

## On Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity: *Meshes of the Afternoon*

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Interdisciplinarity and collaboration are prominent contemporary concerns in the arts that are evident in recent writings about Maya Deren. I will be critically engaging with the literature on Deren in order to explore the potential of the term “interdisciplinary,” with a view to opening her work further for contemporary practice. The film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) was co-created with Alexander Hammid and offers a rich text through which to explore Deren’s collaborative strategies and her approach to interdisciplinarity. This black and white, 16mm film will be the central focus of the essay. I will be referring exclusively to the silent version that resulted from the original collaboration<sup>1</sup> and to the central character as “Maya.”

Maya Deren’s *An Anagram Of Ideas On Art, Form And Film* is a fifty-two page “chap-book” originally published as a limited run by the Alicat Book Shop Press, New York in 1946. This work is now recognized as an important contribution to film theory, a radical attempt to reconcile an interdisciplinary sensibility with avant-garde film practice. Yet, the academic recognition of the importance of Deren’s filmmaking and theoretical work has been comparatively recent. It was not until 1980 that theoretical attention to Deren’s work began to gather momentum, with Annette Michelson—at that time writing for the journal *October*—a key figure in Deren scholarship at this point.<sup>2</sup> 1984 and 1988 saw the release of the first two parts of *The Legend of Maya Deren*, an important biographical compendium.<sup>3</sup> The next significant development in Deren scholarship came in 1991, with Lauren Rabinovitz’s book *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema*. This influential text played an important role in reclaiming Deren as a key precursor of feminism. In the essays included in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (2001), edited by Bill Nichols, Deren’s work is framed in the wider context of avant-garde practice in America, and in recognition of her important connections to avant-garde milieus across art, film, dance and poetry. Renata Jackson’s book *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren* (2002) emphasises the important role that Deren’s early poetic practice played in shaping her subsequent work on film.<sup>4</sup> Also in this year an accessible online article by Wendy Haslem, entitled “Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema,” was published in *Senses of Cinema*.

Most recently there have been two key texts produced that understand Deren in relation to contemporary concerns. John David Rhodes’ *Meshes of the Afternoon*, published in the British Film Institute’s *Film Classics* series, was launched during *Maya Deren: 50 Years On* at BFI Southbank in October 2011. Rhodes emphasises the radically open form of this film; in addressing the experimentation and aesthetics, he makes available the creative discourse between its collaborators—Deren from a background in poetry and Hammid from that of film. Attention to the intensely collaborative nature of *Meshes* provides an important

starting point for this study. In *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (2011), Erin Brannigan approaches Deren's films from a dance perspective, placing emphasis on their interdisciplinarity. She challenges the limitations of the prevalence of writing on "dancefilm," which she perceives as strongly biased toward the profilmic choreographic event (the live performance) and suffering from a lack of engagement with the range of relevant film theories. Brannigan defines a practice of "dancefilm" that is truly interdisciplinary in nature, focussing on "cine-choreographies" that exist only in film and because of film. Deren's work is central to this thesis, both for key films that embody this interdisciplinary approach and also for the concepts and methodologies found in her writing.

Writers on Deren have advanced different explanations for why her films and theories of film have not attracted the critical discourse and position they deserve. Jackson, for example, aims to establish the position of Deren's *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946) within modernist film theory. She notes that Deren's writings do not echo the language of feminist film theory and that this may have contributed to them being overlooked.<sup>5</sup> Nichols supports this, noting that highly influential feminist writers like Claire Johnson and Laura Mulvey "ignored Deren entirely in their search for pioneering feminist filmmakers."<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps overstating the case as in her paper "Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde" (1978), Mulvey does refer to Deren's pioneering work. While she does not choose to analyse Deren's work in relation to experience of oppression and the exploitation of the image of women, Mulvey does place Deren alongside Germaine Dulac, suggesting that "both directors' intermingling of cinematic movement and interior consciousness interested feminist and avant-gardistes alike."<sup>7</sup> Brannigan suggests the interdisciplinary focus may have resulted in Deren's work falling between key theoretical frames. She also draws attention to Deren's significant contribution to the area of dancefilm and the general slow development of critical discourse within this area.<sup>8</sup> Nichols also suggests a range of additional factors that could have contributed to the period of Deren's neglect, including the move within independent cinema toward a Beat improvisational sensibility, the ascendance of structural filmmaking in the avant-garde of the 60s, and the prominence of *cinéma vérité*.

Annette Michelson's *On Reading Deren's Notebook* provides an insightful exploration of the rigor and scope of Deren's writings, as well as an important description of the relation between theory and practice in her work.

The sense of a constant and intimate articulation of theory with practice, of a relentless concern with systematization, the determination to ground innovative practice in theory. And, of course, the manner in which both practice and theory stand in a relation of fruitful, unresolved tension, of variance with those of her time. Tracing the development of Deren's work and of her role, one discerns a particular logic evident only once before in the history of the medium.<sup>9</sup>

In her preface to *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, Deren takes an anti-reductionist stance, drawing attention to the proliferation of statements and theories on which creative practice is based. She states with conviction that "these are, almost without exception, inferior to those works from which the principles were derived."<sup>10</sup> She proceeds to chart the evolution of her own statements, noting how each film would provoke new theories rather than illustrate previous ones, thus creating a "dynamic and volatile" relationship between theory and practice.<sup>11</sup>

The systematization that Michelson refers to above is of particular interest here in relation to interdisciplinarity, as is the notion of an “anagram of ideas” rather than a logical linear progression. Here we find Deren seeking innovative ways to work with the complex and interrelated nature of an interdisciplinary practice. It is perhaps this refusal to orientate her work in relation to one area of critical discourse that has resulted in the slow uptake of her contribution by theorists and critics. Deren’s practice may, by its nature, be open to indeterminate readings as each discipline allows for a particular perspective to be applied, the meaning lying somewhere between these and the creative concerns of the people involved in its making. Not surprisingly, any attempt at defining the genre, meaning or plot of *Meshes* is problematic. These uncertainties become evident when we compare the different approaches that have been taken to framing *Meshes* within an historical or theoretical context. Haslem refers to Deren’s work as “evasive and unclassifiable,” stating that Deren “actively rejected categorization as a surrealist and refused the definition of her films as formalist or structuralist.”<sup>12</sup>

Writers engage in various ways with issues surrounding authorship in textual analysis, particularly in regard to reducing the complexity of a film to a function of the biography and the presumptive psychology of an author. Rhodes highlights the dangers of this approach in regard to *Meshes*, referring to the details of Deren’s life as being “dangerously seductive,” suggesting that “Deren with her antipathy to the claim of the personal and the biographical, would herself have been the first to object to any emphasis on the facts of her life as a way into an understanding of her work.”<sup>13</sup> The biographical nature of Haslem’s article does, to some extent, lead her in this direction. This approach, regardless, would need to address the histories of both authors of *Meshes*. Rhodes perceives the film as:

... a point of origin (that from which much later avant-garde film-making flows), a point of transition (the thing that connects the interwar avant-gardes to those of the postwar period), a point of intersection (between the lives of two artists, between male and female, film and literature), an artefact of an extremely personal—even Hermetic—modernist vision, and a document of political feminism.<sup>14</sup>

Rhodes suggests that the remarkable characteristic of *Meshes* is that it manages to be all these things simultaneously, and many more besides.

In addressing the interdisciplinary nature of Deren’s work, notions of collaboration are of particular relevance. The question of the authorship of *Meshes* has always been disputed and difficult. Haslem quotes filmmaker (and friend of Deren) Stan Brakhage, as well as historian of avant-garde cinema P. Adams Sitney, as stating that authorship should be attributed solely to Hammid. On the other hand, Haslem aligns herself with the consensus of Deren’s biographers in perceiving the project as a collaboration, with Hammid providing the mechanical expertise to “realize images born from Deren’s imagination.”<sup>15</sup> I would argue that reducing Hammid’s role to one of mechanical expertise is unfortunate as it obscures the conceptual level of a collaborative discourse that has much relevance to contemporary film practice.

One text that has become available online recently is *Film and Music* by Alexander Hackenschmied (Hammid). While written a decade before the making of *Meshes*, it does offer insight into his initiatives and strategies for experimental film. Exploring the use of

language and concepts from one medium transposed to another, Hammid frames this line of exploration in relation to his contemporaries at the Bauhaus School in Dessau. His approach challenges the conventional relationships of collaboration as he explores the possibility of a new medium, where neither music nor film can be divided and performed separately, because one part without the other would be unintelligible. This echoes the relationship between dance and film that Brannigan promotes as “cine-choreography.” It is possible that Hammid’s ideas prefigured Deren’s notion of film form as an anagram where the parts are inseparable from the whole. Along with his proposed title for the film *Music of Architecture*, this text suggests a preparedness on Hammid’s part to employ inter- and transdisciplinary strategies across several disciplines for the purpose of one project.

Rhodes refers to the issue of the authorship of *Meshes* as vexing. He acknowledges that his writing on the film focuses on Deren far more than Hammid, and offers as an apology his conviction that *Meshes* “emerges from a set of concerns and passionate commitments that are native to Deren’s life and her trajectory” that preceded the making of the film.<sup>16</sup> However, Rhodes also points out that “Hammid was truly a man of cinema, whereas, in the tremendous paper trail that documents her life prior to meeting Hammid, Deren makes only the scarcest and most desultory of references to cinema.”<sup>17</sup> Rhodes draws attention to precedents in innovative film form that can be seen in Hammid’s earlier work, most notably the “startling intervention in point of view editing”<sup>18</sup> that Hammid employs towards the end of his early avant-garde film, *Aimless Walk* (1930). Here we see the central character exchange glances with what we can only assume to be his double. In his article for *Film Culture*, “Alexander Hammid: A Survey of His Film-making Career,” Thomas E. Valasek interviews Hammid who describes how separating a person into multiple self-images had always fascinated him. Valasek explores the key role this concept plays in *Aimless Walk* both in terms of the film’s structure and its integration of disparate elements:

Hammid skilfully dramatizes the idea of separation in the three climatic sequences that end the film. In the first of the three, where the protagonist walks away from himself in the park, Hammid employs a panning technique that allows both of the protagonist’s “selves” to appear in the same shot. After the camera follows the man a short distance, it pans back to his original position, during which time the actor has run behind the camera and repositioned him-self. The effect is startling. Hammid follows up with point-of-view shots from both positions. In the second sequence, where the protagonist hops a tram, Hammid cuts quickly and on action to give the illusion that the man is again splitting in two before your eyes, even though this time there is a cut. In the final sequence Hammid superimposes the water and the tram, the two unifying images of the protagonist’s “aimless walk,” to suggest symbolically the forces which have split him. In each of the three sequences Hammid employs carefully-implemented cinematic techniques which strikingly realize the concepts of separation.<sup>19</sup>

The three self-images of Maya in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, along with the innovative use of both architectural and natural environments, can be seen to extend and develop this concept and aesthetic. Hammid explains that Deren “had poetic vision and was very responsive to that kind of thing, too.”<sup>20</sup> Deren’s subsequent two films continue to explore this line of work both through multiple self-images and through different actors being

substituted for the same character. Valasek also draws attention to structural similarities between *Aimless Walk* and *Meshes*, particularly in the use of an almost double ending where the final shot opens up new interpretations.<sup>21</sup> In *Points of Resistance* (1991/2002), Lauren Rabinovitz recognises the film's stylistic and conceptual debt to Hammid's first film. She briefly draws attention to Hammid's contribution and his description of the collaboration as being "so involved between the two of us that it's hard to separate what was one person's idea and what was the other's."<sup>22</sup> However, she suggests that the emotional intensity and overall mood of the piece is dissimilar to his work. Valasek's analysis concurs with this as he suggests that Hammid brought "a study into the visual and intellectual possibilities of a cinematic idea" while Deren involved the viewer emotionally, significantly influencing "the overall tone and mood."<sup>23</sup> Rabinovitz suggests that the film's significance lies in its function as a "woman's discourse that rewrites Hollywood's objectification of women by addressing a female subject who must contend with her own objectification."<sup>24</sup> Determining the significance of the film in this way establishes Deren's contribution to resisting the dominant forms and institutions in art and media, and Deren's position in relation to feminist film theory. However, opening up the film's value as a key interdisciplinary text requires an approach that is ready to explore the genesis of ideas and collaborative strategies that brought this film into being.

Both Jackson and Rhodes explore the range of archival material on Deren's life and filmmaking with regards to the issue of collaboration.<sup>25</sup> Jackson notes that what becomes apparent is a contrast of personalities: "Hammid's quiet manner and preference for calm versus Deren's forceful presence and frenetic pace."<sup>26</sup> Rhodes notes Hammid's tendency for self-effacement and his reluctance to be credited, in contrast to Deren who showed herself to be a great self-promoter.<sup>27</sup> Valasek draws attention to how Hammid contributed greatly at a conceptual level to many of the projects he worked on but rarely took sole credit for a directorial role. He appears to have been most comfortable in collaborative roles and in collective ways of working.

Valasek first locates Hammid in the 1920s as one of the few rebellious "malcontents" in Prague who advocated for "nonconformist views about form and meaning in art [and] who wrote about practical applications of 'nova fotografie' and 'novy film.' They argued for film, the 'seventh art'...and for Czechoslovakia to develop an avant-garde cinema."<sup>28</sup> Here the commonalities with Deren's writings and her contribution to American avant-garde cinema become apparent. However, Hammid's interest went beyond developing an aesthetic avant-garde, as we see when he writes in 1930: "the social and ideological reform of the film industry is the highest goal of the independent film."<sup>29</sup> Valasek suggests that in his extensive career Hammid would "strive to manifest 'the free spirit' in a variety of commercial, documentary and experimental films."<sup>30</sup> In the years immediately prior to the making of *Meshes*, Hammid concentrated on documentary filmmaking. Rhodes describes the complex circumstances that led to his emigration to the USA, where, having worked with American leftist documentary filmmaker Herbert Kline on his film *Crisis* (1939)—a film documenting the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia—Kline, fearing for Hammid's life, arranged for his immigration.<sup>31</sup> It was only on meeting Deren that Hammid applied himself once again to experimental filmmaking. It is of note too that after their separation, Hammid pursued his career through a range of roles in independent and mainstream film projects rather than establishing himself as an avant-garde filmmaker.

Jackson exposes some interesting contradictions in the biographical statements included in Deren's publicity material that somewhat inaccurately present her subsequent film practice as one in which she performed all the roles herself, despite the continuing involvement through to 1946 of Hammid and their photographer friend Hella Heyman. This notion of an individual "doing it all" may have been inspiring to subsequent avant-garde filmmakers but there are possible negative implications here in terms of Deren's legacy. This notion may have created a mystifying and unachievable premise for filmmakers who have attempted to make similar films on their own, with disappointing results. It continues to be the case that Deren inspires individual filmmakers, but this can easily become an obstacle to development without proper appreciation of the working processes and the creative discourse involved in her work. In addition, this misconception may also have encouraged a disregard for the range of collaborative contributions (both practical and conceptual) that occur in avant-garde filmmaking.

It is notable that following her careful examination of the available texts, Jackson, in her filmography, credits Hammid and Deren as conceptual collaborators and lists Hammid as co-editor and one of the camera operators on Deren's three subsequent films. In direct contrast, Brannigan's filmography lists *Meshes* as directed by Deren alone, and she makes no reference in her book to Hammid. Perhaps this is a function of her stated decision to focus on the contributions of female dancers, filmmakers and choreographers in order to redress the gender imbalance in critical discourse around film and dance.<sup>32</sup> If collaboration is a significant aspect of the interdisciplinary practice of "filmdance," then this omission is a limiting factor of Brannigan's book. Hammid's later film with Martha Graham may also be of interest here.<sup>33</sup> In Martina Kudláček's documentary *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2002), we see Hammid holding a storyboard for Deren's later film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) and describing the decisions "we" made, suggesting that the creative discourse established in the making of *Meshes* continued through to this film. Authors have commented on the marked shift in aesthetics and form in the films Deren made after her creative association with Hammid. Haslem comments that the film *Meditation on Violence* (1948) "is marked by a lack of dynamism and mobility that we have come to expect from Deren's camera,"<sup>34</sup> while Rhodes notes that by comparison her subsequent films "flirt with a kind of formlessness."<sup>35</sup>

The interest in collaborative strategies has become well established in contemporary art in the past two decades. We now have the opportunity to place *Meshes* within a more extensive critical debate. In *The Collaborative Turn*, Maria Lind overviews the range of contemporary strategies for collaborative authorship in art, highlighting the often ideological and political motivations of those involved. In the pre-feminist context where a woman's contribution could more easily be subsumed, Deren's choices were limited. However, given her earlier commitments to the collective endeavour of radical socialist activism, along with her interdisciplinary strategies and concepts of ritualistic form, it is worth considering whether given today's context, Deren would define her practice in terms of collaboration rather than that of a sole agent.

At the time of the making of *Meshes*, Deren saw herself as a poet and had studied the ideas of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. This orientation may offer us some insight into her approach to authorship. In his 2007 article, "T.S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration," Ronald Schuchard brings a current perspective to the range of collaborative strategies employed by Eliot, and

to the struggles he had in reconciling this with the modernist ideal of authorship. Schuchard focuses on *The Waste Land* and how this emblem of modernism was a suppressed collaboration formed through editing by Ezra Pound and Vivienne Eliot. *The Waste Land* is an interesting text because it exposes the processes of collaboration that lie behind the modernist notions of authorship that were an important part of Deren's formation as an artist. Although Deren would not have known that *The Waste Land* was a collaborative text, even with that knowledge it is unlikely that the questions of power involved in authorship would have allowed her to fully acknowledge her collaborative processes as a female artist. Nonetheless, this is an important context for interpreting her work.

Lind goes beyond both the ideological rationales for collaboration and the struggles that can surround notions of authorship to locate a key creative premise for collaboration. She illustrates this through a quote from the curatorial collective *What, How & for Whom*, who state that their criteria for selecting collaborative practice is that "It has to result in something that would otherwise not take place; It simply has to make possible that which is otherwise impossible."<sup>36</sup> *Meshes* gives evidence of this criteria and of Deren's astute choice of collaborative strategy, with the discourse between the two authors resulting in remarkable work that neither could have achieved or even imagined on their own. Rhodes explores how this was achieved, noting that Deren and Hammid innovated with the materials and environment that they had, while not letting assumptions and previous experience limit what was possible. Rhodes draws attention to how

Deren and Hammid suspended themselves between intense artists' intentionality (think of the precision of Hammid's in camera effects) and a kind of intentionless ignorance about what they were up to (think of Deren's proposal: "Why don't we make a film").<sup>37</sup>

*Meshes* is interesting because of the way that the openness associated with interdisciplinarity is coded into the fabric of the film. *Meshes* starts with a shot of a pathway; walls and vegetation demark the space as it snakes uphill into the curved distance dissolving from sight. In the foreground, a flower (a synthetic poppy) descends into frame held by an arm, which we soon perceive to be that of a mannequin; the arm vanishes leaving the flower on the ground. The film is shot in black and white; bright sunshine casts shadows through the trees and fences on to the path, rendering the scene full of ambiguities of space and form. In a second shot from amongst the shadows cast by the trees on the path, we see another shadow of a figure, a young woman progressing towards the flower. Her shadow reaches out, its form touching the flower, before the physical hand joins it in the frame in the act of picking up the flower.

In this opening scene Deren and Hammid depart from any notion of representing or illustrating her poetic ideas. Instead we see a process of an interdisciplinary nature, where ideas, concepts and literary poetic devices are reconceived in relation to those of filmmaking. The authors took a broader approach to medium specificity than the exclusivist approach promoted by Clement Greenberg.<sup>38</sup> Deren states that

what particularly excited me about film was its magic ability to make even the most imaginative concept seem real. For if the tree in the scene was real and true, the event which one caused to occur beneath it seemed also real and true.<sup>39</sup>

This indexical nature of film, its ability to be perceived as not just “representing” but somehow “being” the thing itself or at least having a causal relation to it, is described by Rhodes:

the flower is left amid the shadows cast on the pavement, their movement an index of the trees, whose movement we have already seen—movement that is itself an index of the wind that we cannot see except through the trees and their shadows.<sup>40</sup>

Rhodes suggests that the directors use this medium-specific quality of filmmaking to its fullest extent to establish with the viewers a language of how we are to engage with the work.

Nothing could be simpler than this opening sequence, and yet few opening shots of any film are so strange. What begins as cinematic realism (an image of the world, “as it is”) converts, within seconds into a demonstration of cinematic artifice.<sup>41</sup>

This encourages the viewer to cease creating a real world of logical consequences and to instead “marvel at the whole nature of the art of filmmaking to produce such startling sensations.”<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to Rhodes, Haslem gives less attention to the key cinematic innovations in *Meshes* and focuses more on narrative devices, on the circularity that results in “unnerving repetition” and on a “vision in crisis” constructed from a “myriad of eyeline matches and mismatches.”<sup>43</sup> She also draws attention to how filmic techniques such as jump cuts and montage are used to incorporate a fascination with the instability of objects that she associates with the Gothic.<sup>44</sup> However, placing the film in relation to categories such as “experimental” or “gothic” runs the risk of concealing how the film challenges such categories and actively defies definition.

Rhodes’ approach highlights how introducing the analysis of the film form and medium specificity of *Meshes* can liberate it from reductionist readings. For example, he points to how attempts at reading the film with an eye towards understanding how it satisfies questions of female agency “run the risk of producing answers that are too ready-to-hand.”<sup>45</sup> He gives the example of the scene where, following the kiss, the poppy turns into a knife, which “Maya 3” reaches for and smashes against Hammid’s face. As we discover, this “face” is but a reflection in a shattered mirror, the gaps in its broken shards revealing the ocean. In the next shot we see the shards landing on the beach only to be washed over by the sea. At first glance this could be interpreted as gender warfare. Whilst warning against over-simplistic readings, Rhodes acknowledges Lauren Rabinovitz’s sophisticated interpretation of the film as signifying the destruction of “the objects governing a woman’s sexual reflection, the man who is both male sexuality and a mirror for narcissistic female sexuality;” Maya has “literally reached out to control the definition of herself.”<sup>46</sup> Rhodes appreciates the way that Deren and Hammid exploit and confront the specificity of the film medium, suggesting that this scene also “constitutes a revolt against the containment of cinematic structures.”<sup>47</sup> In this sense, our engagement in the filmmaking illusion is exposed or shattered by Deren and Hammid into unresolved possibilities.

Several writers focus on the window shot, referred to by Hammid and Deren as their “Botticelli.”<sup>48</sup> This shot is the apex and point of reflection in Hammid and Deren’s multiple

self-image strategies, and can be seen to embody the complexity of meaning in the film. Having seen "Maya 2" approach the window, place her hand on the glass, and gaze down on the path, we then see a shot from her point of view as the mirror-faced figure walks past, followed by "Maya 3" in futile pursuit. It is at this point that the "Botticelli" shot occurs. It is taken from outside of the house at window level, the reflection in the glass of foliage against the sky combining with the image of Maya's hair. This shot would be impossible without the use of a crane, so we should assume that Hammid and Deren again employed their film artistry and resourcefulness in using another more accessible window selected for this combination of reflection and transparency. Haslem points out that this creates an equivalence to a filmic superimposition. As she writes, we "identify with the enigmatic expression at the window, silently observing from within. Although her eyes indicate distrust, she is not desperate to escape her domestic space, but she is not entirely comfortable immured behind the glass."<sup>49</sup> Here we find Haslem quickly revising her interpretation of Maya's expression from one that is enigmatic to one of distrust, suggesting a more sinister and melodramatic interpretation. While Rhodes joins Haslem in interpreting the shot in relation to a woman's containment in a domestic space, he suggests that it is an image of "Inside-ness pressed up against outside-ness," which condenses the film's focus on interiority and making the internal external.<sup>50</sup> At the moment it appears in the film, this "image operates somewhat like a fulcrum of a chiasmus, with the versions of herself before and behind her."<sup>51</sup> As Rhodes suggests, it can be seen to function as a metonymic signifier for the film project as a whole. He points to a metaphorical equivalence between the nature of the window's framing and the functioning of cinema itself. Supported by the fact that the woman in the image is identifiable both as the central character and as co-author of the film, he navigates the complexity of its meaning, suggesting that as her hands press against the membrane of glass it operates as both the boundaries of domestic containment and metaphorically as the skin of the cinematic image itself.<sup>52</sup> In my own reading of the film I do not perceive the "distrust" in this gaze that Haslem refers to, but instead I experience a calm, allowing curiosity as she observes her own cycles, and invites us to join her in that quality of observation. Perhaps this has something in common with Haslem's suggestion that "in this still shot she establishes a silent connection with the eyes, suggesting the possibility for reverie or even hallucination."<sup>53</sup> Haslem strangely blurs the distinction between the still image used for publicity and the moving image in the film. She also leaves us unclear to whom she is referring, whether it is the central character of the film, the filmmaker herself, or both: as she writes, "it is an image that suggests the most compelling themes of her film work: dreaming, reflection, rhythm, vision, ritual and identity."<sup>54</sup> It is questionable how this shot suggests rhythm and ritual, and indeed identity. Perhaps Haslem is looking to attribute too much to this image. When she says "this still shot" perhaps she is referring to the moving image that has a quality of stillness. While it may be valid to critique Haslem's writing, it is however more interesting to view these possible contradictions and inconsistencies as a measure of Deren and Hammid's success in engaging the viewer. Rhodes experiences a liberation in the ways in which the film continually sets up and breaks expectations, in its plasticity and indeterminacy.<sup>55</sup> Arguably, Haslem's metonymic consideration of the still and moving image provokes her to attempt to say too many things for the brevity of her article. However, that one image can evoke such a nexus of ideas, experiences and associations is to some extent indicative of the resonances of Deren's body of work, though it is also possible that Haslem's observations are over-determined by the form of a biographical article,

which inevitably tends to read the work as a sign of the author and the author's oeuvre as a whole. It is of interest that this same shot provokes Rhodes to use such words as "metonym" and "fulcrum of a chiasmus," interdisciplinary applications of literary devices which echo Deren's conceptual use of the form of the "anagram."

It is in Deren's theoretical work that we can look for the key to her thinking about interdisciplinarity, though her exploration of these issues is far from straightforward. Jackson notes a tension in Deren's writing, as Deren warns against adapting other forms into film, particularly novels and theatre, and yet seeks out analogous concepts and methods in poetry in particular, and also in dance and music.<sup>56</sup> The essential nature of film is one of openness and interdisciplinarity. This leaves film vulnerable to becoming subservient to other forms. We can see Deren's approach as challenging the reduction of film to a form of interdisciplinarity dominated by the practices and constructs of mainstream theatre and literature. Deren is, for example, not advocating a film about poetry or about dance, but is striving instead for an innovative translation of the concepts, and creative impulses of these disciplines into the very form, construction and conception of the film itself. This innovative approach—involving a playing off of the constructs, concepts and languages of different disciplines—has similarities to that of Hammid in *Film and Music 1930*. This characteristic is central to Deren's work and is therefore crucial to any attempt to speak of it as interdisciplinary. In order to examine this more closely, it is useful to explore similar practices that have been identified in discourses that attempt to understand the nature of work across disciplines. In relation to health research, Aboelela et al. survey a range of definitions for interdisciplinary practice, within which the term transdisciplinary is used to define those practices, which employ translational innovations along with a high degree of synthesis of ideas and methodologies.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps the "translational innovations" that distinguish Deren's practice and as such it may be necessary to make this distinction in terminology.

Authors have made a range of observations about the interdisciplinary relationships between filmmaking and poetry that Deren developed and promoted. Jackson suggests the engagement with the perceiver/audience central to Deren's strategies in *Meshes* can be seen to stem from Ezra Pound's definition of the poetic image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."<sup>58</sup> Rhodes suggests that T.S. Eliot's notions of depersonalisation informed Deren's writings and her approach to the collaboration where authenticity and expressivity come not from personality and subjective emotions but through the intensity of the artistic process.

Jackson draws attention to the equivalence in the construction of meaning in film and poetry, quoting Deren from *Anagram*, "the spatiotemporal manipulations made possible in filmmaking and editing allow for an economy of statement akin to poetry where a complex of meaning can be created that far transcends the few juxtaposed words."<sup>59</sup>

The question of interdisciplinarity cuts across many of the analyses of Deren's work. Rhodes explores the relationship of interdisciplinarity in the nature of the collaborative process, referring to Hammid's recollection that Deren was constantly writing poetry, as this was her main focus and ambition at that time. It was this focus that provided the starting point through her poetic "images" on paper, which he would visualize in relation to his knowledge and formal experimentation with film.

Brannigan observes the relationship of the symbolist poets to modern dance, particularly in regard to Loïe Fuller, icon of the symbolist poetic imagination, who she perceives as

a precursor to Deren in her utilisation of the technologies of her time to create new forms of choreographic art.<sup>60</sup> However, it is interesting to note that she does not take this connection with poetry further in relation to Deren and *Meshes*.

Deren imports this interdisciplinarity into how she describes her films as variously “chamber films,” “cine-poems,” and “choreographies for camera.”<sup>61</sup> Jackson further develops this, suggesting that Deren’s “adaptation of her literary mentors’ aesthetics provides her with an established philosophical paradigm through which she could argue for film’s legitimate status as an art form.”<sup>62</sup>

A specific parallel emerges between imagist principles and Deren’s strategies for performance in film. Brannigan quotes Deren: “Movements should be rather an extension and perfecting of a normal movement so that audience [sic] is kinaesthetically identified with them, under illusion [sic] that they too are capable of it.”<sup>63</sup> This approach is echoed to some extent in a principle of the imagist poets that Jackson locates in Deren’s writing: “to use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor merely decorative word.”<sup>64</sup> Brannigan notes that the performances in *Meshes* do not simply present everyday utilitarian behaviour but instead have “movement trajectories and loiter along gestural routes that escape into verticality through strategies that preempt Bausch: repetition, exaggeration, abstraction, or rhythmic manipulation.”<sup>65</sup> As the film progresses we see various sequences where Maya ascends the stairs:

In one, she exaggerates her run upstairs, kicking up her heels. In another her progression is played out in slow motion and shot from several angles. In a particularly motile sequence her ascent is shot from above with a swinging camera, Deren lunging from side-to-side as if the staircase is rocking. In her final ascent she appears frozen at various positions on the stairs through a series of shots from a still camera.<sup>66</sup>

Brannigan notes that this approach to choreography has been adopted for live performance, particularly in dance theatre, and that the more successful dance films, such as those of DV8 physical theatre, owe a lot to the approach to performance that Deren and Hammid developed in *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

The notions of ritualistic form that Deren writes of are potentially significant in considering the success in creating “filmdance.” Nichols links Deren’s interest in dance, play and games with her concepts of ritual referring to her writings

The ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specialization and confines of personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole that, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endow its parts with a measure of its larger meaning.<sup>67</sup>

For Brannigan this is evident in Deren’s films where “corporeal performance is one filmic movement among many”<sup>68</sup> with the choreography spreading across people and objects. Brannigan suggest that this characteristic, along with film’s inherent freedom to construct time and space, has had a significant influence on the choreographers of today.<sup>69</sup>

This emphasis on depersonalization is supported by Rhodes' close reading of *Meshes*. Rhodes draws attention to the way in which Maya's image is introduced in the film and notes that given the film's focus on one woman's experience, the filmmaking withholds any vision of her body for a remarkably long time. Instead, we are introduced to her by an intricate composite of shadows and fragments in close-up, building up a complex relation to her environment and to the filmmaking artifice. It is only within the second layer of the dream or consciousness of Maya that we see her face. Rhodes suggests that due to her striking, unusual beauty "we might have been too absorbed looking *at* her to be able—or want to—look *through* her,"<sup>70</sup> and that holding this moment back was important to creating the engagement of the viewer that they wanted to achieve.<sup>71</sup>

Whilst advancing cinematic devices and discourses, Deren drew extensively on dance and emphasised the proximity between the two artforms. In the discussion on Deren's films as "cine-choreographies," Brannigan refers to Deren's tribute to dance and movement as key structural elements in her filmmaking:

I feel that film is related more closely to dance than any other form because, like dance, it is conveyed in time . . . [It] conveys primarily by visual projection and . . . it operates on a level of stylization—it is the quality of the movement that renders the meaning.<sup>72</sup>

Brannigan examines *Meshes* on the basis of choreography as the "primary organising methodology," arguing how the "vertical" form of the film frees the figure from the linear cause and effect progression of the horizontal form.<sup>73</sup> "The movement 'event' of the film passes from Deren through her fragmented and multiple selves to the inanimate objects through stylisation and filmic manipulation."<sup>74</sup> However, an interesting question arises here as to whether Brannigan's decision to identify dance and choreography as the determining methodology and frame of reference really captures the transdisciplinarity of *Meshes*. There is a lot of textual evidence (from her MA thesis onwards) that supports the notion that Deren's interest in the imagist poets influenced her approach both to the performances and to the filmmaking in *Meshes*. It is possible that the innovative choreographic nature of Deren and Hammid's film form owes as much to Deren's use of poetic concepts and methodologies as explored by Jackson, and to the range of strategies brought by Hammid (particularly in regard to space and architecture), as it does to those of dance choreography. Deren and Hammid's agility in engaging a wider range of principals and conceptual frameworks is perhaps crucial to their success in making "dancefilm." This approach may have liberated their work from the expectations and practices surrounding live dance performance, choreography, and indeed from the conventions and assumptions surrounding the practice of filmmaking.

In conclusion, I would suggest that there is value in challenging the dominant notion of Deren as sole conceptual author of her films, a notion promoted to some extent by Deren and perpetuated by writers such as Haslem and Brannigan. Arguably, by omitting Deren's collaborative strategies in *Meshes*, Brannigan misses a potentially valuable aspect of this interdisciplinary practice. Looking at Deren's work as collaborative and interdisciplinary has the potential to offer contemporary artists a richer and more achievable model to draw on in their work and opens up the range of possible readings of the film. Valasek's article is of particular value in this respect. Collaboration seems to have an important relation to

interdisciplinarity in a film like *Meshes* due to the different conceptual and methodological frameworks brought to the project by its co-creators. It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully examine this suggestive relationship, though it certainly warrants further investigation.

With regard to the most recent developments in research into Deren, Rhodes' close reading of *Meshes* is particularly valuable to interdisciplinary film practice in liberating the film from the reductionist tendencies of any one theoretical discourse. In doing so, he exposes a work, which by its intention, nature, and creative processes defies definition. Brannigan emphasises interdisciplinarity as something that Deren offers to contemporary practice. However, she limits her exploration of Deren's work to a study of the relationship between dance and film. Deren's notion of an "anagram of ideas" points to a more complex integration of strategies. While Brannigan's singular approach offers a valuable analysis from a choreographic perspective, it has limitations in regard to the range of interdisciplinary strategies employed by the authors and how these inform one another.

Jackson highlights important tensions in Deren's approach to interdisciplinarity, exposing the need for a more precise definition of her process. Deren warns against adapting or integrating the forms and accepted practices of other disciplines into film, and yet she seeks out analogous concepts, employing translational innovations in regard to poetry, dance, and music. "Transdisciplinary" may be a more appropriate term for her process and for the resulting film that characteristically resists reductive interpretations.

Michelson offers an important contribution to appreciating Deren's work from a contemporary perspective. When she writes, of the filmmaker's "sense of a constant and intimate articulation of theory with practice, of a relentless concern with systematization, the determination to ground innovative practice in theory," we can read this in terms of Deren's endeavour to discipline the shifting elements and complexity of a transdisciplinary practice.<sup>75</sup>

## Notes

1. A sound score by Teiji Ito was added by Deren in 1959.
2. See Michelson, *On Reading Deren's Notebook*.
3. Clark et al., *The Legend of Maya Deren*.
4. Jackson, *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*.
5. See *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*.
6. Nichols, *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, 13.
7. Mulvey, 114.
8. Brannigan, *Dancefilm*.
9. Michelson, *On Reading Deren's Notebook*, 48.
10. Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas*, 35.
11. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
12. Haslem, *Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema*, 5.
13. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 13.
14. *Ibid.*, 12.
15. Clarke, Hodson, Neiman in Haslem, *The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema*, 4.
16. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 13.
17. *Ibid.*, 50.
18. *Ibid.*, 41.
19. Valasek, *Alexander Hammid: A Survey of His Film-Making Career*, 282.

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Valasek quoting Hammid in Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 56.
23. Valasek, *Alexander Hammid: A Survey of His Film-Making Career*, 284.
24. Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, 56.
25. Clark et al., *The Legend of Maya Deren*.
26. Jackson, *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*, 37.
27. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*.
28. Valasek, *Alexander Hammid: A Survey of His Film-Making Career*, 251.
29. Hammid cited in Ibid, 252.
30. Ibid, 252.
31. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*.
32. Brannigan, *Dancefilm*.
33. Hammid, Alexander, and Martha Graham, *Night Journey*.
34. Haslem, *Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema*, 4.
35. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 86.
36. Lind, *The Collaborative Turn*, 29.
37. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 92.
38. See Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*
39. Deren cited in Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 53.
40. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 51.
41. Ibid, 51.
42. Ibid.
43. Haslem, *Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema*.
44. Ibid.
45. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 90.
46. Ibid, 89–91.
47. Ibid, 91.
48. Hammid cited in Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*.
49. Haslem, *Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema*, 12.
50. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 76.
51. Ibid, 75.
52. Ibid.
53. Haslem, *Maya Deren: The High Priestess of Experimental Cinema*, 2.
54. Ibid., 2.
55. Rhodes, *Meshes of the Afternoon*.
56. Jackson, *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*.
57. Aboelela et al., *Defining Interdisciplinary Research*.
58. Jackson in Nichols, *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, 60.
59. Deren cited by Jackson in Nichols, *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, 63.
60. See Brannigan, *Dancefilm*.
61. Jackson in Nichols, *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, 51.
62. Jackson, *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*, 118.
63. Deren in Clark et al., 268, cited in Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 120.
64. Jackson, *The Modernistic Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*, 117.
65. Brannigan. *Dancefilm*, 122.
66. Ibid., 123.
67. Deren, *An Anagram of ideas*, 20.

68. Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 113.  
 69. Ibid.  
 70. Rhodes, *Meshes*, 69.  
 71. Ibid.  
 72. Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 120.  
 73. Ibid., 114.  
 74. Ibid., 124.  
 75. Michelson, *On Reading Deren's Notebook*, 48.

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