

# Art in Jewish Society

---

Małgorzata Stępnik  
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin  
Polish Institute of World Art Studies

## The artist, the explorer, the initiate. Spiritual journeys of Maya Deren

You too have known this merciless transfusion,  
along the arm by which we each have held it..  
In the illusion was pursued the vision  
through the reflection to the revelation..  
The miracle has come to pass..  
Your pale face, Anaïs, before the glass  
at last is not returned to you reversed..  
This is no longer mirrors, but an open  
wound Through which we face each other  
framed in blood..

Maya Deren, *For Anaïs Before the Glass* (1945)<sup>1</sup>

The cited fragment is taken from a poem entitled *For Anaïs Before the Glass*, dedicated to Anaïs Nin, a scandalous writer, with whom Maya Deren temporarily collaborated on her experimental *Rituals of Transfigured Time* (1946), one of the greatest – I daresay, iconic – films of the American avant-garde.. These lines can be interpreted as prophetic, as a kind of ‘augury’ of Deren’s future life and *oeuvre*, of her fruitful journey to Haiti, private discoveries and illuminations and most of all – the act of her being ‘possessed’ by Erzulie, the goddess of love and beauty.. Unquestionably, Maya Deren (1917–1961) (ill. 1) was one of the most intriguing personalities

of 20<sup>th</sup> century art.. She was a filmmaker, film theorist, photographer, dancer and most of all – someone that might be called a creative ‘shamaness’ and quite like, for instance, Edward James, an utterly radical surrealist..

She was born in Kiev, to a well-to-do Jewish family, in the year of the outbreak of the October Revolution. . Eleanora Derenkowskaia – her real name – was a daughter of Mary Fiedler and Solomon David Derenkowski, a respected psychiatrist (as legend has it, she was given her first name after the famous Italian actress Eleonora Duse).. In 1922 her family moved to the United States.. Six years later they acquired citizenship and changed their surname.. In 1935 Eleonora-Maya married her first husband Gregory Bardacke.. In later years, she was married to the avant-garde photographer and filmmaker Alexandr Hackenschmied, known as Alexander Hammid (since 1942) and the Japanese composer Teiji Ito (in the years 1960–1961), who created beautiful soundtracks for some of her films that had for years remained silent..<sup>2</sup>

During her years in New York, Deren attended the New School for Social Research.. It is

---

<sup>1</sup> Internet source: <http://www.readperiodicals.com/201304/3010807521.html> (25.09.2015)..

---

<sup>2</sup> It can be stated that Teiji Ito was a man who dispatched Deren on the last of great journeys.. He scattered his dead wife’s ashes at the foot of the mountain Fuji..



Ill. 1. Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943

worth mentioning that among its founders were eminent philosophers such as Thorstein Veblen or John Dewey, and that the staff of the famous University in Exile, which functioned as the New School's division, included great European scholars who had managed to evade the Nazis.. All in all, in 1939 Deren obtained a master's degree in English literature at Smith College.. The high literary culture, the love for words she acquired during her studies, will characterise her future writings: a long essay entitled *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946), as well as *Divine Horsemen. The Living Gods of Haiti*, first published in 1953 – the book that was a result of Deren's personal research on Haitian voodoo culture.. The thoughts and ideas expressed on the pages of *Divine Horsemen* will be the main subject of this paper..

However, before delving into the content of the book, I would like to add that at the beginning of 1940s, Eleonora – who eventually transformed into Maya<sup>3</sup> – moved to Los Angeles and there, for some time, she cooperated with Katherine Dunham, an African American dancer, choreographer and, as is especially significant here – an anthropologist.. In my opinion, it was Dunham who must have in a very direct way inspired Deren to explore Haitian culture.. Since 1936 Katherine conducted her anthropological studies in Haiti and, unlike Maya

who, in her time, only gained the status of an initiate, a *devoteé*, she became a Voudoun priestess, a real *mambo*.. (In the same year Dunham was awarded a bachelor's degree at the University of Chicago)..

## The metamorphosis

In September 1947 Maya Deren, having been awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for 'creative work in the field of motion pictures,' disembarked in Haiti.. More precisely, this was a reward – as she says in her preface to *Divine Horsemen* – “for the stubborn effort that had been involved in creating, producing and successfully distributing four previous films..”<sup>4</sup> Those films were: *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), in a cooperation with Alexander Hammid), *At Land* (1944), *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) and, last but not least, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946).. Initially, Deren intended to stay on the island for eight months, collecting material for a new project – footage of Haitian dance “as purely a dance form..”<sup>5</sup> But facing the new reality, the tempting world of *Les Invisibles*, soon she had to change her plans.. As she recalls in 1951, while finishing her book: “I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations..”<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of fact, being an artist contributed much to Deren's scientific observations and helped her develop an autotelic attitude described by herself as a “disinterested receptivity..”<sup>7</sup> “It was a deliberate discretion – she writes – reflecting a strong distaste for aggressive inquiry, staring or prying, and which both resulted from and was rewarded by a sense of human bond which I did not fully understand until my first return to the United States..”<sup>8</sup> Deren's artistic background enabled her, in a way, to perceive more deeply and prepared her for that unique journey into the domain of spirits..

According to Joseph Campbell, an American scholar and an editor of *Divine Horsemen*, “Her avant-garde films, composed before her first trip

<sup>4</sup> Deren (2004: 5)..

<sup>5</sup> Deren (2004: 5)..

<sup>6</sup> Deren (2004: 6)..

<sup>7</sup> Deren (2004: 7)..

<sup>8</sup> Deren (2004: 7)..

<sup>3</sup> The name 'Maya' refers to the Hindu goddess embodying illusion – literally: the veil of the perceived world..

to Haiti (...) had already testified to her understanding of the pictorial script of dream, vision, and hallucination.”<sup>9</sup> “She was open, willingly and respectfully, to the messages of that speechless deep, which is, indeed, the wellspring of the mystères.”<sup>10</sup> – that is, of the holy ghosts. . In the same pas-sage, Campbell also refers to a local proverb that says, “When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart.”<sup>11</sup> Paraphrasing this sentence, we can say that when Maya Deren arrived in Haiti, the gods did not depart, but willingly revealed their human faces, as we will see – sometimes even crying..

In the poem quoted at the beginning, dedicated to Anaïs Nin, Deren seems to allude to the problem of identity.. The expression “merciless transfusion” can be interpreted as a metaphor for change, for Ovidian or Kafkaian metamorphoses, for something that, I think, might be called the logic of masquerade (perhaps merciless, because irreversible?).. The motif of the mirror that appears in the poem – as well as in several of Deren’s films – directs us toward the Freudian concept of *the uncanny*, toward *phase du miroir* conceptualised by Lacan and the figure of a *Doppelgänger* (*The Double*)<sup>12</sup> described

<sup>9</sup> Deren (2004: xiv)..

<sup>10</sup> Deren (2004: xv)..

<sup>11</sup> Deren (2004: xiv).. Joseph Campbell on the ideal of objectivity and an artist’s sensitive eye: “To whom, for example, do we turn for the sense and experience of Christian worship: to a Dante Alighieri or to Max Weber? It has always been my finding that the poet and the artist are better qualified both by the temperament and by training to intuit and interpret the sense of a mythological figure than the university-trained empiricist,” Deren (2004: xvii)..

<sup>12</sup> Otto Rank’s *The Double* was directly inspired by *The Student from Prague* (1913) by Stellan Rye, (Hanns Heinz Ewers was the screenwriter).. In one of the key scenes of the film, the main characters, Balduin and Margit, meet each other at Josefov cemetery.. It is noteworthy that the charismatic Rabbi Yehuda Löw ben Bezalel – who, according to legend, animated the Golem – is buried there, in Old Jewish Cemetery (*Starý židovský hřbitov*).. Anyway, Rank’s main aim was to explore the literary topos of the double as a symbolic manifestation of neurotic tendencies, especially – an abnormal fear of death, tanatophobia, which is characteristic for narcissistic personalities.. As he writes: “The frequent slaying of the double, through which the hero seeks to protect himself permanently from the pursuits of his self, is really a suicidal act.. It is, to be sure, in the painless form of slaying a different ego: an unconscious illusion of the splitting-off of a bad, culpable ego – a separation which, moreover, appears to be the precondition for every suicide.. The suicidal person is unable to eliminate by direct self-destruction the fear of death resulting from the threat to his narcissism.. To be sure, he seizes upon the only possible way out, suicide, but he is incapable of carrying it out other than by way of the phantom of a feared and hated double, because he loves and esteems his ego too highly to give it pain or to transform the idea of his destruction into the

by Otto Rank, (who, by the way, was a Nin’s therapist).. Finally, the mirror – as a magical surface producing our ‘twins’ – can also be associated with the Baudrillardian world of *simulacra*.. In this context, it is significant that – as Deren observes – during Vodoun ceremonies, the gods are “greeted in mirror terms” and that “the ritual dance movements likewise revolve counter-clockwise around the center-pole.”<sup>13</sup> What is more, the *vevers*, sacred symbols, “are frequently designed in mirrored symmetry to both sides of an horizon.”<sup>14</sup> That is because: “For the Haitian, the metaphysical world of les Invisibles is not a vague, mystical notion; it is as a world within a cosmic mirror, peopled by the immortal reflections of all those who have ever confronted it.. The mirror is the metaphor for the cosmography of Haitian myth.”<sup>15</sup>

In Vodoun cosmology, every human has their *gros-bon-ange*, “the metaphysical double of the physical being”; we can say – the mirror reflection..<sup>16</sup> As Deren explains, “It is the immortal twin who survives the mortal man.”<sup>17</sup>

## The multiple selves of the Outsider

The motif of the mirror reflection and the twin figure – the eerie figure of the *Doppelgänger* – is already present in the early Deren’s cinematic *oeuvres*.. A mysterious and terrific figure clothed in black, with a mirror instead of the face, constitutes a metaphorical refrain in the next sequences of *Meshes of the Afternoon*.. In the tenth minute of the film there appears a picture which is a double and further enlarged portrait of the artist (ill. 2).. There can be seen ‘two Mayas’ sitting behind the table covered with the table-cloth whiteness, separated by the surface of contrasting background and at the same time joined in the tension of expectation of ... the third Maya who, in a minute, is to bring the requisites: a knife (is that her *self* cut off from the

---

deed.. In this subjective meaning, the double turns out to be a functional expression of the psychological fact that an individual with an attitude of this kind cannot free himself from a certain phrase of his narcissistically loved ego-development.. He encounters it always and everywhere, and it constrains his actions within a definite direction.. Here, the allegorical interpretation of the double as a part of the ineradicable past gets its psychological meaning”.. Rank (2009: 79–80)..

<sup>13</sup> Deren (2004: 34)

<sup>14</sup> Deren (2004: 34)..

<sup>15</sup> Deren (2004: 34)..

<sup>16</sup> Deren (2004: 330)..

<sup>17</sup> Deren (2004: 26)..



Ill. 2. Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943

rest of the world?) and a key (considering the surreal poetics, this is most probably a key to her dreams).. In turn, in the onirist narrative of *Ritual in Trans-figured Time*, in the scenes filmed in slow, almost hypnotic, motion the artist's second self – her twin, albeit a slightly murkier sister – is the previously mentioned Anaïs Nin.. The actress and dancer, Rita Christiani is a symbolic 'tie' between them – un-doubtedly, between the real world and the one lying behind the mirror..

It can be stated that creative identity of Deren is of a smooth and processing character.. Her 'self' undergoes continuous transfigurations and redefinitions.. It is essential that all her "personifications" are *true* and – as Jonas Mekas formulated – they are simply "different petals of the same lotus flower.." <sup>18</sup> Similarly, the *true* figures are Eleanora Antinova, The Black Ballerina from the Diaghilev troupe created by Eleanor Antin, as well as Justine Frank – a Jewish-Belgian painter, a surrealistic pornographer who is a production of the famous Israelite artist, Roee Rosen, as well as Roberta Breitmore embodied by Lynn Herschman Leeson a few decades ago.. In a similarly paradoxical way, all photographic self-portraits of Cindy Sherman (of course, her famous cycle *Untitled Film Stills*) are *real*.. It is significant that – regardless the generation gap – the artists mentioned above share a common Jewish heritage.. All of them as members of "the generation of postmemory" <sup>19</sup> come from emigrant fami-

lies from East European Diaspora, fortunately saved from the Nazi hell.. It is possible that the strategy consisting in producing human simulacra, fictitious entities, though the most *reliable*, expresses an escapist tendency (the Escapist is just the designation of one of the heroes in the novel by Michael Chabon awarded with the Pulitzer Prize).. <sup>20</sup>

The central category in Deren's *oeuvre* is time and its "creative possibilities," <sup>21</sup> as she writes in her *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*. All ritualistic forms such as dance or mystical trans recorded on the movie reel distance us from a feeling of apparent linearity of time.. From the artist's point of view, both the human memory and the whole mental experience are of a simultaneous character (thus her short treatise about art assumes the form of an anagram).. <sup>22</sup> This is remarkable that Deren's film works imitate a specific – that is, a woman's – sense of time through a montage full of slowing down, reversals and repetitions.. According to the artist, the woman's proper condition is "waiting," "being in a stage of becoming" and "the constant metamorphosis.." <sup>23</sup> What is more, something befitting for a woman is a continuous masquerade, being seen in the *male gaze* (ill.. 3)..

However, Deren speaks to us not only from a woman's perspective but above all from a *stranger's*, a newcomer, emerging from the depths of the sea as in the first scene of *At Land*.. She is not only a personification of the Jungian *anima* (related to the water element), but also a figure of an eternal Outsider.. In the biographical film by Martina Kudláček originally entitled *Im Spiegel der Maya Deren*, Rita Christiani states that the mirrors and reflections often used by the artist probably symbolise the state of mind of an outsider, an immigrant on foreign territory.. <sup>24</sup> Thus, the same can be said of someone suspended between two worlds.. Unquestionably,

<sup>20</sup> Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Random House, New York 2000..

<sup>21</sup> Deren (1946: 5)..

<sup>22</sup> "It is an organization of ideas in an anagrammatic complex instead of the linear logic to which we are accustomed.. An anagram is a combination of letters in such a relationship that each and every one is simultaneously an element in more than one linear series.. This simultaneity is real, and independent of the fact that it is usually perceived in succession.." Deren (1946: 5)..

<sup>23</sup> The quotations come from the Deren's statements summoned in the film by Martina Kudláček. See: *Im Spiegel der Maya Deren (In the Mirror of Maya Deren)*.. Dir.. Martina Kudláček.. Austria 2002.. Film..

<sup>24</sup> See: Kudláček (2002)..

<sup>18</sup> Mekas (2000: 128)..

<sup>19</sup> See: Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012..

Christiani of the same age as Deren (born 1917) coming from Trinidad, an emigrant to the USA, perfectly understands this state..

Though Eleanora-Maya touched universal, even archetypal aspects in her art,<sup>25</sup> one should keep in mind the fact that it was derived from a specific culture created by intellectual wanderers, the people whose one and only genuine homeland was the text.. (*Our homeland, the text* as it was written by George Steiner).. Creative nomadism and the accompanying fondness for the word became the subject of a collective exhibition organised by Grey Art Gallery (N.Y.) and Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami in 2000.. The figures of three eminent female artists of Jewish origin were presented at it: Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman whose mature literary output feeds into the feminism interests of the second wave as well as the androgynous Claude Cahun – *née* Lucy Schwob, the surrealist, fascinating photographer and writer forgotten for many years but only really excavated from historical obscurity in the 1990s.. This exhibition was given the characteristic title of *Inverted Odysseys*.. Deren used to talk in this way about her beautifully poetic *At Land*..<sup>26</sup> This term can also be suitable for the trajectory of the human fates of all three artists..

It may not be an exaggeration to compare Deren's predilection to the form of (film and literary) collage with a particular cult of the fragment so characteristic of the Judaic culture, (see, for example, Walter Benjamin and his *Arcades* or *Constellations*).. In this context the statements made by Miriam Arsham, the film editor and Maya's friend are of significant interest.. In the aforementioned film by Kudláček, Arsham recollects: "Every single thing she said was prearranged in her notes, in her mind.. She used to write things on little three per five index cards and carried them with her everywhere.. I mean, she would kill me, if she heard me say this; but it always made me think of *students of the Talmud*.. When you take one sentence out of the Bible, you can write fifty books based on



III. 3. Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943

that one sentence.. It is exactly what Maya did.. Every word, every possible meaning... In other words – she didn't expand what she knew, but she went down into it..<sup>27</sup>

It can be said that Deren was someone living in suspension, "a frontier man" (as Derrida referred to Benjamin),<sup>28</sup> and last but not least, someone 'without a world..' In the final statement, I allude to the great film by Eleanor Antin, her *magnum opus* entitled *The Man without a World*.. Similar to Deren, Antin defies a linear time structure in her works.. Her black and white silent film, whose production was based on the conventions of the Polish Yiddish film of the late 1920s, was released in 1991.. Significantly, this is the first of Antin's works referring directly and precisely to the culture of her ancestors.. This film is a tribute to her mother, an actress in provincial Yiddish theatre somewhere in the eastern outskirts of pre-war Poland..

Similar to Deren, Antin was brought up in a laicised family.. Her parents belonged to leftist, well-to-do intellectuals.. Her return to forgotten roots, the Diaspora language, nostalgia for the small shtetl was mainly due to her mother's illness (Alzheimer's disease).. However, it should be pointed out that it took place at a convenient time when difference and diversity were already commonly

<sup>25</sup> Shelley Rice comparing the oeuvres by Deren, Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman: "Like both Sherman and Claude Cahun, Deren felt the need to place herself within the epic structures of human experience, to identify with the ancient archetypes given to us as cultural role models.. Her use of herself as subject, therefore, is hardly simple self-expression: it is, rather, an attempt at self-transcendence, an endeavor to replace the isolated individual within the context of the larger collective consciousness.." Rice (2000: 15)..

<sup>26</sup> See: Rice (2000: 15)..

<sup>27</sup> One of those cards appears in 58<sup>th</sup> minute of the film.. It says: "Window versus mirror: Child learns because it does not yet have to justify itself.. As we grow older we accumulate a history which we want to justify, and we look for this in whatever we look at.. It becomes a mirror in which we see ourselves over and over; and that is a use one can make of the art experience (...)" See: Kudláček (2002)..

<sup>28</sup> Derrida (1987: 177)..



III. 4. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen. The living Gods of Haiti*, 1985

accepted.. However, the followers of Adolph Gottlieb's New York School still declared that art should be of a universal, supra-ethnic and supra-religious character;<sup>29</sup> the decade of the 1990s was marked by private, personal and even intimate narrations.. This can be found in the essay by Susan Tumarkin Goodman: "The prevalence of religious and spir-itual themes in the art of the 1990s is (...) more than the product of rising ethnic consciousness and ar-tistic pluralism.. The past decade [written in 1993] has been marked by a growing sense of personal al-ienation and global uncertainty.. The fact that Jew-ish content has become increasingly visible in the work of Jewish artists suggests its ability to give visual form to these anxieties.. As family structures loosen and parents and grandparents age and die, the connections to a historic tradition have con-tinued to unravel.. Assimilation and the mounting rate of intermarriage have further weakened eth-nic and religious identity.. But a counter-trend is also discernible.. It seems that the greater the loss of order in the larger society, the more acute is the need to get in touch with one's personal heritage and tradition.." <sup>30</sup>

If Maya Deren had lived some time later, she might have recalled her childhood at the happy home of Maria and Solomon in Kiev.. She might have revealed to us another face, of the little, light-heartedly dancing "Elinka.."

<sup>29</sup> Gottlieb: "I think art is international and should transcend any racial, ethnic, religious, or national boundaries".. After: Goodman (1993: 23)..

<sup>30</sup> Goodman (1993: 23)..

## "The mother of meaning"

Let us come back to Deren's Haiti journey, her most splendid adventure, and to the book describing voo-doo rituals (ill.. 4)..

*Loa* – the word is the same in both its plural and singular forms – are the deities of Haiti.. In the third chapter of *Divine Horsemen*, the author pre-sents the main gods of the Vodoun pantheon.. She elaborately describes and classifies them "according to Principle, Origin and Character.." <sup>31</sup> So, her de-scription includes, among others, Legba as the god of the mystical crossroads and Ghede – his dark twin – 'king and clown' at the same time, the old and gentle Damballah, the father figure, 'the good serpent of the sky' and Ayida, his mistress, symbol-ised by a rainbow.. The third of the main couples – Agwé, 'the sovereign of the seas' and his wife Erzulie

– are symbolised by a checkered and pierced heart, the crying goddess of Love and – as Deren says – "that human luxury of the heart which is not essential to the purely physical generation of the body.." <sup>32</sup>

If 'luxury' means 'excess,' rising above the matter, above nature, then Erzulie – with all the disinterest-ed beauty she represents, with her fine clothes and sophisticated manners – may be as well regarded, at least from our perspective, as the goddess of art..

As Deren observes:

"Voudoun has given woman, in the figure of Er-zulie, exclusive title to that which distinguishes hu-mans from all other forms: their capacity to con-ceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need.. In Erzulie, Voudoun salutes woman as the divinity of the dream, the Goddess of Love, the muse of beauty.. It has denied her em-phasis as mother of life and of men in order to re-gard her (...) as mother of man's myth of life – its meaning.." <sup>33</sup>

Then, what is art if not 'the mother of mean-ing?' Who is an artist if not the one who "conceives beyond reality, desires beyond adequacy and creates beyond need?" Besides, in this context, how can we interpret the figure of Agwé, Erzulie's "hus-band and lover, being, as the sea is, both immedi-ate and enduring, both a ready strength and a deep peace?" <sup>34</sup>

I think, that Agwé personifies the domain

<sup>31</sup> Deren (2004: 82–83)..

<sup>32</sup> Deren (2004: 141)..

<sup>33</sup> Deren (2004: 138)..

<sup>34</sup> Deren (2004: 125)..

of dreams, of the unconscious, the domain so will-ingly explored by surrealists..

“The loa are the souls of the cosmos.”<sup>35</sup> But, most of all, each deity should be regarded as “the archetypal representative of some natural or moral principle.”<sup>36</sup> “To worship the loa,” says Deren later in the book, “is to celebrate the principle, not the matter in which it may be momentarily or permanently manifest.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, the loa figures are phenomena through which we can read or discover universal values, as the author says: “the major human pattern.”<sup>38</sup> The world of *Les Invisibles* is as real as the ‘pattern’ it recreates.. Likewise, human thought is as real as matter.. On the pages of *Divine Horsemen*, one will find a very intriguing definition of a myth.. According to Deren: “Myth is the twilight speech of an old man to a boy.. All the old men begin at the beginning.. Their recitals always speak first of the origin of life.. (...) Myth is the facts of the mind made manifest in a fiction of matter.”<sup>39</sup>

## The 'possession'

What I would like to mention next – and this is almost my final remark – is the very intimate description of Deren’s possession, being – like the Haitian say – *mounted* by the *loa* during a ritual dance..<sup>40</sup> We find it in the final chapter of the book, entitled *The white darkness*.. This oxymoron expresses the state of liminality, of being suspended between the two different worlds (or realities). . Here are some excerpts from Deren’s story: “As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with a softening of the lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen.. It is when I turn, as if to a neighbor, to say »Look! See how lovely that is!« and see that the others are removed

to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that is no longer myself whom I watch.. Yet, it is myself, for as that terror strikes, we two are made one again, joined by and upon the point of the left leg which is as if rooted to the earth.. Now there is only terror.. »This is it!« (...) I must call it a white darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror.”<sup>41</sup> And later: “My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground.. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head.. This sound will drown me! »Why don’t they stop! Why don’t they stop!« I cannot wrench the leg free.. I am caught in this cylinder, this well of sound.. There is nothing anywhere except this.. There is no way out.. The white darkness moves up the veins of my leg like a swift tide rising, rising; is a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which, surely, will burst my skin.. It is too much, too bright, too white for me; this is its darkness.. »Mer-cy!« I scream within me.. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly: »Erzulie«.. The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me.. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once.. That is all.”<sup>42</sup>

Deren’s *Divine Horsemen* is not only an anthropological study, not only, I daresay, a literary masterpiece but, in some parts, also a tractate on art.. The author analyses the social role of an artist in terms of *outsiderism*.. The notion of ‘the Other’ best describes his/her social status.. As the author observes: “In a modern industrial culture, the artists constitute, in fact, an »ethnic group«, subject to the full »native« treatment.. We too are exhibited as touristic curiosities on Monday, extolled as culture on Tuesday, denounced as immoral and unsanitary on Wednesday, reinstated for scientific study Thursday, feasted for some obscurely stylish reason Friday, forgotten Saturday, revisited as picturesque Sunday. . We too are misrepresented by professional appreciators and subjected to spiritual imperialism, our most sacred efforts are plagiarized for yard goods (...)”<sup>43</sup>

The dark mood disappears when Deren comes to describing the ceremony for Agwé, the god of the sea.. A local painter decorates the huge boat that, after the ceremony, will be drowned in the

<sup>35</sup> Deren (2004: 86)..

<sup>36</sup> Deren (2004: 16)..

<sup>37</sup> Deren (2004: 89)..

<sup>38</sup> Deren (2004: 12).. “Moreover, these principles which have been abstracted from the phenomena in which they are manifest are not less real than the phenomena, but merely non-physical and invisible; and this fact may illuminate the Voudoun concept of *les Invisibles* as real.” Deren (2004: 88)..

<sup>39</sup> Deren (2004: 21)..

<sup>40</sup> During the Congress discussion, Prof.. Ziva Amishai Maisels remarked that, in a sense, it resembles the act of being possessed by a *dybbuk*..

<sup>41</sup> Deren (2004: 258–259)..

<sup>42</sup> Deren (2004: 260)..

<sup>43</sup> Deren (2004: 7–8)..

ocean as a sacrifice.. The painter is one of the key figures that take part in the ritual.. As Deren recollects: “Beside me stood the painter, his eyes fixed on the spot where his barque had disappeared.. He was singing joyously.. Everyone had worked hard, and had given, each in his own fashion; but for the painter there must have existed an image of special pride in his mind’s eye, as he saw the fabulous submarine palace where the great Papa Agwé, pleased with his servant’s labor, was already motioning his illustrious guests toward this banquet table. . I turned from him to the glad faces of the others, and turned away to the sea and wept.. It was at this moment that I understood why the gods, who loved these men, would weep..”<sup>44</sup>

## Bibliography

- Deren 1946 = Deren, Maya: *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, The Alicat Book Shop Press, Yonkers, New York 1946..
- Deren 2004 = Deren, Maya: *Divine Horsemen. The Living Gods of Haiti*, McPherson & Co., New York 2004..
- Derrida 1987 = Derrida, Jacques: *The Truth in Painting*, transl.. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1987..
- Goodman 1993 = Goodman, Susan T.: *Eight Artists. A Cultural Context*, in: Susan Tumarkin Goodman (ed.): *From the Inside Out. Eight Contemporary Artists*, exhibition catalogue, The Jewish Museum, New York 1993: 22–39..
- Kudlaček 2002 = Kudláček, Martina (dir.): *Im Spiegel der Maya Deren*, a documentary film, Austria 2002..
- Mekas 2000 = Mekas, Jonas: *A Few Notes on Maya Deren*, in: Shelley Rice (ed.): *Inverted Oysseys. Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, The Mit Press, Cambridge-London 2000: 127–150..
- Rank 2009 = Rank, Otto: *The Double. A Psychoanalytic Study*, transl.. H. Tucker, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2009..
- Rice 2000 = Rice, Shelley: *Inverted Oysseys*, in: S. Rice (ed.): *Inverted Oysseys. Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, The Mit Press, Cambridge-London 2000: 3–26..

---

<sup>44</sup> Deren (2004: 130)..