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| Deren, Maya (1917 - 1961) |
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| Maya Deren (born Eleanora Derenkowskaia in Kiev, Ukraine**)** was a Russian American experimental filmmaker whose work in the 1940s and 50s had a profound impact on American avant-garde filmmaking. She was also a film theorist, dancer, choreographer, photographer, ethnographer, poet, and entrepreneurial promoter of the avant-garde. In her theoretical writings, Deren argues that film is a distinct form of high art uniquely suited to represent modernity. For Deren, film’s distinct nature lies in its ability to use reality creatively through manipulations of space and time by means of cinematic techniques such as the jump cut, multiple exposure, slow motion, reverse motion, and superimposition. She argues that in order for the medium to realize its potential as a unique form of art, a film should be organized according to its own organic logic, breaking with conventions adopted from literature, such as plot. Deren’s first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943; made in collaboration with Alexander Hammid), features a circular narrative structure that explores the subconscious imaginings and subjective focus of its central female figure, played by Deren. Influenced by surrealism and Freudian psychoanalysis, the film constructs an oneiric space where symbols and motifs such as a flower, a falling key, a mirror, a ringing telephone, and a cloaked figure recur and acquire progressively unsettling overtones through creative editing. *Meshes of the Afternoon* also features Deren’s signature technique of cutting on action, which yokes together disparate spaces through a juxtaposition of shots. The technique enables a foot to step from a beach to a field of long grass, and then onto a tiled surface in a matter of seconds, epitomizing Deren’s creative use of reality to construct worlds that can only exist in and through film. *Meshes of the Afternoon* is regarded as one of the most influential films of the American avant-garde, and a key example of trance film.  Deren is also considered a pioneer of dance filmmaking. After graduating from Smith College in 1939 with a Master’s degree in English Literature focusing on symbolist poetry, Deren became assistant to the innovative African American choreographer Katherine Dunham, touring with her company across the US. *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) features Dunham-trained dancer and choreographer Talley Beatty. In program notes, Deren asserts that cinematographic space becomes an element of the dance in this film, producing an ordering of space and time that is impossible in live stage performance. The film should therefore be understood as a duet, choreographed and performed jointly by the dancer and the camera. These ideas are further explored in *Ritual In Transfigured Time* (1946), *Meditation on Violence* (1948), and *The Very Eye of Night*(1958; collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School). Deren’s choreographic films also exhibit her fascination with ritual performance. Between 1947 and 1954, Deren took four separate trips to Haiti in order to conduct ethnographic research on the rituals of Vodoon. Her research was published in the book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1953); in turn, the footage of Voudoon dances and graphics she took during the course of her research was posthumously compiled into a homonymous film by her former husband Teiji Ito. |
| Further reading:  (Brakhage)  (Brannigan)  (Butler)  (Deren, A Study in Choreography for Camera)  (Deren and McPherson, Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film)  (Halsem)  (Jackson)  (Michelson)  (Millsapps)  (Nichols and Deren)  (Sitney, Film Culture Reader)  (Sitney, Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde, 1943-1978) |