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# Introduction: Deren's 'Ritualistic' Cinema

'A ritual is an action distinguished from all others in that it seeks the realisation of its purpose through exercise of form. In this sense ritual is art; and even historically, all art derives from ritual' (Notes from *Ritual in Transfigured Time*)

Maya Deren (1917-1961), the dancer, film-maker, and avant-garde artist, made an effort to create a 'ritualistic form' of cinema (Jackson 2002: 131), by developing the avant-garde theatrical concept of 'primitivism': a return to the archaic 'roots' of ritual as the revitalization of the 'carnival spirit', in ecstatic performances characterized by ambivalence, the 'irrational', the 'subliminal', and the grotesque. It was seen as a 'quasi-mystical therapeutic' way of liberating the unconscious (Innes 1981: 16, and 1993: 14), expressed in archaic tongues, and using gestures ('Gestalt'), an acting method taken from the Brechtian theatre used to alienate the audience through puppet-like caricatures instead of characters. Furthermore, the 'Theatre of Cruelty' of Antoine Artaud, the 'theatre of the absurd' of Ionesco and Pinter, the 'Poor Theatre' of Jerzy Grotowski, and the 'Holy Theatre' of Peter Brook, all produced *liminoid* performances, meaning 'individual products' with 'collective or "mass effects" (Turner 1982: 54-55, and 1987: 29-30), which were staged as initiation rites. As in rituals, the directors engaged their limited audiences into the performance by demanding their active participation, aiming for the collective transformation of both actors and audiences 'into an-other' (Innes 1993: 11). The themes of their plays were also ritualistic, based on archetypal and universal myths. Artaud called this the 'total theatre', a term he coined from his research on Balinese theatre in describing 'an impression of inhumanity, of divinity, of miraculous revelation', and achieving 'the total effect of revelation, whose crests sway rhythmically, responding consciously, it seems, to the slightest movements of their bodies' (Artaud 1988: 220-221).

In three short silent films, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), Deren incorporated 'ritualistic' elements to technically develop a

new form of film-making, in an effort to create a film event in which the audience would actively engage through the movement of the camera, rhythmical editing, and photography enriched with archetypal symbolism:

"Ritual is an act whose very form is so principal... that it passes far beyond casual naturalism... the main effort has been to create dance out of non-dance elements by filmic manipulation. In this sense, the pattern... transcends the intentions and the movements of the individual performers and for this reason I call it Ritual...Being a film ritual, it is achieved not only in spatial terms but in terms of a Time created by the camera. Time, here is not an emptiness to be measured by a spatial activity which may fill it. On the contrary, in this film it not only actually creates many of the actions and events, but constitutes the special integrity of the form as a whole" (Deren cited in Jackson 2002: 138)

In this context, Deren's film-rituals are manufactured 'total events'. Crucially, she distinguished between performance and form, in terms of the former being 'consciously chosen' while the latter functioning on the unconscious (Jackson 2002: 136). The form of her films, the hypnotic rhythm of editing, use of hand-held camera and discontinuity of freeze frames, spatial fragmentation and reversal of movement, use of slow-motion to stretch time and close-ups to exaggerate emotion, all contribute to the manipulation of time and space. By disorienting the viewer, she created an initiatory experience, a 'rite of passage' (Van Gennep [1909] cited in Turner 1967: 93-111), that would actively work on and engage with the unconscious of the audience. The director Deren controls the aesthetical world of the audience's conscious *cosmos*, becoming the charismatic priestess in a film-ritual, which aims to transform each viewer from within.

Hauke and Alister have described cinema as a kind of 'temenos... an active imaginative space... which can then engage the unconscious'. Watching a film in a cinema is an experience of 'psyche-in-projection' that is 'set apart' from daily life, 'in a dark place dedicated to this purpose ... where psyche can come alive, be experienced and be commented upon' (Hauke and Alister 2001: 2). From this post-Jungian perspective, cinema is a kind of a 'Celluloid Church...a modern metaphor of Durkheim's sacred "Church" (Paganopoulos 2010: par.1, 3): the separate space in which 'collective representations' (Levy-Bruhl 1927) express a unified system of belief that supports a moral order through 'things apart and forbidden' (Durkheim 1979: 29). For both Jung and Durkheim ritual was a matter of

experience; the personal way to connect to the wider collective through the luminous experiential concept of 'numinous' (Otto 1958: 5-11). This is manifested in both rituals and films, which bring on the surface certain *a priori* forces kept within us: on the one hand, Jung's concept of 'collective unconscious' which assumes the primacy and reality of the psyche, and on the other, Durkheim's concept of 'collective consciousness' which begins with 'society' as the *a priori* external force that influences our everyday being.

Deren's films about rituals illustrate the tensional but also complementary relationship between the collective unconscious (internal) of the director and the collective consciousness (external) of her society. Particularly, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, which portrays the initiation and descent of a young girl into the dark abyss of her soul, is Deren's personal journey from the surface of the collective consciousness of her bourgeois background into the depths of her unconscious. The film's rich dream-symbolism of the metamorphosis of a widow to a bride, invites for 'Jung's theory of symbols of transformation (that) provides a language to understand the permutations of desire in cultural psychology' (Williams 2001: 121). By referring to the archetypal themes of transformation in relation to anthropological approaches to phenomena of possession, as filmed in her documentary *Divine Horsemen*, this chapter will highlight Deren's fusion of fiction and reality in making her life the heroine of her films, in order to reflect on the 'dark' Other as the collective libido of Western culture.

### The theme of Transformation in *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946)

The film begins with showing two sides of womanhood: a sophisticated lady of higher society, played by the writer Anais Nin, is juxtaposed with the wild and free spirit of the Trinidad dancer Rita Christiani. The opening frame is divided by a dark wall between two doors that lead to a bright room at the background. Anais Nin appears standing at the left door, smiling at the camera. She moves behind the wall to the right side of the frame, picks up a thread of wool, and returns to the left of the frame, where she begins to knit, posing at the camera, as if she is in a 1950s television advertisement. Suddenly, Christiani enters the frame from the camera's position in the foreground. In a close-up, she looks ecstatic, slowly moving in trance through the right door. The camera follows her hypnotic movement taking us into her dream world. As Rita enters the room, Anais remains still, like a statue with her arms outstretched, holding the wool, and positioned in such a way as if they are calling for Rita, who approaches with her right hand outstretched. The scene resembles a spiritual séance: Anais calling for the spirit, which arrives in the form of Rita. She sits opposite Anais,

and starts pulling the wool into a ball. This movement initiates a choreographed scene of knitting, which is reversed by technical means, as in a process of deconstruction. Anais begins to talk, smile, and being confident in contrast to the lost spirit of Rita, who stares silently into space. Suddenly, Maya Deren appears at the back of the room, looking at the two women, but only Rita takes notice of her. Deren discontented with Anais, who continues with her reversed choreographed movement, but this time filmed in slow-motion and accompanied by close-ups of her frozen facial expressions that exaggerate the hypocrisy of her face. She moves like a puppet, as if she is controlled by strings, or the very thread that she thinks she controls. Her puppet-like presence, as in the caricature characters of Brechtian theatre, ironically undermines her bourgeois way of life.

Rita, in between the two women, or two worlds, waits until the thread finishes, and then submissively follows Deren through a third door that leads to a bourgeois party of high society. It is a male-dominated and aggressive world of lustful, fake smiles. Rita dances elegantly, floating around the crowd. Her movement reveals her spiritual nature in contrast to the aggressive movement of a crowd of men competing over her. As in the portrayal of Anais, freeze frames interrupt the continuity of the film, revealing in close-ups the hypocrisy of those bourgeois smiles; the real faces underneath the masked *personas*. Rita begins to feel increasingly anxious and entrapped by this male-dominated world. As she looks for an escape, she falls out of the sky in the arms of the living statue of the choreographer Frank Westbrook. The third sequence takes place in a Roman amphitheatre. Westbrook's body postures imitate that of ancient Hellenic statues, the classical 'perfect body'. But despite their playful relationship, he betrays and ignores her, continuing with a set of self-indulgent moves, as she disappears alone in the wilderness. But then the film turns into a nightmare, as he runs after her. Freeze frames show him moving from one statue to the next, as he/they approach her. Terrified, she runs with dance-leaps towards the ocean. She then falls in the dark abyss of deep water, wearing a white wedding gown. The symbolism of the final scene, which is shot in negative, is amplified by the sharp contrast of the brightness of the falling bride and the darkness of the abyss of her soul. Inside the ocean, she is transformed and reborn into a bride, as if she is a butterfly. For Jung, Water 'is the commonest symbol for the unconscious... which lies, as it were, underneath consciousness' (1968: 18):

... whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the *persona*, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face. (Jung 1968: 20)

Marcel Mauss (1985) in his essay on 'the notion of the person' and the 'notion of the self', drew an evolutionary chart of the development of the *persona*, beginning with the sacred use of masks in rituals, continuing to the legal constitution of the Roman person, and through the Christian 'moral person' to contemporary concepts of the 'self'. Deren reveals the bourgeois mask that hides the real self/society underneath it, as she reverses the 'mirror of water' towards the world she comes from, reflecting on the hypocrisy of her own life in New York. The still-frames of extreme close-ups of the anonymous crowd show their faces frozen, as if they are wearing a mask, revealing the male aggression underneath the hypocrisy of the bourgeois etiquette of conduct. The instinctive escape of Rita in the ocean expresses Deren's own desire to escape from the constraints of bourgeois life and transform into *an-Other*: '...a long-drawn-out process of inner transformation and rebirth into another being. This "other being" is the other person in ourselves... the inner friend of the soul... Our attitude towards the inner voice alternates between two extremes; it is regarded as undiluted nonsense or as the voice of God' (Jung 1968: 131- 132).

Jung wrote that the blocking of the psychic can lead 'to an accumulation of instinctuality and in consequence, to excess and aberrations of all kinds... among them sexual disturbances' (Jung 1967: 169). In Deren's film, these are portrayed by Rita's terror of the male perfect body, and her instinctive reaction to run towards the ocean, away from bourgeois life, and into absolute darkness: 'The treasure which the hero fetches from the dark cavern is life: it is himself, new-born from the dark maternal cave of the unconscious where he was stranded by the introversion or regression of libido' (Jung 1967: 374). In liberating herself, Rita walks in the ocean as if she commits suicide. In this sense, the last sequence portrays a self-sacrifice, which Jung describes as the pre-condition of the manifestation of the Archetype of the Transformation of the Libido. The act of letting-go 'is really carrying the sacrificial act on itself' shows 'individuality in the highest sense' that 'can be called transcendent' (Jung 1969: 258). The ambiguity of the transformation is visualized in the final shot of the metamorphosis of Rita, which carries a multiple and dynamic meaning, amplified by its negative association -shot in negative film- to the institution of marriage (on 'amplification' see Fredericksen 2001: 34-40). The negative film ironically reverses the meaning of the Jungian theme of

'sacred marriage', 'the integration of the conscious and unconscious by analogizing it along gender lines as in alchemical symbolism' (Hauke and Alister 2001: 6-7). In this context, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* reverses the 'subjective' and 'natural transformation' of a girl into a bride, to the metamorphosis of a widow to a bride, making the film in itself an ambiguous transcendental experience, which ambitiously aimed to transform the audience participating, as in the process of 'transformation induced by ritual' (Jung 1968: 119-134).

Hauke and Alister observed that Jung 'saw a good deal of the pathologies of the individuals and of society as arising from our failure to attend to a sophisticated, conscious rationality and other aspects of the psyche such as the spiritual, historical, communal, and fantasy' (2001: 7). In the film, these two realms are juxtaposed through the conflict between the two women who call for Rita, representing two extremes: on the one hand, Anais embodying the promise for a bourgeois secure and sophisticated way of life, but entrapped in a wedding dress; and on the other, Deren who encourages the promise of, and desire for, absolute freedom, symbolized by the liberation of Rita into the dark abyss. During the party scene, Rita is 'depersonalized', meaning she is alienated from the social environment. This is illustrated by her unique elegant movement that contrasts to the aggressive male crowd. She is structurally 'invisible' -in a *liminal* state of mind, in 'betwixt and between' life and death, as if she is 'un-dead' (Turner 1967: 95-96).

"A ritual is characterized by the de-personalization of the individual. In some cases it is even marked by the use of masks and voluminous garments, so that the person of the performer is virtually anonymous; and it is marked also by the participation of the community... as a homogeneous entity in which the inner patterns of relationship between the elements create, together, a large movement of the body as a whole. The intent of such a depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension... the collective is the creative artist" (Notes from *Ritual in Transfigured Time*)

Rita is in a state of trance, as if she is possessed. The two women inside Rita, Anais and Deren, visualize the process of 'dissociation of consciousness that cannot any longer control the unconscious' (Jung 1968: 40). Jung associated phenomena of possession to 'the same archetypal figures that activate the deliriums of psychotics' (Ibid). The struggle between consciousness and unconscious makes it 'necessary to integrate the unconscious into consciousness... (and) arises the need for a synthesis of the two positions. This amounts to

psychotherapy even on the primitive level, where it takes the form of restitution ceremonies' (Ibid). In this context, Levi-Strauss (1963) investigated the efficacy of symbols in shamanistic healing rituals, in a synthetic process of preconscious and conscious structures of the human mind, in order to show the affinity between shamanic curing and psychoanalysis.

In anthropology, possession has been defined as a 'formula of experience and emotion' (Kapferer 1983: 245), expressed through psychogenetic symbols in myths and rituals (Obeyesekere 1981: 14). Possession has 'the potential for individuation' (Corrin 1998: 101), in which the self finds expression 'within a symbolic' and a 'cultural order', through the body, 'the locus of negotiation between the spirits and the initiate and of the redefinition of her [initiated] identity' (Ibid: 85, 89). For Jung, the synthesis of unconscious contents into consciousness results to a 'psychic transformation', a rebirth that 'we recognize as an individuation process' (1968: 147), '...the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual", that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole" (*Ibid*: 275). In this context, the film portrays the process of Rita's 'individuation', that is, 'a life in which the individual becomes what he always was' (Jung 1968: 40).

## Possession in the Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti (1953/1985)

In the end of *Ritual*, Rita/Deren escapes into the ocean. Rita's journey continued in Deren's real life, as she satisfied her libido crossing the ocean towards the 'Oriental'. From 1946 to 1954, she frequently travelled to Haiti, gathering visual material of Vodoun dances, which she filmed between 1947 and 1951, and recording in a diary her own experiences of possession. She published her book in 1953, but the film was edited in 1977, several years after Deren's death, by her third husband Teiji Ito and his wife Cherel. It was released in 1985 as a documentary, with an added voice-over, under the title Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti. During her trips, Deren met the ethnographer Madame Odette Rigaud and the psychologist Miss Ericka who were investigating possession as a healing process. After an incident with a seriously ill child, Deren came to question her own ethics on the field, and particularly her use of modernist poetic aesthetics for recording real situations. While in the beginning she only thought of *Vodoun* as a 'religion', disconnected from the reality of everyday life, during her fieldwork she realized that practice is of as much importance as structure: 'Deren now realizes that in order for a visual representation of religious rituals to make sense, they need the observer's understanding of the rituals "metaphysical context" (Jackson 2002: 151, and Morris 2006: 195). In doing this, she described her personal

experiences after being possessed by the *lwa* spirit of *Ezili Freda*, the archetype of 'a white woman, sensual, seductive with love of fine clothes and jewellery' (Morris 2006: 197). One evening when among a number of *lwa* spirits, the *Damballah* (the serpent spirit) and the *Agwe* (lord of the sea) visited the community, Deren suddenly fell possessed by *Ezili Freda*:

'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?"... It is too much, too bright, too white for me; this is its darkness. "Mercy!" I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly: "Ezrulie!" The bright darkness flood up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all.' (Deren 1953: 260).

The experience records the moment when the *lwa* enters her body, echoing the transformation of Rita in the final sequence of *Ritual*, as both are gradually absorbed in the 'bright darkness' of lost consciousness. As the title of the film suggests, it is thought that the *lwa* enters and "mounts'/rides" the head of the possessed who becomes the living embodiment of God: 'To understand that the self must leave if the loa is to enter, is to understand that one cannot be man and god at once... The serviteur must be induced to surrender his ego, that the archetype become manifest' (Deren quoted in Jackson 2002: 156). During possession, 'the *lwa* moves into the head of a person and in doing so displaces the individual's "big angel"... (that is) the seat of consciousness emotions and sentiments... the personality of the individual' (Morris: 2006: 198, 200). The use of drumming is necessary in providing a common rhythm for all participants, the sound that 'unites' them, depersonalizing them through the collective (Deren 1953: 258), while allowing the archetypes to surface.

The film records the performances of several archetypal Gods surfacing on the anonymous bodies of 'depersonalized' humans. It depicts two types of action: possessions and communication with the *lwa* spirits<sup>1</sup>, and ceremonial dances. Of particular importance is the God *Legba*, symbolized by the symbol of a cross-road, a circle with a cross in it, which is drawn on the ground with flour. The cross-road 'is the point of access to the world of The Invisibles, which is the soul of the cosmos' (Deren 1953: 35). A central archetypal God is *Ghede*, the Trickster and Wise Old Man. He arrives uninvited, dressed as a beggar,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The term '*lwa*', or *loa*, is Congolese meaning 'god' or 'spirit'. It refers to Gods, spirits of ancestors who once lived in Guinea, and to historical characters, such as colonial officers of Napoleon. *Lwa* are divided into benevolent personal spirits with protective powers, called *rada*, and the malevolent Shadow spirits called *Petro Iwa*, described as 'hot tempered and volatile' (Morris 2006: 195).

interrupting the ceremony in honour of *Azaka*, the God of agriculture. With the Trickster's arrival, some of the participants start falling in possession under various spirits, as the phenomenon spreads fast like a virus from one body to the next, forming a 'system of communication' (Lambek 1981: 181-2) between possessed and participants, with the 'priest' *Oungan*, acting as the mediator between Gods and humans. Such acts of collective transcendence reveal the existence of a deeper archaic 'collective unconscious', which comes on the conscious surface through the 'participation mystique' (Jung 1969: 255). The dance brings out on the conscious surface archetypes of the anima-image: 'Among primitives, the soul is the magic breath of life (hence the term "anima"), or a flame' (Jung 1968: 26) -the Flame of Artaud's theatre.

#### Conclusion: The Oriental as Libido

'The primitive "perils of the soul" consist mainly of dangers to consciousness.

Fascination, bewitchment, "loss of soul", possession, etc. are obviously phenomena of the dissociation and suppression of consciousness caused by unconscious contents.

Even civilized man is not yet entirely free of the darkness of primeval times' (Jung 1969: 281)

The bourgeois obsession with the Other reveals the collective libido of a Western society fascinated with the exotic. This fascination with the 'Oriental' aimed to 'examine the degree of mental potential from which they have emerged' (Artaud 2001: 54). Deren developed her search towards a 'metaphysical' form of cinema, highlighting the importance of cultural understanding based on the 'equivalent character' and 'parallel function' of art and ritual, as the film becomes 'a cross-cultural counterpoint' analogous to the musical structure of a fugue (see Jackson 2002: 140-144 on the 'visual fugue' project). Her films are personal 'inverted journeys' (Jackson 2002: 191-9), on the margins between fiction and non-fiction, as the comparison of Ritual to the Divine Horsemen reveals an affinity between avant-garde and ethnographic film-making. The famous ethnographer Margaret Mead criticized Deren's work as methodologically 'inadmissible' (Jackson 2002: 153), because of historical inaccuracies and over-simplifications, although the quality of the material of her painstaking research was widely recognized. In her defence, Deren argued that she wanted to debark from the illusion of 'the static, "objective" camera style favoured by Margaret Mead as the proper form of visual anthropology' (Nicholls 2001: 19), in order to make the viewers conscious of her experience of possession.

The legacy of the dreamy quality of Deren's film-making, which was influenced by the nightmarish atmosphere of the German expressionist mise-en scene of the 1930s, was later developed in popular cinema. For instance, Deren's hypnotic editing rhythm echoes the opening and closing sequences of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (US 1979), and the sequential structure of Scorsese's Kundun (US 1997). Her ironic use of slow-motion, facial close ups, and frozen frames, in order to break the illusion of reality by stretching time, anticipated Hollywood films, such as American Beauty (Mendes 1999) and Donnie Darko (Kelly 2001), both of which used similar techniques to highlight the institutionalized hypocrisy of college life. On the other hand, the underlying theme of the inverted journey into the abyss of the human soul was negotiated in various of genres, as in Tarkovsky's sci-fi Solaris (USSR 1972) and Stalker (USSR 1979), in Petersen's submarine adventure Das Boot (West Germany 1981), in Werner Herzog's journeys into the unknown Amazon (Aguirre 1972, and Fitzcarraldo 1982), and Coppola's adoption of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness [written in 1902] in *Apocalypse Now*, which portrays the initiation of Captain Willard into the 'dark Other' of Colonel Kurtz. Equally, Maya Deren's films demonstrate a collective escapism, as the initiatory theme of *Ritual*, the liberation of a woman into the wild, has also been revisited in films such as in Apted's Gorillas in the Mist (US 1988), the story of Diane Fossey (Sigourney Weaver) who followed her dream to live with gorillas in the jungle, and gradually became 'one of them'.

But ironically, it is the concepts of 'depersonalization' and 'detemporalization' that highlight the 'presence of difference' in Deren's films: 'the visibility of the racial colonial Other is at once a point of identity... and at the same time a problem for the attempted closure within discourse' (Bhabha 1994: 81). In *Ritual*, the possessed Rita is conventionally a Trinidad dancer, while in the *Divine Horsemen*, the possessed Haitians' 'depersonalized' state of mind is kept foreign to us, because the film does not acknowledge *who* these dancers are, and *why* are they dancing. Furthermore, in line with the concept of 'detemporalization' during the state of trance, these people are presented without a history, being in a timeless state of mind that differs 'from ours' (Harris 1991: 150-1). In this anonymous context, they become the Shadow of the bourgeois society that is watching them, demonstrating 'an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality' (Jung 1968b: 8-11).

'Descriptions of other worlds have introduced imaginary variations within our representation of ourselves... traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's fantasy of the "good savage" in denouncing the alienating potential of his society, or to Mead's and Benedict's proposition of cross-cultural comparisons as a "social laboratory" where the cultural relativity of Western notions of normality... are tested' (Corin 1998: 81)

Deren's journeys into the unknown reflect upon the collective consciousness of her own social background: the bourgeois desire for the 'Oriental', common to both fictional avantgarde and ethnographic film-making: 'It is difficult not to view the current fascination of anthropology for "shifting selves", "embodiment", "subjectivity" as a reflection of the inward narcissist turn to contemporary Western societies' (Corin 1998: 82). *Ritual in Transfigured Time* and the *Divine Horsemen* amplify the exoticism of the Other as dark, invisible, and unknown, echoing both Artaud's 'terror' in his writings on Balinese theatre (2001: 40), and Colonel Kurtz's 'horror' in *Apocalypse Now*. Deren died unexpectedly of a brain haemorrhage a few years after she returned from Haiti, in 1961. She was only 44. Could it be that the Gods had finally caught up with her?

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