
Maya Deren: The Magical Woman as Filmmaker

By Judith Noble

Maya Deren (1917-1961) is a key figure in the development of avant-garde cinema. Her series of short films made between 1942 and 1946 - *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1942), *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) - form a trilogy that articulates the initiatory journey of a female protagonist through inner imaginal worlds of dream and magic, in conflict with the conventions of human society and in trance and ritual contexts. Deren cast herself as the protagonist in each of these films. This allowed her to construct for herself a persona of "artist-magician", both in the films and in her extensive body of critical writing on film. By 1946, this persona had become specifically gendered, and Deren began to claim the role of witch. This aspect of Deren's work would have a profound influence on the generation of feminist artist-filmmakers working in the 1970s and 1980s, and on audiences who discovered her work at that time.

When Deren began making films in 1942 she had a thorough knowledge of magic and the occult. Her friends and former partners remarked on her life-long interest in magic: "You could always feel her ideas about magic and ceremony"[\[1\]](#); "Maya's sense of her role in magic was a sacred one".[\[2\]](#)

This interest in magic and its practice would eventually find full expression in Deren's commitment to the practice of Voudoun, which began with an intense initiatory experience during a visit to Haiti in 1947 and subsequently became central to her life and thought.[\[3\]](#) However, all her key films were made before her initiation into Voudoun, and all demonstrate a rather different interest in magic and the occult, drawn from what is termed the Western Magical tradition.[\[4\]](#)

Deren's first documented encounter with a practitioner of magic came in 1939, when she acted as researcher and secretary for author William Seabrook (1884 - 1945) on his book *Witchcraft - Its Power in the World Today* (1940), which would have given her a wide-ranging knowledge of different witchcraft and magical traditions. Seabrook wrote sensationalist mass-market books on the occult and had worked with high-profile occultist Aleister Crowley (1875 - 1947) before becoming involved with Surrealism in Paris and contributing articles to Georges Bataille's periodical, *Documents* (1929 - 1931).[\[5\]](#)

Deren's experience with Seabrook ended bizarrely when he unsuccessfully tried to make her participate in a series of sadomasochistic sexual rituals at his home, disguised as experiments in extra-sensory perception. She later described how these centred on the use of a "witch's cradle", a device intended to induce trance and visions, which Deren would later reference in her unfinished film of the same name. [\[6\]](#),[\[7\]](#)

In 1942 Deren married Czech émigré filmmaker Sasha Hammid (1907 – 2004; born Alexander Hackenschmiedt) in California where they made her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, together. They returned to New York later that year and became closely involved with the Surrealist artists who had fled the war in Europe. Their friends included artists Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Seligmann, Isamo Noguchi and Dorothea Tanning (who would perform in one of Deren's films), gallerist Peggy Guggenheim, writers Anais Nin, Parker Tyler and Gore Vidal, and composer John Cage. Deren always denied that her films were "Surrealist"[\[8\]](#) but the influence of Surrealist thinking on how she conceptualised the role of the artist, and especially on the idea of the "artist-magician, is very apparent. The Surrealist thinker Andre Breton's call for the "Occultation of surrealism" [\[9\]](#) had resulted in an exploration of occult and magical techniques by artists including Duchamp and Ernst, both of whom explored alchemy[\[10\]](#), and Seligmann, for whom magic became the central element in his work and who went on to author a major scholarly study of the history of magic.[\[11\]](#) I have also argued elsewhere that it was Deren's contact with the surrealists that gave her the confidence to express her occult ideas in her films.[\[12\]](#)

Meshes was shown informally to friends in the surrealist circle and the Greenwich Village arts scene where it was widely perceived as a new kind of filmmaking, with its oneiric flow of associative images which disrupted the conventions of narrative cinema.

Deren went on to make *Witch's Cradle* in 1943. It was shot in Peggy Guggenheim's 'Art of This Century Gallery' and featured a number of surrealist artworks and appearances by artists Marcel Duchamp and Ann Clark Matta. In this film Deren sought to express her ideas about magic and the occult. As she stated:

I was concerned with the impression that surrealistic objects were, in a sense, the cabalistic symbols of the 20th century; for the surrealist artists, like the feudal magicians and witches, were motivated by a desire to deal with the real forces underlying events (the feudal evil spirits are similar to the modern sub-conscious drives) and to discard the validity of surface and apparent causation. The magicians were also concerned with the defiance of normal time (mainly projection into the past and divination of

the future) and with normal space (disappearance one place and appearance another, or the familiar broomstick)... and it seemed to me that the camera was peculiarly suited to delineate this form of magic.[\[13\]](#)

Witch's Cradle was never finished, although there is evidence that Deren screened a version of it several times. She wrote what appears to be an extensive draft programme note for it and referred to it in her theoretical writings. *Witch's Cradle* is the clearest exposition of Deren's ideas about magic and the occult.

At Land followed in 1944 and the third part of the "trilogy", *Ritual In Transfigured Time*, in 1946. In each of these films Deren plays the protagonist, although in *Ritual* the role is shared by Deren and dancer Rita Christiani. Viewed together, these three films depict the initiatory journey of a magical woman who grows more powerful across the trilogy. Each film concludes with the rejection of or escape from, a male lover and a resolution in which the 'magical woman' persona becomes more developed and increasingly gendered. Deren's use of occult and magical ideas and imagery also increases with each film. Throughout these films Deren develops a radical revision of conventional cinematic language in which the physical and temporal properties of the film medium itself are foregrounded and used to convey occult meaning.

Meshes consists of a series of five carefully structured sequences that portray the journey of the protagonist (Deren) through her own inner dream world. Each sequence reveals more detail of this world and the protagonist's uneasy relationship with a male lover. An androgynous figure with a mirror for a face is glimpsed briefly. In the final sequence the male lover, who represents order and the everyday world, finds the protagonist destroyed in the waking world by her dream. Here we see the beginnings of the magical woman or "artist-magician" persona which Deren goes on to develop in her subsequent films.



Meshes of the Afternoon (Maya Deren, 1942)

At Land appears to begin where *Meshes* left off. The protagonist, here identified with the elemental world of nature, is washed up from the sea.

A naïve outsider in human society, she struggles to understand its rules and conventions and ultimately escapes from it, running into the far distance along the liminal space of a tideline, and regaining her independent identity, symbolised by a lost chess piece. Chess is a central trope here. Deren is known to have played chess with Duchamp and she shared the surrealists' fascination with the game. The protagonist of *At Land* can be identified with the figure of the Queen/ Bride which is present in the work of both Ernst and Duchamp.[\[14\]](#) Whereas in *Meshes* the protagonist is rather passive and at the mercy of her own dream, in *At Land* she is a powerful magical figure who is able to control each of the situations she finds herself in.



At Land (Maya Deren, 1944)

At Land (Maya Deren, 1944)

In *At Land*, and in *Meshes* also, domestic interiors signify the world of human society in which the protagonist is contained and trapped, but here there is also an exterior world of landscape and seashore, in which she becomes empowered and where she acts with confidence and certainty. When challenged by the “human” world she begins to move like a cat and at one point we see her holding a cat in her arms. The cat is traditionally associated with witchcraft, and it is from the realm of animals and nature that the protagonist draws her power to act. There are references to the Tarot card of The Moon, which carries the occult meaning of the journey of the initiate through all stages of evolution.

In a sequence redolent with sexual ambiguity, Deren meets two women playing chess on the seashore. She seems to be charming them; working

a spell on them as she strokes their air and laughs with them and they let her steal back her lost chess piece and escape. In the final image she runs into infinity, arms raised triumphantly above her head in a pose used in many cultures to signify a goddess or priestess, alone and powerful.

In *Ritual in Transfigured Time* the magical woman persona is at its most developed and also its most gendered; the “artist-magician” has now become the specifically female “widow-bride”. In this film Deren also begins to use visual references to Voudoun for the first time. She had further developed the concept of ritual in her work: “Thus the elements of the whole derive their meaning from a pattern which they did not themselves consciously create; just as a ritual... fuses all individual elements into a transcendental tribal power toward the achievement of some extraordinary grace”.[\[15\]](#)

The film is structured around the classical myth of the Three Fates who spin, measure and cut the thread of each human life.[\[16\]](#) The protagonist, here played by both Deren and Rita Christiani, encounters the Fates winding wool (this image also has traditional associations with witchcraft) and is then ushered across a liminal threshold by a guardian. Dressed in a costume which is a combination of a nun’s habit and the dress of a Voudoun initiate, she finds herself in a crowded party, which becomes a ritualised courtship dance, replete with references to the alchemical trope of the sacred marriage. The protagonist flees from this ritual and ultimately escapes and runs into the sea. As she sinks beneath the water smiling, the film is seen in negative, so that the black widow costume becomes a bridal gown. Deren described this as a “...reversal into life”.[\[17\]](#) In *Ritual*, the protagonist emphatically rejects the resolution offered by the male lover, preferring to be the lone, powerful magical woman.



It was at this point that the magical persona that Deren had created for herself became avowedly gendered. She began to identify herself with witches and with the myth of Lilith, noting that “Lilith has all the independence attributes of the witch,” and that:

For to see is not simply to see a woman, but it is to see a deviant order *which you may recognize*, [Deren’s italics] since something of the blood of Lilith is in everyone, and you may be ‘bewitched’ by the vision of the fact that it [the race of Lilith] does survive...and this triumphant recognition may induce you, if you carry enough of Lilith’s blood in you, to abandon the normal order and partake of the deviant order when you see that it can sustain life in the person of the surviving deviant...This is why, essentially, Lilith and witches are thought of rather in catalyst terms, for their sheer existence and presence is effective in the above sense. Witches do not make signals in terms of the codified signs of the normal; they make signs out of the nature of their own order, and these signs are recognized by potential witches, and that recognition (which escapes the normal) seems a mysterious thing...[\[18\]](#)

For some feminist artists working in the 1970s and 1980s, myself amongst them, the presence of the artist in the work was an essential element in work which explored notions of selfhood and femininity.[\[19\]](#) It could also be perceived, like Deren’s work, as an iteration of the initiatory journey of the artist.

In 1983 Felicity Sparrow and I developed a project to bring Deren’s films back into distribution in the UK. With support from the South West Arts Association and the Arts Council of Great Britain, new film prints were made and a touring programme with a short publication created. I toured with this programme and introduced Deren’s work at venues throughout England, Wales and Scotland for the next fifteen years.[\[20\]](#) What struck me about the audiences for this programme was that they were almost always new to experimental film and were predominantly women. These screenings were held at the height of the 1980s Peace Movement, and during the period of the Women’s Peace Camp at Greenham Common. This was also a time when interest in Goddess Spirituality was growing. A significant number of screenings were organised by women’s groups; a first for an Arts Council programme. These audiences were unconcerned that they were watching avant-garde work which bore little relation to the mainstream narrative structures they were used to. The films were received very positively; on occasion spontaneous applause would break out at key moments. Time and again when I asked these women what they liked about the films, they said it was the “story”, and described

them to me as narratives about a magical woman or “witch”, and that these were films made for women and outside of patriarchal norms. They were both acknowledging Deren as a proto-feminist and recognising and celebrating her presence in her own films as a magical woman.

Notes

[1] Anne Clark Matta interviewed in VeVe A.Clark, Millicent Hodson and Catrina Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren, Vol. One Part 2* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1989), 132.

[2] Parker Tyler, “Letter to Teiji Ito,” *Filmwise*,no.2 (1963): 20

[3] Maya Deren, *The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), For a perceptive account of Deren’s practice of Voudoun in later life see, Stan Brakhage, *Film At Wit’s End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (Kingston: McPherson and Co, 1989), 100-112.

[4] A complex corpus of occult knowledge and practices drawn from a range of classical, medieval and renaissance origins. For a useful overview see Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism - A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004)

[5] *Documents* was a dissident Surrealist publication edited by Batailles, which covered a wide range of subjects including ethnography, sociology and archaeology and included visual contributions from artists including Andre Masson and Joan Miro. Its explicit and often violent content consistently challenged Bretonian surrealism which it considered to be too mainstream. See: Dawn Ades, Simon Baker (eds), *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Batailles and DOCUMENTS* (London: Hayward Gallery and MIT Press, 2006).

[6] Clark et al, *The Legend of Maya Deren, Vol. 1, Part 1*, 403-414.

[7] For a more detailed discussion of Deren’s encounter with Seabrook, see: Noble, Judith, “The Magic of Time and Space - Occultism in the Films of Maya Deren” in *Abraxas Special Issue no. 1 Charming Intentions - Select Papers from the University of Cambridge Conference* (Summer 2013), 116.

[8] See, in particular. Maya Deren, “Note to director of film screening” (c.1946) reprinted in Clark et al, Vol. 1, Part 2, 402, and Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (New York: Alicat, 1946), 61-68. The difference between Surrealism and Deren’s own practice is a central

theme of *Anagram*.

[9] In the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929), Breton demanded “THE PROFOUND, THE VERITABLE OCCULTATION OF SURREALISM” and championed the movement’s interest in magic, occultism and heterodox spiritualities. See Breton, Andre. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. For a detailed discussion of this point see Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou and Daniel Zamani, eds, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics – In Search of the Marvellous* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-5.

[10] See: ME Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

[11] Kurt Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic: A History of Magic in the Western World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948).

[12] See Noble, Judith, “Clear Dreaming – Maya Deren, Surrealism and Magic” in Bauduin, Ferentinou and Zamani, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*, 210 -226.

[13] Maya Deren, *Programme Note for Witch’s Cradle* (New York, privately printed programme note, author’s collection, undated, 1943?).

[14] See ME Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy*.

[15] Maya Deren, *Films in the Classicist Tradition*. (New York, privately printed publicity leaflet, author’s collection, undated, 1947?).

[16] Clotho spins, Lachesis measures, and Atropos cuts the thread.

[17] Clark et al. Vol.1, Part 2, 429.

[18] See, for example, *About Time – Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists* (London: ICA exhibition catalogue, 1980). See also, Judith Higginbottom *Water Into Wine* (slide tape installation, 1980) and works by Catherine Elwes, Annabel Nicolson and Carolee Schneeman.

[19] *Water Into Wine* (1980, Judith Noble)

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Filmography

Meshes of the Afternoon (1942, Maya Deren)

Witch's Cradle (1943, unfinished, Maya Deren)

At Land (1944, Maya Deren)

Ritual In Transfigured Time (1946, Maya Deren).

Water Into Wine (1980, Judith Noble)

About the Author

Judith Noble is Head of Academic Research at Plymouth College of Art and co-founder of the Black Mirror Research Network which publishes on contemporary and modernist art and the occult and esoteric. She organised the symposium *Seeking The Marvellous: Ithell Colquhoun, British Women and Surrealism* (Plymouth 2018) and co-organised of the Cambridge interdisciplinary conference: *Visions of Enchantment* (2014). Her research centres on avant-garde film in the UK and US (1940-80) with specific emphasis on the work of Maya Deren and women film makers, on surrealism and film, and on film, the esoteric and the occult. Her most recent publication (co- edited with Daniel Zamani) is *Visions of Enchantment: Selected Papers from the Cambridge Conference* (Fulgur, March 2019) and other recent publications have included chapters on Deren, Kenneth Anger and Derek Jarman (a full list is available on request). Judith continues to practice as a film maker and artist. Her films are distributed by Cinenova.