

Film as Poetry

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“My film is to other films as poetry is to other forms of literature.”¹

Maya Deren’s body of work builds on poetry and the poetic image as an approach to filmmaking. Not surprisingly, many of the essays and interviews included in this issue of the *International Journal of Screendance* reference poetry as constituent elements in Deren’s films. Andrew James’s essay, for example, makes a strong case for the importance of poetry in Deren’s transdisciplinary approach, and Sarah Keller complements this through an analysis of the poetic and metaphorical qualities of Deren’s films. In addition, the newly translated interview with Austrian-Argentinian filmmaker Narcisa Hirsch pays heed to the kinship between poetic sensibility and film, as do Hirsch’s own films such as *Rumi* (1999), titled after the Persian poet Jelaluddin Rumi (1207–1273). Poetry within cinematic practice permeated the film discourses of the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s. But what exactly is this relation between poetry and film, this likeness, equivalence or correlation? What does the “poetic” stand for in Deren’s work and how come that it can be mapped onto filmmaking? Should we read her work like we might read poetry?

In an essay on Deren’s Modernist poetics, Renata Jackson reviews the roots of Deren’s interest in poetry, referring to the French Symbolists and the American Imagist school, including Ezra Pound, and to other poets such as T.S. Eliot, whilst identifying poetry’s ability “to synthesize emotional content with form” as the central concern.² Furthermore, Jackson points to Pound’s definition of an “image” published in 1913 in the journal *Poetry*, as direct inspiration for Deren. Pound described an image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,”³ and Deren reformulates this in *Anagram* as overarching concept for the logic of form: “A work of art is an emotional and intellectual complex whose logic is the whole form.”⁴ Pound made numerous attempts at defining the poetic image and the particular formulation referred to by Deren exceeds what the Imagists themselves had articulated. Dating from 1913, Pound’s notion suggests that an image actualizes unconscious material and emerges through insight. None of Pound’s subsequent attempts seemed to clarify any further what he meant or how exactly he conceived the relation between image and language, although a later statement from his Vorticist phase is intriguing: “The image is itself the speech... the word beyond formulated language.”⁵ Here the “word” is used metaphorically, to suggest a complex that happens outside of language. On the other hand, Pound always advocated clarity and exactitude, and also effective writing, and it was perhaps a combination of both these aspects that inspired Deren to borrow Pound’s “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” for her concept of film. Deren was not at all interested in improvisation or stream of consciousness as an approach to making work; instead, she combined a precision and

carefully constructed film form with the capacity of the image to directly affect the viewer. As will be discussed further below, Deren's aesthetics builds on a visual poetics and an economy of form, and brings this together with a depersonalization of movement and a stylization of gestures. The constructive elements constitute a basis for a film form that, according to Deren, differentiates itself from documentary on one hand and literary film on the other. This aesthetic also combines with an ethics to provide the artist with the opportunity as well as the obligation to create a reality on screen according to her own vision, a mythical reality that transcends individual experience and the everyday.⁶

In more general terms, the difficulty in defining the poetic image complicates the theorization of the filmic image in that an actual image may correlate with a poetic image that is mainly created through words. This is particularly evident in the case of metaphors, as discussed by Noël Carroll in his essay on visual metaphors.⁷ Carroll argues that there might be some metaphors that could be described as predominantly visual, but that many of them also mobilize linguistic concepts or knowledge which inform the visual material. Equally, metaphors which may appear verbal often activate a personal image repertoire, a communal history of images, or other non-verbal features. He writes: "In expanding the insights offered to us by verbal metaphors we depend upon more than linguistic knowledge. And this is also the case with visual metaphors."⁸ Given this fluidity between verbal and visual metaphors, there is an argument that all visual art is metaphorical, but as Carroll argues, this might be stretching the notion of the metaphorical a bit too far.⁹ However, the proximity between the visual and the verbal in metaphorical elements, as well as the capacity of images per se to summon linguistic material, can account for a conceptualization of film as language, and much of film theory builds on this thesis. For example, in an essay entitled "Film and the Radical Aspiration" from 1979 and again in an essay entitled "Poetics and Savage Thought" from 2001, Annette Michelson proposes that film is comparable to language in that it operates like the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic modes in language, following linguist Roman Jakobson's theorization of those terms.¹⁰ Michelson claims that Deren's notions of horizontal and vertical film form should be read in those terms, as a "cinematic grammar," and this could be a way of understanding Deren's frequent referencing of the poetic.¹¹ This theorization, however, replicates a tension that can already be found in Deren's own writing, in that Deren endeavored to develop and theorize a specific visual logic for film. In view of my following discussion and correlation between Deren and Deleuze, I will propose a different theorization of cinematic form and the poetic, and argue that Deren embraced poetic structures—but not for their likeness to, or interaction with, linguistic material. I will argue that, for Deren, the poetic is instead a means to construct a cinematic visuality, to develop a means of communication that is different from language.

In *Magic is New*, Deren explains:

I came to understand the difference between contriving an image to illustrate a verbal idea and starting with an image which contains within itself such a complex of ideas that hundred of words would be required to describe it. This is the central problem of thinking in cinematic terms, for our tendency is to think in verbal terms.¹²

To illustrate her point she uses the sentence, "She felt frightened and alone," arguing that a filmic illustration of "fright" and "alone" would never come close to the impact of the verbal

statement. She then describes an image from *At Land*, where a small figure stands in the corner of a large room in which the furniture is covered by dust covers, to suggest that this works as a visual statement and that its complexity could not be readily translated into words.¹³ In this passage Deren asserts emphatically that there is a cinematic form in which complexity is built through images and according to a visual logic. She does however fall back on quantity, using the expression “hundreds of words,” whilst attempting to formulate something of a qualitative difference between language and image. This expression is a slippage in the context of her argument for a visual logic that is distinct from a verbal logic and suggests a certain struggle in articulating exactly what the cinematic form might be, a point that will be explored in more detail further along. However, this creative logic, Deren argues, should emerge from the actual mechanics and materiality of film, a statement which reflects her interest in securing a specificity of film as a distinct art form.¹⁴ As Renata Jackson argues in her detailed review of *Anagram*, Deren systematically explored what film could do that other media could not, searching for a specific “filmic integrity and logic.”¹⁵ Arguing strongly against a wholesale reproduction in film of other art forms, in particular literary forms and painting, Deren writes:

Just as the verbal logics of a poem are composed of the relationships established through syntax, assonance, rhyme and other such verbal methods, so in film there are processes of filmic relationships which derive from the instrument and the elements of its manipulation.¹⁶

Technical possibilities afforded by the camera, different lenses, film stock, and the editing, give the filmmaker the means to constitute unique creative possibilities. Deren’s pursuit of medium specificity, on the other hand, does not stop her from also endorsing poetic methods; as Jackson remarks, she “is in fact implying, that a filmic adaptation of the methods of poetry is the only proper means of creating film art.”¹⁷ This suggests that, according to Deren, the poetic is not an operation specific to language but a compositional methodology for visual forms such as cinema.

One particular aspect of the poetic is, for Deren, the “economy of statement,” an approach to composition that she also borrows for her cinematic aesthetics. Writing in *Anagram* about an economy of statement in Cocteau’s film *Sang d’un Poète* (Blood of a Poet), she credits Cocteau for successfully deploying skills he developed as a poet.¹⁸ With economy of statement Deren means the deployment of a minimal number of elements to greater effect, whereby the final meaning or outcome is different or greater than the sum of its parts.¹⁹ Besides the economy of statement, Deren deploys a strategy of depersonalization and stylization, both of which are discussed by Erin Brannigan in her book *DanceFilm* (2011). Brannigan notes that in dance-based films “corporeal performance is one filmic movement amongst many. . . spreading out across people and things,” thereby “releasing figures from the demands of storytelling, allowing them to become part of a transference of movement across bodies and to resonate in moments that are freed in space and time.”²⁰ For Deren, this very particular choreographic strategy stems from her interest in ritual and in the social and political dimension of her art. Rather than exploring individual experience, Deren choreographs the actor or mover as part of a dramatic whole, thus, as Brannigan argues, “sacrificing individuation.”²¹ Discussing this technique through the example of the doubling of Rita Christiani and Maya Deren in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Brannigan proposes that Deren uses dance quintessentially for an “orchestration of sequences

where a movement phrase or quality moves across frames, edits, cuts, bodies, and spaces, making the body of the film a choreographed whole.²² The dance serves a visual poetics and is a means of organization in time and space. It releases the protagonists from their role in a concrete, narrative thread and allows them to inhabit a situation for its own sake. It also binds different filmic elements together, within an image and across different scenes, to invoke what Deren called a “compelling continuity of duration,” a choreographic film form that appears to be informed by Deren’s interest in Bergson’s notion of an indivisible experience.²³ The use of stylization in Deren’s films serves very much the same purpose as depersonalization: that is, to create a dramatic, formalized whole out of the constituent parts. As Brannigan points out, Deren perceives the movement of film itself as “stylized” and proceeds by treating movement in the same way.²⁴ Natural movement is taken from the everyday, formalized, and depersonalized to form a careful choreography of shapes and rhythms.

The significance of the poetic in Deren’s oeuvre comes to the fore in her often quoted contribution to the symposium on “Poetry and The Film,” which took place at Cinema 16 in New York in 1953. At the symposium, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, and Maya Deren discussed, together with Willard Maas, the relation between poetry and film. In the transcript, Deren is given the floor after Taylor and addresses the question, “What is poetry?,” in order to help clarify the terms of the debate. She argues that such a definition is useful so that audiences know what to expect when they come to see a film. Deren says: “If you are watching for what happens, you might not get the point of some of the retardations because [the retardations] are concerned with how it happens.”²⁵ The term “retardations” here refers to phases in a film where a dramatic action is interrupted by an exploration of particular aspects of a moment, such as its qualities or emotional content. Deren continues:

Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to experience, in the sense that a poet is looking at the same experience that the dramatist may be looking at. It comes out differently because they are looking at it from a different point of view and because they are concerned with different elements of it.²⁶

She explains further, in the often cited passage, that:

the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a “vertical” investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its quality and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means. A poem, to my mind, creates visible or auditory forms of something that is invisible, which is a feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement. Now it also may include action, but its attack is what I would call the “vertical” attack, and this may be a little bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the “horizontal” attack of the drama, which is concerned with the development, let’s say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling.²⁷

Deren elaborates that a horizontal development of a story might be combined with, or interrupted by, a vertical investigation of a particular moment, and emphasizes that all kinds of combinations of these two dynamics are conceivable. She proposes that monologues, establishing shots and dream sequences are all part of the vertical dimension, as are entire short films—such as her own work—and are comparable to lyric poems. As an example

she cites a film by Willard Maas, *Image in the Snow* (1952), and describes the visuals as the horizontal drive and the parallel poetic commentary as constituting the vertical element. In other words, the relations between the horizontal and the vertical are complementary and function between images or across image and text.

As is evident from the transcript of the symposium, Deren receives only negative and derisory comments from the other speakers and the discussion contributes little to the ideas or terms that she proposes. One comment from Arthur Miller does warrant attention, however; he comments on Deren's proposition that a dramatic action is interrupted by emotional moments. Arguing against what could appear to be a binary opposition between drama on one side and emotion on the other, Miller insists that emotions are wedded to the action and inseparable from a dramatic structure.²⁸

A couple of thoughts emerge from this exchange: Miller's comment subsumes a clear binary, but as Erin Brannigan points out in her discussion of Deren's terminology, the relation between the two modes is much more complex than that, particularly with regard to Deren's own films.²⁹ If one scrutinizes the different examples that Deren gives at the symposium, Deren's theory could be read as a way of thinking about the relationship between film and the poetic that is flexible and offers endless possibilities to the filmmaker. She gives the example of a Shakespearean soliloquy which literally disrupts a dramatic plot, alongside the example of Maas's film, in which the horizontal and the vertical concur so that the visual and the sound complement each other. Most importantly, however, Deren says that she is thinking of poetry not so much as a verbal form but "as a way of structuring in any one of a number of mediums, and (I think) that it is also possible to make the dramatic structure in any one, and that it is also possible to combine them."³⁰ This comment significantly deviates from her usual emphasis on medium specificity, proposing instead that the poetic can be used in any medium. This sounds much more like a post-medium approach, whereby the vertical and horizontal are conceived as methodologies which are independent of the medium, and constitute two different but complimentary modes of making and perceiving art in general.

It is also worth considering that Arthur Miller's critique of Deren's proposition may have been triggered by the specific terms that Deren deployed to make her point. When she says that a poem or vertical film form gives rise to an emotion, it is difficult to separate this conceptually from narrative or dramatic action, as the emotional is in general considered to be part of narrative, linguistic constructs. This association explains Miller's insistence that the emotional is wedded to action. Deren may, however, have been using the term in a different and less literal way, as something more akin to a register of personal intensity, sensation, and embodied experience—a register that is generally known as affect in contemporary cultural theory and philosophy and is considered to be a pre-linguistic state. To explore this possibility, it will be useful to expand on the notion of affect, even if it is not possible in the context of this essay to review the various histories and complexities of affect theory in current discourses. A brief detour via Brian Massumi's writing in his essay *The Autonomy of Affect* may serve to indicate what is explored through this term. In this essay, Massumi argues for a clear differentiation between emotion and affect, or intensity, in that they "follow different logics and pertain to different orders."³¹ To define emotion, he writes:

An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is

qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progression, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.³²

By comparison, affect is unqualified and therefore difficult to grasp. Massumi circumscribes affect as an intensity or:

a state of suspense, potentially a disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. It is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) towards practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims (if only on screen).³³

This description of affect as a suspended state and resonance chimes with Deren's notion of the vertical as a disruption of narrative progression and investigation of a moment. Deren's concept of the vertical also correlates with Massumi's argument that affect is of a different order to language. And even though Massumi writes that language dampens these intensities, he concedes that "linguistic expression can resonate with and amplify intensity," which could conceivably include poetry or the voiceover in a film like Maas' *Image in the Snow*.³⁴ A key point is that affect does not support or facilitate linear processes or narratives.

Deren's relatively brief statement at the Symposium, as well as her writings—be they *Anagram* or her diverse lecture notes and published essays—leave room for speculation as to what exactly she meant with the emotional and whether she considered it as a quality of an experience that is identifiable and recognizable by the spectator, or whether she referred to a more pre-linguistic realm of sensation and intensities, like affect. The fact that she did speak of the emotional and that she did not seek other possible terms does however differentiate her concept of horizontal and vertical film form from Deleuze's film theory of movement-image and time-image, with which it is so often compared. Deleuze develops the notion of the affection image in *Cinema 1*, and it underpins much of his writing in *Cinema 2*. However, current literature on Deren does not debate this particular aspect and considers Deren and Deleuze's theories to be similar with equivalent terms. Renata Jackson, for example, argues that Deren and Deleuze make comparable distinctions when they differentiate between "vertical" and "horizontal", or, as in Deleuze's case, between "movement-image" and "time-Image."³⁵ Jackson emphasizes that both theorists work with a binary construct of spatiality and causality on one hand and an emphasis on time and experience on the other. As she points out this structure is derived from a shared interest in the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who argued for a separation of space and time and developed a notion of experience-that-cannot-be-analyzed or compartmentalized (as we would do with space) but is rather indivisible (like time or duration).³⁶ As Jackson maintains, Bergson's concept of experience underpins both Deren's and Deleuze's film theories, and both advocate a film form and a spectatorship that is different from that of narrative cinema. Deren, however, struggles to get away from the traditional description of experience as emotion and to push it towards something more specific to visual logic and vertical cinema, as is evident in her statement at the Symposium. One can therefore point to both similarities and differences between Deren's and Deleuze's film theories, though the difference is potentially a difference by degree. Arguably the inconclusive aspect in Deren's work

is eventually theorized through the notion of an embodied spectatorship, which Deleuze puts forward as part of his writing on the time-image; a review of some of his writing will serve to further elucidate this interlinking between their various concepts.

Deleuze published his writing on film in France in 1985. It divides twentieth-century cinema into two kinds and two historical phases: a classic cinema of movement-images with a narrative structure dominated by action across space and time, and a modern cinema of time-images in which a continuity of actions and dramatic development has been subordinated to an investigation of time per se. As mentioned above, the first category of movement-images is generally equated with Deren's horizontal film form, while the second category of time-images is aligned with Deren's the vertical film. Deleuze describes the second category or time-image through fragmentation of linearity, a shattering of causality, and an exploration of disjunctions and extended time frames. According to Deleuze, this modern cinema demonstrates a "whole temporal panorama," the extent of which is tied to a notion of cinema that is independent of language and of traditional narrative.³⁷ Deleuze therefore begins *Cinema 2* with a review of the historical debate on film as language and aligns himself with those film theorists who critique early twentieth-century cinema for its close association with theatre and narrative and for becoming narrative itself. In this kind of cinema films were little stories and an image was the equivalent of an utterance, a construct by which the visual language was conflated with verbal communication.³⁸ Maya Deren expresses a similar view in *Anagram* when she argues that it might have been better if the film industry had never engaged with writers or with literary scripts, and had continued with the development of silent films which "emphasized visual elements and even sometimes, as in the comedies of Buster Keaton, displayed a remarkable, intuitive grasp of filmic form."³⁹ Interested in freeing film from an assumed affinity with narrative, Deleuze distances himself from semiologists, who want to read cinematic images in linguistic terms. He therefore critiques Christian Metz, who posits that the verbal effectively conditions the visual; Metz contends that narration constitutes the "underlying linguistic determinants from which it flows into the image in the shape of an evident given."⁴⁰ In this model the narrative informs the filmic sequences. By contrast Deleuze offers a model by which "narration is only a consequence of the visible [apparent] images themselves and their direct combinations—it is never a given."⁴¹ Deleuze argues that the image cannot be assimilated to an utterance, or be replaced by utterance, and that film should be considered as "non-language material."⁴² More specifically, Deleuze talks about the movement of the image as that which resists assimilation into narratives and linguistic units, as an excess that defies a linguistic forming of resemblance and representation.

Deleuze argues that due to this attachment to narrative, the movement-image of the early twentieth century is a clichéd representation of objects, in which the viewer perceives what he wants to see.⁴³ Drawing again on the writing of philosopher Henri Bergson, Deleuze points out that we never perceive a thing in its entirety, but rather through sensory-motor schemata. A cinema that is based on sensory-motor images is therefore limited in the kind of spectatorship it invites.⁴⁴ In the cinema prevalent in the early 1900s, the spectator would have been entertained and not challenged, indulged with clichés rather than, according to Deleuze, confronted with "real images."⁴⁵ Again Maya Deren makes a similar point in *Anagram*, when she reflects on the process of adapting literature to film. She argues that a representation of characters and their feelings leads to "symptom-actions" or a cinematic "shorthand," that supposedly demonstrates such and such a feeling:

As we watch the screen we continually “understand” this gesture to stand for this state of mind, or that grimace to represent that emotion. Although the emotional impact derives not from what we see, but from the verbal complex that the image represents, the facility with which we bridge the gap and achieve this transcription deceives us, and we imagine that we enjoy a visual experience.⁴⁶

Deren argues that this shorthand does not make use of the real potential of cinema, which resides in the realm of visual experience (as distinct from other art forms such as theatre and literature, which are driven by dramatic, narrative threads). Deleuze proposes that a shift or reversal in the priorities of the film image took place when the classic sensory-motor image was replaced by a pure optical and sound image that subordinated movement to time. Deleuze references René Clair’s film *Entr’acte* from 1924 as one of the earlier films in this cinematic shift, along with Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and some of Buster Keaton’s burlesque scenes. According to Deleuze, however, the new time-image is only fully realized in the 1940s in the work of Orson Wells, Fellini, Renoir, Antonioni, *Ozu*, and others. Deleuze writes of this new image that “the sound as well as the visual elements of the [new] image enter into internal relations which means that the whole image has to be ‘read,’ no less than seen, readable as well as visible.”⁴⁷ Referring to Godard’s formula, “It isn’t blood, it’s some red,” he argues that internal elements and relations in the image dominate over any representation of external objects.⁴⁸ This concern with internal relations within the image is also discussed in *Cinema 1*, where Deleuze first refers to Godard’s formula as part of a discussion on colour and its capacity to affect the image itself and all that is within it.⁴⁹ He reflects on the power of color to absorb characters, objects, and entire scenes, describing colour itself as affect, as a “virtual conjunction of all the objects which it picks up.”⁵⁰ The capacity of elements to affect and to bear the impact of other elements extends to the relation between image and spectator. More than, or perhaps instead of, a symbolic value of objects, this kind of image offers a play of affects—a register of changing intensities—and addresses the spectator in the same way, implicating him/her as another resonant body. As formulated in *Cinema 2*, the new time-image “brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or justifiable character, because it no longer has to be ‘justified.’”⁵¹

Deleuze’s insistence of film as non-language material is significant for a comparison between Deren and Deleuze, and the proximity between their respective theorizations supports a reading of Deren’s film form as visual logic and not as “cinematic grammar” as Michelson proposes. Bringing Deleuze into the debate on Deren also shifts her more firmly into a tradition of filmmakers from the early twentieth century who turned to cinema for its possibilities in visual composition. At that time, many visual artists turned to film as a new medium even though it was not yet established as a means to making art.⁵² The DADA artists, for example, saw the particular subversive potential of film as a means to critique a bourgeois modernity which was considered morally corrupt for allowing the unprecedented destructiveness of WW1.⁵³ Artist Francis Picabia, who scripted the first ideas for the film *Entr’acte*, belonged to this group and shared this attitude, even though he left DADA in 1921 to develop his own Instantanist project. In a review of avant-garde film practices, Chris Townsend argues that the narrative structure of conventional film mirrored too closely the regulated temporality of industrial production and labor, and both Picabia and Clair were fighting against this imposition on the modern subject.⁵⁴ To work against

these constraints and to allow for a broader spectrum of experience, the artists pushed the medium of film towards something that was relational, in a sense of being part of a live event, despite the inevitable mechanized regularity of film, its linearity, and the relative indifference of attending audiences. Townsend writes: "Like Duchamp, Picabia has a theory of 'kinematics' well before he is involved in the production of a film; indeed it is a theory whose temporal dynamics would largely prohibit realization within a film that functioned as a self-contained work."⁵⁵

In 1924, Picabia and the composer Eric Satie were invited to create an evening ballet for the Ballet Suédois, and they asked the filmmaker René Clair to direct a film for the interlude of the performance. Much like the DADA artists, Clair had been very critical of the theatrical, narrative conventions that were popular with the bourgeoisie at the time. He wrote in his *Reflections on the Cinema*, that "Cinema should not be restricted to representation. It can create...Thanks to...rhythm, the cinema can become a new force which, abandoning the logic of facts and the reality of objects, will engender a series of visions hitherto unknown and unconceivable."⁵⁶ This statement by Clair gives a sense of what was at stake and explains the fascination for a cinema that exceeded narrative conventions. The film *Entr'acte* consists of a fast and confusing collage of images and scenes that are devoid of narrative and intended to touch the audience by audio-visual means. The film takes place across a series of Parisian locations such as rooftops, streets, a fairground, and the countryside, and plays mischievously with the spectator's expectations as well as their moral codes: a number of shots turn into actual shots directed at the viewer executed by a canon or a rifle, while a boxing glove directs a punch at the audience; the film includes a close-up from below on a dancer in a tutu who is later revealed to be a bearded man; a funeral hearse is drawn by a camel; the funeral procession begins in slow motion and turns into a chase. In the first half of the film, the fast editing between seemingly unrelated shots created a sense of dissolution, while the second part emphasizes perpetual motion. In the 1920s this sort of cinematic composition would have suggested freedom—creatively, socially, and politically. *Entr'acte* was arguably a new vista of what an image could do and what it would consist of in cinematic terms. Conceived in the context of a ballet performance, *Entr'acte* combined images much like a choreographer would have composed moving bodies, relying on visibility and rhythm to create an experience for the audience.

This interest in rethinking movement and time was not confined to film, but occurred simultaneously in dance-based practices of the time. In her review of dance of the early twentieth century, Erin Brannigan argues that dance as cultural endeavor and commentator on a technologically advancing society would have been a force that anticipated cinema's dissolution of forms.⁵⁷ A wider exchange of ideas and cross-fertilization between dance and film would also have informed a work such as *Entr'acte*, which was more "open" than what was otherwise seen on screen at the time. In fact, just a few years prior to making *Entr'acte*, Clair had acted in an avant-garde dance project, *Le Lys de la Vie*, effectively a choreography for film from 1921 directed by Loïe Fuller.

As Anne Cooper Albright argues in her book on Fuller, Clair's own film and rhythmic composition in *Entr'acte* can be regarded as part of the legacy of Fuller's experiments with movement and light.⁵⁸ Loïe Fuller, and René Clair, together with Isadora Duncan, Man Ray, Duchamp, and others, must be considered the pioneers of what we now call screendance. They form a timeline for the first half of the twentieth century that leads eventually to



René Clair in the role of the prince, in *Le Lys de la Vie* (1921). Dir. Loïe Fuller.

Images: permission of the Cinématèque de la Danse (CND), Paris.



the work of Maya Deren. The timeline traces a shared concern with non-linguistic material which addresses an embodied spectator and works through sensation and visual logic.

Deleuze only commented on very few films of the 1920s avant-garde and never referred to later experimental films such as Deren's, but he made a number of poignant comments on *Entr'acte* which can be used to build a Deleuzian reading of Deren's work. For example, identifying different kinds of time-images, Deleuze argues that European cinema was generally interested in an "automatic subjectivity," an exploration of phenomena such as hypnosis, hallucination, nightmare, and dreams.⁵⁹ According to Deleuze, Clair's *Entr'acte* is an example of this kind of work and consists of "unstable [sets] of floating memories, images of a past in general which move past at dizzying speed, as if time were achieving a profound freedom... Dissolves and superimpositions arrive with a vengeance."⁶⁰ Deleuze describes these images as "malleable sheets of the past," which are part of a circularity in which each image is significant only as part of a chain of images.⁶¹ In Clair's *Entr'acte*, each image becomes "actualized" through the following image, which, according to Deleuze, "itself plays the role of virtual image being actualized in a third, and so on to infinity."⁶² In other words, individual images do not conserve their status or significance and their task is to give way to the next image.

This analysis can be used to describe a dynamic that is at work in Deren's films. The concept of a dream image or "the diffuse condition of a dust of actual sensation," and the "perpetual unhinging which 'looks like' dream, but [takes place] between objects that remain concrete" sounds like *Meshes of the Afternoon* with its sequences of images in which one gives way to the next.⁶³ The party scene in *Ritual in Transfigured Time* has the quality of one image giving way to the next, enforced by the actual gestures and looks, which underline this ongoing flow across images. *At Land* also "looks like" a dream, due to the imaginary use of space and time in the film, whilst not containing the narrative one would expect in a classic dream, and I will return to this film further below. A Deleuzian reading of Deren's work speaks to the visuality of her practice and reads it through the actual film form, rather than through other frames of reference. This is worth considering given that Deren argued time and again against the interpretation of her films and those of her contemporaries through, for example, an exploration of the artist's biography or a Freudian supposition of a symbolic value of objects. Deren therefore dismissed any association of her work with the symbolic iconography and methodologies of surrealist work. The association made here between her work and *Entr'acte* is not to be confused with discourses that invoke surrealist practices; *Entr'acte* was not a surrealist project, despite its date of production, and Deleuze's reading of *Entr'acte* further confirms a very different artistic framework. Arguing against many of the ubiquitous critical discourses, Deren writes in *New Directions in Film Art*: "Unless there is a very good reason why an artist would substitute one thing for another, it might be good to believe that the thing you see, or read, is exactly the thing the artist has intended."⁶⁴

Deren may have used different terms in her writing compared to those deployed by Deleuze, but the intentions that come across in the writing, as well as in the actual work, are often very close. Deren's work anticipates a Deleuzian insistence on the internal relations within an image and a reading of the image through affect. A depersonalization and stylization of gesture in a film like *Ritual in Transfigured Time* compares in visual dynamic and purpose to, for example, the use of color in Agnes Varda's films *La Pointe Courte* and *Le Bonheur*, where a combination of black and white or a complementary use of colors

affects and absorbs characters and objects.⁶⁵ This cinema of colors in Varda, Minelli, and Antonioni is what Deleuze terms the affection-image; it does not represent or refer to any particular thing, but constitutes a quality and an affective force. Taking the face as affective surface and as blueprint for what occurs more broadly within and across the image, Deleuze writes: "The affection-image, for its part, is abstracted from the spatio-temporal co-ordinates which would relate it to a state of things, and abstracts the face from the person to which it belongs in a state of things."⁶⁶ A process of abstraction is key to this visual operation, a process which is already evident in Deren's screen choreographies through her treatment of movement and of the moving image.

In her endeavor to advance film as an art form, Deren not only needed to theorize a new aesthetics, but also to educate her audiences and critics how to see these films. In *Anagram*, Deren addresses the problem of viewing habits, writing that audiences might well expect to understand film in the way they understand theatre: "It would be impossible to understand or appreciate a filmic film if we brought to it all the critical and visual habits which we may have developed, to advantage, in reference to the other art forms."⁶⁷ In addition, she argues, film may appear familiar given that it looks more or less like the world we know. To address viewing habits cinema needed to disrupt this pattern and initiate other modes of affection. Disruptions can, for example, be instigated through a failure of recognition, or a disturbance of memory, a viewing experience which, according to Deleuze, is proper to the pure optical-sound image. Deleuze draws on Bergson in his reflection on the significance of failure, arguing that "attentive recognition informs us to a much greater degree when it fails than when it succeeds."⁶⁸ Although Deren does not talk about invoking the failure of recognition one could claim that her films break with the logic of time, space, and action in a way that implicates the viewer in an unfamiliar experience. The work demands of the viewer to let go of expected frames of reference and parameters. Offering a reading of one of her own films, Deren writes:

At Land strives for the elimination of literary-dramatic lines and tries to discover, instead, a purely cinematic coherence and integrity. It presents a relativistic universe—one in which the locations change constantly and distances are contracted or extended; in which the individual goes towards something only to discover upon her arrival that it is now something entirely different; and in which the problem of that individual, as the sole continuous element, is to relate herself to a fluid, apparently incoherent universe. It is in a sense a mythological voyage of the twentieth century.⁶⁹

An experience of apparent incoherence may successfully frustrate attempts to relate what is on screen to what is known and familiar. An unexpected flow of images would form an alternative poetics of sensation according to a cinematic coherence, whereby strategies such as an ambivalent use of space and time form a continuity that is neither here nor there, running neither forwards nor backwards.

It is possible to read a film like *At Land* through Deleuze's time-image as demonstrated here, but this might be taking Deren's ideas further than she had envisaged herself. The description of the film as mythological voyage within the same passage suggests a metaphorical framework that correlates the film with a quest of some sort and which relates to Deren's wider interests in ritual, magic, and topics like the nature of change. Alison Butler

also notes a tension in *At Land* between a somewhat “classic quest-narrative” and a more abstracted use of space and time, pointing out how a single moving body provides an overarching continuity across the film’s duration, effectively constituting a return towards classic narrative film structures within Deren’s body of work.⁷⁰ Butler also comments on this ambivalence with regards to *Meshes*, arguing that the film allows for a Deleuzian reading of some of its elements even though the protagonist carries a more conventional, dramatic function. She argues that, “In Deleuzian terms, the coexistence of ‘impossible’ temporalities in *Meshes* unleashes the ‘powers of the false’ and shifts the film into the regime of the time-image.”⁷¹ The “powers of the false” is a Deleuzian term for the cinematographic power to create in a way that is neither true nor false, but liberated from chronologies and able to create its own logic.⁷² This compares with Deren’s interest in the movie camera as instrument for the creation of time, and as a means to visualize intensities. Deren, however, is not categorical in her approach and cinematic logic, sometimes foregrounding the body as physical presence and continuity, and sometimes embracing the metaphorical—as, for example, in the doubling of Rita Christiani and Maya Deren in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, whereby the different actresses appear to stand for woman as such. One could cite numerous other examples of metaphorical configurations in Deren’s work such as in *Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), where a metaphor is created through an alliance between the turning head of the dancer, Talley Beatty, and a sculptural head of the Bodhisattva figure behind him. The metaphorical tenor of *Study* and Deren’s other films is discussed in detail by Sarah Keller in an essay published elsewhere in this issue of the *International Journal of Screendance*. Referencing earlier writing on Deren by P. Adams Sitney, Keller reads much of Deren’s work in metaphorical terms, which makes sense of the cinematic ideas but shifts Deren back into a literary-poetic tradition.⁷³ By comparison, Deleuze rejects metaphorical readings of, for example, hallucinatory films and dreams such as *Entr’acte*, writing: “These are not metaphors, but a becoming which can by right continue to infinity.”⁷⁴ As discussed earlier, metaphors tend to combine and mobilize both visual repertoires and verbal concepts, thereby functioning rather differently from the purely visual logic that Deleuze advocates with the notion of the time-image. Deren’s work appears to hover somewhere between a poetic literary tradition and a new cinematic logic, using a metaphorical approach but pushing it to explore what a new medium could do for a new age and relativistic universe. Techniques such as depersonalization and stylization demonstrate her intention to produce abstractions and visual intensities, disassociating herself from the logic of narrative cinema; films such as *At Land*, however, do not go as far as absorbing the character into the image.

Erin Brannigan is concerned with, and tries to dispel, the supposed polarity that Deren is said to have instituted with her two different modes of filmic form.⁷⁵ However, Brannigan’s own reading of *Entr’acte*, in which she only considers the short interludes of the ballerina as the vertical moments within an otherwise horizontal film, enacts a polarity that appears to go against Deren’s own intentions. While the scene with the ballerina literally inserts verticality through the camera angle and the performed movement, thereby disrupting a flow of images, Brannigan’s reading does not seem to do justice to the complexity of the vertical as invoked by Deren.⁷⁶ Instead, it is possible to attribute large parts of *Entr’acte* to vertical film structure, in line with Deleuze’s reading of *Entr’acte* in the context of his debate on the time-image. At least the whole of the first part could be considered as an extended vertical

film form. Given also the interplay between a theory and the material we assign to it this more generous reading of *Entr'acte* produces a more generous conception of vertical film form that, I would argue, is in line with Deren's own concerns, ambitions, and explorations. The second part of *Entr'acte*, with its vertiginous race through Parisian streets and dynamic camera angles, is perhaps more ambivalent as to its place within this debate. Clair's own writing points to an association with the visual logic of kinesthetic cinema. Clair was fascinated by the early chase films of Mack Sennet and expressly "wanted to restore film to what it was at the outset."⁷⁷ The second part of *Entr'acte* could therefore be regarded as a homage to the earlier chase films that used the moving image to touch the spectator through visual means, akin to vertical film form. However, the chase could be considered as a relatively coherent montage of images into a dramatic whole, particularly from today's point of view when audiences are very much accustomed to fast paced sequences and cinematic rides through different kinds of spaces. The montage style of editing of the chase could therefore identify the second part as horizontal film form. What *Entr'acte* also demonstrates is that the vertical and the horizontal mode are not sharply delineated and allow room for interpretation. As Butler argues, the same applies to Deleuze's movement-image and time-image in that the differences are not absolute and constitute "interpenetrating tendencies."⁷⁸

This essay has discussed some facets of Deren's and Deleuze's terminologies to ascertain more precisely what the similarities and the differences are between the two. It is apparent that there is a common ground in Bergson's theorization of time and space as well as a shared interest in a radical film form that functions according to its own logic and that does not need a recourse to language. On the other hand, in working with the metaphorical, Deren's own work does not quite let go of linguistic traditions, and her theorization struggles to find an equally new language to match what she is exploring visually in her films. Nevertheless, Deren's writing predates Deleuze's publications on cinema by over thirty years and her films anticipated many subsequent developments. In order to determine more precisely the role that Deren played in the development of experimental film form, one could use the notion of the "recurrence" to say something about the dynamics at play in this timeline. I am drawing here on an argument at the beginning of *Cinema 2* where Deleuze writes: "It is never at the beginning that something new, a new art, is able to reveal its essence; what it was from the outset it can reveal only after a detour in its evolution."⁷⁹ Deleuze writes this with reference to early American and European cinema at the turn of the nineteenth century and the following couple of decades. As he argues, a possibility of pure movement had been noted at the outset of moving image technologies but filmmakers lost track of this discovery in the turn to theatricality. Furthermore, early cinema developed in different directions at the same time and there was no overarching sense of a cinematic specificity. However, during the 1920s a new interest in pure movement and the actual image became evident within avant-garde projects, as discussed above, and a cinematic specificity was established in the '40s and onwards. It could be argued that Deleuze's hypothesis of a detour in the evolution of a new art form such as film can also be applied to the development of film theory, and explain potential delays in the formation and recognition of new ideas and concepts. Accordingly, his own theory of the movement-image and the time-image could be regarded as a deferred realization of the potential of Maya Deren's horizontal and vertical film form and of its particular visual logic. It will be fitting then to

end this discussion with Deren's own words, which encapsulate the marvelous promise of cinema as well as the seismic shift from language to image that she dared to undertake:

It was like finally finding the glove that fits. When I was writing poetry, I had, constantly to transcribe my essentially visual images—always movements, incidents, events—into verbal form. In motion picture, I no longer had to do translate. Fortunately, this is the way my mind works, and I could move directly from my imagination onto film.⁸⁰

Notes

1. Deren, "New Directions in Film Art," 207.
2. Jackson, "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren," 60.
3. Harmer, *Victory in Limbo*, 165.
4. Jackson, "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren," 60, and Maya Deren, *Anagram*, 25.
5. Harmer, *Victory in Limbo*, 166.
6. Deren, *Anagram*, 17, 24, 52.
7. Carroll, "Visual Metaphor," 189–218.
8. *Ibid.*, 204.
9. *Ibid.*, 206.
10. Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," 632. Michelson also explores this subject in her essay "Poetics and Savage Thought," in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, 26. Again she maps the duality of linguistic structure onto film, interpreting Deren's visual poetics as a metaphor in linguistic terms.
11. Michelson, "Poetics and Savage Thought," 22.
12. Deren, "Magic is New," 205.
13. *Ibid.*, 205.
14. For an extensive discussion of the politics involved in establishing a new art form see Jonathan Walley, "Identity Crisis," 23–50.
15. Deren, *Anagram*, 48.
16. *Ibid.*, 48.
17. Jackson, "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren," 64.
18. Deren, *Anagram*, 51.
19. *Ibid.*, 24, 51.
20. Brannigan, *DanceFilm*, 113.
21. *Ibid.*, 115.
22. *Ibid.*, 114.
23. Deren, "Creative Cutting," 618, 619.
24. Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 120.
25. "Poetry and The Film," 173.
26. *Ibid.*, 173, 174.
27. *Ibid.*, 174.
28. Miller, "Poetry and the Film," 186.
29. Brannigan, *DanceFilm*, 107, 108.
30. *Ibid.*, 185.
31. Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 221.
32. *Ibid.*, 221.
33. *Ibid.*, 220.
34. *Ibid.*, 219.
35. Jackson, "The Modernist Poetics of Maya Deren," 66.
36. *Ibid.*

37. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 55.

38. *Ibid.*, 25. See also an interview with David Putnam, the British film producer, who argues that early film escaped language because it was silent. For his discussion of early film see Bragg, *The Value of Culture*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01pmg02>.

39. Deren, *Anagram*, 39.

40. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 26.

41. *Ibid.*, 26.

42. *Ibid.*, 27–29.

43. *Ibid.*, 20.

44. *Ibid.*, 20.

45. *Ibid.*, 21.

46. Deren, *Anagram*, 40.

47. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 22.

48. *Ibid.*, 22.

49. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 118.

50. *Ibid.*, 118.

51. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 20.

52. As Deleuze points out, the possibility of film to display actual movement did not correspond to the current remit of Art, “since Art seemed to uphold the claims of a higher synthesis of movement, and to remain linked to the poses and forms that science had rejected” (*Cinema 1*, 6). Film, it seemed, was too realistic, too closely mirroring the flux of the everyday to be considered Art in the traditional sense. Some early film clips by the Lumière brothers and later chase films by Mack Sennett had shown the capacity of cinema to be pure movement, but these films were considered amusement for the proletariat akin to fairground rides and roller coasters, not more.

53. As Malcom Turvey explains in his discussion of avant-garde films, the anarchistic and nihilistic tone was directed against the rationalism of an Enlightenment-style modernity, which appeared to be nothing but a veneer for a derailed society. This notion of a “derailed society” serves not only as metaphor for a historical condition but also suggests a visuality and dynamic which characterizes projects such as *Entr’acte*. See “DADA, Entr’acte and Paris Qui Dort,” 78, 79.

54. Townsend, “The Last Hope of Intuition,” 45.

55. *Ibid.*, 45.

56. Clair, *Reflections on Cinema*, 61.

57. Brannigan, 21.

58. Cooper Albright, *Traces of Light*, 200.

59. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 55.

60. *Ibid.*, 55.

61. *Ibid.*, 56. The notion of the dream here is confusing; we conventionally use “dream” in a sense of a dreamy narrative or in terms of a surrealist representation of the unconscious. Malcom Turvey uses the notion of dream in his essay on *Entr’acte* in this narrative sense and therefore argues that *Entr’acte* is not a dream because it lacks narratives, agents, and goals. He therefore takes issue with Deleuze, but this appears to be caused by a different understanding of the notion of dream. It could be argued that Deleuzian notion of dream describes a hallucinatory and disjunctive episode, which lacks precisely the coherence that Turvey associates with dream.

62. *Ibid.*, 56.

63. *Ibid.*, 56, 58.

64. Deren, “New Directions in Film Art,” 209.

65. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 118.

66. *Ibid.*, 97.

67. Deren, *Anagram*, 42.

68. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 54.

69. Deren, “Magic is New,” 205.

70. Butler, “Motor-driven Metaphysics,” 10, 11.

71. *Ibid.*, 9.

72. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 143, 145.

73. See Sarah Keller, "Pas de deux for Dancer and Camera," this issue.
74. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 57.
75. Brannigan, 106, 107.
76. *Ibid.*, 109.
77. Clair, *Reflections on Cinema*, 60.
78. Butler, "Motor-driven metaphysics," 6.
79. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 43.
80. "From Poetry to Film," *The Legend of Maya Deren*, 57

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Media

At Land (1944). Dir. Maya Deren. 15:00 min., 16mm. USA.

A Study In Choreography For Camera (1945). Dir. Maya Deren. 2:00 min. USA.

Entr'acte (1924). Dir. René Clair. 22:00 min. France.

Image in the Snow (1952). Dir. Willard Maas. 29:00 min. US.

Le Bonheur (1965). Dir. Agnes Varda. 94:00 min. France.

Le Lys De La Vie (1921). Dir. Loïe Fuller. 15:00 min., France.

La Pointe Courte (1954). Dir. Agnes Varda. 86:00 min. France.

Meshes Of The Afternoon (1943). Dir. Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. 14:00 min., 16mm. Music by Teiji Ito added 1959.

Ritual in Transfigured Time (1946). Dir. Maya Deren. 14:00 min. USA.

Rumi (1999). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 28:00 min., 16 mm and video. Argentina.

Un Chien Andalou (1929). Dir. Luis Buñuel. 17:00 min. France.