

The Poetic Film in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, or Maya Deren's Ritualistic Cinema¹

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Abstract

This paper wishes to address the dialogue between Maya Deren's cinema and writings, and Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935). The connections between both author's stances remain largely ignored, something that Nichols underlines in Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde (2001). As such, this paper is, firstly, interested in tackling this gap in the literature about Deren, deemed the mother of American avant-garde film. Secondly, this paper aims to, through this comparative analysis, elucidate how reading Benjamin's essay in tandem with Deren's An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film (1946) and some of her essays, can deepen our understanding of her ideas about art in the twentieth century, and beyond. Crucially, we conclude that Deren is somewhat opposed to Benjamin's assertions about the decay of artistic "aura", because she works outside of the Hollywood machine. Indeed, Deren's experimental work, although aware of the illusory nature of film, is deeply influenced by ritual and tradition, as she references the likes of T. S. Eliot and Shakespeare in her films, which also explore ritualistic practices. Furthermore, Deren considers the filmmaker as the centre of the creative act, and technology only a tool. After all, Deren's independent cinema may be closer to the "theology of art", that Benjamin's sees as threatened by modernity, than one might think. As such, Deren proposes a modern, yet traditional and humanistic artistic philosophy, in a century already aware of the growing pervasiveness of the machine.

Keywords: Art and Technology, Avant-Garde Cinema, Comparative Reading, Maya Deren, Walter Benjamin

Benjamin and Deren: two flames of the modern past

This paper wishes to introduce a comparative reading of Maya Deren's writings, particularly *An Anagram of Ideas on Art and Film* (1946), originally published as a chapbook, and Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935).

Benjamin and Deren are two voices of the first half of the twentieth century that perhaps unexpectedly share more than just certain intellectual perspectives, as we will come to see. Both were born in Europe – Benjamin in Berlin, in 1892, and Deren in Kiev, in 1917, and both hailed from assimilated Jewish families. Sadly, neither of them lived long enough to see their fiftieth decade of life. Nonetheless, the two authors' work has far outlived them, in a manner reminiscent of a poem Deren wrote at seventeen: "Let my life be flame, though short, so

bright / That in its burning makes a day from night." (Maya Deren Collection, 1934).

Bearing the metaphorical torch lit by Deren, the goal of this essay will be to ponder on how the ideas of a German philosopher, and a naturalized American artist and theorist, about art and technology may converge in certain aspects and diverge in others. This effort is a preliminary inquiry into the connections that can be revealed between Deren's theoretical and artistic concepts and those of other relevant thinkers. Moreover, this discussion may go beyond elucidating how two consequential authors conceived of modern art and cinema in their time, and suggest how their ideas on how humans relate to technology and art may still be of relevance. As such, we go looking for the lights that lead downwards into the past – a past that crafted the present.

Poetry in the machine – or how to create in the modern age

The connections between both author's stances about the relationship of art to modern technology remain largely ignored, something that Bill Nichols, the editor of *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (2001), writes in the introduction to the volume, as he enumerates what he considers to be Deren's five paramount contributions:

It is possible to summarize some of the radical transformations that Maya Deren sought to inspire: 1) in film form, which for her possesses both an inviolate link to questions of ethics and responsibility and a fundamental obligation to reshape the realist elements comprising it in ways that alter or transfigure them; 2) in our understanding of techniques that work to modify our perception, sensibility, and self-conception in historically and culturally distinct ways (a position that has yet to be compared extensively to Walter Benjamin's pronouncements on this topic); 3) in alternative film practices, for which her exemplary acts of self-promotion, distribution, and exhibition served as a vivid model; 4) in our understanding of the woman artist as a figure distinct from but in no wise less than the prevailing model of the male artist; and 5) in our regard for the self, or subject, with her efforts to understand hysteria, trance, and ritual as socially situated acts of collective association rather than as personal dysfunction. Each of these gestures went against the grain of dominant practices; each incurred resistance and misunderstanding. Each remains an emblem of Deren's extraordinary willingness to transgress boundaries and reformulate their contours. (Nichols 2001, 13-14)

Point number two is the one this essay will concern itself with. In it, Nichols identifies a significant gap in the literature about Deren's work. Although the book this excerpt is taken from was published in the year 2001, I have failed to find any reading or analysis that tackles this relevant topic. As Nichols points out earlier in his "Introduction", Deren's writings "represent a brilliant body of work comparable to that of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, David MacDougall, and Trinh T. Minh-ha." (Nichols 2001, 7). Nonetheless, her wide range of essays, which merge her views on the philosophy of art and the art of filmmaking, have remained underappreciated. Nichols attributes this phenomenon to the status of incompletion of the greatest biographical project about Deren – *The Legend of Maya Deren* (1984, 1988) – but also to the rapidly ascending artistic movements that gained prominence after Deren's unexpected death in 1961 (Nichols 2001). The key issue for Nichols is that the spirit that fed Deren's oeuvre and overall work ethic, one opposed to improvisation and pure self-expression, was at odds with the currents that came into the spotlight in the following decades. With the new millennium, new works, both academic and otherwise, brought new attention to Deren's contributions and legendary figure – she is after all considered to be the mother of American avant-garde cinema (Turim 2001, 78). Still, there remain aspects of her work to be explored and that gain much clarity through comparative readings.

Thus, this paper aims to, through this comparative analysis, elucidate how reading Benjamin's essay in tandem with Deren's *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* and other texts of hers, can deepen our understanding of her ideas about art in the twentieth century, and beyond. In my comparative reading I will be looking at the parallels in Benjamin's and Deren's texts, echoes in terms of ideas and references, as well as disparities. My starting point is the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", originally published in 1935.

Benjamin begins his most famous essay with an epigraph by French symbolist poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945). The quote, which dates from a 1928 essay, addresses the decline of what Valéry calls "the ancient craft of the Beautiful". I would underline this striking passage of the epigraph: "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial." (Valéry 1964, 125). As we read these carefully selected words, we immediately understand that Benjamin is concerned with the astounding impact of modern technology on the arts. An impact which continues to be felt till this day, through an evolution whose rhythm seems to become more accelerated as time goes by.

Indeed, Benjamin takes a cue from Valéry's perceptive comments to establish his notion of "aura" – the aura of a work of art is, to him, "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction." (Benjamin 2007, 221). This idea is, of course, based on another fundamental concept: "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."

(Benjamin 2007, 220). As Benjamin puts forth his observations on the decay of the authenticity of art, as technological means are rendering it increasingly less "valuable" through the overwhelming ease which one can reproduce objects, he proposes that the underlying cause for the death of aura is the lost connection to tradition. He then describes how the industrialization process has separated, more and more, art from ritual, which was its genesis:

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult... In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. (Benjamin 2007, 223-224)

If we turn our attention to the word Maya Deren selects to define the common nature binding all forms of art she chooses "ritualistic". In an exposition which echoes Benjamin's, she too describes the intimate connection between art and its religious or spiritual beginnings:

For want of a better term which can refer to the quality which the art forms of various civilizations have in common, I suggest the word ritualistic. I am profoundly aware of the dangers in the use of this term, and of the misunderstandings which may arise, but I fail, at the moment, to find a better word. Its primary weakness is that, in strictly anthropological usage, it refers to an activity of a primitive society which has certain specific conditions: a ritual is anonymously evolved; it functions as an obligatory tradition; and finally, it has a specific magical purpose. None of these three conditions apply, for example, to Greek tragedy. On the other hand, they are, in a sense, exterior to the ritual form itself, since they refer to its origin, its preservation and its function. Moreover, it is hardly beside the point that all art forms were originally a part of such rituals and that the form itself, within itself, has remained strikingly intact in general outline, in spite of the changes in these exterior conditions. It is to these constant elements, which seem to me of major importance since they exist simultaneously in unrelated cultures, to which I have reference. (Deren 2019, 57-58)

As we can gather from the two quotes above included, both Deren and Benjamin acknowledge the ritualistic cradle in which art came to life, and both authors also reference at the end of both passages, that although remote, this original trait can still be identified, even in modernity.

In his explanation, Benjamin invokes the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, or, as he puts it "a theology of art" (Benjamin 2007, 224), as a key moment in the evolution of art's relationship with ritual and tradition. According to Benjamin, this doctrine was a reaction to the crisis brought on by new means of reproduction, such as photography. In such a way, that for a period of time, artists dealt with such threats by elevating art above the less and less relevant ritualistic aspects that used to define it, so that art did not need a function or purpose. Thus, Benjamin concludes:

An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. (Benjamin 2007, 224)

As the twentieth century progresses, it is undeniable that art and its traditional beginnings are becoming more and more estranged. A paramount issue in this evolving relationship is, as underlined by Benjamin, "the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life." (Benjamin 2007, 223). Regarding this subject, Deren makes harsh criticisms of what she deems the "subjective audience":

Even antiquity does not always protect such works from dismemberment by the subjective audience. But in contemporary art, and especially when the elements are drawn from reality, the audience is certain to approach the work as if it were altogether a natural phenomenon. They isolate from it those elements which they find most personally evocative, and interpret them according to their personal context of experience. Such an individualism implies a complete refusal to recognize the intention of the artist in creating a specific context, and the meaning which is conferred upon the elements by this context. It results in the incredible platitude, intended always as a compliment, that in the great works of art every one can read his own personal meaning. (Deren 2019, 66)

Deren's objections to the "dismemberment" that art suffers at the hands of the people who consume it, finds some parallels in Benjamin's comments on how the masses crave the possession of objects of art:

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines

and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. (Benjamin 2007, 223)

The process through which the aura of a work is destroyed – by its personal consumption through its reproduction – can be related to Deren's idea of dismemberment. Deren was not making use of a term like "aura", but as we deepen this reading, we may come to see how she proposes her own analogous idea. Her criteria for the "purity" of art is related to the idea of craft versus self-expression. Earlier in her *Anagram*, Deren expresses her distaste for those who pretend, in her eyes, to create art:

The art world today is overwhelmed by the products of arrogant amateurs and dilettantes who refuse to respect their "profession" by even so much as a dedication to its skills and techniques. The emphasis is upon spontaneity in the act of creation, although this is the last possible means by which inevitability can be created in the work itself. It is revealing that the exercise of skill—professionalism in its highest sense—is at an apparent all-time low in art. The prevalent feeling is that you, too, can be an artist in three easy lessons, providing you are "sensitive" or "observant," and so can discover, in the world outside or in the microcosmos of your own tortures, some bit of reality which has not already been exploited. The central problem is to represent it with a fair degree of fidelity. (Deren 2019, 63)

Such bellowing statements have their roots in a central doctrine to Deren's philosophy: the work of art does not need a tether to the "real world". In fact, she argues that:

To renounce the natural frame of reference—the natural logic and integrity of an existent reality—is not, as is popularly assumed, an escape from the labor of truth. On the contrary, it places upon the artist the entire responsibility for creating a logic as dynamic, integrated and compelling as those in which nature abounds. To create a form of life is, in the final analysis, much more demanding than to render one which is ready-made. (Deren 2019, 64)

Unlike many artists who came before, and even after her time, Deren was a more of a classicist, opposed to ideas of improvisational creation, a stance that namely separated her from one of her protégés, Jonas Mekas (Nichols 2001, 12). Deren was in fact a perfectionist, something her mother attested was obvious from early childhood (Clark et al. 1984, 28), and she evolved into an artist who cherished craft above expression.

One of her great contributions was the establishment of a pathway for independent filmmakers, eventually developing into what would become known as the New American Cinema (Sudre 1996, 9). Naturally, Deren could not accomplish this without being a staunch defender of the artist's craft.

Deren's rejection of mere "self-expression" as art also finds a kinship with Benjamin's remarks in another essay, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov". In this text, Benjamin states: "The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to [be] impressed upon his memory." (Benjamin 2007a, 91). This idea resonates with Deren's words in *Anagram*, about the importance of "an unprejudiced receptivity, free of personal requirements and preconceptions" (Deren 2019, 67). Returning to the issue of craftsmanship, still in the essay "Storyteller", Benjamin prefaces the need to be self-forgetful, and thus not narcissistic, with the deterioration of the art of storytelling. According to the German philosopher, storytelling is a dying craft, especially after the first World War (Benjamin 2007a, 83-84). There is, in Benjamin's view, a conflict between story and information, information being an overwhelming presence as the twentieth century progresses. A story, however, is "different" from information: "It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time." (Benjamin 2007a, 90). Deren would likely agree with Benjamin's assertions about the timelessness of art, to prove that we need only remember her statement that "the most enduring works of art create a mythical reality, which cannot refer to one's own personal observations." (Deren 2019, 66).

So far, we have been discussing ideas which inevitably share a common thread: tradition. The question of how modern art relates to its ancestry, and its history, is indeed, at the centre of the current analysis. As P. Adams Sitney expounded in his book *Modernist Montage* (1990), tradition is at the heart of the main paradoxes of modernism. There are, consequently, two axes of this "antinomy" – "The first recognizes that innovation is the sole legitimate means of guaranteeing a link to tradition.", whereas the second "defends a position in history and stakes claims for creative freedom by making works that aggressively assert their autonomy." (Sitney 1990, 1). Nonetheless, despite the outward desire for independence, Sitney underlines that even the works belonging to this second grouping are not disconnected from tradition, but their links to the past are often "marked by internal allusions, often obscure quotations, and reductive schemata." (Sitney 1990, 1). The elucidative readings Sitney proposes in his book corroborate a certain inescapable tie to the "forefathers", to those who came before, even when it is cloaked underneath modern experimentation. What rises to the surface is the fact that, within this kind of perspective, works of art are in one way or another, whether by their embracing or rejection of the canon and the past, defined by a common tradition. This idea is, in other words, the central concern that drives Deren's filmic creations.

She specifically states that she aims to address the shared primordial mythological storytelling spirit that binds all human beings:

In setting out to communicate principles, rather than to relay particulars, and in creating a metaphor which is true to the idea rather than to the history or experience of any one or several individuals, I am addressing myself not to any particular group but to a special area and definite faculty in every man – to that part of him which creates myths, invents divinities and ponders, for no practical purpose whatsoever, on the nature of things. This is an area in which few men spend much time and in which no man can spend all of his time. But it is this, which is the area of art, which makes us human and without which we are, at best, intelligent beasts. The intent of these films, then, is to create a mythological, poetic experience. (Deren 2019b, 255)

We should consider how Deren incorporates tradition and ritual throughout her interdisciplinary oeuvre, a practice which, looking back, is aligned with the remarks she makes as an established filmmaker, as we may read above. Deren is, for instance, engaging with Shakespearean tradition when she names some of the dancing figures in her last finished film, *The Very Eye of Night* (1958). Oberon and Titania, names which were made famous by Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (1660). The same may be said about her writing of Shakespearean sonnets and other traditionally inspired forms (Maya Deren Collection 1926-1945). Her poems, all of which can be consulted in the Maya Deren Collection, at Boston University, show us that her interest in the tradition of art dates back to her childhood, and it never ceases. Deren's study of poets like Shakespeare, the romantics like Byron and Keats, and modern names such as Eliot, all of which were themselves interested in ancient rituals and stories infused Deren's own imagination from an early age. Such influences seem to culminate in films like *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), a short imbued with classical gestures, and later on with an attachment to Haitian culture and its rituals. All in all, we may say that Deren kept searching for an understanding of artistic tradition, and her search led her to a study of cultural religious rituals, which as Benjamin examined were likely the birthplace of art. This preoccupation heavily determined Deren's cinematic approach, certainly leading her to make choices unusual for her time period and even for future epochs.

Deren's desire to create a cinema in touch with the mythical nature of men, as she put it, was clearly at odds with much of the products that the Hollywood machine advertised. Deren was writing during the 1940s and 1950s, mainly, and Benjamin wrote his most well-known essay in the mid-1930s. Both authors acknowledge and address the well-known "movie star" business of these decades with a critical tone. For instance, Benjamin naturally associates the "cult of the movie star" with the death of aura:

The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers' capital sets the fashion as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art. (Benjamin 2007b, 231)

Benjamin recognizes the commodification of the leading actors to a pedestal, to the point these people are indeed transformed into perfected images to be desired – constructed products, designed for the masses. This shallowness is, of course, antithetical to the idea of aura – such images are made not to be unique but, rather, to be enticing and profitable. In this kind of cinema, Benjamin only praises its contrariety to the tradition of art before it. Such that, this kind of cinematic production would fit into Sitney's "second class" of modern art – the kind that seems to break with traditional forms. Maya Deren, whose first short film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, was made in 1943 with her then-husband, filmmaker Alexander Hammid, for an extremely low-budget, was a fierce opponent and critic of the Hollywood system. The woman who famously said "I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick." (Clark et al. 1988, 418) was openly opposed to the commodified production line that utilized the deified faces of men and women to sell movies.² Deren's goal was, in fact, to create an artistic environment where film could thrive as a legitimate art form. This meant that it could not depend on the gargantuan budgets of Tinseltown, but the independent filmmaker could alternatively pride himself, or herself, on being not only a true lover of the art, but a free creative (Deren 2019a). To Deren, these attributes were more valuable and dignified than any hefty check could offer. Still, Deren recognizes the contributions that earlier Hollywood productions made towards what she called "archetypal images":

In painting, the image is an abstraction of the aspect; in photography, the abstraction of an idea produces the archetypal image. This concept is not new to motion pictures, but its development was interrupted by the intrusions of theatrical traditions into the film medium. The early history of film is studded with archetypal figures: Theda Bara, Mary Pickford, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, etc. These appeared as personages, not as people or personalities, and the films which were structured around them were like monumental myths which celebrated cosmic truths. (Deren 2019d, 157)

Since Deren understands that an artistic medium is only functioning as "purely" artistic when it remains tied to tradition and myth, she criticizes the evolution of Hollywood towards a style that distances movies from what they are essentially made for, by trying to emulate previous artforms, such as modern theatre, with its desire for realism (Deren 2019d, 157). By

thus depriving cinema of its "creative dimension", Hollywood, in Deren's eyes, is depleting the aura of the work it proposes, to use Benjamin's term.

Indeed, Deren and Benjamin see eye to eye in this aspect of their criticism of the "mainstream" movie business. However, Deren considers that some of the earlier movies produced by Hollywood gave audiences long-lasting mythical figures, who, in her perspective brought such efforts closer to what the artistic cinema should aim towards. Although Benjamin considers that the concoction of such movie stars is mainly empty of aura, or unique depth, Deren's problem with certain choices made by Hollywood is mainly to do with, firstly, its reliance on realism, and, secondly, its authoritarian economy – a system built on immense resources but predicated on a lack of creative freedom for most artists.

In Deren's universe, the issue of creative control is thus tied to the bigger question of creative experimentation. The absence of creativity is precisely what Deren sees as missing in most films, at the time that she is writing. Moreover, Deren considers that the lack of experimentation within the medium of the moving image is astonishing because it means that very few are taking advantage of the "twentieth-century art form", since cinema is not just a product of the new age humanity is living through, but it is the most adequate medium, or art form, to explore the very questions which this modern life raises:

It is almost as if the new age, fearful that whatever was there already would not be adequate, had undertaken to arrive completely equipped, even to the motion-picture medium, which, structured expressly to deal in movement and time-space relationships, would be the most propitious and appropriate art form for expressing, in terms of its own paradoxically intangible reality, the moral and metaphysical concepts of the citizen of this new age. (Deren 2019d, 166-167)

Benjamin makes a similar point in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", when he details the process through which films have become the art objects which most relate to the experience of the modern human:

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art. (Benjamin 2007b, 233-234)

We may notice that Benjamin is comparing, via the surgeon metaphor, the filmmaker to an aggressive cutter, a carver of images. The illusion of cinema is to Benjamin far more aggressive and disturbing than that of other art forms such as painting, and also more scientific. The main reason Benjamin proposes for this, is the fact that the artifice of montage is hidden from view – the equipment used is not perceptible by the ignorant eye of, perhaps, most audience members attending a film screening. This element, the illusory nature of cinema, is extensively addressed by Deren who rather than defending a cinema which pretends to hide its deeply manipulative nature, proposes one which leans into it. In this regard, Deren makes another analogous remark to Benjamin's previous comment when in, *Anagram*, she writes that the "the ritualistic form is much more the art equivalent of modern science than the naturalism which claims to be so based" (Deren 2019b, 59). Here Deren is referring to a dichotomy of "*conscious manipulation designed to create effect*, in contrast to the spontaneous compulsions of expression—and in its results—*the new, man-made reality*" (Deren 2019b, 59). Once more, we return to the significance of the artist's creative hand, the one that manipulates.

Benjamin also discusses in his renowned essay the techniques through which cinema manipulates time and space: "with the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject." (Benjamin 2007b, 236). As he underlines, this "new" art form allows for a "new" vision, but also modern treatments of special and temporal coordinates. This kind of manipulation is deeply explored by Deren, who often plays with time and space in oneiric fashion. It is precisely this dream-like personality that Deren imbues her films with, that functions as the key to her cinema.

Another aspect which Benjamin highlights in the long excerpt above cited, is the fragmentary essence of filmmaking. Fragmentation is certainly one central question of modernity – explored by poets like T. S. Eliot, the fragmentary experience of reality and time is also an object of study for Deren, who was deeply influenced by Eliot (Keller 2015, 36). This is only one of various threads connecting Deren's poetry and films. But above all, I wish to highlight how Deren's cinema functions within a poetic framework. The single most important moment pertaining to this question took place on October 28, 1953, at the symposium "Poetry and the Film", in New York City. The panel, of which Willard Maas was as chairman, was composed by Maya Deren, Parker Tyler, Dylan Thomas, and Arthur Miller. It is on this occasion that Deren presents her concept of verticality, also named "vertical time", which she defines as:

the relationship between the images in dreams, in montage, and in poetry—is... they are related because they are held together by either an emotion or a meaning that they have in common,

rather than by the logical action. In other words, it isn't that one action leads to another action (this is what I would call a "horizontal" development), but they are brought to a center, gathered up, and collected by the fact that they all refer to a common emotion, although the incidents themselves may be quite disparate. Whereas, in what is called a "horizontal" development, the logic is a logic of actions. In a "vertical" development, it is a logic of a central emotion or idea which attracts to itself even disparate images which contain that central core which they have in common. (Deren et al. 2000, 178)

This idea, although sadly misunderstood at the time, is not only a fascinating window into Deren's conceptual thinking, but it also enriches the web she creates through her own interpretation of artistic heritage. Deren is particularly interested in the notion of diving into the emotion, the myth, the idea. Not only is this true of her structural choices, but also of her motifs and archetypes. Within a movement downwards, just like in her film *At Land* (1944), Deren is continuously engaging in forms of katabasis – a descent into the underworld. This motion downwards, "down the rabbit hole", is namely referenced in an evocative passage from Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which upon first reading it, impressed upon me the sensation that I was faced with a description of Deren's vertical waking dreams:

One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld – a land of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. All day long, suspecting nothing we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. (Benjamin 1999, 84)

It is, furthermore, haunting to notice how Benjamin uses identical expressions to those Deren employs in a poem she titled "Lazarene". In this poem, written in 1942, in Los Angeles, Deren speaks in the voice of a woman who descends into a nether world and returns from it. The journey is made through "dark corridors grown long familiar" (Deren 1988, 64). The descent is universal and prosaic, since for each person "there is a private passage -- a personal, dry Styx beginning / with the sliding door behind the Persian carpet" (Deren 1988, 64). The river Styx is the river which one must cross to the underworld in Greek mythology, and with this reference, as well as the feminine version of the resurrected biblical Lazarus, a figure Deren likely borrows from Eliot, she is clearly building a poetic myth which adopts elements from older myths and legends. However, just as Benjamin does in the excerpt from his project about the passages of Paris – nineteenth century glass and steel hallways made to be crossed on a daily basis by Parisians – Deren also places the

oneiric journey to the afterlife within the context of mundane places and objects. Both seem to be saying that the sites of our ancestral chimeras and poems are all around us, and we continuously pass through them, even in the architecture of modern life.

This poem is but one example of how Deren revives traditional and mythical characters in her modern oeuvre. Although I may spend countless lines detailing elsewhere the growing constellation of references in Deren's films to not only her own poems but to older classical texts and archetypes as well, the present essay does not need to concern itself with such an exhaustive account. Deren herself categorizes her films as poetic works which aim to emulate the mythological storytelling essence of primeval tales and images shared by humans who could hardly imagine the wars their descendants would be having over machines they created. The point that most concerns the present discussion is that Deren, as an "avant-garde" artist working with a camera, remains deeply connected to tradition. This possibility is one which Benjamin does not quite account for in his essay, at least not in the way Deren conceives of it.

The human and the machine: can art still be our ritual?

In a broad sense, Walter Benjamin is hinting that film, as a direct descendant of photography, is losing what would make it a unique work of art – its connection to tradition, or the ritualistic history of art – because it is one more product of industrialized modernity. Indeed, movies lose the typical uniqueness that would entail aura – they are, increasingly, reproducible. Moreover, films are experienced through time and are inherently modern in the sense that they can emulate not only scientific tools of probing and manipulation, but they can create effects which speak directly to the subjective and fragmented temporal experiences modernity has brought on. Therefore, to Benjamin, the film seems to be quite distant from the traditional work of art.

It is interesting to notice how Maya Deren, here in a position somewhat opposed to Benjamin's, places her notion of, firstly, art in the mid-twentieth century, then, cinema, as inheritors of the traditions and rituals that far precede that time. This classicist approach does not and cannot erase the technical and technological defining characteristic of cinema. Still, Deren offers an alternative to the profit driven Hollywood pictures and propagandist warmongers. Deren proposes a way of thinking and making films which unlike many of her contemporaries, and predecessors, does not aim to cut with an artistic legacy of past generations and epochs, but build upon it, because in her words "culture is cumulative" (Deren 2019d, 128). The proposal of poetic cinema, or a cinema which functions within precepts common to poetic thinking, is perhaps the major evidence that Deren wishes not only to establish a way of making films that engages with tradition, but also a technical relationship in which the artist controls the machine – the art instrument. This is why Deren is continually adamant that:

Cameras do not make films; film-makers make films. Improve your films not by adding more equipment and personnel but by using what you have to its fullest capacity. The most important part of your equipment is yourself: your mobile body, your imaginative mind, and your freedom to use both. Make sure you do use them. (Deren 2019a, 18)

As a filmmaker, who was first a writer and poet, Deren's artistic ideology puts the artist at the centre of the creative process. Machines are therefore tools to be manipulated by said artist, although the greatest tool the artist possesses is the human body and imagination. Deren's focus on the artist, and their vision is a point of conflict, which she addresses in her chapbook *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, originally published in 1946. Furthermore, she connects the primacy of the artistic vision to the ritualistic form. And she heavily criticizes the "dismemberment" of art by critics and public alike. In this regard, Deren has much in common with authors such as Théophile Gautier, who defend *l'art pour l'art* and "the art of expression, rather than mere expression" as Deren underlines in her Master's dissertation (Deren 1939, 10). The advocates of art for art's sake are, moreover, opposed to any utilitarian concept of art (Deren 1939, 11). This artistic philosophy has its dangers, however, as Benjamin exposes in the last section of his essay.

In the epilogue to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin expresses his concern for the aestheticization of politics resulting in fascism and war, culminating in a violent abolishment of the aura (Benjamin 2007b, 241-242). The danger of the primacy of beauty, as proposed by art for art's sake, can indeed be employed for the pedestalization of what futurists, like Marinetti, called the beauty of war (Benjamin 2007b, 241). In my reading, I see this sadly too truthful conclusion as consequence of an attribute of cinema Benjamin discusses earlier in his text as what he considers the invisibility of the equipment – the fact that the ways in which a film has been cut and manipulated to achieve its final form are hidden. The "equipment-free aspect of reality" is precisely what renders the modern moving picture so apt to disseminate propaganda. This is namely possible due to what Deren's considers as the "photographic authority" – the authority of reality upon which "the entire school of the social documentary film is based." (Deren 2019d, 117). It is precisely because the camera captures a so-called "reality", that we may appreciate one aspect of a constructed image without knowing the gruesome details that were cut out from the shot. Within this frame of thinking, it is possible to perceive the chasm between the poetic film and its distant cousins, the "documentary", the "propaganda" film, and the big budget Hollywood hit. These productions have no wish to acknowledge the illusory nature of cinema, for they depend on its invisibility for their success.

The proposal offered by Deren does not deny any of the properties of cinema and problems which may arise from them, as Benjamin elaborates in his essay.

In fact, Deren often addresses the same questions as he does. The point of divergence, if we may call it so, between Deren's and Benjamin's visions is that, Deren, understanding intimately the process of filmmaking, creates and disseminates a particular kind of cinema which instead of pretending to aim towards a realism which is mostly fabricated anyway, aspires to embrace the creative attributes of the cinematic machine. Furthermore, Deren thinks of the machine-human relationship as a hierarchical one, in which the machine is a creation and tool of human imagination.

Regarding the previous point, I see an affinity between Deren's humanistic order and a recent proposal by philosopher Maurizio Ferraris in his book *Webfare: A Manifesto for Digital Well-Being* (2024). In the third chapter, "From Artificial Intelligence to Natural Intelligence", Ferraris reiterates that "it is humans who confer value and meaning upon machines and tools" (Ferraris 2024, 60). The Italian philosopher underscores the inherently human curiosity and creativity which has led, and will continue to lead us towards more advanced technology:

To become human means to develop increasingly sophisticated technologies. If we have accurately gauged the historical trajectory we have followed so far, it becomes indisputable that we are becoming more human with each passing day. From the outset, human nature has been a second nature—the result of the interplay between organisms and mechanisms, soul and automaton. The development of the automaton is the revelation of the soul, of what we are, both in the extensive history that lies behind us and hopefully promising future that lies ahead. (Ferraris 2024, 61)

As we can see, Ferraris considers that our relationship with machines is a direct consequence of our humanity – we may say the development of technology is indeed what makes us human. Ferraris does not therefore consider that humans should reject technology, since without it we could not even write, much less capture images, but he recommends a model for our rapport with technology, which emulates or echoes Deren's older hierarchy: "as technology becomes capable of replacing humans in functions beyond mere physical strength and precision, it is imperative to ensure that humans become more human." (Ferraris 2024, 64).

To Ferraris this is possible through culture and education. Deren too has suggested the importance of education about the technological traits and creative possibilities of the filmmaking process. The ignorance about the tools we have created is, perhaps, the precursor to the rapid oblivion of ritual and tradition in art. Even if modern art may become increasingly reproducible, and thus more distant from its ancestors, it does not necessarily have to be utterly detached from its origins. Deren's proposals show an alternative to the unavoidable decline of the aura Benjamin astutely observes. However, there are possibly other ways of

thinking about technology, by engaging with its creative essence, the same essence which gave life to it.

End Notes

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² Deren was thus originally quoted in *Esquire Magazine*, in 1946, in a short text about her work titled "The film that dreams are made on", which is reproduced in *The Legend of Maya Deren*.

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