

Seeing Double(s)

Reading Deren Bisexually —

From Unto Realized
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A well-known frame enlargement from *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which Maya Deren used to adorn promotional materials for the film, depicts Deren standing at a window, caught in the act of looking through the glass. At that moment in the film, Deren is a spectator gazing through the window at “another” Maya Deren as the latter retraces certain ritualized physical actions the observing Maya has already performed. The simultaneous coexistence of these two Mayas forces viewers to rethink the traditional opposition between self and other, between same and different. Visually, the Derens are identical to and different from each other. Moreover, their repetitive actions, such as successive attempts to climb stairs, further question distinctions between like and unlike, between original and copy. As four Derens (the dreamer and three “doubles”) emerge sequentially during this short poetic film, only the most nuanced gesture or facial expression helps spectators to differentiate between and among these multiple expressions of Deren’s persona.

Not surprisingly in a film that uses repetition and matches on action to undermine distinctions between reality and dream, these many Mayas watch and are watched. The window in the scene I describe above serves as a metaphor for both the camera lens and the film screen—two sites where self might become other and identification might become indistinguishable from desire. The blurring of the glass in the shot en-

Figure 30. *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Courtesy of Anthology Film Archive.

hances the camera's soft focus, making Deren's face more abstract, less individual. This visual effect speaks to the depersonalizing process of merging self and not-self, of encounters between and among spectator, camera, and actor in the transparent depths and surfaces of lens and screen.

A different kind of merging occurs in Anaïs Nin's often-quoted comment about this shot: Nin implicitly questions rigid boundaries between film and classical visual art. She wrote that Deren's husband and *Meches* collaborator Alexander Hammid "caught a moment when Maya appeared at a glass window, and softened by the glass, she created a truly Botticelli effect."¹ By making reference to Botticelli's *Primavera*, Nin associates the film with the rhetoric of classical portraiture, although Deren's use of this particular shot more accurately resembled the promotional glamour photography of the Hollywood studio system. The painterly properties Nin identifies stem in part from the characteristics of reflection. Camera and window erase the markers of difference between the face and its reflection, merging image and transparent mirror image.

The erasure of difference and an examination of the limits of the individual persona, so palpable in the image of Deren's face at the window, are essential features of Deren's experimental approach to film. A refusal to obey the rules of subject and object informs her perspectives on the nature of cinematography (she called the film camera "independently active and infinitely passive"),² on the dynamics of movement (especially dance), and on film's unique capacity for capturing rhythm and ritual states and suspending chronological time. In an article entitled "Cinematography: the Creative Use of Reality," Deren laments the incursion of theatrical realism into film because it "deprives the motion-picture medium of its creative dimension."³ She prefers to emphasize the "archetypal" potential of film images, including the mythic personas of figures such as Mary Pickford, Marlene Dietrich, Charlie Chaplin, and Marlon Brando. It is no accident that the passage in which she makes these observations is entitled "abstractions and archetypes." Deren's films deconstruct and aestheticize movement through her signature techniques

of slow motion and graphically matched editing, making the visible world abstract is part of a process of mythifying the individual.

By multiplying her own image in *Meches*, Deren engages with the mythic dynamics of identification and desire. Film theories of spectatorship, often relying on psychoanalysis, generally have conceived of identification as a narcissistic yearning for sameness (the spectator projects an on-screen figure or projects him- or herself onto a character) and desire as an voyeuristic engagement with otherness (the spectator encounters a potentially threatening and eroticized other whose sexual and other differences must be mastered, contained, or assimilated).⁴ In Deren's films, however, otherness is a function of the self—neither "internal" nor "external" to it but capable of producing effects both "within" the self and in the "objective" world the self inhabits. In *Meches*, for example, Deren's doubles are imaginary, but they produce "real" effects. In this way, "otherness" is a mythic and abstract force beyond individual control—as is movement—yet is not located in the external environment alone.

Deren explores the contingency of self and other, of difference and similarity, through tropes of doubling, multiplication, and merging in three films concerned with self-representation. *Meches*, *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) explore the film medium's capacity to differentiate between and to blend same and different, with particular emphasis on bodies, movement, and space. These films treat the dialectics of individual identity as a limiting choreography that the film medium can defamiliarize and circumvent. Deren's films intervene in dichotomies, including individual and group, single and plural, active and passive, at rest and in motion. The films depict women whose inability to be categorized as either "same" (the same as other women or the same self from moment to moment) or "different" (different from others, from men, and from inanimate objects) is troubling and provocative. The woman protagonist's relation to her multiplied and fractured persona, expressive of both inner conflicts and social dynamics, remains unresolved at the conclusion of each film. Identity in these films remains a

matrix of similarities and differences that is not amenable to an "either/or" paradigm.

One way to interpret the fragmentation and multiplication of the protagonists, the resistance to limiting definitions of self and other, and the temporal circularity in these films is to read Deren's work from a bisexual perspective. Such a strategy is not simply a mechanistic template to be "applied" to any film; rather, I would argue that certain films call forth such a reading practice because they break down categories of opposition, producing fluid, nonexclusive spaces and times—the "in-between" and the "both/and." As they gesture toward abstraction, these three Deren films envision desire and identification as inclusive and overlapping processes, as fluid discovery rather than as certitude. Deren expressed a dialectical relation between self and other in the repetitive, open-ended structure of her films.

Deren's ritual-based films reject linear narrative trajectories; they also steadfastly refuse to embrace an erotics of either heterosexuality or homosexuality. The films focus on women whose behavior suggests discomfort with cultural imperatives surrounding gender and sexuality. The films' multiplication of similarity and difference produces social and sexual indeterminacies that, in addition to spatiotemporal fluidity, create a space for reading and seeing bisexuality.⁵ Before performing such a reading of these Deren films, I will first discuss the narrative and formal conditions of possibility for reading film bisexuality.

Bisexuality and Film

Although gay and lesbian theories have been brought to bear on issues of film representation quite productively in the work of Andrea Weiss, Alexander Doty, Teresa de Lauretis, Chris Straayer, Judith Halberstam, and others, bisexual representation and spectatorship have been neglected, if not erased, in queer film theory.⁶ Thus, even though textual queerness is acknowledged and sometimes privileged in recent critical discussions, the fact that specific formal, narrative, or extratextual ele-

ments of a film may repress or express possibilities for *bisexual* desire is rarely explored.

Merl Storr has usefully summarized competing concepts of bisexuality and points out that the coexistence of more than one definition of bisexuality remains a theoretical dilemma.⁷ Bisexuality has been understood as a combination of two elements—although those elements have differed in various historical periods. The nineteenth-century sexologists considered bisexuals those people who were anatomically both male and female; Freud conceived of bisexuality as a psychological combination of femininity and masculinity. Since the gay liberation movement and queer theory have produced histories and theories of various sexualities, notions of bisexuality as a relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality have eclipsed earlier models. Social science approaches to bisexuality have adopted an additive paradigm, characterizing bisexuality as "dual attraction."⁸ Under this rubric, elaborating bisexual desire is possible if the dynamics of heterosexuality and homosexuality are understood; rather than questioning what such a dualism might mean, the model consists of a straightforward combination of two terms. The blind spot in film theory may result from an implicit assumption that bisexuality conforms to an additive paradigm of sexuality: that the "bi" in bisexuality represents the sum of heterosexuality plus homosexuality and thus can be elaborated through these terms.

Some regard bisexuality as a border separating, or as a zone between, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexuality may thus be considered a boundary or a mixture, an in-between or liminal space, a limit case or not a case at all but rather a subversion of any sexualities based on strictly gendered object choice. At the most basic level, bisexuality encompasses desires for more than one gender. Therefore, it is limiting to restrict theories of bisexual desire to those that posit bisexuality to be a combination of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

The approach I prefer takes as a point of reference the distinction between monosexualities (heterosexuality and homosexuality) and bisexualities to emphasize qualitative rather than quantitative differences among

sexual identities, practices, and modes of apprehending the world. I define bisexual desire as nonsingular sexual desire that may be detached from gender oppositions: simply put, bisexual desire is non-mutually exclusive desire for same and different.⁹ This intentionally abstract definition does not require that bisexual desire necessarily be associated with monogamy or nonmonogamy, with single or multiple partners (of any sex or gender), with any specific position regarding the relevance or irrelevance of gender, or with any particular stance on the relationship between gender and sexuality. It also resonates with earlier notions of bisexuality as located in the body or psyche—as a physical or psychological status of ambivalence and/or all-encompassing desire.

My argument that Deren's films invite a bisexual reading is not an argument that Maya Deren herself was bisexual, nor do I claim that any text, or any sexuality, is bisexual merely because it eroticizes boundaries or complicates identification and sexual desire. A bisexual film reading, I would argue, is encouraged by a text's specific representational practices, including: 1) the avoidance of a coupled resolution, whether heterosexual or homosexual; 2) the lack of a clear distinction between identification and desire among characters and, potentially, among characters and spectators; and 3) temporal and spatial regimes that undermine both progress and resolution, and therefore admit of the possibility of contingent identities, of subjects-in-process, particularly with respect to gender and sexual identity. Elsewhere I have argued that narrative structures assigning more weight to the conclusion—typical of Hollywood film rather than avant-garde or art cinema—may be less compatible with bisexual reading strategies.¹⁰ Bisexual readings privilege the episodic quality of films that represent time as a field across which a number of sexual acts, desires, and identities might be expressed, not an inexorable march toward heterosexual maturity or the progress of discovery (and final certainty) represented by the homosexual coming-out narrative.

Deren's self-representation trilogy (*Meshes*, *At Land*, and *Ritual*) encourages a bisexual reading practice.¹¹ Her films depict conflicted women

in liminal states who refuse to be defined in relation to men or women. At the conclusion of each film, the woman protagonist has escaped relationships, coupled or otherwise, with male and female others. Furthermore, the excessively watched, obsessively watching protagonists in the films repeatedly confound same and other, or, in the terminology of psychoanalytic film theory, the pleasures of ego idealization (narcissism) and libidinal investment (scopophilia). This confounding of identification and desire, I would argue, forms the basis for the pleasure of reading bisexually.¹²

Finally, the cyclical structures of these films—which draw heavily from Deren's study of Haitian Voodoo rituals and her growing interest in "the creative possibilities of Time"—disrupt chronology and elide closure, interrupting the dramatic teleology of crisis and resolution.¹³ The films cannot guarantee any stable sexuality for their protagonists partly because their emphasis on ritual highlights liminality and transition instead of permanence, which has implications for the notion of a consistently gendered object choice.¹⁴ In exploring difference and similarity, the films render moot the distinctions between self and other, male and female, object and subject, heterosexual and homosexual. What emerges from all three films is an aesthetic of self-elaboration rather than of taxonomy. Deren's interest in ritual possession and dance—two intensely physical states in which the self is suspended—underlies this film aesthetic. In that suspension, all social, representational, and physical categories are reevaluated. In what follows, I interpret each of Deren's three self-representation films in terms of the narrative and formal elements that encourage a bisexual reading.

Decoupling Sexuality and Deforming Narrative: *Meshes of the Afternoon*

Arguably, coupled resolution is the most important narrative trope restricting the possibilities for making alternative sexualities visible. Conventional coupled romance narratives, whether concerned with gay, lesbian, or heterosexual scenarios, make it difficult to recognize or to

imagine bisexuality as anything but an obstacle to overcome or a confused developmental stage coming before "mature" monogamous monosexuality.¹⁵

Furthermore, triangulation can serve as an important device in the formation and subversion of the romantic couple as well as in narrative closure, particularly in film.¹⁶ Romantic triangles offer opportunities for expressing overlapping identification and desire between and among three figures, elaborating rather than restricting similarities and differences the way a dyadic structure might. According to literary theorist René Girard, Western representations of love, romance, and sexuality rely on a triangulated structure of desire.¹⁷ Eve Sedgwick, examining the implications of male homosociality in English literature, concludes that the bonds between male rivals are as strong as those between each of the men and the female love interest.¹⁸ Writing specifically about bisexuality, Marjorie Garber observes that erotic desire depends on one's position within the triangle rather than on essential gender or sexual identities. She stresses the importance of examining "the connections among the 'other' partners that need articulating."¹⁹

What Garber suggests is that the rivalry and jealousy that characterize relations between two characters in a triangle who are competing for the third do not only involve identification (their shared desire for the third person). This construction is incomplete, because these relations may encompass rivalry, identification, *and* desire; the competition for the third figure might reflect or embody erotic desire between the competitors. Similarities and differences multiply within the triangle, offering the possibility that desire for same and other—what I am deeming critical to bisexuality—might be articulated. Bisexual desire does not arise within every romantic triangle; however, the triangle creates hospitable conditions for expressing non-mutually exclusive desire.

Because the (romantic) triangle offers the possibility for simultaneous desire and identification, triangulation may help to highlight the both/and quality of bisexual desire, including its apparent liminality as a zone "in-between" and yet connected with straight and gay sexualities. The third

term produced within a triangulated context becomes a metaphor for and/or agent of structural instability in dyadic relations in general. Deren repeatedly uses triangulation in her trilogy to intervene in traditional modes of sexual- and self-definition.

In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren invariably situates the protagonist (played by Deren herself) as a third term within triangular structures of looking and desire, often as both looking subject and observed object. The dreaming protagonist's desire for self and other is expressed in the radical ambivalence surrounding her relationship to her male lover and three female doubles/copies. Furthermore, repetition and circularity render the film's chronotope a poetic ritual, not a progressive narrative, making a conventional coupled resolution irrelevant.

Deren emphasizes the triangular relations of self, other, and self-image in *Meshes*. I argue that the film depicts the inseparable and simultaneous nature of the search for an other *and* a self. Deren's quest for self-representation refuses a coupled/resolution, enmeshes identification and desire, and rejects linear narrative.

In *Meshes*, the protagonist dreams of a mirror-faced figure, her male lover, and three doubles of herself while occupying an intermediate, third space that encompasses lover and dream doubles, waking reality and dream. The dreamer also forms the interstices between these figures and spatiotemporal coordinates. Deren dreams three versions of herself, each of whom attempts to interact with a mirror-faced figure and fails, enters and investigates the dreamer's house, watches the other doubles through the window, and contemplates the dreamer herself. One result of this multiplication of same and different is that desires and identifications between and among the dreamer, her dreamed doubles and her male lover, are conflated, thus undercutting the issue of monosexual object choice, much less a permanent state of coupling. As the doubles watch one another as well as the dreamer, they are watching themselves as others.

Heterosexual desire is subverted in overt ways throughout the film. The male lover, for example, is an intruder in the dreamer's domestic and psychic (dreamed) space and is associated with violence. Early in the film, the

dreamer sits down and caresses herself before falling asleep. She later awakens abruptly from a nightmare involving the aggressive dream doubles, and a rapid cut shows us that it is the male lover, not one of the dream doubles, who threatens her. As she reluctantly follows him upstairs to the bedroom, his insistence and her resistance become apparent. The earlier auterotic caress is visually echoed by the male lover in a tension-charged moment. During his caress on the bed, the protagonist is unresponsive and visually fragmented.²⁰ Immediately afterward, she seizes a knife and stabs the man, disclosing this reality to be merely a dream within her dream: as she stabs him, the film frame itself cracks and reveals itself to be a mirror. The next shot depicts a mirror-breaking on the beach. In the interaction between dreamer and lover, autoeroticism parallels heterosexuality and triumphs. Whereas the first caress initiates the protagonist's imaginative leap into a dream world of multiple selves, the lover's caress is explicitly distasteful to her, and she strikes out at him soon after he makes the gesture.

Like the male hero, the dream doubles are also associated with violence. The film circumvents any notion of unproblematic "woman identification."²¹ It provides no "solution" to heterosexual difference and its limited choice of same or different; neither self-love nor lesbian sexuality offer refuge from the unstable heterosexual relationship. During the dream itself, the dreamer appears as herself—asleep in the chair near the living room window. The doubles engage in a complex set of repetitions with variation: chasing the mirror-faced figure, entering the house, climbing the stairs, and penetrating the domestic space. The three doubles converge at the dining room table and draw straws. The last of the doubles to enter the house draws the knife and approaches the dreamer, who is stirring restlessly in the chair. It is at this moment that the aggressive dream double is translated into the ominous male lover figure, who takes the dreamer upstairs. The conflation of double and lover is a mixture of self and other, male and female, which suggests that the pleasures and dangers of identification (based on self-love) and desire (love for another) function interchangeably.

In the final scene, the male lover returns home to find the protagon-

nist asleep or dead in her chair, covered with mirror shards and seaweed; she has passed from her various dream worlds to one that is beyond representation. Interestingly, the collision of the dream state and reality has been so thoroughly explored in this film that one must question the reality of the final scene as well. The repetition and the violent imposition of one reality atop another suggest that dreaming and waking are interpenetrating both/and states; there is no space or time that can be categorized as exclusive, as entirely dream world or reality.

The subversion of coupling and multiplication of self and other in the film are connected to Deren's subversion of narrative. Without sequential reference points, the film cannot proceed according to cause-and-effect logic. Deren does not resolve the woman's victimization at the hands of dangerous doubles or a dubious lover by establishing a choice between self (liberatory solitude) or other (the lover, a double). The atemporal quality of the oceanic references and the protagonist's quasi-death merely confirm the importance of circularity and repetition: the dreamer may be dead and within the endless and therefore timeless cycle that the ocean waves evoke. At the very least, she is inaccessible to the reality represented by the lover's final (and perhaps only) entrance.

The bisexual aesthetic of *Meches* grows out of the thematic rejection of a coupled conclusion, the conflation of various similarities and differences, and the recursive temporal structure. Deren refuses to construct an identity for her protagonist that is based on a relationship to an other. Although eroticism is invoked on many counts (the caresses, the upstairs bedroom, the flower motif), no stable object choice emerges. The dreamer's fluid relation to space, time, and otherness refuses to admit a number of binary and hierarchical distinctions, not least of which is monosexuality.

Position, Movement, and Power: *At Land*

In *At Land*, a woman (Deren) emerges from the ocean and infiltrates various social situations, including a dinner party and a chess game on the

beach. Her emergence from the sea and ensuing sojourns among jarring geographies highlight the film's key device—editing. The editing in *At Land*, however, serves a distinctly different purpose than it does in *Meshes*. In this second film, editing yokes together the dissimilar, whereas in *Meshes*, editing infuses the domestic space with the danger of the dream world. In *At Land*, the spaces of same and different are made contiguous but do not interpenetrate, as they do in *Meshes*.

Furthermore, *At Land*'s central metaphor of a chess game signifies forms of difference that are choreographed by rules that are socially agreed on (color, location, mobility, gender) rather than by inner psychological realities. It also offers a quotidian means of avoiding narrative time—game time is also a form of suspended animation. The film casts the protagonist adrift in hostile social and natural environments but provides the character with the means to survive the inhospitable worlds she navigates—a multiplication of herself that produces sameness and difference. *At Land* is Deren's least personal and yet most individualistic film—ignored by many characters in the film, the protagonist is recognized and affirmed only by increasingly abstract, depersonalized, and spatially displaced versions of herself.

At Land's protagonist functions as an outsider, as an invisible intruder; she rejects the social activities available to her and prefers to identify with chess pieces rather than with other characters, male or female. After emerging from the ocean, she climbs a piece of driftwood on the beach. Her body is fragmented; successive shots depict her legs on the driftwood and her upper body at a banquet table populated by a number of guests. These two spaces (natural and social) are joined by her body and the camera, not by narrative logic. The protagonist crawls down the table, ignored by the guests, until she reaches a chess game in which the objects either move of their own accord or follow the protagonist's eye movements (it is unclear whether she is watching them or willing them to move).²² The woman snatches a piece from the board, but it escapes her grasp, sending her on a chase across various landscapes for the remainder of the film.

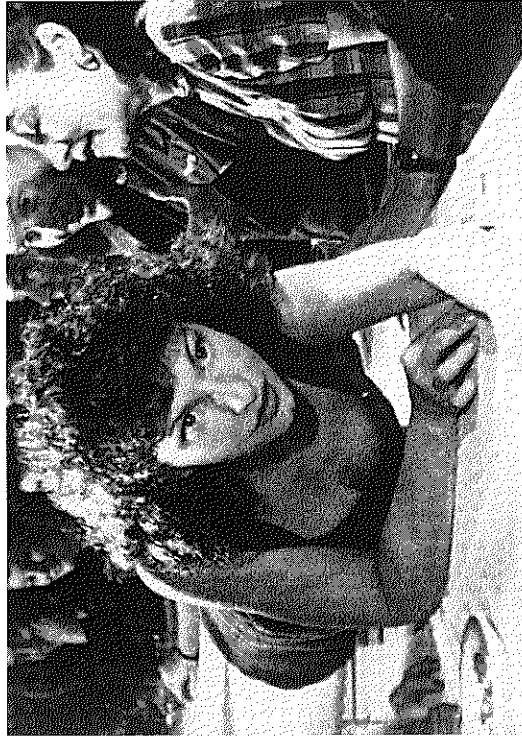


Figure 31. *At Land* (1944). *At Land*'s protagonist (Maya Deren) crawls along a dinner table. She seems to be "at sea" even when she is on land, and yet she moves with purpose and direction. Courtesy of Tavia Ito.

The significance of the chess game in relation to Deren's concern with bodies and movement is played out across the film: position and movement establish one's role in the game. The power of each piece is determined by its ability to move and its pattern of movement. The oppositional win/lose character of the game is embodied in its black-and-white color scheme. The queen is the most versatile and mobile piece, arguably the most powerful; yet she is often sacrificed in order to protect the less mobile king, whose status determines the outcome of the game.

The protagonist's search for autonomy touches on each of the issues emanating from the chess game. The woman is highly mobile yet remains unseen by most of the other characters. When she interacts with male characters, they are hostile or threatening and attempt to limit her mobility. Women characters ignore her until she distracts them from their chess game by caressing their hair erotically; she then steals their chess piece. Her "liberation" of two chess pieces from men and women's games

indicates her rejection of the rules defining individuals according to hierarchies of status, movement, color, and gender.

The woman becomes both an abstract subject and a multiplied version of herself—hovering between worlds of social interaction, game playing, and monosexualities. When she accompanies a man down a country road, the man fails to establish individuality, because three actors play the same character (Parker Tyler, John Cage, Alexander Hammid). Here Deren's editing highlights the woman's structural position relative to some larger, impersonal definition of "man" rather than to an individual man. Like the *Meses* dream doubles, the man/men become increasingly hostile. The last man walks on ahead, finally deserting her outside a house. Inside, she encounters a sheet-draped man who starts at her, unmoving and unblinking. The protagonist, startled by a cat, turns and flees the house through a series of doorways. The woman's mobility—instigated by the cat—saves her from the stasis symbolized by the staring man.

The protagonist then encounters women playing chess on the beach; the women take no notice of her. The women's chess game is invested with an eroticism that the men's game is not. An outsider to both the (masculine) dinner party and (feminine) beach society, occupying a distinct but contiguous time and space, she steals a chess piece from each game. In the final scenes of the film, the camera revisits Deren's image in various locations (on the table in the first scene, on the beach searching for the pawn); her several doubles cheer her triumphant run down the beach with a chess piece held high.

Deren's protagonist, here multiplied in the self-observing selves of the concluding moments, occupies spaces contiguous with but not engulfed by the male and female worlds she encounters (which might stand in for masculine and feminine worlds or heterosexual and lesbian sexualities). The film's rhythmic and repetitious structure is inaugurated in the opening sequences, when the protagonist rolls in on an ocean wave. Throughout the film, she moves through time in a nonlinear manner that is tangential to the other times depicted in the film—the dinner party, the

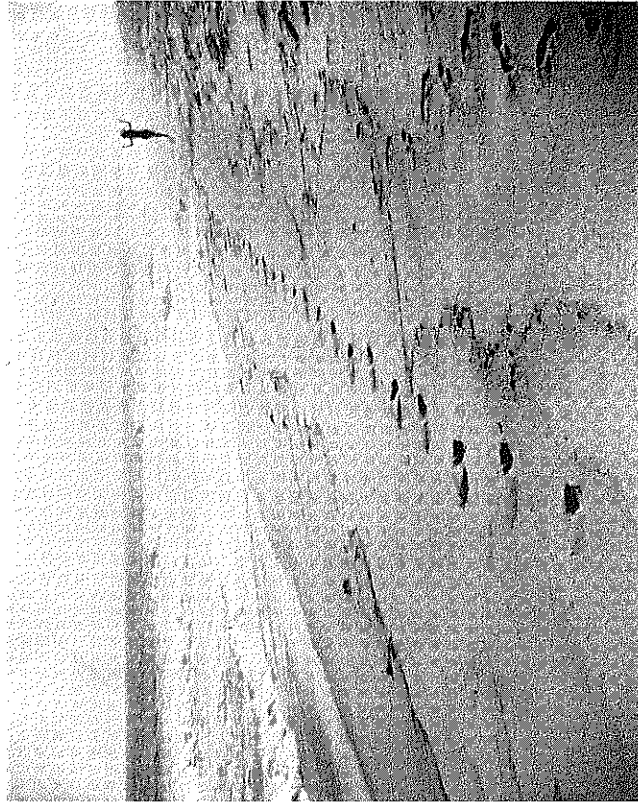


Figure 32. *At Land* (1944). The female protagonist (Maya Deren) returns to the sea, triumphant, with the stolen chess piece. Courtesy of Tàvia Ito.

game. She participates in the action of the other characters but remains unconstrained by their geographical locations or time frames. At the conclusion, the woman runs away alone, carrying her chess piece triumphantly, as if she holds the secret to their rule-bound game, a game over-terminated by oppositions such as mobility/immobility, masculinity/femininity, and heterosexuality/homosexuality.

While less psychologically complex and poetic than the dream-within-a-dream structure of *Meses*, *At Land* nevertheless continues the project of resisting oppositional categories. The film presents the female protagonist with hostile heterosexuality and eroticized encounters with women. Yet she refuses relationships with other characters in favor of an identification with/desire for the chess piece and her multiplied self-

others. In *At Land*, Deren again circumvents coupling, complicates identification, and suspends narrative time. Her protagonist is in process, defined in her resistance to the dualism represented by the game.

Dances of Difference: *Ritual in Transfigured Time*

In *Ritual in Transfigured Time* Deren evokes the liminal time and space of ritual—another form of suspended animation that circumvents cause and effect. In this film, Deren and her protagonist, dancer Rita Christiani, together defy coupling, heterosexuality, and ossification as objects of art. The two women forge a connection that ultimately subsumes self and other within larger forces such as motion and stillness; Deren's and Christiani's similarities and differences are not erased but drawn out by their visual merging. Their identification with and desire for each other are expressed in the final moments of the film in a sequence in which they merge and yet remain distinct. Because of this film's strong woman-centeredness, and somewhat surprising quasi-coupling, this film lends itself to a lesbian reading as well as a bisexual one. I would maintain its relevance to a bisexual reading because of the film's emphasis on the fluidity rather than the fixity of its protagonists' identities.

The film opens as dancer Christiani watches Deren unwind yarn several rooms away (see figure 11, p. 95). Christiani passes through a series of ritual portals, and the women unwind the yarn together. Slow-motion photography draws out their fluid dancelike motions; this space and time shared by the two women is distinct from that of the party Christiani later joins. Deren's yarn winder is an outsider to the contemporary social gathering, yet she occupies an unlikely proximity to the cocktail party. The connection forged between Deren and Christiani—evoked through gesture and movement—will reappear at the end of the film, as match-on-action editing creates the sense of the two women sharing a suspended space-time when they escape from a man who pursues them.

Through slow-motion and freeze-frame photography, Deren isolates the ritualistic nature of interaction at the cocktail party. Men and women



Figure 33. *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). The dance in *Ritual* (also discussed by Turim and Holl) suggests a sense of fluid, relational identity rather than of one person and multiple roles. Though propelled by the male dancer, Frank Westbrook, none of the female dancers (Anais Nin, Maya Deren, or Rita Christiani, seen here) joins with him to form a classic couple; instead they remain in fluid combination. Courtesy of Catrina Neiman.

laugh, dance, talk, and drink—their actions are repetitious and their gestures exaggerated by the slow motion. Christiani is the alien intruder in this context; the only African American figure, she is dressed in what is either widow's weeds or a novitiate's garb and grows increasingly uncomfortable with the party's aggressive energy. The group of men and women seems to take on an identity of its own, as a mob distinct from individual characters.

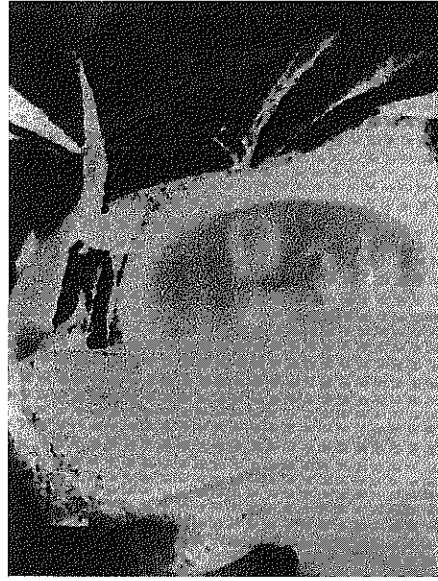
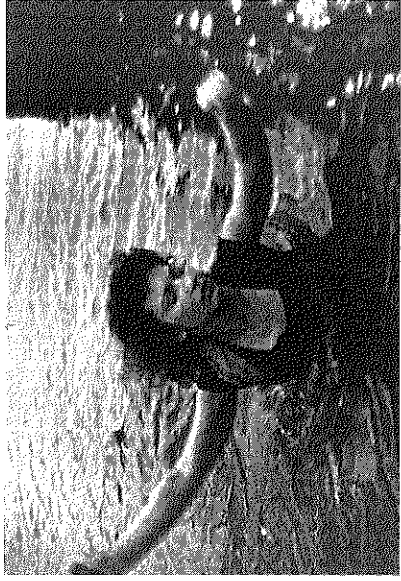
Christiani, two other women (one of whom is Anais Nin), and a man (Frank Westbrook) escape from the party to a sculpture garden. Here the man occupies center stage as he flings the women around in a dance and they are frozen in a still shot—likening them to the static sculptures (see figures 6, 7, and 8, p. 87). Deren intervenes as a third term in the *dance macabre* or Roman Statues game controlled by Frank Westbrook,

the dancer who has the power to turn the women into statuesque art objects. Deren is a means by which Christiani can reject the deadly game of aesthetics defined in male terms.

At the same time, the women's similarities are emphasized to the point of merging identities. A series of match-on-action shots forges an identification between Deren and Christiani as they escape from the game and run toward the ocean, finally plunging into the water. A movement begun by one woman is finished by the other; dancelike gestures represent a larger force—both internal and external—subsuming their separate identities. The final shot reveals the film negative of Christiani underwater, floating upward in a white gown. The rebirth in a fluid medium counters the danger of stasis and fixity represented by the Roman Statues game.

In *Ritual*, as in *Meshes* and *At Land*, Deren illuminates the structure of heterosexual interaction, using space and movement to lay bare the dangers of playing that game. At the party, Christiani is buffeted about by men and women intent on coupling, on terms that disadvantage women, as becomes clear in the sculpture garden. Unlike the two previous films, *Ritual* represents relationships among women as a potential means of transcending or escaping the stultifying rituals of aesthetic codification. Deren's singular protagonist, who heretofore has occupied the spaces of both/and rather than either/or (dream and reality in *Meshes*; beach and dinner party in *At Land*) now literally invites an other into her space-time. Deren's and Christiani's identities are fractured and multiplied through each other—not through doubles of themselves. Matches on action are carefully composed to suggest the fluidity of the women's movements as they become each other and yet remain distinct. The oscillating shots of Deren and Christiani suggest a continuing process of

Figures 34–36. *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). The two women (Maya Deren and Rita Christiani) descend into the ocean and merge into one character as the image changes from positive to negative. Figures 34 and 35 courtesy of the Anthology Film Archive. Figure 36 courtesy of Catrina Neiman.



relational identity rather than a transformation from one identity to another.

This last of Deren's self-representation films may represent a modification of her prior rejection of monosexual coupled resolutions. I would argue that the doubling of Deren and Christiani does suggest a dyadic relation but that the dyad is based on the simultaneity of identification and desire, similarity and difference. The open-ended conclusion offers a number of interpretive possibilities, a few of which are that the two women merge as they escape Westbrook, that they are reborn in the ocean beyond the confines of static forms of art or identity, and/or that they have rediscovered the place and time of the *Mesher* protagonist, a region both imaginative and real.

The film's reliance on and return to the ocean only strengthens the poetic ambience of the film and the trilogy as a whole. Their focus on ritual suspends time altogether. The suggestion of various means of escape (into interiority in *Mesher*, into individualism in *At Land*, and into an other/self in *Ritual*) is not so much a leap to transcendence as a transition to another realm already apparent within the films' spatial and temporal grammar.

Deren's self-representation films privilege neither heterosexual nor homosexual desire; in fact, in all the films, male and female figures are both eroticized and made ominous, even violent. Her protagonists wander through social landscapes unaccompanied but also experience sensual and erotic pleasure. They routinely reject narratives of romance, just as Deren rejects the romance of narrative. While the films seem to sanction the autonomy of the individual, the fragmentation (and multiplication) of characters undermines any claim that these films celebrate the narcissistic ego. The threat to the boundaries of the individual is posed by the complex play of similarity and difference that emanates from within as well as from the external environment. It may not be the lover who destroys the protagonist in *Mesher*, but her dreamed lover, or her mirror-image dream doubles. In *At Land*, the protagonist must navigate a game played by both men and women in order to expose and ultimately resist

its hierarchical rules. In *Ritual*, the transfiguration of time and space is also a dangerous transposition of living women into statues when they are controlled by a man. The flight from this particular creative process is undertaken by women who remain distinct personas even as they share space and time—a couple occupying the both/and status accorded individuals who are also mythic figures.

In terms of a bisexual aesthetic, Deren's films allow one to imagine eroticism beyond the confines of the coupled resolution and to view sexuality as an engagement with both identification and desire, not merely one or the other. Furthermore, the films deconstruct presumptions about what exactly produces identification (similarities?) and desire (differences?). Finally, the films resist narratives of progress—whether beyond Oedipus toward a “mature” heterosexuality or a rejection/rewriting of prior experience in the homosexual coming-out narrative. They suggest that sexuality and identity are processes without resolution, only further unfolding. For Deren, the film medium's power is its ability to create new forms of time and space; her work expands the possibilities for viewing subjects who use her films to continue envisioning the implications of her experiments with temporal, spatial, and sexual fluidities.

Notes

1. Louise Heck-Rabi, *Women Filmmakers: A Critical Reception* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), p. 206.
2. Maya Deren, “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed., ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 59.
3. Deren, “Cinematography,” p. 65.
4. See, for example, the work of the classical feminist film theorists: Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 746–57; Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Mary Ann Doane's “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 758–72; and Gaylyn Studlar's *In the Realm of Pleasure: Masculinity and the Perverse Pleasures of Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Recent work on identification encompasses

feminist, queer, and postcolonial film studies includes Anne Friedberg's "A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification," in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 36–45; Jackie Stacey's "Desperately Seeking Difference," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 244–60; Homi Bhabha's "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 312–31; and Kaja Silverman's *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

5. I draw on recent work on bisexual theory, much of it collected in Merl Storr's *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). I also have drawn from *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, Hall and Pramaggiore, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1996). This work grows out of my essay on Deren's paradoxical avant-garde/star persona: "Performance and Persona in the US Avant Garde: The Case of Maya Deren," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (1997): 17–40.

6. See, among others, Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

A recent exception is Wayne Bryant's *Bisexual Characters in Film* (New York: Hawthorth Press, 1997). Rebecca Bell-Metereau's *Hollywood Androgyny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) touches on bisexual representation but primarily through the trope of cross-dressing.

7. Storr, *Bisexuality*, pp. 3–5.

8. Certainly bisexuals may experience their sexuality in such a manner. However, bisexual "life stories" are often interpreted through an additive lens, with the result that ranges of experience are collapsed into sums. Note, for example, the contradictions in this short passage from Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor's *Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994):

In this book we show, for example, that the majority of bisexuals established heterosexuality first in their lives. Homosexuality was something they later "added on." They became bisexual over time, depending on a range of sexual and cultural experiences. And many did not define themselves as bisexual until years after their first dual attractions. (7)

Clearly, the issue of "becoming," acknowledging, and/or practicing any sexuality over time and through a range of cultural experiences is more complex than a mathematical model can accommodate.

9. Obviously, I have been intentionally vague. This formulation, however, allows for desires and practices that adopt the form of the couple and those that do not; it includes serial bisexuality ("oscillation" between and among variously sexed object choices); it includes fantasies of same and other sex relations; it includes the recognition that same and other sex friendships may be erotically charged. I am not arguing that everyone is bisexual, but I do want to argue for the specificity of bisexuality as more than, and different from, the addition of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

10. See my "Straddling the Screen: Bisexual Spectatorship and Contemporary Narrative Film," in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 272–97.

11. I thank Lise Carlson, who first described these films to me as Deren's trilogy.

12. Thus, in Deren's films, ego idealization and scopophilic pleasures can both be satisfied, but not through the mechanisms Laura Mulvey discusses in "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," namely, active male characters who appeal to spectators' narcissism and passive women who are victims of fetishism and narrative sadism.

13. The phrase comes from the preface to Deren's *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (New York: Alicit Book Shop Press, 1946), reprinted in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, ed. VèVe A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1988), pt. 2. In *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1991 [1953]), Deren describes her experiences and observations in Haiti between 1947 and 1951. Deren won a Guggenheim Fellowship to study Haitian dance but abandoned that project when she became interested in Vodoun religious rituals and filmed these ceremonies. The footage was assembled but not edited before Deren's death in 1961.

14. The practice of determining sexuality according to object choice is clearly Freudian in origin, but it still serves as the dominant model of determining sexual identity.

15. One of the most prominent examples of characterizing lesbianism and, implicitly, women's bisexuality, as a stage appears in heterosexual pornography; see Judith Roof's *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

16. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 16–18, for a look at the sheer number of films that end in heterosexual coupled resolution.

17. René Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

18. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

19. Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 433. The cover to Garber's book suggests the play of meanings offered by bisexuality—it is a painting of three pears, a whimsical

suggestion of the subversion of the couple that bisexuality can, but does not necessarily, offer.

20. The shot of the autoerotic caress also fragments the protagonist's body, but the camera angle hints that we are sharing her point of view as she looks down at her own body, not that she is looked at from a distance, as the lover's caress shot suggests.

21. See Linda Williams, "A Jury of Their Peers: Questions of Silence, Speech and Judgment in Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence*," in *Multiple Voice in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice Welsh (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 432-44. Williams discusses the problem of assuming that "women's ways of knowing" permit women to form instantaneous and "natural" communities.

22. This animation of objects recalls several moments in *Meche* when keys and knives seem to move of their own accord.

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Maya Deren and Me

Maya Deren's films, critical writing, and exhibition and distribution strategies have greatly influenced both my filmmaking and my professional life enormously.

I was a late bloomer of thirty when I entered film school at San Francisco State University. I'd tried many different vocations: bank teller, juvenile hall counselor, and playground director, but none of these fit. Recognizing that something inside wasn't being expressed, I decided to be an artist. Instead of painting, which I love dearly, I chose film, because the discipline included aesthetics as well as philosophical inquiry and politics.

In my film history course there were only a few women, but as budding feminists we were outspoken. Connie, Veronica, and I always sat together and criticized the ongoing academy of male filmmakers whose work we saw day in, day out. My arm grew tired of asking the questions: Where was Pudovkin's mother? Were there no women on Vertov's film train? And, why, oh why, was Lillian Gish portrayed as helpless?

Finally, toward the end of the course, there appeared on screen the black-and-white 16mm films of one Maya Deren. Something was radically different. The screen was filled with images that were created from a different sensibility, an aesthetic I intuitively understood. For the first time, a woman's cinema filled the screen in this dark, cavernous lecture hall. Until then, this "history of cinema" screen had been blank from a woman's point of view. I knew for certain that I would make film.