

Fabric in Film and Film as Fabric: Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*



Abstract

Maya Deren's films employ still and moving fabric in order to articulate the changing relationships among viewer, actor, and director. Deren's use of fiber-based material is an overlooked aspect of her cinematic work. In this essay I explore the parallel between the medium of film—the screen, as well as the representation of fabric on film—and fabric in several of Deren's films, primarily her well-known 1943 film *Meshes of the Afternoon*. This is a generative parallel because a comparison

with fabric introduces the idea that film could be conceived of as, simultaneously, a tactile material and a legitimate art form to mid-century film audiences. Film's relation to the body is traditionally distanced: the audience sits far from the screen in order to view it; the actors' bodies exist only as intangible arrangements of light and shadow. Reading film with an awareness of the characteristics and connotations of moving fabric recasts cinema in light of the screen's status as fabric, a potentially tactile medium.

Keywords: film, fabric, drapery, avant garde, tactility

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Fabric is often thought of in either of two ways: as a part of everyday usage, often as protection from the elements or from public exposure, implying contact with the body, as in clothing and upholstery; or, in the present day, as an untouchable piece of art such as tapestry. In this article I explore the parallel between the medium of film—the screen, as well as the representation of fabric on film—and fabric in Maya Deren's 1943 film *Meshes of the Afternoon*. This is a generative parallel because a comparison with fabric introduces the idea that film could be conceived of as, simultaneously, a tactile material and a legitimate art form to mid-century film audiences (albeit limited to those watching avant-garde cinema). Film's relation to the body is traditionally distanced: the audience sits far from the screen in order to view it; the actors' bodies exist only as intangible arrangements of light and shadow. Reading film with an awareness of the characteristics and connotations of moving fabric refigures cinema as a potentially tactile medium. Laura Marks's work on what she terms "haptic visuality"—"the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (Marks 2000: xi)—provides groundbreaking insights on visuality and tactility, and astute

interpretations of Deleuze's work on film. However, discussions about the haptic have not dealt with the specific presence and impact of fabric-based media.

In the early twentieth century, several artists and theorists worked to separate film from its connotations of popular culture and raise it to the level of serious art. Conflicted as this attitude was, it located film at an indeterminable space between "high" and "low" cultures—a space similar to that occupied by fabric, which can live in the "ordinary" world as well as the often removed (especially at this time) world of museums. As both film and fabric waver between the realms of the everyday and the exceptional, they produce multilayered viewing experiences for their audiences, often creating unfulfilled longing for physical contact. For example, a textured surface creates a longing to touch—but the removed status of art-objects prohibits us from this action. Additionally, a still or slow-motion moment in the midst of filmic movement gives us the illusion of heightened intimacy with the represented image. These moments of suggestive near-contact offer possibilities for imagining new physical intimacies between art and viewer. Bringing film and fabric together in this way

also has implications for textile studies: the medium of film is a dynamic area in which to uncover and investigate the artistic and social meanings of fabric.

The materiality of film has been discussed in relation to the director's use of the camera and the actual filmic material, but there is less attention to the materiality of the screen. Why is it important to think about the screen's materiality? When we consider the screen as a tactile, touchable surface, we are forced to collapse assumptions about our physical distance from the projected image and to question film as a solely visual/aural form. Although Deren does not, for example, encourage her audience to touch the screen, she does create a textural, fabric-like surface which heightens tension between the projected image and the viewer. There is a dynamic among Deren's textured screen, the audience's desire to interact with it, and social/logistical prohibitions against bodily contact with the screen. This is a productive tension describing a *potential* for physical intimacy between audience and screen—as Marks writes, “tactile visuality is still not touch” (Marks 2000: 192). Deren's work perpetuates the idea that the film screen is not a static object, but a potentially dynamic, tangible form, like fabric. In her suggestion that the projected image has the capability to appropriate the qualities of fabric, Deren creates a sense that the screen itself is moving; in other words, it could take on a three-dimensional quality and move outside of the limits of the two-dimensional frame.¹ The emphasis

on potential contact rather than actual touching is important for its dramatic effect in the film and its creation of desire on the part of the viewer. Deren develops this tension in her inclusion of drapery as an important image in the film as well as in her use of light and shadow.

Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” cites the reproducibility of film as the reason for the frustrated longing on the part of the audience: he writes, “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” (Benjamin 1968: 223). I interpret Maya Deren's work as gesturing toward a satisfaction of this “urge.” Deren's directorial technique certainly, as I will show by examining her use of slow-motion, demonstrates Benjamin's claim that “the audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera” (ibid.: 228); however, in her emphasis on the materiality of the screen as well as the materiality of the projected images, Deren enables the film to, in effect, “reach out” to the viewer, creating a more intimate relationship than that between critic and film. I am not suggesting that Deren fulfills the audience's desire to transcend reproducibility, but that her film moves toward a level of interactivity not exhibited by many other films, or indeed other works of art, at the time she was working.

Deren, a multi-genre artist who is primarily known as a filmmaker but who also worked in dance, poetry, and film theory, paid special attention to the materials

involved in film and filmmaking. Her films include multiple images of fabric and textiles, and her writings consistently note the physical components involved in filmmaking: the camera as instrument, the cinematic equipment, the bodies of the actors. The imagery in her work mimics the physical qualities and behaviors of moving fabric as well as evokes the social and cultural connotations of drapery and curtaining. Despite Deren's thorough investigations into and interpretations of her own work, her writings do not interrogate the use of fabric in her films. There are examples of innovative uses of textiles and costuming in several of Deren's films; my focus is primarily on the multiple representations of fabric in her most well-known film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Deren directed and starred in *Meshes* but the film was shot by her husband at the time, Alexander Hammid (Hackenschmied). Like Stan Brakhage and other experimental filmmakers, Deren filmed this and other films in her home—*Meshes* was filmed at the bungalow Hammid and Deren shared on Kings Road in Hollywood. The decision to film in the home was due not only to limited funds but also to a more general interest in the domestic among avant-garde artists (in film, as in the later films of Stan Brakhage and others; and in other genres, for example in Gertrude Stein's book of poetry *Tender Buttons*). Scholars have read *Meshes* extensively within feminist and psychoanalytical frameworks, but Deren's sustained interest in the representation of textiles in conjunction with her development

of the screen's textural quality has not been investigated.

Deren's use of techniques such as quick cuts and an emphasis on the interplay of light and shadows helps develop the illusion that the screen might be a piece of fabric moving in the wind. She writes that "the film image—whose intangible reality consists of lights and shadows beamed through the air and caught on the surface of a silver screen—comes to us as the reflection of another world" (Deren 2005e). This statement conveys film as not only magical and otherworldly but material: even though it possesses an "intangible reality," it is the product of objects moving in space. Like butterflies "caught" in a "mesh," the "lights and shadows" travel through space as living things, encountering the "netted," textile-like surface of the screen. The screen appears textural, three-dimensional, and exhibits plasticity. This manipulation of the screen suggests film is a touchable material extending out into space, containing within it the possibility for physical contact. Slow-motion shots and close-ups of shadowed, textured surfaces in Deren's film contribute to this effect. Stan Brakhage's 1963 *Mothlight* can be read as a response to Deren's statement. In attaching moth wings to the film strip, Brakhage, a filmmaker greatly influenced by Deren, makes literal the idea of fragile bits of light and shadow caught in the medium of film. In both Brakhage and Deren, the screen appears textural, three-dimensional, and malleable. But while this emphasis on the filmic material is often associated with

psychoanalysis in the works of both artists, criticism on Deren has often been restricted to the psychological aspects of her work—while Brakhage is recognized as a master of tactile, visceral cinema.

A close attention to the shadowing of draped fabric is a cinematic gesture with deep roots in "classical" art history, particularly painting and sculpture. Comparing painting and film, Benjamin writes that "the painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web" (Benjamin 1968: 233). Deren deftly employs both of these characteristics in her film: the representation of drapery and "the artistic" aligns *Meshes* with painting, while the development of a textured, three-dimensional screen "penetrates deeply" into the "webbed" reality outside the world of screen and image. At the center of this contradictory presentation of film and reality is the persistent presence of Deren's body, which is constantly being repositioned, reflected, and reconfigured in relation to fabric or fabric-like materials in the film. Not only does this bodily presence emphasize the intimate nature of human relationships with fabric, but it offers an illustration of the potential contact between the body of the spectator and the film screen.

Focusing on fabric in *Meshes* unearths a wealth of seemingly disparate ideas and questions—about art, audience, the haptic, nature, and the body. Here I begin to unravel the deep—and often veiled—interconnections present in Deren's film. Incorporating excerpts

from Deren's own writings on film, I first look at the development of texture on the screen and the larger cultural implications of Deren's use of moving and draped fabric, then I close-read specific examples of how Deren connects fabric with nature and the body.²

The Textural Screen

The initial scene of *Meshes* establishes the suggestion of a textured screen surface and the interplay of light and shadow, as well as the presence of Deren's body.³ In the opening sequence, the layering of images on the screen—of shadows on rough concrete, and the movement of Deren's shadow and the large swaying plants which surround the walkway—give the screen the quality of draped or moving fabric (see Figure 1). Deren establishes rich visual contrasts, giving the screen itself

the appearance of depth and motion. The building-up of cast shadows—those of Deren's body and the surrounding plants—on the pale concrete ground give the two-dimensional screen a sense of three-dimensionality, as if the screen is rippling in space. This effect continues throughout the film in different contexts. At the very end of the film, we are presented with a series of shots of Deren's feet walking on differently textured ground coverings (sand, grass, concrete, carpet). The variations in tonality and shading highlight the film's ability to convey physicality and create sensual experience. By including a close attention to texture, Deren ascribes the qualities of fabric—motion, depth, texture, tangibility, and the suggestion of the artistic, as in drapery and tapestries—to the film screen.

If we imagine the screen as fabric, the closest comparison

is with hanging wall art such as tapestries or draperies. Imagining the film-viewing space as similar to a museum, where visitors are encouraged to look at but not touch the art hanging on the walls, we are forced to ask questions about art, audience, and physicality. At the same time as Deren's techniques infuse the film screen with a tactile, material quality, Deren as a filmmaking persona worked to give film the exclusivity and cultural value attached to museum-housed art (see Pramaggiore 1997). Historically, the work of making an unrecognized "craft" into "art" involves an elitist move which separates the medium from connotations of mass accessibility.⁴ To detach film from the "popular," Deren associates her film with classical art. In addition to exploring the notion of screen-as-tapestry, Deren enacts this separation by employing images of drapery in her

Figure 1

Screen shot from *Meshes of the Afternoon*.



films. As the presence of drapery, primarily in painting and statue, has traditionally connoted “the artistic,” the use of draped fabric in Deren’s films helps separate film from the everyday world and make it “art.”⁵

Another noteworthy characteristic of drapery, in addition to its connotations of “the artistic,” is its folds—and their accompanying suggestion of infinite depth (see Deleuze 1993). Attempts to “capture” drapery in painting and sculpture are characterized by the varied usages of darkness and light among the folds to create a sense of the fabric’s random movement. Drapery as clothing or as part of interior décor is often depicted fluttering, in folds, or frozen in mid-movement, announcing its ability to move in a three-dimensional space. The lights and shadows on folded fabric also give viewers a sense of depth. Depicting elaborate draped folds in fabric is a skill associated with the mediums of painting and sculpture—Deren translates this motif into the filmic form in her use of movement and shadowing.⁶

Traditionally, representations of drapery in painting and sculpture convey a sense of the transcendent—folded, flowing fabric has suggested grand concepts such as “nobility” and “spirituality” as well as “art.” In other words, drapery has historically evoked a sense of distance from the everyday. Anne Hollander writes that by the 1600s drapery was “exempt from kinship with the ordinary objects common to human life, such as books and

keys, arms and legs, or indeed, clothes” (Hollander 1978: 42).

Gen Doy says,

A recurring theme in writings about drapery and the body is the stress on how important it is for the artist to detach the representation of drapery from contemporary life. Thus it cannot fail to be generalised and relatively immune from direct influences of its historical context. Of course drapery and its representations cannot be entirely divorced from the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced ... they merely seem as if they are and are intended to be so. (Doy 2002: 20)⁷

In the art world, the exceptional is often placed in opposition to the tactile. An example is the ongoing argument which tries to pose “craft,” perceived as handmade and functional, in opposition to “art,” perceived as untouchable and unusable. How can we reconcile this “exempt” quality with the idea that the screen possesses the tactility, the physical immediacy, of fabric? In Deren’s writings and films, she maintains a perpetual dialog between the tactile and the exceptional, challenging their long separation. At the same time, Deren depends on the connotations and associations evoked by images such as drapery in order to give her arguments an added validity—painting and sculpture were taken seriously as art forms, but film was not.⁸

Deren also expresses the desire for film to be recognized as

a multidimensional form. Citing early cinematic technologies, David Trotter writes that “a hankering after three-dimensionality is as old as cinema itself” (Trotter 2004: 51). Drapery is “not governed as other two-dimensional surfaces”—it is “metamorphic,” as Deren writes in “New Directions in Film Art”:

film is a two-dimensional surface; but it is not governed as other two-dimensional surfaces, such as canvas. It is two dimensional, but also metamorphic. What is important is how one moment changes into another, how changing is constant. It is the changing of things, not the way things are. Therefore it is a time-form. The sort of thing important in two-dimensional work, in painting or still photography, is different in film. (Deren 2005f: 213–14)

For Deren, film operates in an entirely new space, between two- and three-dimensionality: it is “different.” I interpret Deren’s vague word choice here as indicating film’s “exceptional” (read: separate, superior, special) status among the arts. Therefore film takes on not only drapery’s dynamicism, but it also appropriates its exceptionality. Just as the placement of a tapestry on a museum wall announces its status as a rare and important object, the very nature and material of film, according to Deren, is “special.”

Deren calls attention to film’s “plasticity” as further evidence of its uniqueness. In her essay “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality,” Deren speaks about

“animated films,” experimental films which explored the relation between canvas and screen:

Such films, which combine abstract backgrounds with recognizable but not realistic figures, are designed and painted by trained and talented graphic artists who make use of a sophisticated, fluent knowledge of the rich resources of plastic media, including even collage. A major factor in the emergence of this school has been the enormous technical and laboratory advance in color film and color processing, so that it is now possible for these artists to approach the two-dimensional, rectangular screen with all the graphic freedom they bring to a canvas. (Deren 2005e: 111)

While Deren does not reference fabric directly, she speaks of the filmmaker’s efforts to incorporate the effects and behaviors of fabric—for example, movement, depth, and, here, the “graphic freedom” offered by “canvas.” Unlike canvas, which Deren discusses elsewhere in relation (mostly in opposition) to film, the draping of flat, two-dimensional fabric exhibits three-dimensional characteristics. Canvas, a cloth surface which can undergo stretching, alterations, and manipulation, serves as a material jumping-off point for these experimental filmmakers. The comparison of avant-garde film practices with more traditional painting materials not only strengthens the validity of film-as-art, but associates the plasticity of fabric-based media with the work

of filmmaking and the presence of the film screen.

It is the “specialness” of film, according to Deren in “Cinema as an Art Form,” which enables a heightened attention to the physical world:

The external universe which we once considered, at least in our immediate locality, as the passive recipient of the manifestations of the individual will—the stage upon which the conflict of human wills was dramatically enacted—has been revealed as an active, creative force. And again, cinema, with its capacity for animating the ostensibly inanimate, for re-relating the ostensibly immobile, is especially equipped to deal with such experiences. (Deren 2005d: 32)

Cinema has the ability to “animate” and give agency to the “external universe”—I read this “universe” as the *mise-en-scène* of film, the accumulation of costume, props, sets, and general *stuff* that composes the projected image.

“The New, Man-Made Reality”: *Fabric Represented*

Now I’ll move from a focus on the screen to a discussion of the “external universe” in *Meshes*, namely, the representations of fabric and fabric-like material. In the film, Deren sets up several visual oppositions and parallels between her body and the materials that make up her surroundings. Moving in and around the interior and exterior of a Southern California home, Deren’s body moves and is moved—by wind,

and by quick editorial cuts—in tandem with wind-blown curtains and plant life. The filmic moments capturing these movements are, in a recontextualizing of Erin Brannigan’s words, “mini-choreographies at the body’s periphery” (Brannigan 2002: 1). These are the moments—shots of Deren’s hair moving in the wind, the pressing of her skin against the window curtain and later the window pane, her shadow commingling with shadows of leaves and plants—which take place at the edge of Deren’s body, showing the friction between the body and the fabric of the material world. Using editing to demonstrate textural similarity and contrast, Deren shows her audience the fabric of her clothes, the fabric of window coverings, and the upholstered fabric in the home. She brings in images of her own hair and of foliage to reflect the behaviors and surface patterns of fabric. These multi-layered representations contribute to Deren’s efforts to build up the surface of the screen, giving it a three-dimensional quality.

Although Deren’s long essay “An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film” deals extensively with the issue of nature, the important role of nature in these “mini-choreographies” and in Deren’s work in general has been largely neglected. In Greek sculpture, Hegel points out, drapery is defined by its opposition to nature: “we get drapery where a higher intellectual significance, an inner seriousness of the spirit, is prominent and, in short, where nature is not to be made the prominent thing” (Hegel

2004: 148). Though Hegel would disagree that modernist art offers a revision of this distinction, the images in *Meshes* offer evidence for a merging of natural elements with man-made drapery. I look briefly at Deren’s use of nature as it relates to the body, extending and incorporating this into my larger project of examining fabric in the film.

In “An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film,” Deren refers to “*the new, man-made reality*,” in contrast to the revelation or recapitulation of one which exists” (Deren 2005c: 59). Deren exploits this “contrast” between the “man-made” and the “real,” or “natural,” in *Meshes*, creating a productive confusion between the two states. For instance, a single fake flower reoccurs throughout the entire film, often appearing outside surrounded by real plants and flowers. Similarly, we often see multiple “Mayas” simultaneously, provoking questions about authenticity and falsehood. In terms of this article’s discussion of the significance of fabric in the film, Deren’s use of real/false natural imagery is important in that it foregrounds the relationship between fabric and the body. There is a disconnect between what the audience recognizes as “real” experience and the representation of reality shown in the film. This disconnect is based in sensory knowledge—for example, the plastic flower cannot actually give scent. Speaking about the performativity of objects, Alice Rayner refers to the “sensory dimension that exceeds [the object’s] visibility” (Rayner, 2006: 97). In addition to reflecting an

essential conflict in film—the use of artificial means to represent reality—Deren's use of real/fake contrast brings the film-viewing experience outside the realm of the visual into other “sensory dimensions” such as smell and the potential tactility of the screen.

The fake flower which threads through the film not only serves to confuse the visual and the tactile but as a way to effect moments of visual disruption in which the viewer must rethink the experience of film-watching. In the very first scene of the film, a shot of the path surrounded by large bushes and trees is split by a mannequin's arm holding the fake flower descending into the foreground. We see Deren's shadow pick up the fake flower and hold it up to her face, as if she is smelling it. We suspend our belief at this point, going along with the idea that a plastic flower can possess a scent. This is significant because Deren confuses artifice and the body—as an extension, we can imagine how the artifice of film might be imagined as giving off physical qualities such as scent. The presence of the fake flower in this scene throws both the sensory effects of the screen as well as the believability of filmic representation into question. The fake flower also works alongside images of fabric in the film; most prominently, it visually reinforces the repeated shots of a floral upholstery pattern depicting large rose- or peony-like forms. As if it were lifted from the upholstery fabric and given a three-dimensional shape, the fake flower moves through the film, a flat image come to individual life. This dynamicism—for example, in the suggestion of scent and three-

dimensionality—reflects Deren's work to attribute movement and texture to the flat, seemingly lifeless, film screen.

The floral-patterned fabric visible throughout *Meshes* reinforces the tension between represented and real nature. In the 14-minute film, there are multiple lingering shots of Deren entering, leaving, and re-entering the house. Upon first entering the house at the beginning of the film, Deren-the-director shows us the home's interior before showing us Deren-the-actor's face. The camera pans slowly around the front room, showing sheet-covered couches, pillows, floral-patterned curtains, and a lamp with flowers depicted on its base. The pace of the camera picks up as we move into the kitchen, then focuses in slow-motion on a knife balancing precariously on a loaf of bread which sits on a faded floral-patterned tablecloth. This pan occurs three more times during the film's dream sequence—we see the room from Deren's perspective, as if she enters the room for the first time over and over. A sustained focus on and return to the domestic interior space, one that is decorated with representational images of nature, is not only a metaphor for interior psychological space but a meditation on the prominent role of material such as fabric in the development of Deren's film aesthetic. We are constantly forced to consider the two-dimensional fabric-based flowers in relation to the “real,” three-dimensional flowers surrounding the house. This juxtaposition parallels the struggles between flatness and three-dimensionality, inside

and outside, and between the “authentic” and the cinematic artifice, which pervaded the film.

Lauren Rabinovitz, describing Mary Ann Doane's account, speaks of the “hypersignification of domestic elements—doors, windows, kitchen, bedrooms” in *Meshes*, referring primarily to the feminized nature of these spaces and objects (Rabinovitz, 2003: 61).⁹ At the transition into the film's dream sequence, the camera focuses multiple times on fabric in a “hypersignified” manner: the upholstered chair, the site of Deren's sleeping and then strangled/drowned body; the close-up of Deren's pants; the fluttering robes of the death figure; and later, the hanging fabric of the upstairs window curtains. The camera's slow-motion focus on fabric in these scenes creates an intimacy between the audience and the textiles/upholstery. Deren writes that slow-motion is “a kind of intimate and loving meditation on a movement or a solemnity which adds ritual weight to an action,” and again that slow-motion “expresses” “intimate and loving mediation on a movement” (Deren 2005e: 121; 2005a: 179). The “loving” moment taking place between director and camera, and between the audience and the screen, exemplifies what Sara Ahmed calls “the significance of nearness”—the important role of physical distance in determining intimacy among human bodies and non-human objects (Ahmed 2006: 2). Unlike the use of props in theater, for example, slow-motion shots bring the viewer's eye in close proximity to the filmed object, increasing the sense of intimacy.

A central scene in which we see Deren moving toward and up into a hanging swath of transparent fabric illustrates this potential physical connection between audience and screen. Wind from an unknown source blows the fabric as Deren walks into it dramatically, the folds falling around her face as we view her from the side. After this brief moment, which has no realistic context or recognizable background, we are jolted back to a view of the upstairs window and see that Deren is emerging from the open, curtained window (see Figure 2). This “jolt” transitions us from a decontextualized space back into the “reality” of the setting (see Figure 3). Unlike a non-diegetic insert, this moment maintains the presence of the body while altering the background. The absence of background reference isolates and dramatizes the connection between body and fabric in the foreground, giving the body a sort of “frame,” as if it is displayed on a museum wall. The contact between Deren’s body and the hanging fabric also serves as a visual representation of the imagined contact between film screen and spectator; the

hanging fabric, shown from the side to highlight its movement and three-dimensionality, operates as the screen might. In this way, Deren’s body moving into the fabric visualizes the potential interaction between viewer and screen. The slowing-down of the camera speed in this and other scenes emphasizes the intimacy between Deren and the fabric, and, more generally, the interaction of the body with clothing, upholstery, and curtaining.

In addition to fabric associated with art and domestic interiors, Deren pays special attention to images which mimic the behavior of fabric, such as wind-blown hair, plants, and tree branches. The film incorporates elements from the natural world as well as the world of man-made materials, confusing the distinctions between them. This tension between nature and artifice relates to Deren’s interest in the cinematic instrument and process of filmmaking: by heightening the differences and similarities between images of the natural and images of the artificial, she reminds her audience that film is a “made” object. While bringing attention to cinematic materiality,



Figure 2
Screen shot from *Meshes of the Afternoon*.



Figure 3
Screen shot from *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

the tension between nature and artifice in *Meshes* also shows how the actual experience of “touching” a projected image is not the same as touching the “real” object.

The confusion between nature and artifice is further complicated by the representation of the body in *Meshes*. The final image of the film is of Deren's dead body, strangled by seaweed, lying on the floral-upholstered chair. This is the culmination of the blurring of body, real/false nature, and fabric that has taken place throughout the film: Deren's body visually merges with the chair, the upholstered florals merge with real plant life. In addition to the scenes depicting the interaction of Deren's body directly with fabric, other images confuse nature and the body more indirectly, through images of hair and plants. I revisit the often-reproduced image of Deren sometimes called the “Botticelli” picture (see Figure 4). Maria

Pramaggiore says Deren used this image “to adorn promotional materials for the film.” The frame

depicts Deren standing at a window, caught in the act of looking through the glass. At that moment in the film, Deren is a spectator gazing through the window at “another” Maya Deren as the latter retraces certain ritualized physical actions the observing Maya has already performed. (Pramaggiore 2001: 237)

Pramaggiore deals convincingly with the photographic quality of the image in depth, comparing it to the promotional “glamor” photographs used by Hollywood studios (Pramaggiore 1997). This frame is also noteworthy for its use of nature, the body, and for its link to the painting with which it has become associated.

Occurring midway through the film, the “Botticelli” image

conveys a moment of suspended motion. Literally, the image is “stilled”: in the film Deren cuts to this image briefly between shots of the movement below the window. In the shots bookending the “Botticelli” image, we see the outside through the eyes of the window-framed Maya: another Maya runs after a dark-cloaked figure, fabric moving in the wind, and these movements are framed by swaying palm trees and other plants blowing in the wind. Interestingly, in the “Botticelli” shot Deren's head moves slightly, but the tree branches that seem to extend from her head (like hair) are steady—their lack of movement does not match the swaying trees outside, confusing the logical parallel between the outside trees and their reflection. This detail takes on significance beyond a mere editing slip, considering Deren's interest in the artifice of film as well as her efforts to disrupt

Figure 4

Screen shot from *Meshes of the Afternoon*.



conventional linear logic. The logical disconnect at this moment creates a “timeless” effect—a way of preserving this image, as if it is on display in a museum under glass. (In this shot Deren is shown behind glass.) Like a painting or a shot in slow-motion, this moment is “stilled”—in this way it becomes exceptionalized.

Pramaggiore discusses the use of this sort of momentary pause in the midst of motion as employed in Deren’s *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945–46):

Deren clearly makes a distinction between the art object’s immobility (the statues) and the woman/women’s shared motion in the water; in the process she reveals that film techniques permit objects and subjects to be differentiated through the manipulation of moving images in space and time. (Pramaggiore 1997: 34)

I would argue that Deren, in the “Botticelli” image, is in fact confusing object and subject, and that she employs a moment of illogical stillness to emphasize a merging rather than a differentiation. In the shot of the reflection of the trees against Deren’s head, the technology of the art form—film—enables a visual merging of nature and the body, as the branches seem to grow from Deren’s head. This moment of suspended movement works like slow-motion in its heightened attention and its development of visual intimacy between image and viewer. Seeing Deren’s image through a window pane further articulates this moment of intimate viewing in terms of the film screen:

we watch, through the physical layer of the screen, Deren’s own watching through transparent glass. Our experience is “mirrored” by Deren’s. Like the scene of Deren moving into the hanging transparent curtain, this “Botticelli” image reflects the experience of the spectator in its emphasis on the presence of the screen and the way the screen enables a simultaneous intimacy and separation. As if the layers of window pane and screen are veils between Deren and the audience, we are offered the *possibility* of intimate contact while simultaneously we are made aware of our established separation from the projected image.

In addition to presenting Deren as a Medusa-like powerful woman figure, the slowed movement of her hair echoes the multiple images of moving fabric and plant life occurring throughout the film.¹⁰ The visual confusion of Deren’s hair with the tree branches is useful when read in the context of the film as a whole. Previously, Deren’s hair appears in shots of her posed in an open doorway, the doorframe setting off her wild blowing curls. These shots emphasize the movement of Deren’s hair against the stillness of her surroundings, while the other elements discussed—the movement of Deren’s hair, the stillness of the shot, the illogical reflection of branches on the window—also connect back to Botticelli’s painting. In *The Birth of Venus*, hair, drapery, and plant life contribute to the painting’s suggestion of suspended motion. The wind in the painting does not make sense: fabric, flowers, and the figure’s hair, all central images,

appear to be blown around by several different sources. While Deren may not have intentionally appropriated the illogical wind source from Botticelli's painting, her use of stilled, undetermined movement connects her film to a well-known painting, giving it an added seriousness. This particular detail shared by the film and the painting—a woman stilled among illogically blowing winds—is significant in its display of an inaccessible body. As if in a calm at the center of a windstorm, the figure is untouched by the effects of wind. A barrier exists between Deren/Venus and the “external universe”: a substance such as a screen or a pane of glass removes their bodies from touchability and elevates—or, alternatively, relegates—them to a position of display.

Despite Deren's lack of conscious or recorded interest in discussing the potential in linking film and fabric, there are a range of suggestive moments and statements in her work, both written and filmed, that point toward an understanding of film which incorporates both the physical behaviors and the visual effects of fabric. Deren creates an experience of film in which the viewer is caught between the desire to physically interact with the visually textured surface and the fear of making contact with a prohibited “art” object. In an essay on architecture and the haptic, Juhani Pallasmaa writes that an engaged slowness characterizes architecture which possesses a touchable quality: “tactile sensibility replaces distancing visual imagery by enhanced materiality, nearness,

and intimacy” (Pallasmaa 2000). The use of slow-motion filming and the appearance of a textured screen, as well as representations of friction between Deren's body and fabric, enact this “enhanced” or heightened state. Deren's technique encourages us to linger on the contact between fabric and her filmed body and imagine the potential contact between the screen and the bodies of the audience members. In creating the sense that film is simultaneously touchable and inaccessible, Deren portrays the screen as a sort of veil. Along these lines, we might think of “film” in its alternate meaning, as a membrane: a transparent covering, like a veil or a “mesh.” Deren shows how fabric on film and the film screen itself can work like a membrane—both hiding and exposing—in the relations among actor, director, and audience.

Notes

1. Movement is a crucial issue for Deren and she describes her views on it in detail in her writings. Deren advises filmmakers to incorporate physical movement instead of linear narrative movement: “Instead of trying to invent a plot that moves, use the movement of wind, or water, children, people, elevators, balls, etc., as a poem might celebrate these” (Deren 2005a: 17–18).
2. Although I don't deal in depth here with veils and veiling, there are many useful texts on this topic. On Islamic dress and Arab women, see Bailey and Tawadros (2003) and El Guindi (2003). On cinema and psychoanalysis, see Doane (1989). On women and veiling, see Heath (2008).
3. For more on the topic of Deren as dancer and dance theorist see Franko (2001), Holl (2001), and Jackson (2002).
4. One among many useful sources on this topic is Huyssen (1986).
5. Deren also enacts this separation from accessibility by establishing a body of written theoretical work around her own films. Developing a conversation of theoretical writings about a creative work can assure its elevation to art—for example, in the early twentieth century, written scholarship about modern dance and photography assisted in moving them “up” from marginal or “mass” forms into more elite art realms.
6. Deren deals with sculpture—most notably, in the film “A Study in Choreography for Camera” (1945) where Talley Beatty's movements bring a sculpture's suggestion into reality—and also in her discussion of “animated painting” films.
7. Doy offers a compelling argument about the changing status of drapery: “previously a signifier of civilisation, draped cloth is now much more commonly met within visual culture as a signifier of barbarism” (Doy 2002: 17).
8. This contradiction—the simultaneous rejection and reliance on “the past” in order to assert “the new”—is a trait Deren shares with many of

her modernist colleagues. Interestingly, also working in the U.S. in the middle of the century, weaver Anni Albers was trying to bring serious attention to the art of textile-making and the fields of craft and design.

9. While I agree that discussions of the feminine are crucial to analyses of this film, here I am more concerned with the repeated attention to the presence of fabric in these “hypersignified” moments.
10. Deren writes of a scene in *At Land* when “a girl with long hair turns her head rapidly from side to side”: “By photographing the action I just described, in slow motion, I created an image in which her look from side to side for a way to get down takes place at a speed which is usual in such an action, except that the hair, lifted in a circling movement about her head, lends the moment a sense of suspense which is extremely effective” (Deren 2005a: 179–80).

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