

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution! Tracing the Revolutions of Maya Deren's Dance in Jane Campion's *In the Cut*

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Movement is the qualitative multiplicity that folds, bends, extends the body-becoming towards a potential future that will always remain not-yet. This body-becoming (connecting, always) becomes-towards, always with. I move not you but the interval out of which our movement emerges. We move time relationally as we create space: we move space as we create time.

— Erin Manning, *Relationescapes*¹

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!

In 1990, radical feminist writer and performer Kathy Acker called for the development, in critical theory, of “the language of the body” to shift “[t]he Anglo-Saxon adoption and adaption of deconstruction [which] had depoliticised its theories.”² Writing as the subject of censorship for obscenity for her full-on representations of both female sexuality and feminist rage, Acker insists that the language of the body be recognised as political *because* it includes “flux ... wonder ... contradict[ion] ... scatology ... languages of play [through which] the life of the body exists as pure intensity.”³ Acker’s insight prefigured by three years feminist critic Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight*, a book that crucially drew attention to the disappearance of the body as both material and political field in psychoanalytic feminist theory. Since Bordo, feminist and queer cultural theorists have emphasised performance and embodiment in live performance and cinema. In doing so, both theorists and artmakers have revisited an earlier utopian imaginary, that of the American Jewish anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, who in her 1931 autobiography, *Living My Life*, recounts the anecdote that gave rise to the paraphrased quotation attributed to her: “If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution!”⁴

Goldman, who emigrated from what is now Lithuania to the United States in 1885, was deported to Russia for political reasons in 1917, the year that dance filmmaker Maya Deren was born in Kiev. Deren(kowskaya, as was her birth name) and Goldman never met, as, after her deportation, Goldman was unable to return to the US, where Deren’s family emigrated in 1922. While their paths did not cross physically, it is both possible and productive to imagine that Deren discovered Goldman’s writing during her literary studies and political activism at Syracuse University in the early 1930s. As Renata Jackson argues, Deren’s direct political activism ceased after her divorce from Gregory Bardacke in 1939; or rather, it was *transfigured* by dance. Goldman’s insistence on the dance of revolution, and revolutionary possibility of dance, echoes in Deren’s post-graduate employment with African-American dancer Katharine Dunham. In dance, Deren appears to have located a model of affinity,

collaboration, and transformation that both drew on Trotskyite socialism—to which she had been committed as a student—and also took further Trotsky's arguments for the revolutionary potential of the arts. Deren's casting of dancers of colour from Dunham's company, including Trinidad-born dancer Rita Christiani, in leading roles in her films, demands to be read politically—and in doing so expands political readings of dance and film to include, and indeed be predicated on, "the language of the body." Thus, Deren's films offer a model for reading the implicit, and often-ignored, politics of embodiment in feminist filmmaking, on which her influence is pervasive.

Dance theorist Erin Manning, who inventively entwines the language of the body with the language of deconstruction in her writing, stands as epigraph to this essay for her idea that the reciprocal movement of dance "extends the body-becoming towards a potential future that will always remain not yet."⁵ This extension and potentiality is evident in Deren's dance films, and particularly in *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). Made the year after the United States ended the Second World War by dropping nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* is not a capital-P political film. It focuses on the internal and affective drama of womanhood through five danced acts: a stylised exchange in which Christiani helps Deren wind wool, watched by a cicerone played by erotic writer Anaïs Nin; a social dance party that becomes nightmarish through repetition, as Christiani attempts to move through the party; an outdoor ballet in which a statue (Frank Westbrook) comes to life and dances with Christiani and Deren; and a sequence of stylised movement in which Deren and Christiani run into the sea, and then appear to be drowning, surfacing and flying all at once.

In each danced scene, Deren employs a specific cinematicity to translate the movement: slow motion for the wool-winding encounter between Deren and Christiani; graphic matches and loops in the social dance; jump cuts for the modernist *pas-de-trois*; and finally negativisation. Christiani—who is veiled—and Deren appear as white figures against a black background. Fusing the nun, the mourner and the bride, Christiani is at once a figure of life and death, of mourning and marriage. The coda expands through "the language of the body," connecting the domestic (melo)drama of becoming-female and its rituals and contortions, via the trope of the "angel in the house" to the role of women in war, as mourners on the home front, victims on the battlefield, and—as in the Angel of Verdun—muses of militarism. Falling/rising as a cloud of white, Christiani registers as a visual echo of the atomic cloud. The violence of domestic politics and enforced feminisation is imagistically connected to the violence of international politics through the dancing body, in a way that Goldman would have understood.

Combining rigorous choreo-cinema with a ritualized narrative structure, *Ritual* forms a mirror to Deren's most celebrated film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1942); read together, they book-end American involvement in WWII. A dark fantasia on a sunny afternoon in Hollywood, *Meshes* is an uncanny prefiguration of many of the preoccupations of film *noir*; indeed, it suggestively fuses three popular American genres of the 1940s: *noir*, the musical, and melodrama. Murderous actions and impulses pulse through the short film, embodied in key gestures with a knife, a key, and a kiss. Deren appears in the film as a woman returning home, repeatedly and with some anxiety. Her then-husband, and the film's co-director Alexander Hammid, plays the woman's partner, who returns at the end of the film to find her asleep—and then returns again, to find her dead. Anxiety focuses

on the shifting, risky boundaries between outside and inside, as the window, the door, and the internal stairs are repeatedly traversed and dislocated.⁶ The film's labile atmosphere and intensely private domestic language, at once intimate and violent, can be read as suffused with specific anxieties about being a leftist Jewish immigrant in the US in 1942.⁷

Deren's oblique politics are what dance-film theorist Elena del Rio calls a micropolitics of the powers of affection: that is, a body politics that suffuses the body politic.⁸ Del Rio's argument reframes Michel Foucault's idea of a biopolitics (political effects at the level of embodied experience, and even genetic life itself) to suggest that "powers of affection"—a phrase she takes from Gilles Deleuze to describe the complex intertwining of sensory data and emotional response—could be politically efficacious because they act on the body at the cellular, neuronal and haptic levels. This is particularly important as an intervention into large scale (or capital-P) Politics: a recognition that what queer theorist and philosopher of the body Judith Butler names "frames of war" act not just at the level of the nation-state, but body-to-body.⁹ Like *Meshes* and *Ritual*, Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003) is a film made within a "frame of war," as the first film to be granted an official permit for shooting in Manhattan after the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Campion's study of individual grief, centred on Franny, a female professor of literature, at the epicenter of the ever-Decreasing circles made by a femicidal serial-killer, is—like *Ritual*—an oblique but powerful comment on national and transnational grief and vulnerability. While powerful readings of the film by Sue Gillett and Lucy Bolton have identified many critical ways in which Campion brings together verbal, visual and gestural languages,¹⁰ no attention has been given to the film's use of dance—nor how its insistence on everyday embodiment, of moving sensually through the world, both grieves the geopolitical conflict in which it is located, and counters it.

Both *Ritual* and *In the Cut* speak in "the language of the body"—which unites dance and death—at similar socio-political moments in US history, described by feminist sociologist Susan Faludi in *The Terror Dream*. After national traumas, argues Faludi, the US mainstream recapitulates the myth of the frontier, with its archetypal figures of the powerful, isolationist, and violent male protecting the vulnerable, domesticated female. Westbrook's spinning throws of his two female partners in *Ritual* imply the coercive violence towards women that (re)surfaces in the body politic at such historical junctures, while both films explore women's possibilities of escape.¹¹ Deren's female protagonists choose death over domesticity every time; by *Ritual*, that death has become richly symbolic of flight to another mode of being within ecstatic religious ritual. Campion's protagonists often pass through a death-like experience—such as Ada's near-drowning in *The Piano* or Ruth's hallucinatory experience in the desert in *Holy Smoke*—before choosing a transformed life; *In the Cut's* Frannie is no different. In *In the Cut*, as in *Ritual*, the possibility is extended through relationality: specifically, a relationship with another woman who is both herself and the protagonist's double. In *Ritual*, as described, this doubling which is not one takes place between and across the figures performed by Deren, the white Russian Jewish immigrant, and Christiani, the black Trinidadian immigrant. In *In the Cut*, the physical identification is closer, but the union still occurs through dance, as Frannie and her half-sister Pauline compare their separate (and separated, by their mutual father's infidelities) adolescences while dancing in Pauline's apartment.

This echo of foundational feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* is deliberate: questions of binaries and dualities are crucial in feminist theory, and perhaps

crucial too with regards to dance. In Darren Aronofsky's film *Black Swan* (2010), to take a high-profile example, schematic misogynist dualities between masculine and feminine and within femininity are troped through associations with (feminised) dance and performance, despite forty years of feminist dance and dance film. Irigaray's generative language of doubleness and repetition-with-a-difference offers a potent framework for reading both Deren's and Campion's films as they mimic, but alter, the misogynist *noir* genre, and as their protagonists try to break out of the spiral of repetition of gendered violence. This is the primary political work of the dance in both films: asserting the biopolitical power of the active, affective body as, in Manning's words, dance "folds, bends, extends the body-becoming."¹² It is this becoming—this extension to a potential future that refuses the femicidal narrative logic of the genre—that unites *Ritual* and *In the Cut*, and is unfolded through this essay.

Moving and Moving

Compositionally, albeit not traditionally choreographically, Campion's film clearly signals its inheritance from Deren, and in particular Deren's theory of poetic film's "verticality." Whereas Deren used dance to thread the stacks of her vertical, associative montage, Campion makes dance scenes one of the associative tracks or stacks through *In the Cut*. Each danced scene is constructed with both explicit and implicit references to Deren's associative and rhythmic editing, her juxtaposition of real and imagined spaces, and her non-linear temporal signature. But it is their associative repetition-with-a-difference across the film that creates a structural verticality that strings the film together, like the bridges across which Frannie travels to reach Pauline's apartment, which connect Manhattan to its outer boroughs, and to the rest of the U.S.

As Frannie travels home from the George Washington Bridge in the very north of Manhattan (where her quest to discover the serial killer ends), to her apartment in Washington Square in the south (following the track of Broadway), a series of associative edits moving her across the city suggests the famous sequence in *Meshes*, in which Deren steps from beach to garden to interior across straight cuts. As Manning comments, "when I take a step, how the step moves me is key to where I can go."¹³ The step is the key signature of Campion's film, as it is of *Meshes*. Frannie, too, is frequently shown walking up (and down) stairs, often with the use of expressionistic camera angles and slow motion. Like *Meshes*, *In the Cut* is a daylight anti-*noir* that uses the tropes of the genre (including the knife and the key) to critique femicide, to tell, in Yeats's words, the dancer from the dance—that is, to take the *femme fatale*, whom Janey Place reads as an intelligent, forceful female protagonist able to articulate her own desire, and separate the femme from her fatality.¹⁴

Famously, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" proposed an anti-narrative counter-cinema to do that work. Yet Deren's films, which influenced counter-cinema dancer-filmmakers such as Yvonne Rainer and Sally Potter as well as Campion, are not anti-narrative, but rather foreground dance as a counter-strategy that, like narrative, moves through time and moves the body. They use dance to foreground the female body not as an object of the gaze, but in the manner argued by feminist performance art theorist Jill Dolan, as a subject "know[ing], intellectually and psychophysically ... how to control the seductions inherent in the frame, and how to speak the language so that authority,

seduction and language mean something different about the status of women in culture."¹⁵ Similarly, Deren's films use dance in the same way that Mulvey suggests that conventional Hollywood narrative cinema uses the close-up of the female face: to delay, disperse and defer the narrative thrust.

Like Deren, Campion uses dance to disrupt narrative logic without recourse to the reifying force of the close-up. Instead, she offers medium long shots of bodies in movement; as Lucy Bolton notes, Frannie is rarely still.¹⁶ She walks incessantly around New York; even standing on the subway, she moves and is moved, both by the forward motion of the subway car, repeated by the handheld camera, and by the Poetry in Transit placards that cause her to move her mouth, reading to herself. This repeated scene of Frannie engaging, bodily, with an artwork in a rectangular frame, repeats and draws attention to Campion's imagining of the viewer's experience of cinema. Film theorist Noël Carroll described dance-filmmaker and choreographer Yvonne Rainer's work as "moving and moving."¹⁷ That is, screen movement (co-composed of gesture and cinematography) engages the viewer affectively because the viewing body responds to movement.

Campion's earlier film, *The Piano*, was crucial to the development of feminist film phenomenology, a theory that extended Carroll's insight to explore exactly how screen media affect the viewing body. Its pioneer, Vivian Sobchack, devotes a chapter in *Carnal Knowledge* to reading the opening moments of *The Piano*, in which the viewer appears to be looking through Ada, the protagonist's, fingers. In *In the Cut*, Campion experiments with other images of women's self-touch in relation to the female gaze, including a scene in which Frannie masturbates. Yet she is unable to climax because her foot cramps. Later in the film, after Pauline's death, this bare foot becomes a sign of vulnerability and mourning: she loses her shoe in the police station; then on the stairs of her apartment building when she goes to welcome a student who subsequently attacks her; after the attack, her lover—the detective investigating the murders, Giovanni Malloy—bathes her and washes her feet. When she finds a clue that suggests he is the murderer, she flees down the stairs and into Washington Square barefoot, returning the same way the following morning.

Sally Banes titles her book on post-modern dance *Terpsichore in Sneakers* to suggest the contrast between the traditionally feminine, atemporal, fleet-foot image of the dancer, and the multiplicity, dynamism, athleticism, and creative juxtapositions of the form's reinvention. Yet Frannie's barefoot movements are far from indicative of a nostalgic return to Mount Helicon. Instead, as viewers, we become aware of the sole of the foot as a sensitive, even erotic, surface of touch, like Ada's (piano-playing) fingers in *The Piano*, so that what Laura U. Marks calls our "haptic visuality" is solicited.¹⁸ The vulnerability of Frannie's feet makes us feel (texture) and feel (emotion). Feet yoke agential forward motion and the dilatory effects of dance. They also draw attention to the ground Frannie stands on: New York, whose traumatic recent history is the counterpart to many other historical strands, including immigration via Ellis Island (Giovanni Malloy's name suggests his heritage from both Irish and Italian immigrants), as well as counter-cultural practices from Deren's days in Greenwich Village to the radical dance innovations of Judson Church described by Banes. Like the sneaker-clad dancers of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*, Frannie's barefoot flights blur the boundaries between dance and the everyday, drawing attention to all of the gestural language in (the) film as choreographic. Although there are only a handful of brief scenes that could formally be designated as dance in *In the Cut*, Frannie's feet moving and

moving—nevertheless mark Champion's inheritance from Deren, not least her repetition-with-a-difference of Deren's danced intervention into film *noir*.

Dance of the Seven Veils

Femmes fatales don't dance. As Richard Z. Santos notes, despite its nocturnal urbanity and erotic overtones, *noir* rarely employs dance, with only mannerist, pastiche *noirs* *Bande à Part* and *Pulp Fiction* containing notable dance scenes.¹⁹ Richard Dyer suggests that dance would allow the viewer to know the *femme fatale* on her own terms, and that this would undermine the conceit of the genre, in which the male protagonist is knowable, stable and thus our point-of-view character, while the *femme fatale* is mysterious to both the (anti) hero and the viewer. He notes of Gilda:

No other *femme fatale* dances . . . The use of dance as “self-expression” as instanced by Fred Astaire was also available to and used by [Rita] Hayworth (though always in a less developed form than Astaire's). Although “self-expression” is a problematic concept in relation to the arts, as a notion informing artistic practices, and especially dance, it is extremely important, and especially in the context of a character who is generically constructed as having no knowable self.²⁰

Santos points to the contrasting example of David Lynch and Mark Frost's television series *Twin Peaks*, which features dance as a polyvalent expression, oscillating between a potent symbol of female sexuality (culminating in the ridiculous Miss Twin Peaks pageant choreography) and a dangerous expression of male madness (the Man from Another Place's shoe shuffle, Leland Palmer's dancing); either way, it marks alterity and the disruptive power of sexual desire.

Santos does not include *In the Cut* in his article, and critics have failed to note the way in which dances similarly pervade *In the Cut*, focusing instead on the film's engagement with literature and verbal language. Frannie teaches creative writing at a community college, and is writing a book about street slang. Yet there is a verbal connection between these two cerebral activities that also connects them intimately to her body. She is teaching Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and among the first lines of dialogue in the film is an exchange about one of the slang words she has pinned to her wall, when she explains to Pauline that “virginia” means “vagina, as in ‘he penetrated her virginia with a hammer.’” The coolly-delivered grotesque violence, emerging as it does from a dreamy credit sequence in which Pauline walks through early morning Manhattan, is startling. Champion's film is insistent on both the grace and the vulnerability of embodiment, on how being open to the sensual world also leaves one open to the invidious violence of those who are threatened by openness.

As in *Ritual* and *Meshes*, a woman's entry into the world risks the equal and opposite entry of the world into the woman: this can be consensual or violating. The interchange in *In the Cut* between verbal language, visual language, and gestural language is highlighted by Frannie's absorption in the Poems in Transit on the subway. When Malloy is similarly stimulated to read aloud a quotation from Pablo Neruda that Frannie has pinned to the wall in her home office, we are alerted to their *simpatico* and his feminine openness. “I want to do with you / What spring does with cherry trees,” he reads, wiping his hand across his moustache, as Gillett observes.²¹ When a white blossom pastes itself to Frannie's leg as she

climbs the stairs barefoot and grieving, this quotation returns to mind, again connecting poetic language to physical movement, and particularly the Terpsichorean figure. It is by harmonizing her poetic insights and her kinetic embodiment that Frannie is “[anti]” generically constructed as having [a] knowable self.”

Barbara Kennedy, reading the feminist potential of neo-*noir*, argues that “the erotogenics of the filmic experience ... articulates more than just the pleasures of scopophilia and voyeurism. Identities and subjectivities are experienced, created or negated through wider affective or sensual frameworks outside the notions of vision and the gaze.”²² It is through the mediation of dance that Frannie’s poetics of the body becomes actualised, and/as it is her poetics that lifts the film’s dance. As in *Meshes*, the use of eccentric framing, slow motion, extreme close-up, canted angles, and the contrast between exterior and interior light adds to the film’s expressionistic dreaminess, and its insistence on femininity as a challenge to the hard-boiled, hard-bitten *noir* genre encoded. It is this reframing, which reinforces the dilatory temporality of danced movement, that in both films not only troubles but completely reappropriates the voyeuristic scopic regime apparently incited by the focus on the female protagonist as erotogenic subject. Through choreo-cinema, they articulate an answer to Clare Whatling’s question: “Can the femme lesbian articulate, just by looking, that she is both object and subject of that look?”²³ Both films suggest that looking needs to be embedded in movement and the haptic to achieve that articulation.

Both Frannie and her half-sister Pauline are decidedly femme in their self-presentation: both have, as various men in the film note, long hair, and they exchange dresses and jewellery. Unlike the hard-bodied heroines of post-feminist films such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991) or *Blue Steel* (1989), which rewrite the narrative of the thriller by making the female protagonist(s) physically aligned with the action hero, Frannie is an accidental hero, embroiled in a murder mystery by chance when a woman’s body parts are found in the garden beneath her window. Frannie finds herself a key witness, complicated by having seen the woman alive shortly before her murder, and further complicated by becoming sexually involved with the investigating detective, Malloy, whom she suspects of being the killer. Although Frannie’s relationship with Malloy unfolds across the course of the film, Pauline is Frannie’s primary relational figure. Campion and co-screenwriter Susanna Moore, adapting her own novel, transposed Frannie and Pauline from best friends to half-sisters. This adds both biopolitics, through their genetic connection, and, as Bolton argues, an Irigarayan female genealogy. She notes “a tender, gentle scene in which the intimacy between the women is portrayed by their clothing, their gestures, and their palpable affection ... [which frames] the discussion of their mothers as women.”²⁴

The palpability of their affection is presented through dance. They are in Pauline’s apartment, which is a mass of sensory stimuli that blurs the auditory, visual and tactile: beaded curtains, textured fabrics, and the women’s own bodies in conversation. The use of close-ups, attention to small sounds, muted colours combined with sparkle, and natural light, all leading into the dance, combine to

make experiential musicality felt as a sound-moving-with and a moving-with-sound. This creates an amodal relay that distributes sound throughout the sensing body in movement as both the effect of movement and the instigator of

experiential space-time. We experience this sound-movement tonally, affectively, through a rhythmic re-invention of the environment's sensory dimensions.²⁵

When Frannie and Pauline dance, it is as if they have been led into the dance not only by the song on the radio and the intimacy of their conversation, but by the sonorous, reflective, tactile kinesis of the apartment and the cinematography.

Their dance is tactile, languorous, unforced, suggestive of a shared adolescence—the shared adolescence that their conversation reveals they didn't have, as Frannie's father left her mother for Pauline's mother, whom he didn't marry, but also abandoned. *In the Cut* has been read as a Freudian essay on the feminine Oedipus complex—both Pauline and Frannie, deprived of paternal love and familial security, are driven to 'Wait in Vain' for their phallus.²⁶ As they talk, Annie Lennox's cover of Bob Marley's "I Don't Wanna Wait in Vain for Your Love" plays on Pauline's radio, suggesting a typical chick flick, in which women talk only about men, and perform only for men—specifically, for a man who will probably come between them, causing jealousy and separation. *Ritual* dramatizes this separation in the violence of Westbrook's partnering and the impossibility of an equal *pas-de-trois*, as his appearance separates Deren and Christiani even as, and because, he dances similar sequences with each of them.

Yet Frannie denies that chick flick trope. Instead of arguing about men, she quotes poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to the effect that she is "of this human heart a-weary." When the song changes, she jumps up and pulls Pauline into a dance, saying of "Just My Imagination," "This is my song," a phrase that is suggestive both of romantic relationships culminating in marriage ("They're playing our song"), and the strip bar downstairs from Pauline's flat, where the workers may lay claim to, or be scheduled by, particular songs. Yet, as Frannie would know, the phrase could also be Coleridge's, and thus stand outside these gendered forms, as he theorised "imagination" as the generative power of creativity, which could be read as an abrogation of female reproductive capacity.²⁷ Thus Frannie lays claim—*my* song, *my* imagination—just after Pauline has told her she thinks she should have a baby, for their mothers' sakes. Pauline later gives her a charm bracelet with a baby-in-a-carriage charm that becomes a clue in her identification of the killer. Dance, with its affective knowing, will end up saving Frannie's life—as it re-unites (or merges) and saves Deren's and Christiani's in *Ritual*, as they are transfigured from drowning to flying. The final union makes good on the initial encounter between Deren and Christiani within the house, winding wool, and repairs the damage done by the *pas-de-trois*. Frannie and Pauline's dance resonates far beyond its brief length because of the discussion of their mothers—which extends the film's duration back in time beyond its first scene to Frannie's mother's engagement to her father—and because Frannie claims "her song," her knowable self expressed through music and movement.

Dancing in Circles

Frannie's claim to *her* song layers the affect of this scene across the film, almost as a manifesto, so that both previous scenes—specifically, her interactions with Malloy (which are the subject of discussion before she and Pauline dance—and future scenes—specifically, the encroachment of the serial killer, who acts on/out his warped "imagination"—are embedded in this casual dance. Both the use of dance and its centering of a spiral that

exists in productive tension with the linear drive of the thriller point to the influence of Deren's work on the film, and particularly to *Ritual*. Whereas Deren worked with the lyric intensity of short films, Campion uses Deren's strategies to structure a narrative feature that takes on the fatalistic (il)logic of *noir*, using dance both to delay *noir*'s tight temporality, and to illustrate, for both the viewer and Frannie, the ways in which embodied repetition can become a difference, preventing fatality.

Dismantling the romantic narrative often associated with the dance film (although Sue Thornham argues otherwise²⁸), and of which *noir* is the cynical obverse, *In the Cut* counterposes the intimacy of the sisters. It does so through a series of resonating danced scenes, centred on Frannie and Pauline's dance, whose spiralling interconnection echoes the multiple modes of social dance that are Deren's rituals to transfigure time. As in Deren's film, the dances span from quasi-adolescent homosocial "bedroom dancing" to the highly public and coercive rituals of heteronormativity, when Frannie enters the classic neo-noir scene of the (*Looking for Mr. Good*) bar on a date with Malloy. This association is made explicit in the climactic scene, when the serial killer who has been stalking Frannie asks her, at knifepoint, to dance. This confrontation echoes both *Rituals* and *Meshes*: the violent *pas de trois* of the former, with Pauline, the killer's previous victim, as an absent presence between the dancing pair of Frannie and Rodriguez; and the alternating homicidal encounters of the latter, as we think Frannie has been murdered, then—after a reverie—we learn she has killed the killer. Deren, making films in the 1940s as both feminism and socialism were curtailed by the war and then by post-war normativisation, can find only ambiguous solutions; Campion, making films after post-feminism and 9/11, returns to those solutions but allies them to feminist experiments in narrative, particularly the retelling of myths and fairy tales.

This is most apparent in a second associative cascade, also connecting Frannie and Pauline: an imagined dance, shown in sepia vignettes, whose coloration and costuming link *In the Cut* to Campion's costume dramas *The Piano* (1993), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), and *Bright Star* (2009), which investigate women's resistance to the coercive gendered asymmetry replicated by canonical literature.²⁹ The first vignette appears in the opening sequence, and shows a beautiful young woman whose ice-dance on a frozen pond solicits the gaze of a handsome older man, who skates up and proposes to her. Frannie is awakened from this dream by Pauline arriving to describe the petal shower she had danced in, which Frannie had thought was the snow seen in her dream. This vignette repeats as Frannie dances languidly with Pauline, and retells this story of her mother's engagement to their father. It recurs again, changing its details towards a horrific realisation, after Frannie's dance with the killer: it is what interrupts, and then restarts, the scene of the murder in its doubling. The reconfiguration shows Frannie's mother's legs being severed by the show-off skater when she refuses his offer of an engagement ring (as Frannie has refused the killer's offer of a ring); grotesque and grand guignol, red blood spurts into the sepia tint. Campion uses this violence, as Deren does in *Meshes*, to uncover the violent premise of submission secreted at the heart of the costume drama and of the heteronormative partner dance.

Dancing in the Ashes

Both *Meshes* and *In the Cut* engage, via danced embodiment, with *noir*'s deathliness as both an analogy for, and a paradigm of, the fatalistic national American myth of male violence

in defense of the victimised female/feminised victim described so precisely by Faludi. *Noir* is particularly powerful as an analogy that problematises this model because, as Rebecca Stott argues, the *femme fatale* is not the simplistic figure of the feminised victim, but “a sign, a figure who crosses discourse boundaries, who is to be found at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties.”³⁰ Like *Meshes*, *In the Cut* uses the home as a site of dangerously porous boundaries to posit a dual meaning of “domestic” that conflates living space and nation-state at moments of crisis. Within that domestic space, the crisis of invasive violence disrupts the cohesive self, so that experimental techniques, including embodiment as danced, become psychically and empirically “realist,” moving us into what Gilles Deleuze would describe as the molecular experience of a particular (and particulate) subjectivity. Deren, prefiguring Julia Kristeva and influenced by Henri Bergson, describes her films as “the films of a woman... Time is built into her body in the sense of becomingness... I think that my film is putting the constant stress on metamorphosis ... this is a woman’s time sense.”³¹ This emerges signally in dance, as suggested by Manning. The repeated, hieratic movements of dance also introduce ritual or festival time; as described by Mikhail Bakhtin, this resonates with Deren’s idea of the vertical film, in that ritual time, through repeated performances linked to the cyclical calendar of the seasons, lifts the festival out of historical horizontal time, stacking it vertically with all other occurrences of that festival. Thus dance is again figured as a disruption of the linearity that produces the violent vengeance of cause/effect narratives, as they structure US foreign policy as well as *noir*.

It is thus suggestive of the origins of theatrical performance in the Greek mysteries, which involved ritual dances by women, to be performed away from the male gaze. Mystery comes from the Greek root *muēin*, meaning “to close one’s eyes.” *In the Cut* uses the close-up to stage a micro-dance of the eyelids, opening and closing: the film opens with Frannie drifting in and out of sleep while dreaming of her parents’ meeting, and ends with her awakening fully from the nightmare of the ice-dance that is her primal mystery. As Sue Gillett notes, the film is replete with references to Medusa, and thus to the Freudian primal mystery of the mother’s (castrated) genitals.³² Countering this, however, the disarticulated heads left by the killer could be read as evoking the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, with Frannie gender-transposing the role of the grieving poet as she ascends and descends stairs. The Orphic mysteries borrowed from those of Demeter, whose search for her daughter Persephone in the Underworld was commemorated at Eleusis, outside Athens. It was one of the few occasions when women were allowed to leave the classical city-state without chaperones, providing an all-female space that was also public and political. In the context of post-9/11 America, this is deeply suggestive, as the Eleusinian mysteries were rituals of civic mourning performed only by women, grieving for the dead and reincorporating them into civic life as beloved memory. They allowed the city to mourn: that is, to move on, to accept the reality of death, to accept that, as Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, even the most powerful city-state can be undone, and is always vulnerable.

The film positions Frannie as Korē, the figure of the Girl as always being abducted by Death, as three women, including Pauline, are in the film; it also, however, suggests her as an inverse-Demeter, searching for her mother, and later for Pauline. On one of her subway journeys, she sees a bride on the platform, a vision that will recur to her when she is in the car with the killer towards the end of the film. Both Eurydice and Persephone, and also Alcestis who died on her wedding day to save her husband’s life and was returned to

life by the hero Theseus, the bride encodes marriage as murder and mourning, reflecting the serial killer's *modus operandi* of proposing engagement to his victims. She is also an ambiguous but utopian sign to Frannie: as well as warning her of the serial killer's MO, she invokes Alcestis' and Persephone's possibility of return from the underworld—not erasing it, but surviving it. Reading the end of *In the Cut*, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that “waking up and walking into the dawn of morning might just as well mean preserving the dialectic between night/day rather than insisting on a violent repression of the nocturnal side of the psyche. It might well mean focusing on the partial darkness inevitably accompany all hopes and anticipations connected to love, on the partial light illuminating all sense of vulnerability and anxiety.”³³

Such a reading could also be applied to *Meshes* and *Ritual*. Deren wrote to James Card in 1955, “What I meant when I planned that four stride sequence [at the end of *Meshes*] was that you have to come a long way—from the very beginning of time—to kill yourself.”³⁴ Frannie's repetition of Deren's stride in her dawn walk suggests such a death as both a figure of transformation, and “a preservation of the dialectic between night/day.” Deren sought and found such a dialectic outside mainstream American culture: first in Dunham's dance, and then later—following Dunham's own work as an anthropologist—in her anthropological work in Haiti. In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Deren writes of her identification with, and possession by, Voudoun goddess Erzulie, the goddess of love (and its shadow side, jealousy) and imagination: the arts, and especially dance, fall under her sway. Erzulie, as an archetype, is absent, suppressed or distorted in Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian mythology, hence Bronfen's reappropriation of the Queen of the Night from Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* and Campion's of Demeter/Persephone: at the heart of these figures, in their movement in particular, is the kernel of a pre-patriarchal feminine power that Deren found in Erzulie.

The Dance of Death

Bronfen reads the Queen of the Night as an the uncanny figuration that condenses female power and the occult, rather than emphasising “positive representation.” The medieval image of the woman locked into the Dance of Death, of which the *femme fatale* is but the latest iteration, is predicated on female reproductive sexuality, which both by its sinfulness and its temporality entraps women in the mortality of the body. Frannie's dance with death ends with her shooting Rodriguez with Malloy's gun; she had snatched up his jacket after finding the baby-in-the-carriage charm from Pauline's gift bracelet, while looking for the handcuff key. Mistaking the charm for the key to the identity of the killer, she also finds—at exactly the moment she needs it—his gun. So the danced logic of the film, which led her through affective contact with Pauline to trust Malloy, reverses the dance of death. It is Frannie's generative immersion in the temporality and sensuality of embodiment—which first emerges in contact with Pauline—that saves her.

In *In the Cut*, dance marks a model of women's time whose embodied presentness insistently carries traces of the genealogical past; from that remembering, which is also grieving, there emerges a potential future. This is both personal and political, as in the negativized coda at the close of *Rituals*, where Christiani's survival by merging with Deren is a riposte to racism and warmongering. Similarly, Frannie's dance with Pauline forms the

fulcrum of two vertical series that draw on her lived experience with Pauline in order to initiate her survival of Pauline's fate. It's part of the sisters' physical and affective closeness in urban movement, walking around lower Manhattan near Frannie's apartment holding hands and talking, and also of their intimacy in domestic space: moving and moving. They also move between, and thus link, spaces: they spend time in Frannie's apartment at the start of the film, and then—after Frannie's apartment is tainted by Angela Sands' murder, and then by a mugger who takes her keys—Pauline's. Pauline's apartment is above a strip club, where both Frannie and Pauline hang out, chatting with the staff. On one occasion, Frannie watches part of a dance, whose exaggerated eroticism and muscular virtuosity is in contrast with her dance with Pauline, and yet whose vigorous female embodiment (and loud music) connects the dancefloor to the apartment vertically above it. Troubled by the loud music in a later scene, Pauline comments to Frannie, "I need to *move*." It's her last line in the film.

Even after Pauline's apartment is desecrated by her murder—and Frannie finds her sister's head in exactly the location that Pauline uttered this line—the interpersonal bond between them shapes the film. Del Rio argues for

the irreducibly affirmative signatures of the body, which only the onset of death can fully erase, for it is precisely at that moment that the body's powers to affect, and to be affected by, other bodies reach a point of exhaustion ... [Yet n]either forgetfulness of signs or traces, not the physical elimination of bodies, can truly result in a full erasure of their affects. Instead, the body subjugated cannot but continue, however stealthily, to express itself.³⁵

Dance as propulsive movement opens the sisters' relationship towards the city (and vice versa); as affective touch, dance's traces throughout the film link all its locations as a shared intimate space. In both forms, it enables Frannie, through her relational enmeshing with Pauline, to contest the fatalistic spiral of the killer's phantasmic heteronormativity. She had been wearing Pauline's dress when she first heard about Rodriguez's demotion, and subsequently receives a startling display of Rodriguez' misogyny, even as he cruises the dancefloor at the bar where she has met Malloy. She and Malloy do not dance, and she walks home alone. She has a bruising encounter with a masked mugger, which she subsequently replays with Malloy in her kitchen. Both in its specific physicality—the mugger encircling her neck from behind, a gesture reminiscent of the starting pose of Johnny and Baby's climactic dance in *Dirty Dancing* (Baby's given name, uncannily, is Frances)—and this rehearsal, the mugging is transmuted into dance, as Frannie's self-awareness of desire begins to open the spiral of gendered violence into the negotiated potential of mutuality.

When she engages in a performative, hyper-femme re-embodiment of Pauline after the murder—dressing in red, Pauline's colour, and being sexually aggressive—Malloy not only accepts but enjoys it. Handcuffed to a radiator pipe, Malloy is literally trapped in Frannie's imagined spiral of repetition as she mis-takes him for the killer, fleeing into the path of Rodriguez. Although Frannie returns to Malloy, still cuffed to her pipe, at the end of the film, her *Mesher*-esque walk is so evocative of Pauline's journey through the city at the beginning of the film that the two relationships—heterosexual and homosexual—fuse into each other, with Malloy repeating Frannie's supine position of the opening scene. It is *as if* the spiral/cycle can start again—of course, it can't, and it doesn't cancel

grief. But it is the *as if*, the transfiguration of time, that is part of the film's utopian project. Pauline's dance in the petal shower at the opening, which Frannie says she thought was the snow in her dreamed vignette, has been transmuted into dazzling glitter that occurs after Rodriguez appears to strangle Frannie, which transpires to be rain falling onto their bodies; the sparkling bead curtain of Pauline's apartment forms an intermediate term. This "haptic visuality," in which the screen itself appears to dance, is allusively described by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 2*, where he says that cinema "spreads an 'experimental night' . . . over us; it works with 'dancing seeds' and a 'luminous dust'; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception."³⁶

In the Cut meshes profilmic and cinematographic "dancing seeds" to instigate a Derenian poetic cinema that resituates the everyday as dreamy, imaginative, sensual and affective. Dance is no longer a distinct/ive mode of the performative, but integrated into feminist cinematic embodiment. This integration is what opens the film and its danced bodies beyond questions of representation and presence, into a negotiation with biopolitics at the level of 'luminous dust,' which figures both the generative imagination (Frannie's revised dream returning her to life, re-mothered by Pauline's death) and the micropolitics of the body. This in turn figures the new feminist theory argued for by Elizabeth Grosz, which "needs to welcome again what epistemologies have left out: the relentless force of the real, a new metaphysics . . . we need to reconsider both representation and representational forces in their impact on the mediation of the real."³⁷ Closing her apartment door in our faces, Frannie turns us both back to the beginning of the film with a set of tools learned *from* the spiral to read the spiral, and outwards towards the world. In its haptic and narrative pleasures, predicated on Derenian dance, this is Emma Goldman's longed-for revolution.

Notes

1. Manning, *Relationescapes*, 17.

2. Acker, "Critical," 91; 85.

3. Ibid. 91–92.

4. Goldman, *Living*, cap. 5.

5. Manning, *Relationescapes*, 17.

6. Rhodes, *Meshes*, 64–66.

7. Alexander Hammid, Deren's husband and the co-director of *Meshes*, fled to the US from fascist Czechoslovakia over fears about a critical documentary he had shot. At the moment Deren and Hammid were conceiving *Meshes* in Los Angeles, Japanese Americans were being interned under FDR's Internment Act of February 1942, at Pomona and Santa Anita just outside LA, as elsewhere throughout the West Coast.

8. del Rio, *Deleuze*, 208–16.

9. Butler, *Frames*, passim.

10. Bolton, *Film*, 60–94; Gillett, "Engaging."

11. See Geller, "Each Film Was Built," on Deren's strategic response to the post-war re-domestication of women in the US.

12. Manning, *Relationescapes*, 17.

13. Ibid., 6.

14. Place, "Women," 37.

15. Dolan, *Presence*, 1.

16. Bolton, *Film*, 62.
17. Carroll, "Moving."
18. Marks, *Skin*, 206–11
19. Santos, "Dancing."
20. Dyer, "Resistance," 96–97
21. Gillett, "Engaging."
22. Kennedy, "Post-Feminist," 126.
23. Whatling, "Femme," 80.
24. Bolton, *Film*, 82.
25. I'm here borrowing Manning's account of a short dance film. See Manning, *Relationscapes*, 214.
26. Bolton, *Film*, 66.
27. See Harvey, *Ventriloquized*.
28. Thornham, "Starting," 33–46.
29. All of Campion's costume dramas feature tangential or eccentric versions of the climactic social dance scenes that are a key trope of costume drama, while never offering pointed parody, as Sally Potter does in the ballroom scene *The Gold Diggers*, where the female dancers throw over their male partners and escape, leaving the men to dance together. In *The Piano*, for example, Ada's young daughter Flora dances uninhibitedly on the beach—performing cartwheels that reveal her knickerbockers—as Ada plays the piano, while in *Bright Star*, Fanny Brawne is seen at a dance at the start of the film, cuing viewer expectations of an Austen-esque romance. Fanny talks about making dresses for dances thereafter, but her expected unison with John Keats through the trope of social dance is never realised.
30. Stott, *Fabrication*, 30.
31. Qtd. in Kudláček, *In the Mirror*.
32. Gillett, "Engaging," n.p.
33. Bronfen, "Nocturnal," n.p.
34. Qtd. in Rhodes, *Meshes*, 86.
35. del Rio, *Deleuze*, 209.
36. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 201, qtd. in Brannigan, *Dance Film*, 10.
37. Grosz, *Becoming*, 85.

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