technical scheme of the film—to the extent that one wonders if the makers have implied a linguistic pun in the object's name. In the first sequence, except for the significantly subtle interlude when it momentarily slips out of the woman's hand, the key acts like the object it is. Found in a purse where such keys are normally kept, and used to open a door, the key is then forgotten. It doesn't make an appearance in the first repetition—which is in itself a gentle step away from the real, since by smoothly entering the bungalow without a key, there is a newly heightened component of somnambulism and inevitability. Pulling a key from a purse and turning the lock might have seemed like too realistic a detail for what is being presented as a dream or memory of the event we have already seen. One doesn't always face a locked door when returning home, so no obvious law of the real has been openly contradicted.

In the second repetition, a more directly unrealistic element is introduced: the woman pulls the key from inside her mouth (an act that can be achieved without camera or editing). Yet significantly this incongruous (and highly suggestive) gesture still relates to the opening of the door and an entrance by a new incarnation of the woman. It is only in the third repetition that the key jumps entirely away from its original context. But not at first; such is the care of the stepwise development. Again, the woman pulls the key out of her mouth (note the tightly

controlled texture of repetition), yet this time the key, through stop-motion cinematography, instantly turns into a knife. At this point, the third and last "dream" version of the woman enters with a knife in her hand. The key, still associated through editing with opening a door, has taken yet another step into a purely symbolic realm, one that needs a cinematic means (that old Méliès trick of stop-motion) to get it there. But that progression can only be complete once it is divorced from being associated with the door—its vestigial link to the real. This quickly occurs. The third "dream" woman has entered with the knife, places the knife on the table in front of her, and sits down facing her two dream counterparts. The knife transforms itself back into a key and the three women engage in a curious ritual of grabbing the key, turning it over in their hands and pulling it out of frame. Stop-motion photography replaces the key for the next woman's selection. The last fateful hand is painted black as it turns over the key in its palm. Like drawing straws, the now black-palmed dream woman has become a chosen figure. The key transforms back into a knife and this chosen woman stands and begins a threatening walk toward the original figure of the woman who is still napping in her chair by the window.

The intricate way the image of the key has developed is impressive for its formal consistency. It gradually slips further and further away from its tiny bit of objective truth until its very materiality is seemingly undercut by the sudden transformations of key into knife, then back again, and also by the stop-motion replacement of the key on the table. By way of their assertive manipulation, the camera and editing devices have become almost more present within the frame than the objects themselves. The key's final function is its role in a mysterious, arbitrarily arranged ritual of choosing lots—a function not only wholly divorced from what keys do but also one that as far as I can tell could have been served by any other small object placed into the ritual. In other words, the cinematic construct has imposed its meaning at this point, like the rules of a game, to the extent that the object itself has no meaning except when it conforms to those rules. Arguably this is the only small object in the film that the woman has used in its proper way; we never see her reading the newspaper, playing a record, or cutting bread with the knife. The artificial flower has been introduced as such, and when the knife is actually wielded as a weapon, it never draws blood but remains a weapon in only symbolic terms.

Noting that the key is the same object that momentarily took off on its own (as it were) in the opening sequence, we can see how readily a mapping of the key's transformation gives us not only a central insight

into Deren and Hammid's exquisite formal control in this film, but also into Deren's deeper intuitions about the nature of cinema in general and her working methods within it. Editing, frame composition, camera speed, narrative context, all the technical tropes that operate on how we see the key, are a series of expressive tools at her disposal to carry on the fundamental meditative, intellectual work of her medium as it struggles with the traces of the real world that the photographic process unavoidably supplies her with. In this instance, the simple everyday object is so common we wouldn't give it the slightest meaningful regard in normal circumstances.

At this point we might think back over the entire film and try to piece together the ultimate meaning of the key in the psychological drama of the central female protagonist—for instance, as a means of unlocking oneself from the entrapment of marriage, or as a tool for finding the entryway to an internal erotic quest that ends in self-destruction. Many readings are possible and have been suggested, and certainly one could argue that the strength of the film is that it manages to sustain multiple readings, something we would expect from a strong work of art. But we can ask the question differently, and decide from the outset that the interpretation of the key has less to do with some symbolic value we attach to it and more to do with its value as standing for the process of thinking, of discovering or assigning symbolic meaning in the first place. The key's transformative role in the film, parallel to other visual components, may have to do with how the mind sees the outside world, isolates aspects of it, and creates symbolic contexts for those aspects that ultimately emerge as meaningful signs quite divorced from their origins. In *An Anagram* Deren outlines such a process:

> Even in science—or rather, above all in science, the pivotal characteristic of man's method is a violation of natural integrity. He has dedicated himself to the effort to intervene upon it, to dissemble the ostensibly inviolate whole, to emancipate the element from the context in which it "naturally" occurs, and to manipulate it in the creation of a new contextual whole—a new, original state of matter and reality—which is specifically the product of his intervention.
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> Once a natural integrity has been so violated, by the selection of elements from the original context, all subsequent integrations are no longer natural or inevitable. The task of creating forms as dynamic as the relationship in natural phenomena, is the central problem of both the scientist and the artist.[16]

Meshes constitutes a dynamic form not only because it gives us a highly personalized poetic psychodrama but also because over the

course of its roughly fifteen minutes it visually dramatizes the very process of how such a psychodrama takes shape, of how one can "think" in cinematic terms—a mode that necessarily presupposes a knowledge of basic filmic properties and a self-consciously aggressive employment of them. One could choose many visual elements of the film and see that they are all carefully repeated and transformed in similar fashion as the key. For instance, the knife is first found stuck in a loaf of bread on the dining table, then at the bottom of the set of stairs where it might easily have been dropped, and then incongruously in the bed where we now more strongly feel it must have been "placed" symbolically. The knife first starts to transform by way of its material qualities as the distorting mirror surface of its blade is emphasized in close-up. Later it will be dematerialized altogether as it changes at will into the key and back. Actions can be treated in the same progressive fashion; that is, in an escalating progression of cinematic intrusion. First the woman climbs the stairs "naturally," and then in slow motion. Gradually the entire stairway seems to rock and turn upside down (via carefully choreographed camera movement) as the woman floats through a more ambiguously oriented space. Eventually, through elided cuts or stop-motion photography, the editing itself will move the woman upstairs or downstairs at will—with no action taken on her part. In fact the cutting starts to control her presence so strongly that eventually which "dream version" of her presence we are viewing is itself at times not always clear.

The fragmenting and rearranging of the strictly unified scenic space of the film reaches such a dramatic pitch that it threatens to break down altogether. This it does at a precisely significant juncture: the moment of the self-enclosed ritual of lifting the key off the table by the three dream figures of the woman. In my earlier delineation of the key's progress in the film, the action has now invented a new set of rules for an isolated mental inscription that has in turn cut the umbilical cord connection to the opening "homecoming" event. As the chosen woman, wielding a knife, approaches the original sleeping figure in the chair, she is wearing a pair of mirror goggles that have dropped into the scene from nowhere. Mirror and black array provide a visual connection with the shrouded figure introduced earlier, but there is no precedence in the film for the intrusion of an object wholly alien to the initial staging of the woman's entrance to the bungalow (except by mental association). The game of drawing lots with the key has presumably allowed for a new stage of development. Even more significantly, in a justly famous montage sequence, the scene itself has opened up and the begoggled

woman is now suddenly standing *outside* in an indeterminate space. She then takes five steps, ostensibly across the living room, but the first four steps are visually represented by shots showing a foot being placed down into four different exterior landscapes (note that one is a seascape) as she moves toward her sleeping, original counterpart. The sequence emphasizes the newly transformed, free-floating cinematic space the woman now finds herself in. This spatial disunity has been carefully withheld until the right dramatic moment.

It feels appropriate that at this particular juncture the woman is wakened by her husband, and the strict, relatively realistic spatial unity of the interior of the bungalow is abruptly and eerily restored. As she follows her husband upstairs, the woman gazes around the room and sees various elements—like the phone and the bread knife—"back in place," even as the fact that her husband's carrying of the flower brings with it a powerful sense of déjà vu. Upstairs, after careful visual suggestions that this is yet another repetition or false ending to the dream, the woman throws the suddenly available knife at her husband only to have the screen image itself break apart as if it were a shattered mirror. "Behind" it is revealed a shot of a seascape extending into deep space. The film cuts to two closer shots of the shoreline with mirror fragments in the sand, the second of which pans back up to view the ocean and the distant horizon line once again.

Here is Deren's most dramatic and suggestive gesture as it relates to our critical awareness of the status of these particular exterior images, which like the shots of the exterior footsteps drop into the film in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. The film's imagery has begun to relentlessly pursue its own cryptic line of meaning, and as it does so it runs up against inherent contradictions that can't be overcome. Within the shots of the seascape, two possible modes of representation radically collide. One is that the image contains a large expanse of "uncontrollable" accident—the ocean, whose constantly shifting natural contours (that is, "the irregularity of the waves") must emphasize that the camera can only stand by and passively record them. The film has suddenly opened up to an overwhelmingly unstaged reality that is all the more evident because the shot doesn't really belong to the space of the film's now radically interiorized actions. As we watch the feeble gesture of a few fragments of mirror being thrown onto the beach from off-camera, it's hard to see how any montage illusion is sustained here. The fact that we stay with the seascape for four successive shots shows we're on new ground altogether. A mode of mental connectiveness seems out of place. Yet precisely because the seascape images have been so arbitrarily

inserted in order to stand for a reality that lurks behind the illusion of the film's dream narrative (that's the only way we can make sense of them), they are also paradoxically the most purely emblematic shots in the series of dream variations at this point. The seascape, in its very abrupt, alien entry, also inevitably points to a preassigned meaning. We see reality as a mere sign for reality, the image merely as an image—perhaps quite neatly constituting our own awakening as viewers.

The violence of the shattered "mirror," which has led to a kind of empty dead end in the dreamscape's progression, proves to be a false ending as well. Just as the four exterior footsteps led to a brief and fragile restoration of a reawakened spatial clarity, so too does the arbitrary intrusion of the seascape. But now the stakes are a little higher, for we seem to have acquired a newly achieved, objective, outside presence as we watch the husband return home in a final, matter-of-fact, and distanced repetition of entering the front door. When we cut to his point of view as he stands in the doorway, we are shocked to see an image composed of disparate elements that make no sense except as a wholly contrived symbolic condensation of actions previously seen in the film: the woman is prostrate in the chair, covered in seaweed with shards of a shattered mirror strewn around her on the floor. Her eyes are wide open and apparently frozen in death. In its frontal, artificial staging, the image takes us back by way of circular logic to the very first shot in the film's prologue of a mannequin's arm as it places a flower into the frame. We are reminded of an original artistic impetus, imagination and language wholly antecedent to and independent of the act of photography with which any film (on Deren's terms) must begin. Unlike most films that give way to dreamscape, even some of the great ones, *Meshes* does not attempt to represent a wakened "reality" in clear counter-distinction to a dreamscape. As only a few filmmakers realize, such a dichotomy becomes hopelessly arbitrary in terms of the way a film image works, since a chain of cinematic images is always too palpably real to stand simply as a dream mode; and when asked to stand for reality, it is too insubstantial and dreamlike. The purposely anticlimactic ending of *Meshes,* a shrewd coda-like commentary on Deren's own cinematic means, seems to assert a final caveat: though she may represent a mental process, that does not mean that she can step outside of that process in the act of representing it.

It is significant that in *An Anagram,* her highly sustained and central theoretical statement, written in the immediate wake of her four most celebrated and influential films, Deren often conflates the terms

"science" and "art." As I hope to have demonstrated, *Meshes* contains a tight logical development of its mental drama that we can easily see is almost equally akin to analytical thinking as it is to expression. Were the film not so ingenious in its construction we might call it airless or arty, as if its carefully premeditated design were ultimately signs of a stultifying intellectual pretension. For some viewers Deren's work is an acquired taste; on the surface, her films not infrequently come off as overly self-important. Their rhetoric knows little of a light, ironic touch or humor—elements we see in the work of her near contemporaries of the 1940s like Sidney Peterson and Kenneth Anger. As we might expect, Deren's work reflects the kind of mind she had, one whose power of intellect and analysis perhaps ultimately overcame her more creative and artistic side to the extent that after the initial rush of four inspired films of the mid-1940s, other work sidetracked her and completed films became fewer and farther between—and arguably less significant. Part of what made those early films unique, especially *Meshes,* is also what made a strictly artistic career hard to maintain.

Within the avant-garde, Deren had an exceptional mind for rigorously consistent, probing thought. We would be hard-pressed to find another filmmaker capable of the disciplined prose of *An Anagram,* to say nothing of the research project *Divine Horseman* (1953), a full-length study of Haitian religious ritual. In an interview for Martina Kudlacek's recent biographical film *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2003), Deren's friend, the film editor Miriam Arsham, recounts the method that Deren employed in preparing talks and essays. Central concepts and assertions were written on index cards and then obsessively rewritten and extended on adjoining cards over the years, with many cards a minor variation of a preceding one. In the disciplined, stepwise progression of its sequences, *Meshes* reflects this obsessively analytical process, yet another characteristic that seems to back up the claim that the film mostly reflects Deren's creative input and less that of her husband and collaborator, Alexander Hammid.

More biographical or personal readings of the film are certainly valid and they open up other riches that the film offers: for instance, it is hard not to associate the narrative conflicts of *Meshes* with Deren's personal search for her own creative identity at the time. The recent death of her own intellectually demanding father, just prior to beginning the making of *Meshes,* was always linked in Deren's mind to the ability finally to find her true métier in the medium of film. This creative surge was an emotional release in more ways than one; it warranted her changing her name from "Eleonora" to "Maya"—the Sanskrit word for

illusion. It has always seemed to me that the one word "spoken" in *Meshes* is "Maya," which I faintly read on the lips of Hammid as he stands over his wife and wakes her at the beginning of the first false ending of the film. Interestingly enough, direct testimony in Deren's biography suggests that it was Hammid who suggested "Maya" to Deren as the new name she was seeking.[17]

If I am right about Hammid's single spoken word, that would certainly serve as a critical clue to a particular personal crisis the film addresses. Yet I find the way *Meshes* reflects what we know of Deren's quality of mind also to be a compelling road of entry into the film's significance, in part because it makes a concrete connection to her other written and oral work. These discursive activities took up no small part of her time and only increased her influence as an artist even as that art regrettably waned in energy and imaginative power. In works by film artists as disparate in sensibility as Michael Snow, George Landow, and Yvonne Rainer, or in the work of poet James Merrill or playwright Richard Foreman, we can find allusions, either conscious or unconsciously employed, to Deren's work and to *Meshes of the Afternoon* in particular.

The remarkably innovative work of the late Stan Brakhage remains the most compelling example of Deren's influence; if we examine the deep structure of *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), the major turning point in his early career, where he essentially left the formal constraints and pre-camera staging of "psychodrama" behind and embraced more immediately free-flowing, nonnarrative lyrical forms, we still find the blueprint, albeit faint, of *Meshes*. Brakhage's film also has a fixed set of obsessively repeated visual elements: a single room, a lone protagonist/shadow, a door, and a "borrowed" piece of symbolism—a flower in water. As the film progresses, the spatial wanderings of the film's imagery go further and further afield, from inside the room, to a space that could be right outside the door, to a carnival perhaps a few miles down the road, and ultimately to the "dead end" of a purely figurative space, the imagined "animal dreams" of the sleeping youths once seen on the carnival rides. This flight of vision is an energetic quest done as an act of suicidal desperation similar to Deren's, but her work didn't approach Brakhage's sheer visceral agony. Yet beneath *Anticipation of the Night*'s improvisatory and radically nonlinear design there are still traces of the analytical, highly premeditated spatial logic as it progresses in *Meshes*. Incidentally, *Metaphors on Vision* contains Brakhage's written scenario for *Anticipation of the Night*—evidence of its role as a methodically planned transitional work despite how startling and incomprehensible its visual rhetoric was

for many at the time of its initial screenings. In taking such a bold step, Deren's most immediate and influential artistic heir needed perhaps some means of keeping his feet on terra firma, and as a consequence, Brakhage reached back to the disciplined vision of *Meshes of the Afternoon* in particular, as a formal anchor, a gesture that only stands to reaffirm the earlier film as a fecund and enduring point of origin.

NOTES

1.   Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Alicat Book Shop, 1946), 47. Reprinted in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde,* ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

2.   P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 14–19.

3.   "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium, 1963," in *Film Culture Reader,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 174.

4.   VèVè A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren,* vol. 1, part 2: *Chambers, 1942–47* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1988), 113–14.

5.   Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren,* 1:101.

6.   Ibid., 1:114.

7.   Maya Deren, "To James Card, 19 April 1955," *Film Culture* 39 (Winter 1965): 29.

8.   Deren, "To James Card," 29.

9.   Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren,* 1:85.

10.   Ibid., 1:31.

11.   Deren, *An Anagram,* 37.

12.   Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren,* 1:241.

13.   Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography,* trans. Jonathan Griffen (New York: Urizen, 1975), 1.

14.   Maya Deren, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," reprinted in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 60.

15.   Ibid., 66.

16.   Deren, *An Anagram,* 12.

17.   Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren,* 1:74.