

Ritual in Transfigured Time: Narcisa Hirsch, Sufi Poetry, Ecstatic Dances, and the Female Gaze¹

Silvina Szperling

I say:
I burn like a moth in the candle of your face.
You say:
Die.

— Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-1273)

This essay intends to shed some light on the work of the artist Narcisa Hirsch, an Argentinean experimental filmmaker born in Berlin in 1928. It also discusses the influences of Maya Deren's films on the artistic work of Hirsch, exploring the legacy of Maya Deren in South America.

Narcisa belongs to roughly the same generation as Maya Deren—she was born eleven years after Deren—and their lives show some similarities: they were both infant immigrants (one in the USA, the other in Argentina) who escaped death and misery, and who found new communities that offered the possibility to realize their ideas on art and film. They were strong women at a time when Feminism was rather new, and they both practised an artform (Cinema) when women were not generally holding the role of director. Narcisa Hirsch continues to be, at the age of 85, an active artist.

Narcisa Hirsch's film *Rumi* (1999) is the focus of this paper, since it uses dance as one of its main elements. Other films of Hirsch's, such as *Testamento y vida interior* (1976), *A-dios* (1982), *Comeout* (1971), and *Ana, ¿dónde estás?* (1987) will be referred to as experimental films that, although they would not be considered as screendance, are connected to the experimental cinema of Maya Deren.

The Myth of Narcisa

Following the example of a painter father whom she barely knew, Narcisa attended a number of painting workshops as a teenager in Buenos Aires, where she had arrived from Austria in 1937, at the age of nine. The emigration happened just in time to escape the Second World War.

Born in Berlin as the only child of an Argentinean-German mother and a German father who abandoned them when she was five years old, Narcisa grew up in rural Tyrol and was sent to a Viennese school at the age of eight with no previous formal education. The move to Vienna cut her off from the Tyrolean childhood of cows, daisies, snow, and lakes—images which turn up over and over again in her films. She then went to Argentina at age

nine, when her mother took her for a sabbatical year to her grandmother's house in order to recover from the experience of the Viennese school.

Argentina became her adoptive country, although she was always seen as an outsider: a German to the Argentineans, an Argentinean to the Germans. Eventually Narcisa Heuser married and adopted the surname of her husband, Paul Hirsch. After a decade of raising four children she joined the avant-garde movement of the 1960s that circled around the Di Tella Institute. This movement proclaimed the death of easel painting and introduced her to a local scene of happenings, where she performed street actions in collaboration with her friends, the photographer Marie Louise Alemann and the actor Walter Mejía. They distributed apples to pedestrians in the busy city centre with the intention of taking Art to common people. Explaining her motivation for this event, Narcisa refers to the comment of a pedestrian and participant: "This is the first time that I ever got anything for free. In this country, you never get anything for free."² Later on, they performed another street action, distributing baby dolls to passersby. This was in 1972, after Hirsch had performed the event in London and New York with the intention of creating a three-city-happening. The performance of this action coincided with the arrival in Buenos Aires of the corpses of sixteen people who had been shot in a multiple execution in Trelov, Patagonia. Hirsch remembers that at the time a friend had asked her if she was going to do the performance anyhow, to which she replied: "Of course I am going to do it. There's nothing extraordinary about today; they are killing people every day." During the street action the performers were surrounded by policemen who tried to stop the performance, while angry crowds stomped on the dolls and tried to crush them.

In 1967 the group performed *Marabunta*, the biggest of their happenings, at the foyer of the Coliseo theatre on the night of the premiere of Antonioni's *Blow Up*. *Marabunta* consisted of a giant female skeleton covered with food, which fell prey to the greed of spectators who casually passed by. When one of them took a pineapple that was strategically placed at the skeleton's sex, three or four birds painted in fluorescent colors that had been hidden inside the body flew away, as if flying free from a cage. In order to record this action, Hirsch got in touch with the camera operator, filmmaker and political activist, Raymundo Gleyzer, who was later "disappeared by" the military dictatorship. Whilst editing the material with Gleyzer, Hirsch became interested in filmmaking and joined the world of underground cinema. She flew to New York, where she attended film sessions at MOMA, met Jonas Mekas, and got to know the New American Cinema, the formation with which Deren had been involved.

Primarily a visual artist with a background in Action Art, Hirsch included, from the very first moment, human movement and the body itself as a primordial axis in her cinema. Wanting to experiment above all else, she surmises her filmmaking as follows:

I think that the twentieth century, to which I belong, has a lot to do with movement and I still feel that I need to achieve a certain mobility, I need to unleash certain things... the fall of fixed values, truth, reality, all that we have been carrying since Modernity in philosophical and metaphysical terms, all this is in ruins at this moment.³

Her early pieces reveal a strong boldness and an interest in transcendental themes such as death, love, sex, and time. She was one of two women in a group comprised of Claudio Caldini, Juan José Mugni, Juan Villola, Horacio Vallregio and Marie Louise Alemann, and Hirsch and Alemann shared the role of leadership. The group gathered under a kind of

artistic activism; what brought them together was not a common aesthetic but the idea of sharing a total freedom of expression and the possibility of collaboration in terms of equipment, technical ability, and efforts to summon a reluctant audience, who usually added up to a mere dozen people. Extensive debates were facilitated in the face of the resistance of an audience that was not used to experimental art, and in the face of the total ignorance on the part of local critics. In situations when they shared a screening with other groups of emerging filmmakers who made narrative or “commercial” films (for example, at a UNCIPAR festival / Unión de Cineastas de Paso Reducido / Short Filmmakers Union), large riots would take place between both groups. The screaming arguments would eventually become another form of Happening.

In 1976, at a UNCIPAR contest, Hirsch’s *Comeout*, with music by Steve Reich, won the first prize in the “Fantasy” category, and *Film Gaudí* by Caldini won the second prize of the “Documentary” category. *Comeout* consists of a single shot that starts with an out-of-focus image and gradually reveals, after about ten minutes, a record player with the revolving record of the soundtrack. The critics, who rarely paid any attention to experimental film, responded very negatively to the prizes obtained by Hirsch and Caldini.⁴ With regards to *Comeout* by Narcisa Hirst [*sic*], erroneously translated as “Salir y mostrar” in the programme notes,⁵ a critic wrote:

We elude all comment about this film, since we could not attend the last screening on the Fantasy category for special reasons. Thus, we’ll limit ourselves to inform the reader about its theme, referred to us by third parties. The film is conformed by only one shot that shows the needle of a record player, which appears to play a broken record. After approximately 15 minutes [*sic*] the arm of the record player lifts automatically, showing that (against expectation) the record was not broken.⁶

With regards to *Film Gaudí* by Claudio Caldini, the critic stated:

Regrettably it is not possible to make a comment on this film without feeling the obligation of taking as reference the films made (on this very subject) by professionals and in superior formats. Maybe that’s the worst mistake of this film, despite the fact that it has nothing to do with it. Nevertheless the concrete and real is that anybody who had seen any of the previous films tends to establish comparisons, most often hideous ones, but which are valid from the point of view of the spectator, and also the critic’s.⁷

The comments suggest that the critic took minimalism for a mistake (comparing it to a broken record), while he did not even mention the cinematography with the long out-of-focus shots, probably because he hadn’t actually attended the screening.

A certain amount of scandal regularly surrounded the public presentations of the group around Hirsch and Alemann. In the same way that their sixties happenings attracted the presence of police who often tried to interrupt the events, the seventies screenings transcended the usual audience of friends and acquaintances, and caught the protest of an angry audience, who, according to Hirsch, tended to make familiar accusations such as: “This film could have been done by my five year old daughter”. More recently, in April 2012 in Buenos Aires, members of the audience booed during a screening of *Comeout*. The film was recently chosen for a Blow-up to 35mm Award at the Viennale 2012, but still manages to discomfort some audiences in Buenos Aires.

The year 1976 proved to be a turning point when the Goethe Institute of Buenos Aires, who used to tour German films throughout Argentina, hosted the group of experimental filmmakers via a connection with Marie-Louise Alemann. The Institute provided them with a room for exhibitions and workshops with well-known filmmakers including the Lithuanian, New York-based artist Werner Nekes. During Nekes' visit the artists lived together for two weeks in a suburb of Buenos Aires, each producing their own 16mm film. By then, Hirsch had already joined the majority of the group in filming on Super 8. This format turned out to be economically viable, and therefore capable of sustaining the complete artistic freedom of the group. During the late seventies Argentina suffered its bloodiest military dictatorship, but the group of experimental filmmakers did not attract too much attention. It was labelled elitist and bourgeois by activists of political cinema, like the Grupo Cine Liberación (Liberation Film Group) founded by Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino, and Gerardo Vallejo, and at the same time was considered repugnant and senseless by mainstream filmmakers. Hirsch, although politically minded, was therefore again marginalized between two positions, but it was this marginality that allowed her to survive: "Because things happened," she says, quoting her mentor, Werner Nekes, "in between frames."⁸

Transposing Poetry into Film

A video runs and a film is projected into its centre, doubling the image.

Cows walk over cows.

Female fingers open the petals of a rose.

A dervish dancer whirls under the gaze of a woman.

The images show clouds, plants, fire or water superimposed over faces, ploughs, and words written on a cave wall.

A curtain opens and a window allows us to look through onto a landscape, while reflecting at the same time the character, as if observing from the other side of the mirror.

These images are part of Hirsch's film *Rumi* (28 minutes, 16mm and video, Argentina, 1999). This work integrates dance as one of the forms of movement of the universe and its creatures. Its metaphors transform time and space into coordinates that are mythological rather than Cartesian. The course drawn by the movements constitutes an eternal present; there is no destiny, no point of arrival, no finishing line. The world turns and turns, in the way the dancer whirls while the landscape (nature at its purest, strongest form) constitutes horizontal lines: a series of peaks of the Andes Mountains, a snowy field, a herd of cows walking in a row. The circular whirling of the eternal present moves against a horizontal timeline, the seasons coming one after another, the sun beginning to fall, the road sustaining the walk of a human. Both directions, the circular and the horizontal, come together on Hirsch's screen. She embroiders poetic images by the heat of the fire that consecrates and consummates the passion.

The film *Rumi* starts with a scene that reveals the huge scenery of the Andes Mountains. The snowy landscape unravels its power in panoramic views while the words of a poem by Rumi appear on a textured surface. Introducing her films at public screenings, Hirsch offers an analogy with literature, arguing that experimental film is like poetry, while commercial film is like a novel. Deren, a poet before she came to filmmaking, believed like Hirsch that experimental films with their non-linear structure and dream-like transitions could visually transpose the experiential qualities of lyric poems. Hirsch's *Rumi* is based on a poem by

Jelaluddin Rumi (Afghanistan, 1207–Turkey, 1273), who left a successful academic career to follow his master Shams e Tabriz to the desert. Meeting Shams caused Rumi's poetry to flow with a mystic eroticism until his death:

See,
 this is love.
 Whoever is not killed for love is carrion.⁹

In Hirsch's artistic career the encounter with Rumi's poetry was significant and became the culmination of a search she had started as an experimental filmmaker in Buenos Aires in the 1970s. The words of the poem gradually appear in the film written on a textured surface, slowly discovered by a spotlight. The image reminds one of Plato's myth of the cave dwellers, in which reality and the perception we have of it are understood as temporary reflections of eternal ideas. Could it be that for Hirsch, the art of filmmaking is what allows us to unite reality with thought? The original "Allegory of the Cave"¹⁰ was intended to demonstrate to Greek philosophical disciples that the real world is not what we see with our eyes, but what we know with our minds. Hirsch, having studied philosophy, revisits the image of the cave to show that what we see and what we know at the end of twentieth century is related through intricate and complex patterns.

Rumi's words are distilled with great deliberation as the film progresses, always lit by the same spotlight and captured by the camera. They delimit, refer to, and anchor the rest of the images that alternate superimposed human bodies, animals and natural elements. All of them are consumed by the passion that is cooked over a low heat.

See...
 this is the dark one
 this is the wedding night
 a never-ending passion

 Become that passion
 and every burden
 will be
 light¹¹

The multiple layers of reality that Hirsch unravels in *Rumi* remind us of Deren's poetic movement between different states of reality in her films. For Deren, no transition is needed between a place outside (such as a forest, or a park, or the beach) and an interior room. One action can be performed across different physical spaces, as in *A Study in Choreography For Camera* (1945), and in this way sews together layers of reality, thereby suggesting continuity between different levels of consciousness. Although Hirsch's editing of movement in *Rumi* tends to favour long shots and repetition rather than the deconstruction and reconstruction of temporal and spatial continuity as in the case of Deren, Hirsch manages to unite the different spaces, interior and exterior, through the gaze of the female character, as she opens curtains and windows, revealing to the spectator both the landscape and her male counterpart.

In *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945/46) Deren uses editing to construct a flow of movement while creating a shared identity between her female protagonists. Hirsch has similarly

been interested in this sense of doubling, casting multiples of her female characters, for example in *Rumi* or in *Ana, ¿dónde estás?*. But Hirsch tends to use a repetition of movement executed by different female figures rather than reconstructing a continuous “real time.” For her, movement is an abstract element that finds expression in life and its cycles.

I Am A Body, Therefore I Am

For Hirsch, the body is always both sexual and mythical. And her female gaze strongly colours her films. She was a member of several groups of women who gathered to work out their own concerns, away from the gaze of husbands, bosses and other men. One such group gathered in the seventies around psychologist Susana Balán, who suggested the idea of filming as a means of looking at their own image and talking to themselves. This proposition led eventually to Hirsch’s film *El mito de Narciso* (2005), which will be discussed further below in this essay. Balán was also responsible for introducing Hirsch to the poetry of Rumi. In the film *Rumi*, Hirsch includes a scene in which a naked male dancer descends a staircase under the gaze of a fully-dressed woman; the fact that she contemplates him appears like a statement by the filmmaker, in which the woman is empowered and actively looking, no longer the object of the male gaze but the subject of her own gaze whilst also gazing at a man’s body.¹²

In *Testamento y vida interior* (*Testament and Interior Life*, 11 minutes, 8mm, Argentina, 1976) the images of a funeral procession in which four people carry a coffin through the city alternate with images of a woman taking a bath in the middle of a park. The film was shot in the same year that the last Argentinean dictatorship came to power in a coup d’état, and the notion of modesty of the prudish Buenos Aires society of the seventies is profoundly challenged by work such as this. But the film is more than a simple urban provocation. The funeral procession follows its path through the city and out into the fields. The relatives of the deceased move forward through a snowy road, dressed in ponchos, to the sound of flamenco music. The image becomes tinged with red and eventually fades into the light of the sun, swallowing the whole of the procession. Her “actors”—cameo appearances of her colleagues—move naturalistically, but her cinema is very far from naturalism. As Hirsch writes about her own process, there is always a note coming from the unconscious that feeds the narrative: “A film starts from a thought, from an image that emerges, that comes out of its context, becomes independent and sends signals. An image trapped in an instant of opening and estrangement of the world.”¹³

Deren’s interest in the unconscious has been evident since her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). In addition to the link which she establishes between different layers of reality, Deren uses filmic techniques such as slow motion and negative imaging, among other effects, to create a sensation of strangeness or estrangement which the characters also often allude to in their performances. For example, in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, we can see Rita Christiani’s expression of astonishment from the very moment that she appears in the film, reinforced by the wind that blows her scarf backwards and by the movement of her arms, which she lifts in front of her as if in defence while entering a dangerous space (the room in which she will face her other-being, played by Deren). Hirsch’s approach to filmmaking is different in that she uses relatively few in-camera and post-production effects (except occasionally to suggest an acceleration of natural events) and her actors tend to have a neutral

facial expressions, almost like masks, as for example the figure of Ana in *Ana, ¿dónde estás?*. In this film, two actresses play the part of Ana, and both adopt equally neutral facial expressions. The viewer cannot interpret their emotions, and it is mostly their movements or actions which carry the progression of the narrative. One actress embodies a woman's wild nature; the other conveys her social duties. The first is very physical; she has several scenes where she does acrobatics in a circus tent. The other tends to interact with people and hosts a party at the climax of the film. In this party sequence Hirsch depicts a game of chess, a recurring motif in Deren's *At Land* (1944). In this film, Deren, in the role of protagonist, intervenes in a chess games she encounters, thus reflecting Deren's own commandment (as artist) of the film's ludic structure. In *Ana*, Hirsch pits her protagonist against several male opponents, thus implying her strategic negotiation of a gendered game.

In her film *A-dios*¹⁴ (22 minutes, 8mm, Argentina, 1982), Hirsch works on the myth of the hero. This film constitutes her explicit tribute to men, to whom she dedicates the film (along with Carl Jung), and in it the naked body, both male and female, receives a sculptural, almost Greek classical treatment. There is something stark in those images of male torsos which include sexual organs but no faces: bodies that are lit, printed in black and white, revealed as if they were made of marble. The artist alternates between these images and other quasi-heroic ones (sportsmen making supreme efforts, warriors entering the sea, nuclear explosions, military parades, Nazi iconography) with the slow advance of a man on crutches, who moves with great difficulty along a path, until he finally reaches a resting place: a pub on the road. In the film Hirsch quotes Simone de Beauvoir, printing text across the filmic image: "Man is in revolt against his carnal state; he sees himself as a fallen god: his curse is to be fallen from a bright and ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of his mother's womb."¹⁵

The hero always has a mission, and the woman-artist shows his failure, his fall, by filming him and accompanying him in his difficult advance on crutches. She looks at that failure with pity but her look gives the warrior, even in his fall, a way to vindicate himself: to get to his resting place by his own means. The warrior always can (and must) vindicate himself. The female gaze is compassionate and admiration is born from this compassion.

This preoccupation with the relationship between women and men is also present in Deren's films. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, which is co-directed with her husband Alexander Hammid, the man appears to be an executor of a mandate. In the beginning of the film when Deren's protagonist enters the house, the male figure is absent and his absence is marked by a series of malfunctioning objects: a knife that falls, a telephone which is disconnected, and an empty bed in the bedroom, with curtains blowing in the wind. Towards the end, just as one of the "Derens" is about to stab the sleeping Deren, she opens her eyes and the male character appears for the first time, facing the camera in a point of view of Deren. He leads Maya upstairs, and on his way puts the telephone handset back into place. Further along, the man enters the house for a second time, this time to witness Deren's character killed by a knife. The co-directors leave any interpretation of the relationship between the woman and the man open, but there is a suggestion that the male figure might be an executor of the woman's intention. In any case, the film suggests that the roles within a couple are not always what they appear.

In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, a man is a heroic figure on a plinth, a marble statue seen against the sky. As statue, the man is at the same time an object of desire and of fear, but

as he jumps off the plinth and comes to life he becomes the connecting element between an ideal world and a real world, just as in *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, where the movements of a male figure connect an outside space with an interior space. This would have been an unusual casting of a male figure for Deren's time. For Hirsch, who belongs to a generation that lived through the seventies with its Feminism, Free Love and Existentialism (hence her quoting of de Beauvoir), the man who comes to life is also an object of compassion for his historical role of hero and his mandate of success, therefore as victims of his own gender mandate. The anger is faded and there is a possibility to play with the male persona in these films.

Nature Provides

Another element that is always present in Hirsch's films is nature. Nature as a force, as power, as a signal of the passing of time, and as the signal of humanity's tragic destiny. Hirsch often immerses herself in Patagonia, the icy, deserted and mountainous southern tip of Argentina. For decades she has spent long periods of time in this region, gathering images from the different seasons of the year, images that also remind us of her alpine childhood. Generous framings of snowy fields, mountain ranges and infinite roads are recurrent in her work. She also dwells on details in which matter, almost in an abstract form, invades the whole frame: blue water, rough rocks, flames silhouetted against the night sky. And, over all those images, time embroiders its own course, which Hirsch emphasizes either by means of the acceleration of the cloud motion or the quiet observation of a sunset.

Today
like any other day
we wake up
empty and frightened¹⁶

These words, again projected on a surface as if in a cave, give rise to visions of nature and its impressive breadth. We see a woman from behind. She raises a curtain and the movement mediates between our gaze and the landscape in the scene. It is the woman who reveals to the viewer her vision of the landscape. Furthermore, the 16mm image, projected into the video image, replays the same scene with a fraction of delay and echoes the woman's gaze looking into the landscape, and by extension, the viewer looking at the woman. From within the landscape, her field of vision, a man moves towards the camera, and towards the audience, carrying his tools.

The film reiterates this discovery, this lifting of the veil between the interior and the exterior, between looking out and looking in. The process is mediated by the hand gesture of a mature woman, of a teenager or of a young girl. It is one woman and many at the same time. At this point the film echoes Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, where the female protagonist shares a sense of identity with three different performers: Anaïs Nin, Rita Christiani, and Deren herself. These three performers perhaps represent a woman at different stages of her life and with different attitudes towards life and society: surprise in the character of Rita, wisdom in Maya and mystery in Anaïs.

In Hirsch's *Rumi*, each time the woman opens the curtain, we see the landscape which she sees and which is the same, but different. The mountains are the same, but different.

The fields are the same, but every time they are lit by a new light and seen from a different angle. Or they are superimposed over a previous or a subsequent scene. Time appears to be different under this new, multi-layered gaze. Through the simultaneity of the 16mm and the video image, as well as the repetition of gestures, what happened before happens again at the same time as what is happening now. Thereby the viewer never runs out of ways of looking, and of seeing.

For Hirsch, nature is a mirror in which the interior is reflected onto the exterior, much like the close relationship between interior and exterior in Deren's cinema. As Brazilian researcher Joao Luiz Vieira states:

Which is the particular experience that this film, as well as the other dance films made [by Maya Deren], offers to the spectators? Seeing and re-seeing *Meshes of the Afternoon*, we are continuously surprised by a sequence of images...that seems to continuously express a conflict between the interior and the exterior, or better, the coexistence of both spheres, expressed by means of dream, of imagination and also from some sort of memory of a sexual fantasy that is in conflict with the external reality. Referring not only to Cinema, but also to her *desire* of Cinema, Deren made clear that she wanted to put into her films "the feeling that a human being experiences in any incident, and not only to register that incident."¹⁷

The proximity or perhaps continuity between interior and exterior that Vieira describes is reflected in the fluid relation between dream, imagination, fantasy and reality in Deren's films. This can be mapped onto the work of Hirsch, and *Rumi* in particular, where the layering of images and the intricate play of a frame within a frame dissolve any clear distinction between seeing and experiencing, watching and being watched, inside and out.

Rumi was originally filmed in 16mm, but since its premiere it has been projected simultaneously in both film and video, with the 16mm image projected as a smaller frame inside the larger video image. It is one of Hirsch's pivotal works of the nineties, during which time she made the difficult transition from film to video. In the seventies Narcisa and her group experimented extensively with projection surfaces, projecting onto water, ice, and smoke in place of the traditional screen. At the occasion of Hirsch's recent retrospective at BAFICI (Buenos Aires International Independent Film) Festival, April 2012, Artistic Director and critic Sergio Wolf described her to be a materialistic filmmaker, working with the material qualities of film.¹⁸ This is confirmed by Daniela Muttis, filmmaker and assistant to Hirsch, who writes with regards to Hirsch's interest in the relation between technologies and perception:

In these processes of schismogenesis¹⁹ between the different technological languages Narcisa settles in as an experimental artist, nurturing herself from all the technological variables. Her ideas try to cross-link forms and concepts, to generate a conflict through simultaneous images, to provoke reflection within the space where the actions happen, inside and outside the screen.²⁰

The experience of this double projection is particularly touching for the audience and turns the usual movie-theatre experience into one akin to ritual. When both projections run simultaneously, a kind of picture-in-picture effect is generated, but far from the perfect synchronization of digital technology, it causes a degree of mismatch between

the different qualities of the projected images. Seeing the almost mythical figure of the older filmmaker operating the 16mm projector adds a performative aspect to the already poetic images. Meanwhile, listening to the sound of the film move through the projector provides an underlying cushion to the soundtrack and adds another degree of presence to the experience. As this mechanistic soundtrack can be heard beneath that of the video, the combination of both soundtracks and images is experienced as aleatoric. As viewers, we contemplate, or witness these images, which tell us that nothing is concluded, nothing is completely under control, nothing has a definite ending. In *Rumi*, cows can walk over other cows. As Daniela Muttis argues:

The ritual that Narcisa proposes is the experience of chance, the immersion in the body of the moving image but also in the body of each spectator who traces their own personal journey. The combination of two simultaneous readings that are offset in time. What lies beneath are not the coincidences of the forms, but the possibility of simultaneous thoughts that are superimposed in that search for relationships and conceptual issues, where she proposes to exceed the limits of the languages that technology imposes...The images of her films are part of a mirror that produces the action of their portrait, and the technology is a tool that enables their distortion, by pushing on towards the new, the unpredictable.²¹

This is how the landscape changes, again and again. The harsh winter gives way to spring, the relationship between the woman and the man changes. The transitional moment is marked by images of one of the elements of nature, fire, and the fire is cooking a sacrificial lamb. The next time that the woman opens the curtain, we see the landscape of spring: grass has grown on the land that had been covered by snow. Birds sing over the sound of a flute. The man is harvesting what he had sown, and his image is followed by one verse from Rumi's poetry, superimposed over dark water:

die
of passion
passion²²

A vase full of flowers of a strong orange color stands in front of a different window: the woman who opens the curtain seems older than the previous one, and a new performer incarnates the man's character, a dancer. The male figure stops being a collector, a hunter. He stops carrying out tasks that are necessary for his survival and appears as a beautiful, naked body walking down a spiral staircase. He sees a woman lying with her back to the camera, fully dressed. She is watching him, which reiterates a leitmotif of the film, the female gaze. As Hirsch has stated: "*Rumi* is a film about the gaze, about the female gaze."²³

The man reiterates a descent, a landing from a distant place in the unconscious carrying of life in his member and in the intensity of his gaze. He allows himself to be watched. The woman, as always situated by a window, which this time around reflects plants as a part of nature that is present and vibrant, is holding a rose in her hands. She touches its petals, deflowering it.

This tactile contact, a process of deflowering, is repeated over and over again across layers of images that blend with each other: reflections of plants, pupils looking at the camera, words travelling over the screen:

I say:
 I burn like a moth in the candle of your face
 You say:
 Die
 Die!²⁴

In this moment the man starts dancing and whirls interminably, his skirt circling around his body as the camera pans horizontally, taking him (and the viewer) through new landscapes: a riverside path, a field, flames and mountains. This superimposition adds to the one produced by the double projection technique, multiplying the possible readings. *Rumi* deals with the passing of time. This theme runs through the work of Hirsch, both generally, with reference to the transitioning of elements of nature, and more particularly, through her treatment of the ageing process of humans, especially women. In *El mito de Narciso* (*The Myth of Narcissus*, 20 minutes, 16mm, 8mm and video, Argentina, 2005) she explores the issue of "self-image," investigating the possibility or impossibility of knowing oneself. For this purpose, she used interviews that were made at different times with the same women, confronting and talking about her own image. Using a voiceover, Hirsch asks:

Who am I? Am I the one who looks or the one who is looked at? We are always two, that is the dialectic, and between the two of us there is a space. That's why I see myself so strange and so foreign, just as I have always seen myself. And that separation, that distance, would be the no man's land from which utopia could arise.²⁵

At the age of 85, Hirsch continues to work and rework her images, bringing new and younger audiences into contact with an Argentinean experimental cinema they never knew existed. For the retrospective that the prestigious festival BAFICI²⁶ dedicated to Narcisa Hirsch in April 2012, the filmmaker digitized and re-edited her film *Aída* (6:41 minutes, 8mm and video, Argentina, 1976–2012) in which the dancer Aída Laib plunges into a frenzied dance that transports her body into an ecstasy of movement. The context is a living room in an apartment, probably the dancer's home. Seen through contemporary eyes it looks somewhat like a pastlife memory, not unlike the experience of watching *Study in Choreography for Camera* at the moment when the foot of dancer Talley Beatty enters Deren's mid-1940s apartment. The viewer sees the dancer occupy an everyday habitat, but cannot escape the feeling that the body has entered into a different dreamlike time. The viewer's gaze activates the temporal transportations implied by these *danced* spatial transitions.

In *Aída*, images of the actual dance alternate with images of Aída's naked body in a foetal position, while the rhythm of the movements is altered through the process of editing. Layers of images are superimposed showing us details at unexpected moments. Aída's dance becomes a dance of the gaze, a ritual in which the audience takes part by simply being there, watching images that address the senses. A strange sense of empathy is provoked, as audiences are invited to feel with the film, despite knowing that they are other. Hirsch says in the voiceover of *El mito de Narciso*: "Creation in the space, creation in no man's land. It is like love: it is not a fusion; it is separation, distance, to let the other one be."²⁷

One of the common elements between Hirsch and Deren's work is a feminine gaze and the presence of nature in their work, with nature being both the interior and the exterior. In *Meshes* the interior—Deren's face—is seen through the window as part of an exterior; in

Rumi the exterior is reflected into the interior. Nature is a possible portal for a flow between the two, and it is also the passing of time. Deren and Hirsch share a view of human movement as a means to enact rituals of passage between different levels of consciousness, an interest that also finds expression in the use of multiplied female characters. But above all, they are both courageous women who challenged prejudices of their era, embracing film as a passport and as a way of shaping the discourses around them.

Some of the filmmakers from Narcisa Hirsch's experimental group still gather today to do screenings in the intimate setting of her home. Hirsch owns several projectors (8mm, 16mm, and video) and enjoys being a hostess for a crowd of filmmakers, musicians and visual artists. Maya Deren, who frequently hosted screenings at her Morton Street apartment, shared with Hirsch a particular connectedness with the materiality of film and its associated apparatuses. In a personal notebook of 1947, Deren wrote: "here, suddenly is the strange fever and excitement. Is it because holding film in one's hand, one holds life in one's hand?" And she continues:

The immediate physical contact with the film, the nearness of the image, the automatic muscular control of its speed—the fact that, as I wound, my impulses and reactions towards the film translated themselves into muscular impulses and so to the film directly, with no machine-buttons, switches, etc.—between me and the film...This physical contact creates a sense of intimacy. It is not an image independent of me, projected on a wall, of which I am a spectator. It is immediately, directly, uniquely for my eyes. It comes to life out of the energy of my muscles.²⁸

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was published in Caldas and Blum, *Ensaíos Contemporâneos de Videodança*.
2. This and other quotations of Narcisa Hirsch were obtained during a series of interviews that the author of this essay had with the artist between September 2011 and December 2012.
3. Torres.
4. Translated from Claudio Caldini's blog: http://eldevenirdelaspiedras.blogspot.com.ar/2012_03_01_archive.html
5. "Salir y mostrar" is the skewed translation of the title of Hirsch's film *Comeout* in the program of the UNCIPAR festival. It does not translate the real meaning of the title, which is also the title of the music piece by Steve Reich.
6. Taken from an online blog by Claudio Caldini: http://eldevenirdelaspiedras.blogspot.com.ar/2012_03_01_archive.html
7. Ibid.
8. Torres.
9. Rumi, Jelaluddin. All excerpts from his poetry are quoted by Narcisa Hirsch in her film *Rumi*.
10. Plato. The Allegory is written as a dialogue narrated by Plato's friend Socrates and Plato's brother Glaucon at the beginning of Book VII, 514a–520a.
11. Rumi, qtd. in Hirsch.
12. See note XXV.
13. 14th BAFICI Festival Catalogue.
14. Translation note: The title *A-dios* is a word game that translates both as "Good-bye" and "To-God".
15. Translation note: Translated from Spanish from *El segundo sexo*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999.
16. Rumi, qtd. in Hirsch.
17. Vieira (orig. emphasis, my trans.) Deren's original quotation can be found in *Writings of Maya Deren*.

18. Sergio Wolf, in his public introduction to the audience at the occasion of Hirsch's recent retrospective at BAFICI Festival, April 2012. See end part of this essay for a comparison with Deren's materialistic and physical relationship to film.

19. Jutoran and Ricardi. As an anthropologist in New Guinea in 1927, studying the latmul tribe, Bateson coined the term "schismogenesis" as "a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals."

20. Muttis.

21. Ibid.

22. Rumi, qtd. in Hirsch.

23. Presentation of *Rumi* at the Alliance Française de Buenos Aires, August 2011. Discussion with the audience.

24. Rumi, qtd. in Hirsch.

25. Hirsch, voiceover in *El mito de Narciso*.

26. BAFICI (<http://www.bafici.gov.ar/home12/web/es/biographies/show/v/director/810.html>)

27. Hirsch, voiceover in *El mito de Narciso*.

28. Deren, "From The Notebook of Maya Deren," 21.

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Media

A-dios (1982). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 22:00 min., 8 mm. Argentina.

Aída (1976-2012) Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 6:41 min., 8mm and video. Argentina.

Ana, ¿dónde estás? (*Ana, Where Are You?*) (1987). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 65:00 min., 16mm. Argentina.

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

Bebés (*Babies*) (1974). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 10:37 min., 8mm. Argentina.

Comeout (1971). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 10:00 min., 8mm. Argentina.

El mito de Narciso (*The Myth of Narcissus*) (2005). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 20:00 min., 16mm, 8mm and video. Argentina.

Marabunta (1967). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 7:55 min., 16mm. Argentina.

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

Retrato de una artista como ser humano (*Portrait of an Artist as a Human Being*) (1968).Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 5:16 min., 16mm. Argentina.

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

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

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

Testamento y vida interior (*Testament and Interior Life*) (1976). Dir. Narcisa Hirsch. 11:00 min., 8 mm. Argentina.