THE PERSONAL CINEMA OF MAYA DEREN: 
MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON AND ITS CRITICAL 
RECEPTION IN THE HISTORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

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Maya Deren’s Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) could be said to exemplify Teresa de Lauretiis’s idea of “the really avant-garde work in cinema and in feminism,” which “is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, since it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and that specific contradiction of the female subject in it—the contradiction whereby historical women must work with and against Oedipus” (40). Deren worked tirelessly “with and against Oedipus” as a filmmaker and activist in an otherwise masculinist avant-garde art world. The critiques she waged against the dominant representations of women were met with vehement resistance by a rigidly patriarchal, and frequently misogynist, avant-garde film culture that did not hesitate to conflate Deren herself with her films in their attacks. In this way, Deren’s films do not register simply as “personal cinema,” but as a form of cinematic autobiography. I want to show this by mapping the connections between Deren’s first and most screened film, Meshes of the Afternoon, and Deren’s own role within the history of the American avant-garde. This film’s critical reception and Deren’s responses to it reveal a set of autobiographical themes.

Deren is credited with making the first narrative film in the history of the American avant-garde, which up to that point had been dominated by abstract representations and formal experiments with animation. Meshes utilizes characters, setting, and a narrative temporality owing as much to film noir and to Hollywood’s “women’s films” as to avant-garde experimentation. Yet, the fact that this film focuses on a woman, played by Deren herself, who is never assigned a name (nor does Deren give herself film credit as2 actress), invites the narrative themes of the film to be interpreted as autobiographical (Sousloff 123). As Bill Nichols contends, this interpretation of Meshes influ-
feminism has addressed in great detail how the classical epistemic subject is clearly marked as masculine. This psychoanalytic supplement to structural linguistics troubles Bruss’s definition of autobiography, both written and filmic, with sexual difference making all the difference. As a film that openly engages with the ontology of sexual difference, _Mesbes_ deals with the unconscious and pre-symbolic traumas that trouble the unified subject. At the same time, in its critical reception, _Mesbes_ arguably comes closest to “the unity of subjectivity and subject matter—the implied identity of author, narrator, and protagonist on which classical autobiography depends” (Bruss 297). According to Bruss, this unity is shattered by film: “the autobiographical self decomposes, schisms, into almost mutually exclusive elements of the person filmed (entirely visible; recorded and projected) and the person filming (entirely hidden; behind the camera eye)” (297). Yet, Deren reunified these elements by drawing “attention to herself through appearances in front of the camera and on the stage of an avant-garde scene” (Turin, “Ethics” 79). Even without these interventions on Deren’s part, her unique position as a woman artist supplied “exceptional reasons” to seek her out “as focalizer and focus” of her films (Bruss 307, 309).

A feminist and psychoanalytic framework provides one way to answer the questions “what happens to the notion of personal cinema when the person behind the camera is a woman and what happens to the representation of the other (and by extension the world) within that which is offered as a personal vision of the self” (Turin, “Ethics” 81). Deren’s personal cinema exemplifies the feminist anthem “the personal is political” by atomizing the psychoanalytic processes ascribed to Woman. By analogizing the girl-child’s experience of the structuring principle of the unconscious, the Oedipal drama, the film positions itself against cinema’s typical theme of the masculine subject’s Oedipal narrative, with Woman as the object (and outcome) of desire. Indeed, this trajectory is often the very paradigm informing the male filmmaker’s autobiography, as in Bruss’s examples of Federico Fellini and Woody Allen. “If the personal was primarily a historically bound male perspective,” notes Maureen Turin, “whose myths, heroics, and metaphors were conditioned by the consciousness of the male artists who sought to equate the camera with their own subjective eye, Deren infuses the personal with her experience as a woman. She then arranges the force of experience into a form that evokes connections to shared cultural experience” (“Ethics” 82). By evoking the psychoanalytic mythology and metaphors of sexual difference, _Mesbes_ visually realizes Jacqueline Rose’s claim “that the imaginary, of which the cinema may well be the most privileged and efficient machine, is precisely a machine, an apparatus in which what is at stake is a repression or refusal of the difficulty of sexuality itself” (218). In this way, I argue, _Mesbes_ employs “abstract expressionism, fantasy, or surrealism,” which convey the Imaginary, to map the very psychic structures that predate and predetermine both the “eye” and the “I” of the autobiographical (sexed) subject (Bruss 309).

The beginning section of _Mesbes_ is performed in first-person through its cinematic structures; only after the dream sequence commences does the camera turn to third-person (Heck-Rabi 202). This first-person camera work is what inspires P. Adams Sitney to see the film as an “interior quest,” and to see “the character and Deren herself” as one and the same (Sousloff 112). This system of first-person representation is encoded not simply through how we see but _what_ we see. This begins with the first image of the mannequin arm dropping the paper flower. We, like the infant, see the fragment of the female body,—her arm. And like the infant knowing the mother through metonymical experiences of her,—her arm entering the crib—the arm is seen as an object (a mannequin rather than a real arm). We experience this arm as a thing in itself, and like the mother’s arm, the mannequin disappears without a trace, except for the flower. By so doing, the film brings to the surface the most startling experiences of the infant in the Imaginary by calling the spectator’s attention to the more frightening aspects of loss and alienation that dominant cinema works manically to efface through the fullness of the screen image—and particularly the fetishization of the female.

This affective impact is heightened by film techniques. The lack of an establishing shot places the camera as the stand-in for Deren, and the “subjective” film techniques ensure that she is never filmed in totality. Without a reverse shot, Deren’s character appears fragmented, with arms, legs, and hands intermittently occupying her, and our, field of vision. This subjective camera work is akin to the infant, who experiences its own body as fragmented. Deren is filmed in such a way as to appear to be lacking a unified, cohesive body. This lack of cinematic representation initiates the spectator into the intensive focalization typical of autobiographical cinema. As Bruss has said of Fellini’s films, “this is perhaps as close as the ‘eye’ of filming can ever come to the ‘I’ of writing...both the subject and object of perception” (314). Yet, unlike Fellini, Deren does not attempt to “restore equilibrium” with the trope of the dream sequence, but instead will show that, for the woman, “the coherent image” afforded by the “stade du miroir” is unavailable, for she is the ground upon which the male’s coherent image is established (Bruss 314).

When Deren first enters the house, the domestic space is cinematographically framed to defamiliarize it. Objects are fetishized through the operations of the camera, such as the use of close-up. Yet, these scenes are edited rapidly
to emphasize the camera’s (Deren’s) main trajectory—the bedroom. Like the film spectator, Deren looks through the rectangular frame of the doorway to see a messy bed, and as such, the trace of sexuality left behind. The first-person scenes end with Deren seated, placing the flower on her lap (again giving it metonymic signification in relation to the female body), and caressing herself. This caressing symbolizes the subject not yet cut off from her desire, not yet lacking. However, the dream segment indexes the advent of desire, which is introduced by a loud sound, akin to the role of the cry for Freud (although all aural accompaniment was added several years later, supplied by Deren’s third husband, Teiji Ito), and by the visual of a cylinder. Joanne Betancourt sees this as a stand-in for the cinematic apparatus: “The cylinder, so clearly a camera part, relates directly to the fact that this interior vision, this view of her dream, is possible only through the strategies of the movie camera” (103). The dream sequence is introduced by a close-up on Deren’s eye; this, and the mesh over the camera, signifies an interior psychic space (“1”)—the realm of the unconscious where the structures of the primal scene and castration have been repressed.

The dream commences a cycle of repetition that illustrates Deren ritualistically chasing an androgynous person with a mirror where its face should be, a person who threatens confrontation while nevertheless eluding Deren’s gaze. It is significant that this mirror never reflects back Deren’s image. Instead, the mirrored enigmatic figure places on the bed the paper flower, the original signifier of sexual difference. In this way, the flower, and its relationship to the mirrored character, communicates the correspondence of the Other (ultimately Deren in relation to Alexander Hammid’s male character) with sexual difference, a difference that is threatening to the female subject. With each circuit of the chase of the mirrored Other, and each refusal of the mirror to cast back a reflection, the female character becomes more and more infantilized, presenting a regression of subjectivity. This scenario is paradigmatic of the stakes of mirror-stage for the female, as Jacqueline Rose explains:

Lacan’s conception of the mirror-stage is founded upon a structure of subjectivity whose basic relation is that between a fragmented or inco-ordinate subject and its totalizing image (the structural equivalent of the metonymic relation, part for whole). In order to vehicle the image, the subject’s own position must be fixed. . . . It is from this fixity, and the images that are thus produced, that the subject is able to postulate objects of permanence and identity in the world. The mirror-stage is, therefore, the focus for the interdependency of image, identity and identification. . . . As a result of identifying itself with a discreet image, the child will be able to postulate a series of equivalencies between the objects of the surrounding world, based on the conviction that each has a recognizable permanence. (173)

Yet, Deren is never allowed to identify with a “discreet Image”: even the knife can only give a blurred and unrecognizable reflection in that it is one of the many objects within the domestic space which has no permanence. This is because, without a discreet image, she becomes an object herself; she is filmed in a rigid position and then “moved” up and down the stairs with jump cuts, recalling the first scene of the dream where she drops the house key and it “bounces” along the stairs. Deren too “bounces,” becoming an object among objects.

Deren renders the gaze and its objectification of Woman explicit. After the first chase in the dream sequence, Deren (Maya-2) has been put in the place of spectator to both the sleeping Maya-1 and the other two Mayas that follow. She stands, unmoving, at the window to view the subsequent profilmic ritual. Maya-3 appears unaware of the gaze of Maya-2. In fact, the editing works to suture the spectator into the gaze of observing Maya-2, and to play with the viewer’s sense of filmic reality by revealing the fungible barrier separating spectator and character. The erasure of difference between spectator and spectacle—Maya-2 and -3—implies the spectator’s position in a disturbing and surreal fashion. The image of Deren pressed up against and looking out of the window viewing herself is one of the most reproduced images of her work, perhaps because it visually demonstrates the dialectic of active exhibitionist and passive voyeur that structures visual pleasure and challenges the general assumption of film theory that “the perceiver can never hope to catch a glimpse of himself; the figure that he sees before him on the screen cannot be his own, for he is somewhere else watching it” (Bruss 308, my emphasis). Unlike the unified male (and in a move foreshadowing Luce Irigaray), Meshes illustrates a sex which is not One.

Because Deren’s multiplication on-screen echoes her split as filmic autobiographer, simultaneously in front of and behind the camera, the reproduction of this image will come to be iconic of the way Meshes negotiates the opposition between, as Bruss puts it, “the stress on the person filmed and . . . the person filming” that will mark Deren’s place in the history of the avant-garde (313). This moment in the film works as an index of “the first-person narration necessary for autobiography,” despite its lack of “truth-value,” because it demonstrates self-observation rather than objectification (313). To this extent, this scene illustrates that “identity-value” is not the same for the female subject (constitutively an object of male desire) as for the male subject. If “in autobiography,” as Bruss contends, “the logically distinct roles of author, narrator, and protagonist are conjoined,” then this simultaneity is constitutively more difficult for Woman than for the presumptive masculine subject (300). The multiplicity of Woman troubles the claims made on
This act of refusal—the very moment her eyes open—is filmed as a shocking event. Simultaneously, the paper flower, the signifier of sexual difference, is transformed into a knife through jump cut editing, a knife the woman wields to tear into both the male spectator and the filmic space itself. By putting the knife through the face of the viewing subject, Hammid, the phallic male, Deren performatively rejects the traumatic history of sexual difference. It is the Imaginary, referenced in the cut to the ocean, a symbol of boundarylessness, which lies behind the Symbolic order and its violence to Woman. With the knife, the symbol of castration par excellence, Deren exposes the non-center of being which unounds all subjectivity, or in Rose’s words: “The moment of castration...represents the final collapse of the Other as the guarantor of certitude” (188). What is implied in Deren’s narrative film is the cost of the psychic production of sexual difference—the elision of woman’s subjectivity. Her objectification is the necessary grounds for stabilizing masculine subjectivity, and ultimately, the cinematic apparatus itself.

Mshes offers a double ending: one in which Deren turns to confront the male gaze, effectively destroying camera/mirror/male subject; and the other, her own suicide. The suicide is left ambiguous, revealing the traces of woman’s power to “burst” the seams of cinema—mirror shards and seaweed denote Deren’s subjectivity, and specifically, her resistance to the site/sight of sexual difference (castration). It is exactly this ambiguity that challenges the traditional definition of autobiography. Deren’s work, as Maureen Turim argues, can be understood “to play theoretically with the process of identification between filmmaker, protagonist, and viewer. It does so quite differently than does the more expressionist autobiographical film in which this process is assumed and iterated directly” (“Ethics” 93). Because the film destabilizes the foundations of subjectivity itself, the subject that centers the autobiographical work is necessarily deconstructed. Mshes speaks to the profound difference gender makes in terms of representation. In this way, Deren’s film reorders experience, moving backwards from Symbolic to Imaginary registers, not to overcome what Bruss calls “the old antagonisms between self and other,” but rather to expose and interrogate their psychic origins (299).

To this extent, the film is less concerned with “personal idiosyncrasies” than with what it means for a woman to “submit to the camera” (Bruss 318). Cinematic autobiography is foreclosed in ways specific to women because their film image, as Claire Johnson suggested at the dawn of contemporary feminist film theory, is not their own: within a sexist ideology and a male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for man...
The fetishistic image portrayed relates only to male narcissism: woman represents not herself, but by a process of displacement, the male phallus" (135–36). In its utilization of avant-garde aesthetics, *Meshes* retools cinematic devices to interrogate, and ultimately to challenge, the psychoanalytic structures upon which gendered subjectivity, and by implication spectatorial subjectivity, are founded. The impact of the film's (feminist) challenge becomes clear in the context of its historical reception. It is in the reactions to *Meshes* that the autobiographical resonance of the film with Deren's role as a woman filmmaker and titular "Mother of the Avant-Garde" can best be witnessed. Indeed, how Deren fared in the history of the avant-garde is irreducibly tied to the history of *Meshes*. Her reputation in patriarchal film history is to a large extent conjoined to the disavowal of the cultural work *Meshes* accomplishes, exemplifying Lauren Rabinowitz's insight that "women filmmakers were contained and categorized because the films they made consistently articulated positions for a refusal of the male gaze." (10). Indeed, Manny Farber "went so far as to call Deren's films 'lesbianish,'" and he and James Agee wrote devastating reviews of *Meshes* (Neiman et al. 378). Farber was correct in assuming that some sort of refusal of heteronormativity was in effect. The editors of The Legend of Maya Deren underscore this by citing both Farber and Deren's response: "he said . . . this film, cluttered with corny, amateurishly arranged symbols and mainly concerned with sex, hops too confusingly from reality to dream." In response, on her copy of Farber's review, Deren noted in the margin: "This is exactly the point!" (Neiman et al. 378).

This "point" is highlighted in the vitriolic attack aimed at Deren's film by Jonas Mekas, the filmmaker and film critic who notably originated the concept of "personal cinema." For Mekas, films that fail to conform to heteronormative paradigms of masculinity and femininity do not even deserve the title of "art" (24). Deren, therefore, is awkwardly condemned under the heading "The Conspiracy of Homosexuality" (23). Included in this "perversion of sex" is Deren's presentation of Woman "robbed of both her true spirituality and her unashamed carnality," which for Mekas marks Deren as an "adolescent film poet" (23). Deren is the only woman filmmaker Mekas discusses in his history of the American avant-garde, raising questions as to why he seems so committed to setting her apart. "The supposed depth of Maya Deren is artificial, without the ingenious spontaneity which we find, for instance, in Brakhage's or Anger's work," Mekas writes, castigating Deren as well for a lack of technical expertise. Her work ultimately is the "absolute zero" of the "new film poets" because it cannot evoke universal sympathy — "a deeper insight into the human soul, emotions, experiences, as related to the whole rather than to abnormal exceptionalities" (25). Mekas is especially useful for helping us to understand the relationship of gender to autobiography because, although "he failed to recognize that many of the first filmmakers to introduce abstract and personal filmmaking were women," he nevertheless recognized "that the personal cinema did in fact have certain tropes that were gendered, even if his analysis of those gendered tropes was symptomatic of gender prejudices" (Turim, "Reminiscences" 201). His "misreading of the complex permutations" of "Deren's female imagery," as Turim illustrates, does in fact underscore "issues of the gendered subject" ("Reminiscences" 201).

That *Meshes* is a deeply personal film is evident when its themes are placed within the context of Deren's larger, explicitly feminist critique of cinema's more obvious "gendered tropes." Indeed, Deren spoke of narrative cinema as an appeal to the latent Peeping Tom in the audience" ("Making" 55). The historical record reveals Deren to be a vocal critic of sexist cinema: "the majority of French films and particularly those of the New Wave . . . has produced a preponderance of films that exhibit the kind of obsessive, even lecherous, sexual sensations which one ordinarily associates with the frantic desperation of a man on the threshold of senility" ("Movie Journal" 53). Her criticisms inform the "subjective reality" and "authorial intervention" structuring *Meshes*, aimed at those very voyeuristic gender relations (Thompson and Bordwell 413). However, such historical documentation of Deren's opposition to cinematic sexual objectification troubles the smooth integration of her work into the canon of either the American avant-garde or European postwar modernism. As *Meshes* circulated, in no small part due to the tireless efforts of Deren herself, the radical potential of its content was hastily defused to enable integration into one camp or the other. This required critical strategies that simultaneously undercut the implicit interrogation of gender relations while at the same time lauding the film's formal techniques.

This was much more possible in a European context, because the film's formal qualities could be foregrounded to construct a story of European modernism into which *Meshes* could be neatly integrated. Rather than read *Meshes of the Afternoon* as a feminist intervention and reappraisal of the patriarchal discourses at work in early European modernist film, it has been written into film history, most notably by P. Adams Sitney, as the unproblematically legacy of that tradition. Significantly, Sitney opens his history of the American avant-garde with the chapter "Meshes of the Afternoon," although this chapter is equally occupied with Dali and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* as it is with Deren's film.
Both films have a “frame” and a double-ending. There is similar cutting on action across disjunctive spaces. The mechanics of Un chien andalou and Meshe result from a theoretical application of the principles of cinema to the experience of the dream. The abrupt changes of location, so common in dreams, have the same cinematic meaning for both sets of collaborators. (14–15)

For Sitney to claim that the films share “the same cinematic meaning,” gender difference must be effaced. Yet, because both films involve the “self-expression” of their makers, Sitney is not content simply to ignore Meshe’s gendered content (6). His implicit discomfort with the film’s critical engagement with gender relations impels him to bracket Deren’s authorship almost entirely:

Commentators on this film have tended to neglect the collaboration of Alexander Hammid, to consider him a technical assistant rather than an author. We should remember that he photographed the whole film. Maya Deren simply pushed a button on the camera for the two scenes in which he appeared. The general fluidity of the camera style, the free movements, the surreality effects . . . are his contribution. If Meshe in the Afternoon is, in the words of Parker Tyler . . . the death of her narcissistic youth, it is also Hammid’s portrait of his young wife. (9–10; my emphasis)

This comparison effectively marginalizes not only the role of gender in the film, but Deren’s significant part in its making.

Sitney’s bias reveals the political fallout of the ambiguity of cinematic autobiography, which as Bruss implies, tends “to fall into two opposing groups—those that stress the person filmed and those that stress the person filming” (309). Despite Deren’s vocal claims to the opposite, Sitney sees the film as conforming to the dominant artistic paradigm of the male auteur with his female muse. In short, he sees Meshe not as Deren’s film but as a joint project: “The collaboration of Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid shortly after their marriage in 1942 recalls . . . the earlier collaboration of Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel” (3). Yet, Sitney goes to some lengths to show that these collaborations are far from parallel. While both Dali and Buñuel were established artists in their own rights, Deren “wrote poetry, but she was never satisfied with it. . . . She developed an interest in modern dance . . . but was not a dancer herself. . . . She conceived the idea of writing . . . on dance.” (6) The book never materialized. This list of at best unfulfilled goals, and at worst failures, is juxtaposed to Hammid, “well known in filmmaking circles as a cameraman, editor, and director” (6–7). The autobiographical is thus transformed into biography. By granting Hammid authorial intention, Sitney denies Deren autobiographical representation of what Turim describes as “the relationship between artist and lover, artist and home” (“Ethics” 92).

This erasure is not surprising if one considers that home carries much different and much more loaded connotations for the woman artist than for her male counterpart. “The home and the relationship,” Turim writes, “are fertile grounds for the woman artist, whose intensity of association often releases imagery bespeaking an angry rush of pain. Meshe is Deren’s most direct expression of that pain” (“Ethics” 92–93). Sitney not only ignores Deren’s pain and rage, but also effaces her agency. For instance, he never asks why a newlywed husband would create such a brutal portrait, ending in his beloved’s death. By ignoring Meshe conjoining of “autobiography and female space,” as Turim puts it, Sitney assigns the role of Woman only to the presence in front of the camera, circumscribed in this way to the sign of femininity (and inherently, to the ownership of the male gaze/spectator/filmmaker) (“Ethics” 82). She is no longer a threatening presence behind the camera—ironically enough, the very point that Meshe raises. Indeed, Sitney resists to biographical innuendo to identify Deren as a threat, opposing “the mildness and acquiescence” of Hammid’s personality to “Maya Deren’s persistence and dynamism,” and going on to imply that it was only through her “persistence” that Meshe has been ascribed to her, since “Hammid has done nothing to contradict this” in film history (6–7). By enacting discursively the very thing the film itself critiques—the de-subjectification of woman—Sitney turns Deren into Hammid’s, and his own, object of contemplation rather than seeing her as an artist and subject in her own right.

Furthermore, although Sitney readily admits that “the quest for sexual identity” is “the central theme of all psycho-dramas,” his historiography effectively masks the difference gender plays in this quest (18). A qualitative example of how the feminine quest troubles the patriarchal order appears at the end of Sitney’s analysis. Rather than taking seriously the possibility that Meshe might be a cinematic critique of the gender disempowerment on which such a (masculinist) quest for sexual identity is founded, Sitney presents such a reading by mysteriously substituting Man Ray’s Étoile de Mer for the analysis of the quest in Meshe. Setting aside the violent outcome of the male’s quest, as allegorized in the death of Deren, or the aggressive rejection of male desire, as demonstrated by Deren’s act of putting a knife through Hammid’s gazing face, Sitney turns to Man Ray’s “hero,” who gets a stable and readily objectified Other in the woman/starfish of his film. What threat “the woman” still poses, even after the awkward substitution of Man Ray’s female for Deren’s character, remains utterly incomprehensible to Sitney: “Metaphors . . . are deliberately jarring. After an illusion to ‘les dents des femmes’ we see a shot of the heroine’s legs, not her teeth” (19). What is truly jarring here is Sitney’s refusal of the parallel. He sets up the chapter’s central comparison as
between Meshe(s) and Un chien andalou, but fails to address the narrative themes and motifs of the former in any direct way.

One might read the slight of hand from Meshe(s) to Étoile de Mer as Sitney’s unsuccessful displacement and disavowal of Deren’s more threatening “les deus des femmes.” Because she functions as a structuring principle in his book, it seems this first chapter works to de-fang Deren and the threat posed by her sexual subjectivity. Unlike other authors, Sitney does not efface Deren’s significance in the history of the film avant-garde. Rather he circumvents the more critical (feminist) implications of Deren’s work as an author. Despite his detailed interest in her biography, and his willingness to connote male auteurs with their protagonists, Sitney avoids any possible autobiographical reading of Meshe(s), illustrating only too well Rabinovitz’s claim that “the discourse of the ‘author-function’ is all the more important when the name of the author is a woman’s, because it signifies and empowers a gendered social subject as an index of a female textual subject” (22). This link between the social subject and the textual subject surfaces when the autobiographical impulses of Meshe(s) are acknowledged, but patriarchal film histories such as Sitney’s rarely explore this interpretation in any detail, despite the obvious historical grounds.

To integrate Deren smoothly into an otherwise patriarchal film history, whether American or European, gender disappears as a category of analysis. In the American context, Sitney could readily claim that “sexual metaphors abound in the avant-garde films made in America in the late 1940’s and 1950’s,” without ever acknowledging that not all metaphors are the same (20). In addressing the specific sexual metaphors at work in Meshe(s), those willing to recognize Deren as a founder of the American avant-garde, like Mekas and Sitney, still often equivocated when directly confronted with their actual gendered implications. Mekas and Sitney are referenced in A. L. Rees’s history of independent American cinema, which presents Deren as the inventor of “the narrative film-poem . . . which] enacts the personal conflicts of a central subject or protagonist. A scenario of desire and loss, seen from the point of view of a single guiding consciousness, ends in either redemption or death” (539). But Sitney evades Deren’s filmic sexual scenario by deftly assigning the film’s guiding consciousness to Hammid, while Mekas acknowledges Deren’s specifically gendered influence in order to attack it.

Although Mekas condemns both Deren and Anger, their similar film scenarios “of desire and loss” demonstrate the difference gender makes to cinematic autobiography. Both notably make “home movies.” Like Bruss’s description of Kenneth Anger, Deren “writes, directs, and plays the principal role . . . yet the particular events the film depicts are entirely fictitious . . . badly skew[ing] our usual assumptions about the self-evidence of visual information and the coherence of the visible person” (312). Deren’s films, like Anger’s, “unearth a delicate polyphony within an apparent unity of a single existence,” but, while Anger’s work has a certain “therapeutic” resolution, Deren’s character is left for dead (318). Clearly the sexual implications of visual culture call forth vastly dissimilar “alien” gazes when a man (albeit gay) “deliberately exhibits” himself and when a woman does. In the filmmaker’s critique of this very difference the gaze has for and on women, “Deren asserted an oppositional voice to Hollywood cinema and confronted Hollywood’s formal aesthetics as a set of political practices” (Rabinovitz 49).

Yet, even those committed to a feminist revision of film history have been ambivalent about Deren’s role in it. To designate Deren as a founder of feminist film practice would challenge claims to the new, often made by second-wave feminism to instantiate the power of current feminist ideology and the praxis it informs. But crediting the critique of Woman in representation to the historical rise of second-wave feminism ignores the earlier women’s filmmaking which made this critique possible. In this way, the woman artist is de-linked from the discursive resistances affected in her film texts. The opposition to fetishistic representations of women enacted in Meshe(s) is interpreted, even by the most generous feminist scholars like Lauren Rabinovitz, as the radical potential of “the diegetic elements,” but separate from the film artist herself. Deren thus becomes one of the women artists who were “female pioneers in their ‘masculine’ fields of endeavor” yet “remained prisoners of an ideology that even constructed their positions of resistance within traditional roles” (Rabinovitz 5). So, although her “actions outwardly opposed the dominant ideology of the 1950’s,” for a feminist biographer like Rabinovitz, Deren “did so without entirely understanding how the cultural institutions, including the family, constructed and organized women’s social subordination” (3). The presumption that one may ever “entirely understand,” or stand outside, the ideological apparatuses that construct one remains debatable. Yet, the institutions of knowledge production demand such claims be made to shore up and validate specific sites of feminist redress and intervention.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Laura Mulvey’s influential article, “Film, Feminism and the Avant-garde.” How this piece deals with the figure of Deren reveals the ambivalence feminist film historians have in constructing the history of women in film, and specifically the influence women had behind the camera on the ontological questions raised concerning the image of Woman in front of the camera. Mulvey openly claims that “Maya Deren’s pioneering work in the United States during the 1940’s had earned her the title ‘Mother of the Avant-garde,’” and that both Deren and Germaine
Dulac's "intermingling of cinematic movement and interior consciousness interested feminists and avant-gardists alike" (202). Nonetheless, in the same piece, Mulvey claims that "women have played only a marginal part" in various avant-garde movements (210). Mulvey's investment in maintaining the distinction between "the avant-garde tradition" and "feminist film" forces Deren out of film history. This inscription of Deren to the discursive margins because of the way she complicates categorization is deeply troubling when enacted within feminist film circles, and especially within those openly committed to constituting a feminist film history and practice. The outcome of such an elision of women from the "crucial and influential response within avant-garde aesthetics . . . pioneered by the New American Cinema of the 1960's" allows Mulvey to emerge from this void—along with her European counterparts Yvonne Rainer and Chantal Ackerman—as the necessary integrators of avant-garde film praxis and feminist polemics (213). In this way, Maya Deren and Shirley Clarke are swept into a parenthetical aside about dance films, rather than given full credit as the legitimate founders of feminist film practice, described by Mulvey as the "meeting between the melodramatic tradition and psychoanalysis" (214).²

For Mulvey, "both film theory and feminism . . . have been influenced by recent intellectual debates around . . . the eruption of the unconscious in representation (psychoanalysis)" (209). But these intellectual debates are not so recent. For as Rees notes, Meshes of the Afternoon is "erotic and irremediably Freudian (despite Deren's protestation at the label)" (539). Mulvey's goal of legitimizing feminist interventions into a patriarchally defined avant-garde therefore thwarts the project of establishing links to past women filmmakers' shared textual theamatics. Instead, Mulvey chooses to constitute feminist film production as a wholly new cultural practice:

As woman's place in past cinematic representation has been mystified, at once a linchpin of visual pleasure and an affirmation of male dominance, so feminists, too, have become fascinated with the mysteries of cinematic representation itself, hidden by means of the sexized female fantasy form. . . . Politically, a feminist formalism is based on a rejection of the past and on giving priority to challenging the spectator's place in cinema. (208, my emphasis)

This "rejection of the past" is troubling. Although Meshes could readily be cited for "inseparably link[ing] problems of form and content," Mulvey fails to place Deren in the "tradition [that] has broken rigid demarcations between fact and fiction and laid a foundation for experimentation with narrative" (213). Only through a network of rhetorical disavowals can Mulvey claim, "it is hard, as yet, to speak of a feminist film-making practice" (213). Mulvey agrees with and perpetuates the constitutive narrative of Deren as "the Mother" of the American avant-garde movement. Mulvey's construction of a specifically feminist film history and its relationship to the avant-garde enacts a confinement of this Mother, whose specter is raised early with "the first glimmer" of independent film, but is then quickly relegated to the margins of "this tradition." Like patriarchal film historians before her who are willing to confirm Deren's significance in cinematic history, Mulvey also eventually replaces Deren with the Nom du père, the appropriate paternal names to stand in the place of the (now castrated) Mother: "going back to Eisenstein and Vertov, influenced by Brecht, re-emerging with the late work of Godard" (213). Deren thus disappears into the historical gulf implied here with the use of the term "re-emerging."

What is striking is that the central trope linking misogynist critics like Mekas and Sitney to feminist thinkers such as Mulvey is Deren's omnipresence as "the Mother of the Avant-garde." But it is this trope that suggests the ways in which the otherwise narrative film Meshes of the Afternoon should be understood as an autobiographical act. On the psychoanalytic level, the maternal is a term, if not the term, of gender ascription, a process Freudian, and later Lacanian, psychoanalysis describes at great length. Film theorists such as Mulvey have taken up this theory to explain the operations of the cinematic apparatus. In short, the psychoanalytic position claims that it is the relation to (and the ultimate rejection of) the maternal signifier that makes the subject a social being. At the risk of being overly reductive, it is through the mother, and the recognition of her castration, psychoanalytically speaking, that the subject comes to understand himself as a subject, and becomes a speaking (engendered) subject in the social order. Although much has been written on how this relation infiltrates and shapes film texts along with the cinematic apparatus itself, much less attention has been paid to how this dynamic might infiltrate and shape institutional conditions and historical practices.

It is significant that progressing from the Imaginary relation to the Symbolic order demands the disavowal of the power of the mother. To this extent, the maternal signifier helps contain the threat Deren insinuates as a producer of public culture, and whose productions, like Meshes, can be read as a challenge to the tyranny of Woman as object of the gaze. The maternal metaphor simultaneously acknowledges Deren's position as a gendered subject in history, while maintaining the sanctity of the patriarchal social system. That is, if Woman is the sign of sexualized Otherness, Woman, re-inscribed as "Mother," is de-linked from such connotations of (sexual) power by her mark of castration, of "lack," and by her historically and culturally constructed
role as supporter and caretaker of the patrilineal order. The ubiquity of the
"Mother" narrative describing Deren’s role in film history underscores the
anxieties she and *Meshe* raise for both patriarchal historians and their femi-
nist counterparts. In this way, the maternal narrative no longer operates sim-
ply as a figure of speech honoring the unquestionable significance of Deren.
Rather, it is through this maternal trope that Deren becomes fixed in specifi-
cally gendered terms—"the good mother" who derives her power not from
her own appropriations of the modes of production, but indirectly from her
progeny. Thus the incorporation of Deren into film history as the "Mother
of the Avant-garde" works to reify the patriarchal film system rather than
highlight the sexualized representations Deren critiqued.

One way to redress this discursive construction, which has greatly influ-
enced the historical reception of Deren and her work, is to see her films as a
form of cinematic autobiography, what Bruss defines as "a personal per-
formance, an action that exemplifies the character of the agent responsible for
that action and how it is performed" (300). This would invite a reexamina-
tion of the sexual politics Deren articulated in her films as a creative response
to their effects on her own life. Rather than placing her films either before
or after other (male-defined) movements, categorizing Deren as a cinematic
autobiographer fits her squarely within a modernist art world that Egan argues
"began to replace realism with experiments in perception, apprehension, and
process" that transformed "the manner of representing the autobiographical
subject in the text" (29). If modernism marks, as Egan contends, "the begin-
ing of frequent experiment with self-representation," then Deren’s films
share the autobiographical tendencies expressed by her modernist cohort,
such as the diarist and writer Anaïs Nin and the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp
(29). The representation of the sexual self is specific to Deren’s film experi-
ments because of her own heightened awareness of cinema’s dominant por-
trayal of Woman, and her unique position as a woman filmmaker. Deren’s
"trance" film is autobiographical, following Bruss, because it conveys the
unconscious workings of the sexual subject, taking gender identity specifically
"beyond what one consciousness can grasp, beyond even what the unaided
human consciousness can encompass" (319). In this way, *Meshe of the After-
noon* stands as a powerful autobiographical intervention in the cinematic
representation of sexual difference.

NOTES

1. This presages Barbara Kruger’s pop-artwork, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits The Side of My Face)*, symbolizing only too clearly how "your gaze [the male gaze] hits the side of my face [the woman’s]."

2. To explain the emergence of Deren’s career "as a dancer—one role in the arts where women are less likely to suffer discrimination and oppression," is spurious on numerous
grounds. In fact, there is no record of Deren ever having a professional career as a dancer
(like Clarke); rather, she worked as a personal assistant to the dance director and
writer Kathryn Dunham. Further, Deren’s professional connection to this dance troupe
—not as a dancer, but significantly as an organizer and administrator—was indeed
defined by "discrimination and oppression" because the troupe was entirely African-
American and traveling in the Jim Crow United States. The implication of Deren’s his-
tory in dance as one that is less fraught with issues of "discrimination and oppression"
insinuates a possible avoidance strategy on her part that is simply not the case. With
Dunham, and with her activism as a member of the Socialist Movement of the 1930s,
Deren spent her life openly battling "discrimination and oppression" on a number of
historical and cultural fronts.

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VITAGRAPHIC TIME

GARRETT STEWART

Hence the division of western cinema into European humanism and American science fiction.

—Gilles Deleuze (17)¹

Life, mutation, biography. Vitagraph, Mutoscope, Biograph: those patent wars among the early American movie companies may seem to cash in certain narratological associations without even trying, by the very cast of their mercantile coinages. Yet in reflecting on the special case of the auto/biographical in cinema, what appears at first an obvious checkpoint is really a misnomer. Whether biographic in its overall narrative emphasis or not, what the intermittent and mutable rather than fixed image of a projected screen event captures is at best life or living, not a life. This is to say that the allusion to biography in the first of the Edison spin-off companies, though it might seem catchy enough for the present considerations, would offer something of a false hook. For the cinematograph—as biograph—intercedes in time, rather than charting it wholesale.

Same with the alternately marketed but equivalent technology of the Vitagraph (corporate pronunciation as in vitality rather than curriculum vitae). Yet the idea of vitagraphic record, unlike the familiarized associations of the term “biography,” does not so effectively stave off the etymological paradox of a “life graph.” In any event, it should readily be clear why the general term movies took hold instead—as a hedge against recognized serial fixity. Even the poetics of cinema, let alone its experience, tends to minimize the underlying fact of the fixed photographic increment. The reasons are clear. As generations of film theory since the earliest days of the medium, through Bazin and on to Deleuze, have wanted to show, cinematic movement, though always of the moment, grasps time’s inherent flux. In its mechanism, it gives up to us the very becoming of the moment. The projected image, as image, thereby precedes narrative, its evolution truer to time at