

Maya Deren:

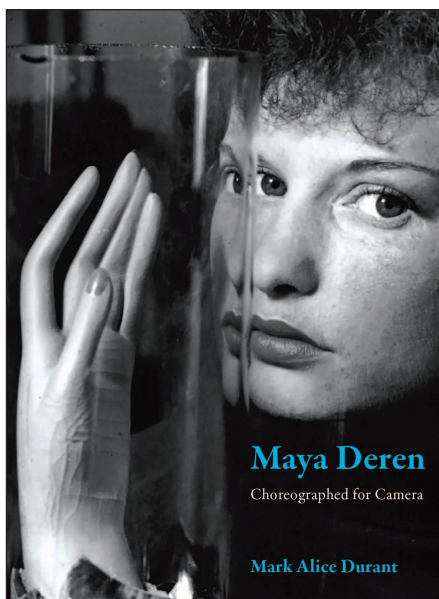
Choreographed for Camera

by Mark Alice Durant. Baltimore, MD: Saint Lucy Books, 2022. 315 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$35.00.

In 2022, Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943)—a fourteen-minute short wherein the artist plays the heroine haunted asleep or awake by a fugitive mirror-faced figure in the California sunshine—was voted the sixteenth greatest film of all time in the decennial *Sight and Sound* critics' poll. Not only was this the highest placing for an American avant-garde film—next on the list was Jonas Mekas's *As I Was Moving Ahead, Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000) at no. 225—but it also outranked many former top ten mainstays, from *Battleship Potemkin* to *8½*. This placing crowned decades of advocacy for Deren's experiments in dream narrative, cine-choreography, and subjective anthropology, by filmmakers, curators, historians, and feminist scholars.

Maya Deren was not the first American experimental-avant-garde-underground-artist's filmmaker—however you choose to define that notoriously slippery form of cinema; relevant precursors include Watson & Webber (dream narrative), Emlen Etting (dance), and Zora Neale Hurston (anthropology). She was, however, the first American to take such experiments beyond the province of small elites toward broader cultural acceptance. She traveled across North America with her films, showing them to audiences in museums, art galleries, campuses, and any space she could find away from mainstream venues. She presented her own and others' work by writing for or giving interviews to periodicals at once popular (such as *Vogue*), academic, or technical, becoming the first American filmmaker to build a substantial body of theoretical writing. She was the first artist to receive a Guggenheim scholarship for film. Her work in raising support for experimental American filmmakers would eventually lead to the founding of The Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York that would serve as a model imitated across the world. In a much-quoted tribute duly quoted by Mark Alice Durant, Stan Brakhage called Deren “the mother of us all.” Her importance exceeded even the field of experimental cinema she helped to expand. She is a crucial figure in the histories of twentieth-century dance and anthropology; her films were key to the new academic discipline of women's studies in the 1960s and 1970s; and her work exploring personal symbolism, interior states, and primeval energies has influenced many cultural figures since her death in 1961, from filmmakers like David Lynch to pop star Madonna, who restaged *At Land* (1944), the follow-up to *Meshes*, for her music video *Cherish* (1989).

Deren's films were highly regarded from their first public screening at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village in 1946.



They received unprecedented coverage in a variety of outlets in the 1940s, while her apartment became a salon hosting countercultural luminaries such as Marcel Duchamp (with whom she made the aborted *Witch's Cradle*, 1944), André Breton, and John Cage. Not everyone has been a fan, however, of either the work or the artist herself. James Agee called the films “solemnly, arrogantly, distressingly pretentious and arty.” Now-revered figures Manny Farber and Jonas Mekas wrote vicious homophobic broadsides against her films and that of her neophytes. Sidney Peterson, prominent among the irreverent and jazz-influenced next generation of experimental filmmakers, admired her work and promotion of avant-garde filmmakers but, to quote Durant, “he found the unrelenting seriousness of how she spoke about her work, controlling and filled with self-regard, leaving little room for the viewer to define their own experience with her images”; he also criticized her overuse of archaic “optical tricks.” In 1953, two major figures of mid-twentieth-century literature, American playwright Arthur Miller and Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, tried to humiliate Deren at the epochal symposium “Poetry and the Film” organized by her admirer Amos Vogel at his Cinema 16 film society. Even Brakhage's “mother of us all” comment could be construed as ambivalent and condescending, with Deren as the “mother” who made experimental film possible, but mothers are to be outgrown and abandoned while the sons did the “real” work.

The artist's legacy was to fuse the work (finished or unfinished) and the life (documented or speculated) to create The Myth of Maya Deren. This was the title of a projected three-book compilation of transcribed and facsimile archive records, photographs, and interviews compiled by the team of Vève A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, and sponsored by Anthology Film Archives. Although only two books were published (1985 and 1988), covering the period 1917–1947, it has

been the key resource for everything published about Deren since. The fact that the third book, due to cover 1947–1961, was aborted, may explain why this is the least covered period in the extensive Deren bibliography.

Despite the profusion of previous volumes on the artist, Durant's book claims to be the first full biography of Deren. It is a chronological retelling of the familiar narrative: birth as Eleonora Derenkovskaya in Kyiv months before the October Revolution; the family's flight from the antisemitism of White Ukraine in 1922 to Syracuse, New York, where they changed their surname to Deren; education in Geneva, Syracuse, and New York; involvement with Trotskyist left-wing organizations, where she met her first husband Gregory Bardacke; and Deren's decisive encounter with Katherine Dunham. The choreographer and anthropologist introduced her to modern dance, filmmaking, and Haiti, the trinity of subjects that would dominate Deren's subsequent artistic and personal life. Dunham's dancers Talley Beatty and Rita Christiani would feature in two of her most important experiments in dance cinema, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). Deren met her future husband and most important collaborator, Czech exile Alexander “Sasha” Hammid (né Hackenschmied), at one of Dunham's parties. Durant is right to call Deren out for excising Dunham from accounts of her career. Deren, always overly concerned with how “original” and “path-breaking” she and her work were, brooked little acknowledgement of predecessors, especially if they were still alive.

Choreographed for Camera is at its best when evoking the atmosphere of febrile creativity that accompanied Deren's projects, finished or unfinished. In particular, Durant captures the excitement leading up to *Meshes*. Maya and Sasha's personal relationship developed in parallel to the artistic discoveries made in a series of staged photographs that prefigured that breakthrough film (Deren was a remarkable photographer often hired by prestige publications). In this series, the blazing sun created dark shadows in claustrophobic interiors where tableaux of empty rooms, unsettling figures (played by Maya and Sasha themselves), and charged objects (including dismembered mannequins), all prefigure *Meshes*. These scenarios are clearly Surrealist in style and effect—a comparison Deren would reject all her life, and which she would attempt to shut down by directing viewer response through personal introductions at screenings, artist statements, and giving the initially silent *Meshes* a minimalist score by her third husband, Teiji Ito. This is the version most people are likely to see today. Despite its haunting originality as a piece of music, many viewers—including this writer—feel that Ito's score undoes the suggestiveness of *Meshes*. In any case, Maya and *Meshes* continue to be read in terms of Surrealism—during the reading of Durant's book for review, I saw *Meshes* screened at two institutional exhibitions in London about Surrealism.

At best, most texts on *Meshes* pay lip service to Hammid's role as a co-author, but then go on to treat it as solely a Deren statement. A superficial comparison between *Meshes* and Deren's subsequent films reveals evident stylistic and thematic differences, many of which can be traced to Hammid and his involvement with the European avant-garde during the 1930s. He ran a film society in Prague that screened the work of figures such as Dulac, Epstein, Buñuel, and Cocteau, all of whom haunt the shadows of *Meshes*. His own experimental films also inform it, not least *Aimless Walk* (1930), with its peripatetic doppelgängers. His technical mastery—Hammid was also a cameraman-for-hire to various public and private organizations—enabled the amazing subjective camerawork that drives *Meshes* to its bloody conclusion. Deren's subsequent films rely more on framing and editing for their effect, rather than mobile camerawork. It is good that Durant—following academic John David Rhodes—reinstates Hammid's contribution to *Meshes*.

The second most satisfying passage of *Choreographed for Camera* comprises the chapters on Deren's three visits to Haiti. The project was conceived with the typical "primitivist" hubris of early modernism—Deren intended to make a film paralleling the structures of Haitian ritual, Navajo dance, and children's games. This approach was given the imprimatur of anthropologist Gregory Bateson, husband of Margaret Mead, and with whom Deren may have had an affair. Once in Haiti, however, this glib conception—fueled by Western research into Haitian history and culture—was abandoned. Rather than "objectively" recording rituals as ethnographic documentation, Deren participated in them, trying to access ecstatic states, an aspiration that was contrary to both the logistics of filmmaking and the analytic logic of anthropology.

There followed a crisis of ethics and aesthetics, with Deren finally abandoning the proposed film and writing a book instead. This seems to be the ultimate failure for an artist who had found her voice with the movie camera. From the beginning of her film career, however, Deren had built such failure into her practice—her first show was advertised as "Three Abandoned Films," with the flyer citing French poet Paul Valéry: "a work is never completed, but merely abandoned." Durant is good on why Deren's Haiti film should be considered an "abandoned" film in an artistically and philosophically productive way. Its abandonment raises questions about the "limits of documentation" (the name of Durant's chapter), of completion, of visibility, of using physical means to record nonphysical states. Those mute film cans left in Deren's drawer were a Pandora's Box of warnings and ramifications about the limits and ethics of film. Unfortunately, the radical impact of Deren's gesture was blunted when, after her death, Deren's intentions were ignored—not for the first time—and Ito

initiated an edit of the Haitian footage with recordings taken by Deren in the field, and a voice-over culled from the book *Divine Horsemen*. The result is exactly as Deren feared, just another problematic ethnographic documentary. Durant is right to ignore it.

Choreographed for Camera is a curious book. What is its intended audience? Is it a book aimed at a general audience interested in an extraordinary individual, the history of female artists, experimental film, or the counterculture of mid-twentieth-century America? If so, there are immediate barriers to an enlightening and pleasurable reading experience. Frequently, you might think that Durant is a bad or sloppy writer. He is not; he writes more fluidly and engagingly than most of the academics who have written about Deren, but his publisher appears to have skimped on proofreading and copy-editing to concentrate on the (admittedly gorgeous) graphic design and reproduction of images. The text is littered with typos, howlers, redundancies, confused punctuation, missing or misplaced words, and evidence of uncorrected drafts. There are sometimes several errors on one page. Too often, the reader must reread a passage to understand the meaning of sentences and paragraphs, making what should be a fluent read halting and frustrating. Since the publisher is the author, Durant has only himself to blame.

If the book was intended to be of more restricted use to scholars, then Durant and his Saint Lucy press have misjudged once more. First, there is no index. Worse, although Durant, in his afterword and blurb, claims to have undertaken original research and conducted interviews, there is no annotation in the text, and no list of archival sources consulted, or people interviewed. There is a bibliography at the back, but nothing is directly cited within, even when large chunks of other sources are quoted. At other times, sources are synopsisized without credit and made to read like third-person narration or indirect narration in a novel. As a result, it can be unclear what is a precis from one of Deren's own private or professional writings, what is a witness statement, what is derived from secondary sources, and what are Durant's own speculations. This makes *Choreographed for Camera* virtually useless as a resource—as I discovered when trying to retrace facts and quotes for this review.

Deren's most important theoretical formulation contrasts "horizontal" cinema, the cinema of narrative, linear movement, beginnings, middles, and endings, with the "vertical," films that pause movement to privilege and explore discrete imagery, moments, and experiences. In his afterword, Durant describes the long gestation of his book, and his initial ideas for structuring it in imitation of Deren's structurally complex, symbolically fraught, and chronologically and spatially fractured films. To do that successfully would take someone like Proust or Woolf, so it is perhaps just as well that

Durant eventually opted for the tried-and-true linear narrative approach, but by making just another book, he presents Deren as just another filmmaker, while the "real" Deren, the one who still lives in her work, remains elusive. Perhaps the best approach to a Deren biography is found in those works that treat Deren in her own medium; films like Jo Ann Kaplan's *Invocation: Maya Deren* (1987) and Barbara Hammer's *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011). Just as Deren sought alternatives to mainstream narrative approaches to cinema, perhaps biographers need to go beyond the soulless cradle-to-grave approach, beyond literal or verifiable facts, beyond the horizontal, and to start thinking vertically.—Darragh O'Donoghue

Costa-Gavras:

Encounters with History

by John J. Michalczyk and Susan A.

Michalczyk. New York: Bloomsbury

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\$120.00, Paperback: \$39.95, and E-book:

\$108.00 (20% discount available when ordering from publisher's Website).

Few directors have had as long and impactful a career in the film industry as the Greek-French auteur Costa-Gavras, born on February 12, 1933, whose ninetieth birthday earlier this year was marked by a series of wide-ranging retrospectives around the globe. As one might expect, very few of his peers are still making films, with directors such as Clint Eastwood (born 1930), Roman Polanski (1933), and Woody Allen (1935) among that ever-decreasing group. Costa-Gavras, too, continues to work, with his most recent film, *Adults in the Room* (2019), released exactly fifty years after *Z* (1969), the film which marked his arrival on the international film scene, won him an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and largely defined the trajectory of his career as an overtly political filmmaker, one often called the "father of the political thriller."

The recent publication of John J. Michalczyk and Susan A. Michalczyk's *Costa-Gavras: Encounters with History* is therefore particularly timely, arriving just two years after editor Homer Petty's informative critical anthology *The Films of Costa-Gavras: New Perspectives* (Manchester University Press, 2020). The Michalczyks' book provides an insightful retrospective of the director's filmography and makes a compelling case for Costa-Gavras as one of the defining filmmakers of the second half of the twentieth century.

The fifty years between *Z* and *Adults in the Room*, not forgetting the two earlier films, *The Sleeping Car Murders* (1965) and *Shock Troops* (1967), are meticulously explored in *Costa-Gavras: Encounters with History*, whose subtitle characterizes the essential nature of the director's oeuvre—films which have engaged with the tapestry of twentieth-century history and navigated a pro-



In *Saint Omer*, Rama (Kayije Kagame) warily observes the trial of Laurence Coly from the courtroom gallery, perhaps recognizing something of herself in the defendant.

In elucidating *Saint Omer*'s particular position in postcolonial French cinema, it is fruitful to compare it to the work of one of Diop's acknowledged influences, Claire Denis. Denis's films based in Africa—except for *Beau Travail* (1999), whose setting in Djibouti is incidental—provide a valuable point of reference for *Saint Omer* and draw out Diop's distinctive thematic contributions. They include *Chocolat* (1988), Denis's debut feature, and *White Material* (2009) which, like *Saint Omer*, was co-written by the Goncourt Prize-winning novelist Marie NDiaye. The earlier film strikes an autobiographical note, featuring a white French woman born in Cameroon prior to its independence revisiting the country as an adult. Although critical and in some ways historically insightful, the narrative perspective—in both its extended flashbacks to the woman's childhood and the present—is rooted in the French experience of colonization and decolonization. The relative standings of the mother (country) and daughter are never destabilized. It is this precise subversion that Diop manages to execute to staggering effect in *Saint Omer*. The trial exposes the overt and genteel racism in French society, and then reverses the positions of metaphorical analysis. Here, at last, the role of the mother is questioned head on.

If *Chocolat* represents the French postcolonial positionality from which Diop strongly departs, *Saint Omer* is most redolent of Denis's later *White Material*. On its face this may pose a strange comparison, but both films fixate on individuals whose identities have been thoroughly distorted by colonialism. Laurence has made the opposite physical journey of Maria Vial, the oblivious white French coffee-plantation owner played by Isabelle Huppert in *White Material*, but that is much less significant than the almost archetypal postcolonial condition they share. They fully belong neither to the former metropole nor to the newly independent nation, both of which recoil

from such hybridity. These characters are driven to unhealthy degrees by alienation and frustrated ambitions.

If it is not already apparent, *Saint Omer* is an intellectually stimulating film, saturated with ideas and histories that are projected with refined craft. The film also raises more issues than it can possibly hope to resolve, which makes the ease of its flow remarkable. The subtle complexities are conveyed not only through the screenplay (co-written by Diop, NDiaye, and Amrita David) but also in the simple expressions and contrasts captured by the camera, especially those between Rama and Laurence. The supporting characters are largely underdeveloped and serve to propel the narrative forward and enable self-recognition between Rama and Laurence. Rama has done nothing as grisly as infanticide, but Laurence's ordeal resonates personally and intellectually. Toward the end of the film, we see Rama watching and skipping to the ending of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), and we learn that her current academic project engages this mythology.

An easy mistake in assessing *Saint Omer* would be to put undue weight on the facts of the case itself, as Anthony Lane did in his misguided review of the film in *The New Yorker*. I am unsure how Lane concluded from watching *Saint Omer* that Diop "pretty much" wants the viewer to believe that Laurence has been acquitted, unlike her real-life counterpart who was convicted and sentenced to a lengthy prison term. If there is an implied verdict, it is decidedly more complicated and unsettling. While there is no doubt that Laurence is presented primarily as a racialized victim of France, there is clearly a part of her that is French and inextricably so. If Diop has judged France to be guilty, then Laurence could hardly have been acquitted. Perhaps it is Diop's refusal to completely absolve France that has animated the mercifully few detractors of this masterwork.—**Abe Silberstein**

Contributors

Mitchell Abidor is an author and translator whose latest book is a translation of Claude Anet's *Ariane, A Russian Girl* ... **Robert Cashill** is a member of the *Cineaste* editorial board ... **Mary F. Corey** teaches history at UCLA where she specializes in intellectual history and African American history ... **Will DiGravio**, an Assistant Editor at *Cineaste*, is a Brooklyn-based critic and researcher ... **Thomas Doherty**, professor of American studies at Brandeis University, is author of numerous books ... **Megan Feeney** has a PhD in American studies from the University of Minnesota and is author of *Hollywood in Havana: US Cinema and Revolutionary Nationalism in Cuba before 1959* ... **Graham Fuller** is a *Cineaste* Associate ... **Valerie Kaufman** is a freelance writer who also teaches film and writing ... **Jonathan Kirshner** is a professor in the political science department at Boston College and author of *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* ... **Robert Koehler** contributes writing and film criticism for *Cinema Scope*, *Variety*, *DGA Quarterly*, and *Sight and Sound* ... **Gary M. Kramer** is a film critic for *Salon*, *Gay City News*, *The San Francisco Bay Times*, and other outlets ... **Jarek Kupść** is a lecturer in cinema at the Warsaw Film School in Poland, a Polish American filmmaker, and author of *The History of Cinema for Beginners* ... **Eugene Kwon**, a doctoral candidate at Yale, is based in Tokyo and writes about East Asian cinema and media history ... **Kevin Lally** is the former executive editor of *Film Journal International* and *Boxoffice* and author of *Wilder Times: The Life of Billy Wilder* ... **Stuart Liebman** is professor emeritus at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center ... **Dr. Terence McSweeney** is a senior lecturer in film and television studies at Solent University and author of *Black Panther: Interrogating a Cultural Phenomenon* ... **Adrian Martin** is a film critic and audiovisual essayist living in Barcelona ... **Jonathan Murray** teaches film and visual culture at the University of Edinburgh ... **Darragh O'Donoghue** is an archivist at Tate Britain in London ... **Leonard Quart** is author or co-author of several books on film ... **Michael Sandlin** is a Houston, Texas-based writer and academic ... **Christopher Sharrett**, professor emeritus in film studies at Seton Hall University, is a Contributing Writer for *Cineaste* and a Contributing Editor for *Film International* ... **Michael Scinski** is a writer and teacher based in Houston, Texas ... **Abe Silberstein**, a writer living in Brooklyn, would like to thank Kino Klub Split and Jonathan Rosenbaum in whose workshop an earlier and shorter version of his review of *Saint Omer* was presented ... **Ryan Silberstein** is a Philadelphia-based film critic and the managing editor of *MovieJawn's* Website ... **Christopher Small** is a writer, filmmaker, and festival programmer born in the U.K. and based in the Czech Republic ... **Imogen Sara Smith** is a freelance writer and teacher and author of *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* ... **David Sterritt** is a *Cineaste* contributing writer and author of fifteen books on film ... **Coleman Taylor** is a recent graduate from Boston University and an aspiring critic ... **Clarence Tsui** is a Hong Kong-based film critic, part-time university lecturer, and film festival programmer ... **Harris Wheless** is a writer from North Carolina whose work has appeared in *NPR*, *McSweeney's*, *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *Indy Week*, and elsewhere ... **Amiya Young** is a graduate student pursuing a master's in film and television studies at Boston University. ■

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