

**Elinor Pearson**  
**London Consortium**

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### **Mute Movement: Score and Silence in the work of Maya Deren**

In her text 'An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film', Maya Deren acknowledges the potential for the creative use of sound in film. 'Anagram' was written in 1946, 2 years before the making of 'Meditation on Violence', the film that was for Deren an innovation in terms of the use of sound and score. She proposes that sound, approached with an attitude of exploration and brought to the techniques of recording, mixing and amplifying, might, and I quote, "create a wealth of original film-sound elements". In the concluding paragraphs of 'Anagram', Deren imagines herself, her practice in filmmaking, the history of art and even the history of man teetering upon the threshold of unexplored technological, philosophical and perceptual possibilities. Deren had a tendency to make such massive proclamations in her persuasive rhetoric on the nature of 'film as art form'; essentially she was determined to emphasise the breadth of possibility she envisioned in the dynamic integration of visual imagination and advancing technologies in film production. Film sound, mentioned in parenthesis after film time and film space, was for Deren a potential contributory element in what she referred to as the "special integrated complex" of film form. And this concept of film – form, fundamental to both Deren's aesthetic and analysis, was for her the product of, and I quote from 'Anagram' here, "a dynamic manipulation of the relationships" between these filmic elements. Sound had its place, hypothetically at least, until the making of 'Meditation on Violence' when a score of Haitian drums and Chinese flute was conceived of as a dynamic component of the dance of the film.

Only two of Deren's completed films were conceived of with music; 'Meditation on Violence' as I have mentioned, and 'The Very Eye of the Night', Deren's final film,

made between 1952 and 1955 and released in 1959. A score by Tiejū Ito was added, in 1959, to Deren's first film 'Meshes of the Afternoon' of 1943. In its inception 'Meshes' was made as a silent film: the weight of the dreaming girl's footsteps are visually emphasised, a key falls unheard down some steps, the record player plays silently. There is no indication in the film that we as spectators are to imagine the presence or effect of any sort of sound: it appears to be unnecessary in a film which sought to convey the experience of an individual's inner reality through the exploitation of cinematic techniques and the choreography of performed movement. Deren's concept of characterising the moving frame as not only the means of viewing action, but as the action viewed, is a significant concept in her works and is inaugurated here in 'Meshes'. The sequence in which Deren as the somnambulist protagonist attempts to climb a seemingly conspiratorial staircase was achieved simply with a hand-held camera tilting in the opposite direction to Deren's simulated fall against the wall, first to the right, then to the left. In absence of sound, the perceptual reality of this dreamlike scenario is ascribed to the moving frame, and to the quality of movement it transfers to the objects and figures captured within it. The visual relationship between the frame and the figure is uncompromised as the means by which this particular emotional experience is communicated to the spectator.

The soundtrack by Ito was composed for flute, voice, tone bells, drum, cello, sho (a Japanese free reed instrument), koto (a traditional Japanese stringed instrument) horns and acoustic guitar. And its addition significantly alters the dynamic of the film. The metronome-like quality of the drumbeat punctuates the dreamer's footsteps, and 'Meshes' is transformed into a sort of naïve music video wherein the beat and the protagonist's movements are synchronised. In her article on Deren for the 'Senses of Cinema' web site, Wendy Haslem identifies the rhythm of the soundtrack as significantly impacting upon the spectatorship of the film. It is the specific relation of movement, editing and the soundtrack's rhythm, she suggests, that produces the effect of a trance-film. It is important to remember that 'Meshes' was originally made as a silent film, and that the score was conceived of in *response to it* rather than *alongside it*. Paraphrasing Haslem, the repetitive structure emphasises the condemnation of the protagonist to this cyclical scenario. The drumbeat amplifies and accentuates the dreamer's repeated footsteps. The monotony of the ambient vocal accompanying the presence of the hooded figure resembles some sort of incantation. Haslem notes that the soundtrack also functions temporally, providing a continuous

rhythm to highlight the deliberate progress of the protagonist across the discontinuous spaces of the film. This is particularly effective and notable in the sequence featuring the protagonist's three 'selves' seated around the table, which culminates in the menacing rising up of the goggle-wearing girl from her seat followed by a series of close-ups of her feet striding first across sand, then pavement, then grass and then onto a rug. Deren intended this striding sequence to be a profound "symbolic statement" a metaphor for "the vast psychological differences which lie between people who may be in close physical proximity". However, she emphasises that such symbolism might be ascribed only to the unique capacity of film to creatively relate such disparate images in the act of editing. Ito's score provides a sort of continuous rhythmic space within which such a dislocate procession can take place.

What is so interesting about 'Meshes' is that it was conceived of as both silent, and with sound. And that sound was added after the completion of Deren's final film, 'The Very Eye of the Night', which was conceived of and created very much with a score in mind. In its silent inception, 'Meshes' conveys what Deren referred to as its perceptual 'reality' to the spectator only through the visible: and since she called for the exploration and exploitation of cinema as, above all else, a visual form this is hardly surprising. The addition of a soundtrack opens up a different perceptual dimension to the spectator: the, in Deren's words, "critical emotional experience" conveyed visually through movement and editing is now made manifest in the auditory. In the notes accompanying a screening presentation in 1960 entitled 'Chamber Films', Deren describes how she believed the understanding of the film was, in her opinion, impeded by a "cultural tendency towards personalised psychological interpretation". She disliked the film being labelled as "psychological" or "Freudian" and saw the addition of a score as a means of "offsetting such tendencies". She writes; "This music, with its dramatic intensity and its archaic austerity is not only extraordinarily pertinent to the film but, in its impersonal, mythological character, underscores and illuminates the original intent of the film itself". The soundtrack functioned to subvert popular received opinion of the film, and to somehow direct the spectator's attention to the 'mythological' as the film's impetus in meaning making.

In the sleeve notes of 'Music for Maya', a collection of film music by Tiejū Ito released by the Tzadik label, there is a transcript of an interview between Deren and Ito from

1953, a year after they first met and she asked him to create music for 'The Very Eye of the Night'. She asks Ito about the matter of creating scores for film and theatre and about the specific relation he envisaged between the music and the visual performance. Proceeding from traditional Japanese theatrical music forms, wherein, to quote Deren, music contributes its part to the total, Ito emphasises his concern to express through music the "feeling" of an image, that is to say, its invisible element. When Deren describes the score as bestowing its "impersonal, mythological" quality upon the film, we can consider the film in relation to one of the most fundamental metaphors in her filmic aesthetic – the depersonalised form of ritual.

Before her collaborations with Ito, and before the making of 'Meditation on Violence' where her use of sound in film was inaugurated, Deren celebrated the absence of sound in her works. She writes in a 1947 article about lack of funds and the amateur means at her disposal that presented her with limitations to be put to positive, creative use. As she puts it, she had a silent camera with no recourse to vocal explanations. She recalls an anecdote in which a young boy had attended a screening with his parents, and on overhearing them discuss the absence of sound and dialogue in what they had just seen, informed them with some finality "oh, these things never happen with sound!" Deren writes: "with that statement, he had reassured me that, in creating a film experience which was silent in its very nature, I had used the muteness of my camera as a positive factor rather than permit it to be "limitation" of a "lack" of sound." She characterised the absence of sound in those silent works as 'muteness', or, as she articulated in a lecture given in 1951 at the Cincinnati Museum of Art entitled 'New Directions in Film Art', as "the experience of the essence of silence". 'A Study in Choreography for Camera' proceeds, in part, from the kinship Deren perceived between the visual and the auditory. Both, she argued, constituted perceptual experiences which had nothing to do with descriptive narrative. Deren vehemently believed that in order to re-establish film as an art form it must be 'rescued' from the debasing dominance of Hollywood narrative cinema. Her call to ally filmmaking practice with the concerns of the time – based arts of dance, music and poetry constituted something of a conceptual rescue attempt. Much of her 'film as art form' rhetoric persuasively calls for such an alliance. Fundamentally a matter of time and of movement, film shares with those other art forms the capacity to incite certain modes of perceptual attention through temporal composition. Poetics became a sort of conceptual arch in her work wherein a certain approach to experience is expressed

and accomplished through rhythm and cadence. Deren wrote her masters thesis on the modern poets, and her absorption of the aesthetic of the Imagist conceit of, among others, Ezra Pound, is evident in her proclamations on the emotional and perceptual impact of visual rhythm in film. In 'An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film', she borrows from Pound's conception of the poetic image when she writes "A work of art is an emotional and intellectual complex whose logic is its whole form" (Pound, in the March 1913 journal 'Poetry', asserted "An Image is that which presents an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time")

The dynamic relationship between Talley Beatty's movement and Deren's editing is the impetus for the silent dance of 'A Study in Choreography for Camera'. The dance is very much of the camera; she describes it as 'film dance', 'choreography for camera' and as "a dance so related to camera and cutting that it cannot be performed as a unit anywhere but in this particular film". Dance is not just the subject of the film, but the vehicle upon which the film attains movement: in the sense that this dance belongs only to the visual, its silence somehow ensures an unrelenting focus on the notion that this dance is very much a product of visual, filmic manipulations. (It is worth noting, however, that later the film's name was changed to 'Pas de Deux' and that John Cage was approached to put together a piano score, although this was never realised)

What is so striking about 'A Study in Choreography for Camera' is the sense of visual rhythm Deren establishes. She employs the technique of cutting into action wherein the integrity of a trajectory of movement is maintained across seemingly unrelated locations. For example, Talley Beatty begins to lower his leg in the woods, only to appear to complete the movement in Deren's New York apartment on Morton Street. She wrote of the creative facility of the time potentialities of film, wherein two unrelated locations might be cut together on the strength of the rhythm of a movement. In Deren's words, "with a turn of a foot, he makes neighbours of distant places". She pays special attention to the creative possibilities of the manipulation of time and of movement in film in 'Study', and in this sense it can be understood as a visual elucidation of Deren's 'poetics'. In his text 'A History of Experimental Film and Video', A.L. Rees likens the structure of 'Study' to that of Haiku, and indeed the film does embody a certain economy of expression germane to the form. She talked and wrote about her own practice as a visual rendering of certain 'logics', and she

conceived of these 'logics' as fundamentally 'poetic' in essence. Deren's conception of a poetics of film, and of a filmic poetics, can be considered a sort of immanent organising principle within her work. Within this, the poem's capacity to, to quote Deren, "create visible or auditory form for something that is invisible" was among her most insistent conceptual impetuses. Embodying within the film's construction something of the composite logics of poetry invited a different kind of perceptual attention in the spectator. As she asserts in 'Anagram', the "relationships established through the composition of syntax, assonance, rhyme and other such methods" constitute these verbal logics. Poetry constituted a particular approach to experience for Deren, an approach characterised by the transcendental capabilities of the use of verbal structures and, to quote from 'Anagram', the complex created by "the inspired juxtaposition of a few words."

So, whilst 'Study' is silent, its silence is somehow characterised as analogous if not to sound then to the sense of the auditory, at least in poetic terms. The spectator is called to attend to the creative juxtaposition of spaces, and to film's capacity to conjure an almost magical integrity of movement across this juxtaposition. When Deren described her works as 'Chamber Films' in the presentation notes for that screening in 1960 she articulated the particular nature of the conceptual affiliation between music and film that she sought. Chamber music, to Deren's mind, is concerned with economy over elaboration, is abstract in structure rather than narrative, is lyric in character, and "is dependent upon the meticulous exploitation of the virtuosity of the selected instrument". Deren's instrument was the motion-picture camera, and her idiom visual, but nonetheless she intended those chamber music principles to be kept close in mind by the screening's spectators. Incidentally, the screening began with the playing of an audio piece entitled 'The Tape', with words by Deren and music by Ito. In the notes, she articulates something of her evolving interest in the creative possibilities of sound for furthering the conceptual concerns of her practice. She, rather grandly, proclaims, "In the tape two aspects, words and music, combine to produce a realer sense of the unity of poetic perception. They at once complement and extend each other's possibilities: the possibilities of man."

'A Study in Choreography for Camera' presents a dance where the quality of movement is to some degree mechanistic, the dance itself is made possible through

the agency of the camera and the screen. Its silence enables dance movement, both performed and mechanistic, to sing out as the film's unhindered impetus. In 'Ritual in Transfigured Time', made after 'Study' between 1945 and 1946, the quality of movement is described in more symbolic terms as the very means by which the meaning of the film is established. The film was a collaboration, with choreography by Frank Westbrook, and featuring performances by Anais Nin and Rita Christiani alongside Deren and Westbrook. In 'Study', Deren wanted to "remove the dancer from the static space of the theatre stage to one which was as mobile and volatile as himself", and in 'Ritual' she develops the concept that the camera is an active participant in dance further by extending the quality of dance based movement to non-dancing elements within film's frame. This is fundamental to her choreocinematic conceit; the quality of dance conferred upon the movement by the instruments of filmic manipulation, in Deren's words, "transcends the intentions and movements of the individual performers". And for this reason, Deren describes the film as 'ritual'.

The silence of 'Ritual in Transfigured Time' functions somehow audibly: she was clear in her intention that the film was to be projected at 24 frames per second, "sound speed" she called it, and it is to this film that the descriptions of "muteness" or "the essence of silence" are most pertinent. Deren adopts the party as a choreographic motif and observes, in an article published in Dance Magazine in 1946, that if "one were to remove from an actual party the long conversational pauses, there would be left mainly that constant moving pattern of smiling, social anxiety; each person seeking to reach someone at the other end of the room, or moving, tentatively, to meet someone new." The movements of the guests become increasingly more stylised thanks to slow motion and freeze frame, and the experience of this is rendered disorienting by the rapid repetition of sequences of movements. We see, at the beginning of the film, the character played by Deren unwinding yarn and mouthing silent liturgy at Christiani who remains still, watches but does not answer. The party guests converse in silence, in mute confusion: I imagine the scene is not taking place in absence of sound, but somehow just beneath it. The presence of dialogue is implied, but goes unheard, and is in any case subsumed under the amplification of movement and gesture. Lips move in slow motion so we imagine the dialogue, if we were suddenly able to hear it, would appear as discontinuous, jarring and confusing as the manner of the movement itself; similarly Deren's silent liturgy would be transformed into wordless mouth music thanks to the reversed presentation of this

yarn winding sequence. In her article on Deren entitled 'The Ethics of Form', Maureen Turim observes in this domestic ritual speech represented by the same rhythms as the arms that hold the skein. Turim writes: "the specificity of words, the instance of language, is indicated (lips move) but withheld (absent sound)." I think it is worth noting the differentiation in the nature of the implied sound between the intimate yet disquieting space established between Deren and Christiani, and the disorienting social space of the cocktail party.

Deren strove to filmically embody the form of ritual in this film. Use of slow motion and freeze frame emphasises and exaggerates the ritualised quality of the movements and gestures associated with social interaction. The film is resonant of ritual in form and construct, and also portrays a negotiation through some rituals of the everyday: domestic rituals connoted by the yarn winding, party going, and game playing. 'Meditation on Violence' was made in 1948, a year after Deren's first trip to Haiti to observe and document dance based possession ceremonies. The performer is engaged in a boxing ritual based on the flowing, rounded movement of the Wu Tang and the more aggressive Shao-Lin style. Deren describes 'Meditation' specifically as 'choreography for Camera' in Dance Magazine in 1948, and she comments on her intention to "recreate through filmic means - editing rhythms, camera attitudes and movements etc, - the sense and spirit of these forms." 'Meditation on Violence' was an innovation for Deren in terms of the use of score which comprised the recording of a Chinese flute and some original drum recordings made by Deren herself in Haiti. Where she had previously celebrated the absence of sound as a positive limitation, and characterised silence as a constituent element in film art form, 'Meditation' was conceived of with sound that functioned to compliment and extend the metaphysical content of the movement of the film. She considered the flute to embody "the sound itself of the lyric spirit", the drums in turn epitomised "the pulse of blood". In the question and answer session of that lecture given at the Cincinnati Museum, Deren is asked about the importance of sound in 'Meditation on Violence' since it was unnecessary in her previous works. She responded that she always conceived of the film as being with sound, and that the music was imagined to extend from the impulse of the movement: "sound is another manifestation of what goes on inside of the person" she said. The sound of Chinese flute is encountered immediately as the film begins, and it begins as if in the middle of some interminable refrain. Its repetitious,

seemingly continual phrase emphasises the loop effect Deren produces in reversing the film part of the way through: the movement is presented forward, then backwards, and its differentiation is almost imperceptible. With this looped continuity of movement, and of sound, Deren strove to represent the principle of eternity, the, in her words, "changingness of things". The movement of the Wu Tang form presented Deren with a subject capable of embodying such a concept both metaphysically and visually: the form of film, she considered, was able to mechanistically confer upon this movement some quality of its inherent metaphysical statement through the simple reversal of the footage. The sound lends the movement a degree of the theatrical, resonant of the infinite, non-climactic and un-resolute qualities Deren observed in oriental music and particularly Chinese theatre. What is interesting about the choreography of 'Meditation' is that the camera movement is instantiated by that of the performer: in her previous choreographies for camera, movement is presented very much as a product of filmic manipulation. It is worth noting that at the point during the sword sequence in which the performer's leap is extended in freeze frame, the sound is suspended, ensuring, perhaps, that undivided attention is called to the virtuosity of Deren's the filmic instrument.

Deren's final film, 'The Very Eye of the Night' shares an impetus in score with 'Meditation on Violence'. Both films encapsulate Deren's shift in focus following her trip to Haiti, both use music as a dynamic component of the filmic choreography, and as intrinsic to the metaphysical content of the movement. 'The Very Eye of the Night' was made between 1952 and 1955, in collaboration with dancers from the Metropolitan Ballet School and choreographer Anthony Tudor, and not released until 1959 because its production was beset by financial problems. Ito composed the multi-instrumental score for flute, bass clarinet, Balinese brass gamelan and three Haitian drums, and it was recorded layer-on-layer with Ito performing all the instruments except for the flute and bass clarinet. In the interview between Deren and Ito included in the 'Music for Maya' sleeve notes, Deren discusses the impact of the relation of music and movement in Balinese and Kabuki theatre. When Ito expresses his intention to give form to the invisible content of the image or movement through music and sound, he emphasises how the music of traditional Japanese theatre often transmits an emotive contrast to the nature of the movement it accompanies. Deren recalls a sense of tension experienced whilst witnessing a Balinese dancer standing very still, on one leg, whilst the music was going, in her words, lickety split. The

music, Ito reiterates, is expressing the invisible. In 'Meshes of the Afternoon', the score seems to express some ambiguous presence; it seems somehow to shift in alliance from sympathetic to conspiratorial. It is very much 'of' the action, whilst maintaining a quality of impersonal austerity. There is a definite space of gradation and ambiguity between the visible action and the score of the 'Meshes' reprint. In 'The Very Eye of the Night', Ito explores the proximity of the nature of the music to the action of the movement of the film. There is a synchronicity between the drum beats and the movements made in the men's dance, whilst in the women's dance where the performers are configured as circling slowly in the sky an atmosphere of inner tension is created through a rapid beat played out on the gamelan which contrasts with their scarce movement at that moment.

'The Very Eye of the Night' is a dance of celestial navigation, a ballet of the night in which the dancers represent the movement of the constellations and the four satellites. The film is a visual elucidation of Deren's notion that film choreography could enable the emancipation of the dancing body from the architectural limitations germane to theatrically based dance choreography. The visual imagining of the night sky is, to paraphrase Deren, "about as far out in space as she could get", and it seems to be no coincidence that her use of score and sound gains ground as the spaces of her choreographies for camera become literally more abstract. She wrote that in her films prior to 'Meditation on Violence', she wanted to emphasise the camera's capacity in creating dance, movement and action that could transcend geography and take place anywhere and everywhere. In 'Meditation', however, Deren proposed that the camera might quite literally meditate upon the idea of movement, turn inwards upon an abstraction that takes place, as it were, in no place, or nowhere. The night sky of 'The Very Eye' constitutes such an abstraction: the dancing bodies, shot in the negative, are depersonalised, composed as luminosity; their dance space constitutes a perceptual allegory. In her early silent works, Deren makes a show of film's ability to configure an integrity of movement across the juxtaposition of unrelated spaces: the focus on temporal composition across geographic and spatial discontinuities augments a sense of visual rhythm such that whilst the films are absent of sound, they somehow proceed as analogous to it. Following her trips to Haiti space is configured as an abstraction, the spirit of the forms of movement she explores is communicated no longer in relation to temporal movement through spatial settings but through sound and music which, in the case of 'Meditation', amplifies the

meditative engagement of the performer, in 'The Very Eye' bestows a classical, theatrical quality to the action of the dance and in 'Meshes of the Afternoon' to recompose and confer a sense of the austere and the mythic upon the action. The transcendental function of sound, of drumming and singing, in Haitian Voudoun ritual ceremonies Deren observed, filmed and participated in no doubt was transferred to the work she made afterwards; it is important to note that she made over fifty hours of audio recordings of ceremonial activity alongside twenty thousand feet of film and one thousand stills. Sound, characterised in terms of score or silence, was undoubtedly a dynamic component of Deren's choreocinema. She borrowed from the language of musical form when qualifying the structure and spectatorship of her silent works, a sense of the auditory is invoked through her attendance to poetics as a filmic method, and in her use of sound and music she exemplifies the conceptual intention of the movement of the films.