

ESSENTIAL
DEREN

COLLECTED WRITINGS ON FILM BY

Maya Deren

Edited with a preface by
Bruce R. McPherson

DOCUMENTEXT

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ESSENTIAL DEREN

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206 patterns which had been carefully conceived for a theatre stage space and a fixed-front audience. In this film, on the other hand, cinematographic space—the entire world—becomes itself an active element of the dance rather than an area in which the dance takes place. And the dancer shares, with the camera and cutting, a collaborative responsibility for the movements themselves. This results in a film dance which could not be performed except on film.

I am now engaged in a new film, as yet untitled [*Ritual in Transfigured Time*], which is the most elaborate of my productions. In order to be able to concentrate creatively on the direction of the film, I have had most of the acting done by friends. It is only in the increased number of actors and in such physical details, however, that this film is more elaborate. What still inspires me most is the capacity of cinema to create new, magic realities by the most simple means, with a mixture of imagination and ingenuity in about equal parts.

For example, to achieve on film the sense of an endless, frustrating flight of stairs, the great Hollywood studios would probably spend hundreds on the building of a set. You, however, can do it for just the price of the film required to photograph any ordinary stairway three times—the first angle shows all but the top landing, the second angle shows the flight without any landings included, and the third angle shows the flight with the top landing. If the actor climbs the visible portion of the stairs three times at a consistent rhythm, you will succeed in having created a stairway three times as long as the real one. By such exercise of ingenuity, using even the the most modest camera and equipment, you can create whole worlds for just the cost of the film.

For more than anything else, cinema consists of the eye for magic—that which perceives and reveals the marvelous in whatsoever it looks upon.

New Directions in Film Art

Whenever I am scheduled for a lecture, I am always asked what the program title should be. I find it extremely difficult because I am being asked to define for films what is taken for granted in other art forms. It is customary to think of films as Mass Media which must provide some sort of entertainment. If you think of doing something else with film, people become uneasy. There is a whole ideology about films; that it is mass media and therefore wrong to do a film that might have a more limited audience. The fact is that mass media isn't peculiar to film at all. The printing press is more of a mass media. You only need to be literate and have fairly decent eyesight to read, whereas in order to see a film you have to have something between a palace and a small room, equipment, etc. Immediately it is less a mass media than the press. In publishing, the printing press as mass media has not prevented the publication of poetry, art reproductions, etc. A publishing house which has just put out a best seller or some other highly commercial piece of work considers it proper to bring out a book of poetry. My own feeling is that just as language may be used for textbooks, poetry books, etc., so film can be used for all these and not essentially in competition with each other. Use of the film medium in one way is not necessarily a threat to other films. My film is to other films as poetry is to other forms of literature.

Whenever one announces an unprofitable activity as poetry and art, the question on people's minds is "What is the motivation, the incentive, since so little reward and so much suffering

is involved?" There is actually only one reason that an artist ever functions and that is his creative vanity. He wants to feel that but for the grace of him this object, this reality, this experience would not exist. Therefore he doesn't go through a great deal of suffering to give something which you already have. He would want to create something that is worth the special labor, in that it contributes something new to your experience. The creation of an experience—which is what a work of art involves—when it is new, is new as an experience and not necessarily as a basic idea. For example we all know fear, a universal experience. When an artist creates a new experience of fear, he shares the universality of the basic emotion and gives a new view of it which refreshes your sense of it and which illuminates once more that first principle. The fact that it is new as an experience—that is, immediately recognized and identifiable in detail—has led people to assume that it is subjective on the part of the artist. An artist uses his own experience—what other could he use? The fact that it is subjective does not mean personally subjective. For every one of us has a subjective. There is a collective subjective: communication of art between those elements common to all people. As children we all had a box which we kept hidden; it contained a butterfly wing, a beetle, a lucky penny. For each, that box was private, intimate and secret; and yet we all (most of us) had it. Communication of art is between those boxes, between subjectives, the secret that we all share, each privately. If it is something that we share, what is the basis of the difficulty...in trying to pretend there is no problem of communication between art and audience...if universally shared? Partly because we are products of a scientific era, one which has taught us to suspect the appearance of things, we have learned scientific analysis: things are not what they seem to be, we must discard appearances to arrive at true composition. We have come to suspect the aspect and believe that the real meaning of things lies somehow beyond it and we must almost destroy the

aspect to arrive at the true meaning. This is quite valid for natural phenomena. We see a small animal create its shell. To understand the structure of shell and animal, we have almost to deny the beauty of it and go beyond that aspect of it to understand the animal and how he builds. Art consists of this aspect. A sculptor uses stone because it seems massive. He is not concerned, as we might know, about a table that is not solid. He uses stone for its aspect of solidity, aluminum for its aspect of lightness and fragility. Art consists in this aspect which is a meaning. If one applies the principle of penetration, ignoring aspect, then one has simply gone through the door that leads nowhere and the work of art is left behind. One understands other things, but in the work of art the problem is to create a material object with sensory existence, which is a manifestation of emotions, ideas, which are themselves non-material. So art is the manifestation in material terms of non-material things. That is real meaning, not to be penetrated and left behind.

In art, scientific analysis has taken the form of symbolic diagnosis. Diagnosis, because a school of analysis springs from a theory of diseased personality. I submit it is shocking to call artists diseased, and subject them to diagnosis. Second, it is necessary to redefine symbol, and how it is used. To my mind, symbol is exactly a substitute for the thing itself; something which stands in place of the thing. If one assumes something is a symbol, one must be prepared to answer why the artist has substituted at all; why one should assume that every image is a mask for meaning. If you regard it that way, your feeling is that an artist has not said what he means, but something else. All artists know it; they look past it; they are all in on a conspiracy in which nobody says what they mean and everybody knows it. That seems ludicrous. Unless there is a very good reason why an artist would substitute one thing for another, it might be good to believe that the thing you see, or read, is exactly the thing the artist has intended.

210 The fact that image has fallen into a second class in symbol is apparent. As, "bird in flight." Well, I mean bird in flight. "Oh, you mean that is not a symbol for something else?" No, it is a bird in flight. "Oh, it's just a bird in flight?" It is all a bird in flight might mean. There are many ramifications here. It might be in an exemplary sense, or a generalization—all birds in flight; an abstraction—idea of thing rather than thing. Abstraction about flight. It might be an example of equivalence—my heart soars as a bird in flight. That isn't a symbol for the heart soaring, because the heart does not soar materially; but to give it a material existence in art, you find equivalence. It is not a symbolic substitute; there is no image for which you are substituting. It may be an archetypal statement—the bird in flight. There are many more ramifications, and [the] image is more rich than the symbol and so rich in fact that the problem for the artist is how to confine it, how to prevent the intended compliment. "Oh, you mean everyone can think what they want?" That is intended as a compliment. That would do well for natural phenomena, which don't intend anything, as the setting of the sun might be the beginning of an ominous night for one, the end of a perfect day for another. Sun has no intention emotionally, so one may attach any emotions. A work of art is an intentioned thing. How to construct, confine, make it mean what you mean and not so anyone can take it as they please. The way that an image is confined is by its position in context. A table might be old, high, and red. An antique dealer is concerned with "old," a painter with "red," a child with "high." When it appears in a work of art, as film, that table, the sense in which it is being used would be evident by what happened to it. If in the scene following, the table fell apart, the table was used in reference to age. If someone jumps off, it is the height of the table that is functioning in that context. There are many implications (for each person a different quality). It is then defined by its contextual position. Form as a whole defines the parts. The meaning of a work of art rests not in elements which

appear in it, but in the relationship of those elements.

211 A work of art is an emotional invention. Invention combines known things into a new thing; so does a work of art relate known things into a new experience. This means that the form as a whole and the relationship between things must be respected and the work must not be dismembered with some system as Freudian, nor interested in personal terms (according to personal history). I mean that the element can only be understood if you ask "What does that mean in terms of thing?"; not "What does it mean to me?" Children learn very rapidly and then at adolescence, as ego asserts itself, there is a slowing down of the learning process. That process slows down to a full stop and we cannot learn any more. What is happening is that a child looks at the world through eyes like clear windows, really looking outward; then the individual needs to justify a history that has begun to exist with him, the window silvers over and thickens and thickens and finally we are confronted by a mirror in which we see nothing but ourselves, the affirmation of ourselves over and over again. We no longer learn; we see ourselves and we know it. For any human being it is important to try to keep as many holes in that mirror as possible. This is necessary in works of art because the experience of art is essentially an autocratic one; a work of art demands the temporary surrender of any personal system. The person who surrenders then possesses new experience. That is growth. It is the growth of traveling in another mind and knowing it. This requires the surrender of history, an innocence of past—if you will—in an audience whether it looks at a painting, reads a poem, hears music, or sees a film.

These films stand in relation to most films as poetry does to literature. Actually in a sense, their structure is closer to music. One of the habits that we bring with us is the anticipation that there will be narrative in film and that narrative will give the film form. In this case there is no narrative, any more than there is

narrative musical composition. Yet we know there is logic in musical composition, even though no narrative. To say there is no narrative is not to say that it is anarchic; but according to another logic. My effort is directed toward discovering what would be the logic of film form as contrasted to the logic of narrative form: to discover this logic—as a poet discovers the logic of one tone following another—and in which we recognize a melody, although it is not a narrative.

Apart from this suggestion, one more thing: in this literate age there is an emphasis upon verbalism that I think makes things quite difficult, because it has confounded understanding with explanation and we feel that if we cannot perfectly articulate and explain what we feel, we have not understood it... What is the sort of answer we cannot give about a painting, a piece of sculpture; we very often cannot say. That does not mean that we have not understood. It takes a poet to put into words any profound and subtle meaning. It is not necessary to be a poet to experience and understand. My experience has been, in reference to visual forms and music, with people who imagine that they did not understand and ask questions; if you press them a bit and they dig out a little inarticulately, you find they have understood it but not expressed it totally.

Ritual in Transfigured Time is based on the manipulation of times. (FILM SHOWN.) That film has no new objects in it and it isn't a new theme. It is a film called *Ritual in Transfigured Time* because it is a reference to ritual and ritual in primitive society or any society where ritual takes a place is known as "rite de passage," that state which means the crossing of an individual from one state into another—boyhood into manhood, or as here, from widow into bride. That is not an unusual theme. Form here is the distinguishing factor. Rather than form in reference to content, it is more important to discuss it in reference to the instrument by which it is realized. By "realize" we mean "to make real." A

poem, painting, etc., about love differs not because of content, but because of the different instrument. It is the creation not only of the artist but the creation of a collaboration between artist and instrument. There are certain things about the inevitable aspects of form in film, because it is achieved with camera and with editing. A motion picture, unless it records a theatrical form, or is a documentary, is a poetic form which attempts to create and use the elements of the film medium themselves to create a new experience. Film deals in visibles. In pointing out differences between verbalization and visualization (and since you are a museum, not a literary audience), briefly this: the fact is that you can never show "never." Never is a verbal idea. It is a true idea, but it cannot be shown. You cannot show "I never saw her before." There are images verbal in nature, in vision. An image "fan without feathers" seems to be a visual image. To show it you might show the skeleton of a fan, but that does not convey it; then a few feathers left on the skeleton and plucked one by one. Three minutes of film do what a phrase does in two seconds. The entire pathos, the emotion is that it withdraws from something which should rightfully have feathers. A writer (transferring from experience to words) may write "she felt lonely." An expensive actress simply makes a face which is understood to stand for the interior condition of loneliness. The audience gets the idea. This is an expensive process. In another way you think not "She felt lonely," but "She is alone"; that is a visual condition. You might put a small figure in the center of the screen. Activity in the right hand corner points up the dissociation, the isolation of that figure. That is a direct translation into visual terms of lonely feeling rather than translating it first into verbal terms and trying to illustrate that.

Because 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.

214 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. A still shot might be concerned with a detail of space. Film might be concerned with the detail of time in slow motion—a microscope in time. Film is concerned with sharpness and investigating through slow motion the detail of an action, whereas still photography investigates the detail in space. To contrast it again to painting; a painter will make a room appear long by manipulating perspectives. For me, a long room is one that takes a long time to cross. If I can spend a long time crossing it, I make it long by making that act long. In this film, as the girl starts toward the other girl, she walks and walks and walks. Yet we know from the opening scenes that the distance between the two doors was small; but for the girl entering, it becomes a long time. Space is created by time in the film, whereas in painting it is done by space manipulation. The function of time in slow motion has an emotional element. When you see slow motion you are affected not by the rate of movement of the object, but you are affected by the fact that it is the wrong rate, which you recognize by your own pulse. A run takes place at a certain rate; when it is no longer at that rate, it is not a run but a walk. If you become nostalgic, you are actually experiencing a counterpoint between your own pulse and time on the screen. Counterpoint gives the emotional manipulations of the camera. That is why I don't bother with abstractions. A square may go slow, or fast, but it cannot go slow motion, because it has no pulse which is proper to it... You counter the reality which is known and impose your own changes upon it. These changes are not only within the frame—time functions not only in slow motion or in making a room long, but in the total entity, the way things are put together: i.e., the relationships between things, and in the things themselves.

I have been interested for a long time in making a film based

on some sports activity. I had in mind that the actual movements of dance and sports are very similar. In sports, movements are combined for one purpose and in dancing for another. But if it were up to me to combine them and determine a total result, why not take sports movement and combine into dance? When I saw the training movement of a Chinese boxing Wu Tang, the ancestor of ju-jitsu, I conceived of such a film. 215

When an artist is asked to speak about form, you expect something different than when a critic talks about it. Because you think that somewhere between sentences and words, the secret will slip out. I am trying to give you that secret; it isn't a secret at all, but it is building solidly, not using secrets. I had been trying to extend into metaphysical extension; that film is changing, metamorphic; that is, infinite; the idea that the movement of life is totally important rather than a single life. My films were built on an incline, an increase in intensity. I hoped to make a form which was infinite, the changingness of things. I thought I would want to find a total form which conveyed that sense, particularly in reference to an Oriental subject. My impression was: one is walking down a corridor of a hotel. One hears a sound, opens a door and a man is playing; one listens for three minutes and closes the door. The music went on before you opened the door and it continues after you close the door. There was neither beginning nor end. Western music increases in intensity to climax and then resolves itself. Oriental music is infinite; it goes on and on. The Chinese theater goes on for hours and hours with time for lunch, moving scenery, etc.

To begin a film in the middle of a movement and end it in the middle of a movement is my intention. It would have no climax. This "Wu Tang" is like the muscular statement of a metaphysical system. It is based on the *Book of Changes [I Ching]* of Confucius. The basic principle of life is that the dynamic was the functional flow of negative and positive, repeated. In sports terms that was

216 called breathing. Movements open and close according to breath which is kept at normal pace. Another metaphysical principle is involved: "you don't aggress against aggression, but use the force of an opponent against himself, as carried out by ju-jitsu. So, in Wu Tang, never an aggressive force, but rather a swallowing of the force coming at you, spitting it out and using it against where it came from.

When you train for something, you imagine possibilities, meditate on possibilities of action, but you are not involved in it. Meditation on Violence. It is the nature of meditation to look at a thing in one way, then approach it from another, move forward, recede, return. I conceived of photographing this as a kind of cubism in time. The same movement is seen from different approaches just as in cubism, simultaneously different aspects are seen, but here not in space but in time. Although it is true that one meditates and life is infinite, it would be awfully dull if there were no variations of intensity. I asked my Chinese friend about another school of Chinese boxing which would develop principles of Wu Tang. There was another school called exterior boxing, determined by exterior conditions. If the opponent was guarding, you were guarding too. It was aggressive statement, dependent on being aggressive, upon the point of impact. Wu Tang was based on breathing; keeping the whole body integrated. In Shao-Lin one used all of the body. A weapon? Yes, a saber—a logical extension of meditating on the strength of the arm: the arm would sprout a saber. Thus my film is based on metaphysical movements.

First section: background of cloudy white. Films up to now were in time; this time a film is in no place and no time, like the inside of an egg. Curved, inside, all white, flat lighting; no source, no direction, being quality of infinity. Costume is anonymous. The camera is the witness of action.

Second part: Shao-Lin begins. Room is squared off black and

white; moment of meeting, impact is important. Aggressive principle. Feel different form, rounded curve of passive principle.... Light sharp from one side. Costume is almost coat of mail. The camera here is the opponent which ducks your blows. So it is a meditation increasing in violence and a meditation on reality. 217

Third: Moment of meeting is eager, stressed. Here part of the action is left out. The hand is quicker than the eye. More happened than one saw. To me, when you carry an idea to the extreme there is a moment when it must become its opposite. I said this to my Chinese friend. Here I am going more and more intensely, but it must bump itself against its own extremity or reversal. I think it would be paralysis. He said: That's right. That's why Wu Tang never extends movement to the extreme but rounds it about. It would be vulnerable at all points. No movement is ever concluded, it merely leads again. That makes it metamorphic, dynamic, the very principle of life itself. At the extreme of development is the point of paralysis after which the entire film is photographed in reverse, as the extreme curve of a parabola. The movement is so much in balance that it is equally in balance going backwards as going forwards. Only the sash jumps ahead of the movement of the body. As far as the Chinese were able, they created a system which was equally in balance, no matter which way it went. *Meditation on Violence* was a reaffirmation of this total form which I thought of as being equally balanced in itself reversed in its forward movement: The parabolic curve, infinite in its extension on both sides.

. . .

Q: You said that people insist on seeing symbols where symbols are not. It seemed to me that from what you have said and from what we have seen, there are profound, philosophical implications back of it. It manifests a philosophical attitude. I wonder if you would expand on that.

A: In the last film, the image which you see is not a symbol for

218 another event. It is the creation of an event for a philosophical idea. A philosophical idea does not exist in time. In created matter, this film is a statement which is equivalent. What I argued was against the symbol applied as the manifestation of a material idea. These are not merely decorative. At the same time also, the image which I created to manifest that known material emotion or idea was also the best that I could possibly arrive at. I prefer that one get the idea through that image than through verbalization. If I have made it into film, I feel that film form is particularly apt.

Q: How important was sound in the last film, since it was unnecessary in the first?

A: It was conceived with music. A ten year-old boy saw them and sat through them quietly. I talked to the child. The father said: "I didn't notice there was no sound on them." The mother said: "No, that's true; I didn't miss it." The little boy said: "Oh, those things never happen with sound." You experience here (the first film) the essence of silence; they were mute. The last film was thought of as being with sound. I conceived it in relationship to the sound track which I had in mind. When I told people I was going to mix Haitian drums with a Chinese flute, they were shocked. But it turned out well. The sound is another manifestation of what goes on inside of the person. The pulse, increasing intensity, is proportional to the abstract throbbing of the flute. The drums begin before a new movement just as an idea precedes action. Music, like time, incites the mind of man; drums begin a little before going into action.

Q: What do you think of Disney's treatment of music and color in *Fantasia*?

A: Seemed to me a bit Coney Island.

Q: You have ideas on how you want to create films as an artist. As an artist, how do you expect people to see it, to react. What do you anticipate? Their enjoyment, appreciation?

A: My purpose is neither to instruct nor entertain, but to be

219 that experience which is poetry. That experience may be incidentally educational. Experience is really the only education. When a person comes in, experiences something, and goes away a little bit different, he has been educated. Art is the only educational medium. It changes the organism which experiences it. It doesn't add to it, take away from it, but is directed toward a qualitative change in the organism.