ART RESEARCH JOURNAL
Art Research Journal / Revista de Pesquisa em Arte
ABRACE, ANPAP and ANPPOM in partnership with UFRN

Katherine Dunham and Maya Deren on ritual, modernity, and the African Diaspora

Ramsay Burt
De Montfort University
rburt@dmu.ac.uk

In the early 1940s, Katherine Dunham engaged the future experimental film-maker Maya Deren to act as her personal assistant. Deren toured with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company doing secretarial work for Dunham as the latter wrote up the findings from the anthropological fieldwork she had done in the mid-1930s in Haiti and other parts of the Caribbean. Dunham, a mixed race African American born in Chicago, sought to educate black and white Americans through writing about and choreographing with the rich dance culture which had developed as a consequence of the African diaspora. Deren, born in Kiev into a Jewish family who migrated to the United States in 1922, discovered ritual through her contact with Dunham and subsequently used it as a key device in her pioneering experimental film work. In a 1946 pamphlet Deren wrote about the importance of ritual in her films, two of which had been made with dancers who had been members of Dunham's company; the following year she made her first visit to Haiti to study and film vaudun (voodoo) rituals that had been the subject of Miss Dunham's research a decade earlier.

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 to create works that were grounded in an Africanist approach to the dancing

body (although in Deren's case this has rarely been acknowledged by scholars). Through a discussion that draws on their work and writings, this paper argues that each explored a distinctly modern approach to spirituality that presents an alternative to the idea of disembodied transcendence which runs through the European philosophical tradition.

Paul Gilroy and others have demonstrated the way that Black intellectuals during the nineteenth century developed a discourse about modernity from their own experience of diaspora. By examining Deren and Dunham's understanding of ritual, my aim is to show how their appreciation of the affective power of ritualistic movement practices amounts to a rethinking of the modern body. In 17th and 18th European philosophy, the idea emerged that a modern capacity for abstract thought would provide rational explanations for phenomena that had previously been matters of unscientific, superstitious belief. The unsuperstitious modern subject was one whose (implicitly masculine and white) rational mind would not be fooled by the unreliable information fed to it from a fallible body. The social changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and the emerging consumer economy at the end of the nineteenth century were ones that early sociologists recognized at the time were creating a modern individualistic subject. This subject was not only divided from others but also internally split into a rational but unemotional mind and an unreliably emotional body.

Through their written and artistic explorations of ritual, Deren and Dunham became aware of the limitations of these dualistic ways of conceptualizing embodied experience, particularly where performance of movement is concerned. Dunham implies this when she describes dancing in a Haitian houngfor – a rural vaudun temple compound: "[we danced] as I imagine dance must have been executed when body and mind were more united" (Dunham 1994, p. 109). In both their writings, the experience of ritual is one in which a person becomes part of something larger than him or herself. What each found in Haitian vaudun practices were ways of approaching the spiritual that were very different from European ideas about metaphysics. Rather than transcending the self by leaving the physical behind, Deren and Dunham found ways of becoming part of something larger than, and outside or beyond the self that nevertheless remained grounded in embodied experience. Deren and Dunham did not approach Haitian vaudun in a neo-primitivist way: nei-

ther abandoned intellectual ways of thinking when they became involved in ritual practices. By reflecting on what they had discovered through their art – Dunham's dancing and choreography, Deren's films and her performances in them – each identified shortcomings and limitations within the way embodied experience is conceptualized within the European philosophical tradition. Within Africanist aesthetic experience they found solutions to these problems.

Dunham was initiated into the Rada-Dahomey vaudun cult in Haiti. Deren found herself so at home performing in vaudun ceremonies that, as she wrote, "Haitians began to believe that I had gone through varying degrees of initiation" (Deren, 1953, p. 9) although she had not. Both continued to observe vaudun rituals for the rest of their lives. It is clear from what Dunham wrote about her initiation ceremony that, as a trained anthropologist, she recognized various strategies were being employed to put her and her fellow initiates into a state of mind receptive to becoming possessed. She mentions drugs, incense and burning herbs, and repetitions of hypnotic movements in the dances that were dedicated to particular loas (or gods). The Yanvalou, for example, which honored the Serpent god Damballa to whom Dunham dedicated herself, involves low undulating movements up and down the spine. Despite recognizing that these strategies were being employed, Dunham knew that she believed in the rightness for her of what the Haitian vaudun belief system offered. She therefore found herself straddling contradictory positions of studying and being initiated so that, as she later wrote: "Where the participant begins and the scientist ends, I surely could not say" (Deren, 1953, p. 106).

The actual experience of dancing itself seems to have resolved the anxieties and contradictions she faced. In the following extract, she describes the final stages of her initiation ceremony. In this, Téoline is the priest whose role is to sense which loa is present at any moment and lead the appropriate dance in their honour. La Place is her assistant, Georgina a fellow initiate, and Doc a white American friend who had settled in Haiti:

> The joy of dancing overwhelmed me and I found myself sometimes in front of Doc, at other times in front of Téoline or La Place or Georgina in the ruptured movements of the feints, then gasping, stumbling, teetering on the verge of rhythm- and fast-induced hypnosis, returning to the sheer joy of motion in concert, of harmony with self and others and the houngfor and Damballa and with all friends and ene-

> mies past, present, and future, with the wonders of the Haitian countryside and with whatever god whose name we venerated, because by then a number had been honoured and I had lost track. (Deren, 1953, p. 131-2).

Dunham herself never became possessed. At first, she seems to have worried about this, but found that the priests presiding over her first initiation and subsequent confirmation ceremonies were satisfied that the gods showed their approval of her dedication by allowing her to dance as well and as intensely as she did. Dunham choreographed a few dances of possession which include her dance piece Rites de Passage and Shango and a scene in her narrative ballet L'Ag'ya. In the passage above, what Dunham writes about time is, I suggest, significant. The experience of ritual and repetition is one that makes the participant lose track or let go of the everyday experience of ordinary clock time. Through dancing, Dunham evidently felt a connection with something outside of this ordinary experience of time, giving her a sense of harmony with past, present, and future. This is an impression that Maya Deren's films also created.

These passages about dancing in a houngfor all come from Dunham's 1969 book Island Possessed. While Deren was working for her, Dunham would have been writing sections of her earlier book Folk Dances of Haiti published in 1946. Although this doesn't discuss details of Dunham's initiation, it does present her analysis of the way dance movements like the Yanvalou were used within ceremonies to create autohypnotic effects. Deren would also have seen dances like L'Ag'ya and Rites de Passage performed many times while on tour with the company. It was at the end of one such tour in 1943 when the company was temporarily based in Hollywood that Deren met the cameraman Mark Hamid and collaborated with him to make her first film Meshes of the Afternoon. Deren collaborated with the choreographer Talley Beatty in 1945 to make A Study in Choreography for the Camera. Beatty had first begun to dance with Dunham in Chicago in the early 1930s before her trip to the Caribbean. Another Dunham dancer Rita Christiani is one of the main performers in Deren's 1946 film Ritual in Transfigured Time.

One of Deren's best known observations about dance film is that, using editing to manipulate time and space it is possible to create a choreography that exists on film but would be impossible to perform live. There is a moment towards

the end of A Study in Choreography for the Camera where Beatty performs a large step which he begins in a forest but finishes in a domestic living room. As Deren wrote in her 1946 pamphlet An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film:

> [in this section] the integrity of time and the continuity of the tempo of the movement holds together spatial areas which are not in reality related […] the interruption and resumption of action here creates an integrity as compelling as that of theatre but of actually different quality. (Deren, 2001, p. 51).

Deren then gives another example from her films in which, by keeping the camera fixed but stopping and starting it, actions appear in the final film with unreal jumps in time. The first example creates a movement through space that could not be presented in a live performance, while the latter manipulates the viewer's experience in time in a way that would only be possible with film. Deren concludes that "such techniques contribute an economy of statement comparable to poetry, where the inspired juxtaposition of a few words can create a complex which far transcends them" (Deren, 2001, p. 51). Her argument was that mainstream Hollywood movies used film in a prosaic manner whereas experimental films like hers were an art form comparable to poetry.

In another part of her pamphlet Anagram, Deren discusses ritual. What I want to argue in the rest of this paper is that Deren's filmic manipulations of time and space, in which dancing bodies were central, drew on ideas about possession to which she had been introduced by Dunham. To demonstrate this, I will discuss incidents in the first half of her 1943 film Meshes of the Afternoon. At the start of this Deren walks up some steps and enters a suburban Hollywood house, looks round the living room then walks up stairs to the bedroom and falls asleep in an armchair. In her dream, she sees herself through the window in the lane outside the house pursuing a mysterious cloaked female figure. Failing to reach this, she turns around and enters the house, reprising the film's opening. After a strangely difficult climb up the stairs to the bedroom, this second Deren seems to go into a trance, arching her back and seemingly falling backward down the stairs in dream-like slow motion. There she finds the first Deren asleep in an armchair. Looking through the window, she observes a third Deren running after the same mysterious figure. When this new Deren turns, and enters the house, the three of them sit around a table.

Deren as film-maker uses these dream-like disruptions or folds in time and space, and this doubling and trebling of herself to put the viewer into a state of mind receptive to something other-worldly or supernatural. Lesley Satin and Mark Franko have both pointed out that the kinds of movements that Deren performs when she appears to fall slowly backwards are related to modern dance. Deren initially approached Dunham to ask to be taken on as a dancer in her company. The dance vocabulary with which Deren was most familiar in 1943 was that of Dunham's choreography. The way Deren arches her back in this short sequence is reminiscent of the way the boy in Shango performs the Yanvalou while becoming possessed.

In Anagram Deren wrote that the ritualistic form is not the expression of the individualistic nature of the artist but "the application of his individual talent to the moral problems which have been the concern of man's relationship with deity" (Deren, 2001, p. 20). The use of ritual can create fear "by creating an imaginative, often mythological experience which, by containing its own logic within itself, has no reference to any specific time or place" (Deren, 2001, p. 20). Meshes of the Afternoon contains its own logic within itself, while the mysterious cloaked female figure seems mythological rather than contemporary. Anagram was written before Deren's trip to Haiti and contains no actual mention of vaudun. Similarities between ritualized material in Deren's films and Dunham's presentation of her discoveries about Haitian vaudun in her choreography are, however, too close to be coincidental. Anagram explains how Deren used her understanding of ritual to create abstract, modernist films. She notes:

> Above all, the ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of the personality. (Deren, 2001, p. 20).

Deren is referring here to the doubling and trebling of figures in her films and to the use of stylized repetition to create an abstracted poetic ambience that is so different from the prosaic narratives typical of Hollywood movies. The word depersonalization suggests a repudiation of the individualism encouraged by western consumer culture. If one changes the word 'depersonalization' into 'possession' one sees the connection with vaudun; it would then read possession is not destruc-

tive of the individual, and possession enlarges him or her beyond the personal. In her 1953 book, Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti, Deren wrote: "If a loa possesses a person, it will be assumed that, for the duration of the possession, the actions and attitudes witnessed are those of the loa spirit and not of the person proper" (Deren, 1983, p. 16-17). As the book's title suggests, the loa rides the person like a divine horseman, enlarging him or her through a connection with something more important than ordinary experience. This directly contradicts the dualistic modern, European way of thinking that separates mind and body. In Divine Horsemen, Deren posed a rhetorical question:

> Is it valid to use this [Western] means to truth in examining Oriental or African cultures which are not based on such a dualism and are, on the contrary, predicated on the notion that truth can be apprehended only when every cell of brain and body – the totality of a human being – is engaged in that pursuit? (Deren, 1983, p. 9).

Deren had already discovered that truth depends on a completely embodied human being before she went to Haiti. She found this exploring in her dance films the insights into possession to which Dunham had introduced her. It goes without saying that the act of dancing engages every cell of brain and body.

Deren's *Divine Horsemen* and Dunham's *Island Possessed* are generally recognized as key books in English on Haitian *vaudun.* The connections between these books and their writers' artistic achievements – in film and choreography respectively – are rarely discussed. Most books on Dunham, for example, focus in detail on her anthropological work in the mid-1930s and her work as a civil rights activist in the late 1960s, reducing the thirty years between the two when she ran a pioneering dance company to a few pages. Similarly, Deren's association with Dunham has rarely been examined. I have argued that it was through the practice of their art that each discovered the shortcomings of modern, western, individualistic ways of being. Their critical modern engagement with spirituality was grounded in their performative celebrations of the cultural riches transmitted through the African Diaspora.

References

DEREN, Maya. An Anagram of ideas on art, form, and film. In NICHOLS, Bill (Ed.). Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde. Berkley: University of California Press, 2001.

DEREN, Maya. Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti. New York: McPherson & Company, 1983.

DUNHAM, Katherine. Island Possessed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.