

Cross-fertilization of the ethnographic work of Maya Deren, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson

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In 1946, Franziska Boas, the daughter of anthropologist Franz Boas and founder of the “Boas School of Dance” organized a lecture series: “The Function of Dance in Human Society”. Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson were among the anthropologists invited to participate.¹ At the Boas seminars, Deren learned of Mead’s and Bateson’s filmmaking in Bali in 1936 -1937 where 22,000 feet of film had been shot and later incorporated into a series of films.²

Deren had written a three-part essay “Religious Possession in Dancing” in 1942. She was personal secretary to the African-American ethnographer and choreographer Katherine Dunham in her dance troupe³ in the early forties. As her assistant, she typed and edited Dunham’s anthropological field studies during the mid-1930s on dance rituals in Haiti and other parts of the Caribbean⁴. During this period, she met her dancers Pearl Primus, Talley Beatty and Rita Christiani, and the latter two later became actors in her films.⁵ Maya Deren made “dance” films – to be more precise, rituals predicated on dance and movement. They are examples of “chorecinema”, an excellent designation given to her films by *New York Times* dance critic John Martin upon their release in the 1940’s. Deren’s success in chorecinema lay in the photography and editing of motion:

the filmmaker can leave dancers out altogether and yet follow the principles of dancing – which is the arrangement of movement . . .
‘My choreographies for camera are not dances recorded by the camera; they are dances choreographed for and performed by the camera and by human beings together.’⁶

Such a perception was based on Deren’s belief that the task of the filmmaker was similar to that of a choreographer. Her ethnographic filmmaking during several trips to Haiti from 1947 to 1954 concerned ‘principled dance’ in reverence to deity as a participant-observer.

In the 1930s and 40s, ritual was generally understood, within artistic and scholarly communities in Europe and the US, as a survival or retention from a more primitive stage of human development that had no relevance for modern educated people like Deren and Dunham. Neither artist, however, considered ritual to be irrelevant to modern people. Each used their experiences of Haitian vaudun [Voudoun] to create works that were grounded in an Africanist approach to the dancing (although in Deren’s case this has rarely been acknowledged by scholars).⁷

Deren claimed that her “background as an artist and the initial approach to the culture . . . served to illuminate areas of Voudoun mythology which the standard anthropological procedure has not concerned itself”⁸. Her ethnographic work included a monograph *Divine Horsemen, the Living Gods of Haiti* (1953) edited by Joseph Campbell, recordings of ceremonial music, photography

¹ Other anthropologists included Franz Boas, Harold Courlander, Claire Holt, Georg Herzog, Cora Du Bois, and Geoffrey Gorer.

² *From the Notebook of Maya Deren* (1947), reprinted in *October*, vol. 14, n° 102 (Autumn 1980), p. 21-46: 8.

³ See PBS documentary *Dance in America: Free to Dance: Steps of the Gods* (episode 2 part 1, 2015), which ends with parts of Maya Deren’s film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1943), with Talley Beatty, Dunham’s top dancer.

⁴ Maya Deren, “Religious Possession in Dancing”, *Educational Dance*, vol. 4, n° 9 (March 1942), p. 4-6, n° 10 (April 1942), p. 9-11, vol. 5, n° 3 (August-September 1942), p. 7-10.

⁵ Maya Deren, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1942, with Talley Beatty); *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946, with Rita Christiani).

⁶ Arthur Knight, “Cine-Dance,” *Dance Perspectives*, n° 30 (Summer 1967), p. 6-7.

⁷ Ramsay Burt, “Katherine Dunham and Maya Deren on Ritual, Modernity, and the African Diaspora,” *Art Research Journal* (Brazil), vol. 3, n° 2 (August-December 2016: Beatriz Cerbino, Cassiá Navas, ed., “Dance, Body Art and Other Bodies of Arts”), p. 44 – 51: 44-45.

⁸ Maya Deren, *The Voodoo Gods*, Frogmore, Paladin, 1975, p. 14 [first edition: *Divine Horsemen, The Living Gods of Haiti*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1953]. Spelling of Creole pronunciation of Voudoun as used by Deren.

and 20,000 feet of ceremonial rituals and secular life.⁹ However, since she was not an anthropologist, she was unable to get the footage accepted for an ethnographic film whereby she could acquire appropriate funding.

Bateson's and Mead's Balinese footage was considered as one of the first ventures into ethnographic filmmaking in the US. Their objective in Bali was to film sequences of behavior with "primitive filmmaking techniques" in correlation with field studies – a frontal camera, an unchanging distance in medium long shot and no camera movement.¹⁰ It was Margaret Mead's requirement for the recording of anthropological field studies.¹¹ Their work in Bali was used as a rule of thumb to establish the, as yet developed, field of ethnographic film Clifford Geertz in *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, purports:

Mead argued that Gregory Bateson's hundreds of photographs demonstrated her arguments, but hardly anyone, including Bateson, much agreed with her. ... Perhaps ethnographers should be believed for the extensiveness of their descriptions, but that does not seem to be the way it works.¹²

According to Mead, accessibility was the principal purpose of photographic documents in ethnography and film enhanced the dissemination of her fieldwork. She sought to have it accepted within the field with the Balinese project and ethnographic film was established, although the field did not begin to flourish until the 1950's.¹³ Both Bateson and Mead were invited to the famous Macy's conferences from 1946-1953 that founded "cybernetics" and incorporated this methodology into the anthropology of their time.¹⁴ According to Margaret Mead:

From a complex culture like Bali you take a lot of chunks — birthday ceremonies and funeral ceremonies, children's games and a whole series of things, and then you analyze them for the patterns that are there.¹⁵

Later Bateson gave Deren this footage to use for a film she was planning. At the time Deren was conducting research on the "trance dance" rituals of Southwest Indians (Navaho) and was planning to travel to Haiti to further study ritual dance. She envisioned making a film combining the two dance forms. Mead reported that no such footage existed on the Southwest Indians though this later turned out to be incorrect.¹⁶ Deren decided on a "cross cultural fugue" incorporating ritual dance from Haiti with Balinese footage and children's games: "I wish to build the film, using the variations between them to contrapuntally create the harmony, the basic equivalence of the idea of form common to them all".¹⁷ Her vision for the concept of the film was inspired by Gregory Bateson's exhibition review "Arts of the South Seas" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1946.

⁹ See Moira Sullivan, "Notes on Haitian footage", mayaderen.org, 2017.

¹⁰ See Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole, Feminism and Women's Cinema*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 157.

¹¹ Moira Sullivan, *An Anagram of the Film Ideas of Filmmaker Maya Deren*, Karlstad, University of Karlstad Press, 1997, p. 90.

¹² Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 4. Their photographic essay *Balinese Character* was an arrangement of 25,000 photographs in two impressive monographs.

¹³ Marcus Banks, Howard Morphy, *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 13.

¹⁴ See Ute Holl, *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetic*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

¹⁵ "For God's Sake Margaret, conversation with Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson", *CoEvolution Quarterly*, n° 10 (June 1976), p. 32-44: 37.

¹⁶ Margaret Mead was unaware of the ethnographic filmmaking of the Navajo by John Adair in 1938, who together with her founded *The Society for Applied Anthropology* in 1941.

¹⁷ Arthur Knight, "Cine-Dance," *op. cit.*, p. 6-7.

The “Arts of the South Seas” exhibit was organized by René d’Harnoncourt, the director of the Museum’s Department of Manual Industry. It was a collection of 400 artifacts from Oceania-Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia, and Australia. D’Harnoncourt proposed that the exhibition demonstrated a “kinship between arts of the South Seas and recent movements in modern art such as Expressionism and Surrealism.”¹⁸ In Bateson’s exhibition review he claimed that most of the objects “were collected with no information as to their use; many were collected before the days of critical anthropology”.¹⁹ Bateson called the exhibition “a work of art”. In the exhibition catalogue d’Harnoncourt claims that “only a few artists and art lovers, most of them associated with advanced movements, have recognized its full esthetic value”.²⁰ Bateson poses the question: “is the whole aesthetic experience one which is appropriate to what the exhibit is trying to say? What in ourselves is touched off by this arrangement of alien items in an occidental syntax?” He called the key to the artistic success of the exhibition “a structure of climax” without “overt libidinal references”. The arrangement of phallic objects was followed by a set of keepsakes: the heads of the domestic dead lit by light. According to Bateson these heads were the only departures from the rigors of scientific display.²¹

Bateson describes different parts of the exhibition, for example “assertive art”, representing the fighting spirit of the village. The objects positioned within the great male ceremonial houses were adorned by a female face on its entrance. “The masculine assertive art thus has its locus within a grandiose female matrix”, proclaimed Bateson.²² He compared the various components arranged by the museum curator as elements of a symphony. “Each actual object is given its full value as an assertive virile statement and the assertiveness of the region is given full value but its position in the major sequential cultures”.²³

Artifacts from the Oceanic regions are arranged according to their origin in Papua New Guinea - the Sepik River, New Britain, and New Ireland; the Solomon and Admiralty islands; Micronesia; Polynesia; New Guinea; and Easter Island. The arrangement was subject to one caveat, according to Bateson, for the inhabitants have traveled, borrowed and traded their objects and are not homogenous entities. He described how the curators got around this historical truth and created movable walls where objects could be re-arranged. In so doing, “‘the symphony’ of artifacts could be arranged and then rearranged in movements from initial placements to new sequences”. Bateson argued that these placements as a whole correspond to the human reproductive cycle with the exception of “etiologial hypotheses borrowed by anthropologists from psychiatry”.²⁴ These could prove problematic, he argued, in such cases when the “classification of ethos depends on Freudian or other hypotheses about the processes of character formation”.²⁵

¹⁸ “Arts of the South Seas”, January 29–May 19, 1946, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3188>.

¹⁹ Gregory Bateson, “‘Arts of the South Seas’, Museum of Modern Art in New York (January 29 - May 19, 1946)”, exhibition review, *The Art Bulletin*, College Art Association of America, vol. 28, n° 2 (June 1946), p. 119.

²⁰ *Arts of the South Seas* (January 29 - May 19, 1946), exhibition catalogue, New York, Museum of Modern Art, p.7

²¹ Gregory Bateson, “Arts of the South Seas”, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 121, note 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Bateson praised d'Hanoncourt for ignoring anthropological literature and using his "artistic sensibilities" in his arrangement of artifacts and came to an important conclusion which became of immense importance to Maya Deren:

It is evidently important to bring together anthropological knowledge and artistic sensitivity. Such work may always require two persons, each with his special skill, and always there will be pitfalls. The artist may try to verbalize his conclusion in totally erroneous phrasings of why some arrangements seem to him to be artistically appropriate and the anthropologist will probably err in trying to push the conclusions toward too sharp a precision. But there is a real hope that collaboration along these lines might lead to some advance in our understanding of the tangled emotional themes expressed in man's diverse artistic conventions.²⁶

It might seem that this hypothesis was written for Maya Deren, an artistic film director whose creative work in motion pictures was the genesis of the postwar avantgarde in film. She was exactly the kind of artist that Bateson had in mind. The anthropologist, of course, seems to have been himself.

In December 1946, after having read Bateson's exhibition review Deren began exchanging letters with him. Deren acknowledged that the arrangement of artifacts in the South Seas exhibition corresponded to the desirable pattern of her new film. Deren wrote that it was possible to "create a transcendent horizontal pattern of development by cutting through a series of vertical integrities, without violating these later, or falsifying them or even distorting them". Bateson agreed. She intuitively understood the South Seas exhibit and wrote that the grouping of artefacts was "true to the individual culture which it represented at the same time that these groupings were so arranged in reference to each other as to create a 'sensible' pattern which transcended them all and even strengthened them each in their individual terms as well".²⁷ She proposed a cross cultural fugue as an art form for her new film:

My problem then becomes to discover in the various cultures, images or artifacts of such force that they carry the entire culture in their arms, so to speak, and so bring to the larger patter the vertical dimension of their singular reference. Were I to use a more casual movement or image, it would tear loose from its context and would bring nothing for itself, in very intermediate and flat terms to the film.²⁸

Bateson replied that it was possible to make a film with a conceptual framework similar to the arrangement of the South Seas exhibit, but it had to incorporate cultures that were ethologically compatible rather than the "Navaho" and "Haitian". She chose the Balinese footage, footage of children's games she had shot in New York and footage from her upcoming trip to Haiti. Bateson suggested that the two cultures should be linked on the same theme that would be "musically relevant".²⁹

Yes, I think the answer has got to turn around a pair of themes each of which is the topological inverse of the other, e.g., one culture which sees its hopscotch lines as permitting freedom of movement between the lines, while the other culture sees the same lines forbidding movement across the lines. Granting that mathematically there is no difference between such systems, psychological, there is, and I think differences

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 122.

²⁷ Maya Deren, Letter to Gregory Bateson, December 9, 1946, Boston University Mugar Library: Howard Gotlieb Special Collections, uncatalogued papers of Maya Deren, donated by her mother Mrs. Marie Deren (BUML_HGSC).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Letter to Maya Deren from Gregory Bateson, December 12, 1946, (BUML_HGSC).

of this order would give you themes sufficiently related to be coordinated into a single artistic structure.³⁰

Bateson, Mead and Deren met on several occasions in New York to discuss her initial film proposal on cross cultural rituals. Bateson privately contributed \$2,000 to the 1947 Haitian trip, and “The Institute for Cultural Study”, where Bateson and Mead were affiliated, partially subsidized Deren’s 1949 trip. Mead later stored the original Haitian footage at the “American Museum of Natural History” together with a duplicate that Deren had agreed to deposit with the institute. In preparation for her trip to Haiti Deren attended Bateson’s lectures at the “New School for Social Research” in New York on cybernetics, a “branch of mathematics dealing with problems of control, recursiveness and information that focuses on forms and the patterns they connect”.³¹ In Deren’s “chapbook” *An Anagram of Ideas on Art Form and Film* (1946) and in her notebook *From the Notebook of Maya Deren* (1947) she addressed her hesitations with Bateson concept of cybernetics.

Maya Deren and Gregory Bateson decided to marry before going to Haiti which ended the marriage between him and Mead. Bateson however changed his mind about going to Haiti. She traveled in September 1947 without him and with a Guggenheim for “Creative Work in Motion Pictures” – the first time such an award was given. Her intention with her film to “manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my own creative integrity”³² had changed: “I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logic of a reality that has forced me to recognize its integrity and to abandon my manipulations”.³³

Deren’s, Bateson’s and Mead’s style of ethnographic research was a product of the time influenced by Franz Boaz and Bronislaw Malinowski.³⁴ Deren followed the Boas method of studying and recording the language and people, focusing on a study of the practitioners of Voodoo, music and dance and the iconic language of the vevers, or corn meal drawings of Haitian deity. Malinowski rejected historical anthropology in order to perceive the totality of a culture and the interrelationships of its parts. Such an approach underlined Deren’s recognition that dance could not be understood separate from the rituals.

Once my original premise was destroyed – once I realized that the dance could not be considered independently of the mythology, I had no other preparation or motivation, no anthropological background and anticipation for other ethnic cultures, no systematized approach to an established methodology for collecting data, no plan of questions to ask which might have created a self-consciousness and distorted the normal distributions of emphasis. But if my specialized concern for film left me unprepared for the culture as a whole, it created, also a disinterested receptivity to it. And if at first and for quite a while, I merely retained an amorphous, formless collection of memories which a professional observer would have systematized as soon as possible, I, having to commitment nor professional or intellectual urgency, could permit the culture and the myth to emerge gradually in its own terms and its own form.³⁵

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1979, p. 227.

³² Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art Form and Film*, New York, The Alikat Bookshop Press, 1946, p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See Franz Boaz, *Mind of the Primitive Man*, New York, MacMillan Company, 1938; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, New York, W.W Norton Inc, 1926.

³⁵ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen, op. cit.*, p. 7

She was encouraged by Bateson who wrote in *Naven* (1936) that a culture could be studied by scientific or artistic techniques³⁶ such as analogue communication.³⁷ *Naven* investigated male and female transvestite ceremonies of the Iatmul culture in Papua New Guinea.³⁸ His greatest anthropological contribution was developed as a result of these studies: the concept of schismogenesis, a “process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals”³⁹. According to Morris Berman in his study of scientific consciousness, *Reenchantment of the World* (1981), the artistic approach allowed the “reader” or “spectator” to unconsciously grasp meaning because of, a “range of non-verbal affective communication and perception (analogue knowledge)”⁴⁰. Berman explains that Gregory Bateson “instinctively knew that most knowledge was analogue, that realities lay in wholes rather than parts, and that immersion (*mimesis*) rather than analytical dissection was the beginning of wisdom”⁴¹.

Maya Deren studied Bateson’s original footage, recognizing its value to both filmmaking and ethnography. Moreover, it gave her invaluable clues on how she should proceed with her film project in Haiti. She learned from the limitations of Bateson’s original footage and avoided the didacticism of Mead’s voice-overs which can be found in her notebook:

February 28, 1947

Roll 5. These shots of the dragon will not be very useful, I think. He seems to have been torn from some context and one has the feeling he was asked to come out so he could be photographed. He belongs in the context of some ritual activity; without it – isolated by himself – he has once the irreverent, weightless pathos of the fallen streamers and the confetti of a Sunday morning ballroom after a masquerade. There are two close-ups in the beginning, though, which in their framing conceal his lack of context, and in these he is strong enough to project an ‘understood’ context into the areas behind the frame. This is somewhat similar to the effect which a strong spatial orientation within the frame – as a person looking sharply to the left has. This project of the dragon is not in terms of directional orientation, but an emanation of aura beyond the frame. On both cases, however, we understand what we do not see in terms of what we do see.⁴²

Deren’s expertise as a filmmaker and knowledge of the stylistic system of cinematography and editing was an outstanding skill and asset⁴³. Of equal importance was her understanding of what was meant by “ritual context”. Mead regarded a Balinese ritual as a “ballet” and the participants as “actors” separating ceremonial logic from their contexts. Deren was able to see in the Balinese footage that the ceremonies were done for the camera and not for ritual context. She began a collaboration with Bateson to incorporate clearly marked footage shot by him with footage to be shot in Haiti.

Her filmmaking process differed from Bateson and Mead in several respects. Her camera was handheld throughout the ceremonies. For Bateson, the technical restrictions of the 1930’s

³⁶ Gregory Bateson, *Naven*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1936, p.1.

³⁷ During the late 1950’s, Deren was invited to MIT by Gjorgy Kepes to observe research on analogue communication. Kepes was editor of *Daedalus*, a journal specializing in interrelationships of the arts. In a special issue, “The Visual Arts of Today”, Deren’s essay “Cinematography” was published (*Daedalus*, vol. 89, n° 1, Winter 1960).

³⁸ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 202-203.

³⁹ Gregory Bateson, *Naven*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

⁴⁰ Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of the World*, 1981, p.343

⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 343.

⁴² *From the Notebook of Maya Deren*, *op. cit.*, p. 34

⁴³ See for example “Choreography for the Camera”, *Dance Magazine*, vol. 19, n° 10 (October 1945), p. 10-14; “Magic is New”, *Mademoiselle*, vol. 22, n° 3 (January 1946), p. 180-181, p. 260-265; “Creative Cutting”, *Movie Makers*, vol. 22, n° 5 (May-June 1947), p. 242-243.

required a stationary tripod camera. Shots abruptly end without providing adequate context, notably in footage assembled for *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1951) which was initially of particular interest to Deren. None of the choreography of the camera valued by Deren was possible. In light of her later filmmaking in Haiti, this is the strongest argument that can be waged against Bateson's footage. Of his cinematography with assistant Janet Belo, Bateson remarked "we had cameras on tripods just grinding".⁴⁴ Mead opposed the creative use of the film camera and defended the Balinese material, claiming "it was important to hold the camera long enough to get a sequence of behavior".⁴⁵ She added that no one since Bateson had been as successful at taking stills and film at the same time and with the same focal length. Although restricted to long takes, he later admitted that a long sequence of behavior, in his vocabulary, was only 20 seconds.⁴⁶

It seems clear that Mead's attitude about artists working in ethnography in part stems from first-hand knowledge of Deren's work. She argued that her own approach allowed for subsequent study where even without a thesis, one could review background details of a filmed sequence and apply findings from field studies. Afterwards, Mead endorsed Deren's filmed footage but not her book, *Divine Horsemen*, citing its methodology as problematic. In truth, she was not only at odds with Deren but Bateson on this account: she insisted on a positivist approach to anthropology in both written and photographic records, a position she maintained throughout her career. This was reinforced in a paper she presented in 1975 at the "International Conference in Visual Anthropology", five years before her death.

We do not demand that a field ethnologist write with the style of a novelist or a poet, although we do indeed accord disproportionate attention to those who do. It is equally inappropriate to demand that filmed behavior has the earmarks of a work of art. We can be grateful when it does, and we can cherish those rare combinations of artistic ability and scientific fidelity that have given us great ethnographic films. But I believe that we have absolutely no right to waste our breath and our resources demanding them.⁴⁷

Several problems can be noted in Mead's assembled films. Because they were intended to be supplementary to written ethnography, conclusions that were reached after field studies were not represented. Mead's use of Bateson's footage was conceived as a preliminary step to the final analysis, yet, after editing, the imagery seems inconsistent with the claims of her voice-over. Because alteration of film speed is considered problematic in ethnographic filmmaking, the faster film speed used by Bateson was claimed to distort the Balinese way of life. The anthropologists confirmed that the camera was not especially noticeable to the Balinese because of indifference to the Western notion of the stage, however, contradictions are evident in sequences where people seemed to be looking for direction from the filmmakers.

In comparison, Deren's Haitian footage is an oppositional discourse. Deren's "Guide to Haiti Film Catalogue" is a shot description of 5400 feet of her best footage.⁴⁸ The footage is divided

⁴⁴ Excerpts from "For God's Sake, Margaret, Conversation with Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead," *The CoEvolution Quarterly*, vol. 10/21, (June 1976), reprinted in "Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on the Use of the Camera in Anthropology," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter 1977), p. 78. *Trance and Dance in Bali* is archived at Anthology Film Archives, New York City. The original six films are housed at Museum of Natural History, New York.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p.79.

⁴⁷ Margaret Mead, "Visible Anthropology in a Discipline of Words", in Paul Hockings (ed.), *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, The Hague and Paris, Mouton Publishers, 1975, p. 5-6.

⁴⁸ Located at Boston University Mugar Library Howard Gotlieb Archival Center.

into seventeen sections. The first eight reels were for the eight-day “ceremonie caille”⁴⁹ filmed in 1950; the next four reels were sections she refilmed of the ceremony in 1949; the last five reels were dance festivals and ceremonies, dated between 1949 and 1954. Focus is on the different loa, or gods and goddesses in Voudoun ceremony including Legba, Ogun, Ghede, Erzulie, Damballah and Azacca and Agwe – with animation of the particular vevers (illustrations of the loa – Haitian divinity).

Divine Horsemen was a project conceived separately from the film, making no claim that it should serve as a supplement or guide to the footage. The hounfor (temple) Deren visited esteemed her filmmaking as a form of service to the loa and considered it an intrinsic part of the rituals. She and her film camera were considered a “natural part of the behavioral space”, a virtually unprecedented relationship for camera and event. Parts of Voudoun ceremony in the Haitian footage were specifically shot in slow motion and defended as an essential source of illumination for the delineation of the mobile body in principled states. Moreover, in response to the altering of film speed, Deren insisted that the ontological nature of film based on optical illusion could never render total authenticity to movement, a position she maintained as a former student of Kurt Koffka, one of the three founders of Gestalt psychology which advanced the phenomenon as an explanation of apparent motion. In fact, slow motion is used in Bateson and Belo’s footage with Margaret Mead narratives citing “normal speed” or “slow speed” in sequences of behavior.

Margaret Mead’s refusal to endorse Deren’s study *Divine Horsemen* is noteworthy. She criticized Deren’s participant-observation in rituals. In the introduction to *Divine Horsemen* Deren quotes an old Haitian proverb: “when the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart”. Mead offered to store the footage in her office at the Museum of Natural History, a gesture that had she had this been a permanent offer, might have prevented it from being bounced around in various storage facilities in New York after Deren’s death in 1961.⁵¹

In a letter dated January 22, 1953 Mead wrote Deren:

Dear Maya,

I enjoyed reading your book; it is beautifully written, much of it is exceedingly evocative, and I was especially impressed in the way you made a ritual essence come through the hodge podge of culture contact detail, like the paper on Erzulie’s soap.

⁴⁹Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, *op. cit.*, p. 212. “Sunday: Action de Grace; Monday Service for les Marassa [Divine twins] and les Morts (the collective dead); in the evening, the coucher yam [ritual where yams are laid to sleep at night], late afternoon and evening, feasting of Legba, Loco, Ayizan, Damballah, Ayida, Erzulie and Agwe; and their escorts (these loa are considered to be on very good terms and amenable to being served together); Wednesday: Ogoun with a dance in the evening in his honor; Thursday: Azacca, or Erzulie, or perhaps one of the other loa; Thursday: Azacca, or Erzulie, or perhaps one of the other loa especially important to the hounfor; Friday: Ghede; Saturday, the Petro loa; Sunday: often a bapteme [baptism], followed by a reception; Monday: a personal loa perhaps a work loa such as Mounanchou. If possible, each loa is served on the day of the week sacred to him. The procedure, usually, is to perform the individual ceremony either in the mid-morning or in the late afternoon, while the rest of the day is devoted to the preparation of food, and in the evening, there is generally a ‘danse de réjouissance’ in honor of the loa feasted that day.”

⁵¹ Maya Deren stored her films in Medaglia d’Oro® coffee cans. They were moved from Mead’s office in New York to various places and now reside at Anthology Film Archives. Her films are in the process of digitization in the US in cooperation with the Johan Jacobs Museum in Zürich, Switzerland, funded by the Johan Jacobs coffee (<https://johannjacobs.com/en/>). The intellectual property rights of the “Estate of Maya Deren” belong to Tavio Ito, daughter of Teiji Ito, Deren’s husband at the time of her death. Pip Chodorov (*Re: Voir*, Paris) transferred Deren’s 16 mm films to VHS with permission by the late Chere Ito: <https://re-voir.com/>.

But I can't give you a blurb for it, because any blurb that I would give would have to be as an anthropologist, not as a literary critic. If you had let anthropology alone altogether and had been contented to write a poetic and evocative book about Haiti, that would have been something I could endorse. But you didn't. As it is, methodologically, it's utterly inadmissible; the handling of American Indian origins has just nothing to do with anything – except of course poetry at which level it's likely true. But bad documentation and poor methods spoil good poetry, I am sorry. I am mailing the page proof volume back to you as I assume you will need it for other pre-publication readers.

Yours,
Margaret
Margaret Mead

In an original thesis, Deren described the influence of the Indians of Spanish heritage in Haiti on the development of these rites, and how this preserved the New World African culture.⁵² Mead incorrectly refers to them as “American Indians” in a patronizing letter to Deren. According to anthropologist Dr. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique:

Formal research on the Taïno heritage in Haiti today is dismally limited; although there is so much to say. Contrary to mainstream currents of work highlighting our European and African roots, only a handful of scholars have investigated this question. They include, during the 19th century, the Haitian author Baron Emile Nau who published the “Histoire des Caciques d’Haiti” in 1894, Ms. Maya Deren in the 1940’s who introduced questions on the Taïno heritage in Vodou after the seminal archeological works of Edouard Mangones and Louis Maximilien on Taïno artifacts and Jeannot Hilaire, in the domain of linguistics. Not one Haitian archeologist works on this heritage today”. (<http://www.tainolegacies.com/154087477>).

There is another achievement in Deren’s Haitian scholarship: although historians understood that a “ceremony” was an instigator to Haiti becoming the second free colony of African slaves in the Western Hemisphere, Deren specifically identified it as a Petro rite.⁵³ Both *Divine Horsemen* and the Haitian footage are expositions of the dialectic of rites which developed in response to slavery in Haiti: the benevolent or *Rada* rites from West Africa and their New World counterpart developed out of rage, the so-called *Petro* rites.

The Haitian footage embraced unique techniques of “chorecinema”⁵⁴ that evolved from Deren’s early dance films. This perspective allowed her to film the fluid, spontaneous movements of ritual in Haiti. She argued that using different film speeds was crucial to filming principled states within their ritualized contexts. The use of art in ethnography promoted by Gregory Bateson, gave Deren the theoretical platform from which to use these chorecinematic principles in the use of the mobile camera in filming and editing movement. It can be argued that she, in fact, expanded the possibilities for ethnographic filmmaking through her own work. Her unique study of the origin of myth in Voudoun and its ritual enactment remains an important background for understanding her ground-breaking method of representation in ethnographic filmmaking. Her association with Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson were two of many valuable liaisons that impacted her ethnographic work. She took ethnographic filmmaking to another level on her journey in Haiti where the crossroad of art and ethnography helped her to articulate the African spirit religion of Voudoun.

⁵² See Dr. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, <http://www.tainolegacies.com/154087477>.

⁵³ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, *op. cit.*, p. 61-71; p. 271-286. “Appendix B: Some elements of Arawakan, Carib and other Indian Cultures in Haitian Voudoun”.

⁵⁴ See Maya Deren. Grant proposal. Maya Deren Collection, Boston University Mugar Library, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center. Inventory by Stephen Edgington, Box 5,[n.d.].

Biography of Moira Sullivan

Dr. Sullivan is a distinguished film scholar and has been invited to special university programs in the US, Sweden, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Korea to speak about Maya Deren. She has a doctorate from Stockholm University in cinema and media studies (1997). Sullivan has frequently published scholarship on Maya Deren's avantgarde and ethnographic filmmaking. Her scholarship includes *An Anagram of the Ideas of Filmmaker Maya Deren*, 1997 (doctoral dissertation), partially reprinted in the anthology by documentary film scholar from SFSU, Bill Nichols: "Maya Deren's Ethnographic Representation of Ritual and Myth in Haiti", in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, University of California Press, 2001. Sullivan's scholarship on Deren's ethnographic work is used at courses universities such as Harvard, Rice and Temple, and in numerous monographs and journals. She teaches cinema studies at City College of San Francisco.