Deren's Ritual

(A tale from The Aphoristic Theater)

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> The slowest snail that ever crawled dashed by too fast for me.
> The twinkling succession of darkness and light was excessively painful to the eye.
> H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

It was already too late when she glimpsed the flash of the blade as it silently, and with nearly invisible quickness, sliced through the air to decapitate her in a single stroke. Her black hair and ebony flesh dripped with a crimson more red than the sky was blue; her eyes still held the rapturous image of her illicit lover, whose body continued to be entangled in hers, whose passion was still defined by turgidity, whose fate would be the most unspeakable. For adultery with a Princess of the Realm of the Upper Kingdom of Egypt was the most terrible sacrilege. The Divine Pharaoh Mentuhotep hadn't conquered Nubia and seized its most beautiful woman only to be deceived.

She was not embalmed. Her cremation was an indication of the royal fury, and the funeral pyre of the Princess flamed with a brilliance sufficient to attract the gods. The last thing visible was the tattoo of a sacred crocodile emerging from the stylized waters of the Nile inscribed on the palm of her left hand, which mysteriously arose, signaling from the flames, as if in a final gesture of longing or despair. Her ashes, mixed with rose petals as the only sign of the Pharaoh's nostalgia, were to have been sifted through the hands of her slave girls and let fall, to float into the funerary urn. But just at the instant her desolate body was completely vaporized by the intense conflagration, the smoke miraculously took the form of a phantasmagoric being and flowed into the vessel, which was quickly sealed, in fear and trembling, and cast into the tomb. In punishment for her deeds, she was deprived of the customary comfort of being accompanied by the bodies of her household retinue and domestic animals. Instead, they were sacrificed in mere vengeance, and thrown into unmarked graves. The Princess was destined to spend eternity alone.

Centuries later, in 1908 to be exact, an American archaeologist would discover the tomb and unearth the urn, dating from 2040 B.C. When it was inadvertently broken, a stream of smoke slowly escaped and began to take shape — the form of the Princess herself reincarnate, after a respite of nearly 4,000 years.

That time does not run backwards, that is his wrath. Revenge is the will's ill will against time and its "it was." "It was" — that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. That the will cannot will backwards, that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy. To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all "it was" into a "thus I willed it" — that alone should I call redemption. All "it was" is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident — until the creative will says to it, "But thus I willed it."

Thus spoke Zarathustra. Thus wrote Nietzsche. The elimination of temporality is a manifestation of the revenge of a strong poetic will, a reaction against time itself. Poetic substitution, replacement by tropes, is the transformation of the "it was" into an "it is," with the subsequent transmogrification of this "it is" into an "I am." Thus the rhetorical figure of *hysteron proteron* determines a reversal of Western metaphysics, heretofore ruled by the ancient dream of temporal reversal and time travel. Of all the arts, it is cinema, permitting a radical plasticity of time, that most vividly meets these paradoxical conditions of renewal and creativity.

Maya Deren had seen Billy Bitzer's 1908 film, *Princess in the Vase*, in the paper print collection of the Library of Congress. Though she had been somewhat amused by the fact that the young D.W. Griffith played the role of the Princess' lover, it was not this that gave rise to her reverie. She had always felt that the photographic enterprise lacked a temporal dimension, and had intuited that much of the early history of still photography entailed the struggle of the art to purge itself of temporality. Photography is the unlikely art of the annihilation of time, making it a defective art form — and not the eternal capture of the image, as some critics mistakenly surmise. As a dancer and a filmmaker, she couldn't understand that struggle, and relished the irony of seeing a film reduced to a series of motionless stills. She felt that photography could be entirely subsumed by cinema. Just as the human being is merely a minuscule part of the infinite and circular history of humankind, so a still photograph is ultimately nothing more than an isolated frame in the cinematic unfolding of infinity.

Deren loved the illusionism of film, was captivated by its magic, and wondered at its loosening of causal bonds. The filmmaker as demiurge. Artists who bothered with transformations of mere matter were among the weak, for matter is but the most passive aspect of the cosmos. She, to the contrary, wanted to inflict her will upon the most inexorable, the most active aspect of existence: time itself. She wanted to become teleology incarnate.

Deren had abandoned dance because she hated the spirit of gravity that predetermined the gestural possibilities of her body. If the limitations of the erotic body engaged in the act of lovemaking were at least phantasmatically shattered by the blessing of ecstatic oblivion, the shackles of the body in dance obeyed a crueler geometry, already understood by Pythagorians and Euclidians alike. In opposition to that obeisance, she, like Nietzsche, *would only believe in a god who could dance.* She endlessly sought that moment when she could proclaim: *now a god dances through me.*

The ontology of cinema is a ritual in transfigured time. Time is not measure, but a dynamic, creative element. Her operations on the cutting room table created the body of an impossible dance, where pirouettes could repeat to infinity, like the segments of Brancusi's *Endless Column* ; where bodies could levitate in perfect stillness and silence; where each floating leap could be transfigured into a palindrome by reversing time and redoubling space; where the grace of muscular contractions could be held indefinitely in suspended animation. Her vision traced his motions; her gestures controlled his fate. *Anyway, here, suddenly, is the strange fever and excitement. Is it because in holding film in one's hands one holds life in one's hands*?

The magic of cinema bore the dancer's body into an unstated future, carrying the filmmaker's soul along with it. Now, for the first time, Maya Deren had vanquished the immortal laws of causality. As in a voodoo dance — where the supernatural powers of rhythm lead to possession and inspiration, provoking the apparition of a god, a dancing god within a dancing body — the body of the filmed dancer is no longer his own. The moment of loss of self, of deposition or depersonalization, arrives swiftly and esoterically. It is precisely the "break," the offbeat motion, which forces the voodoo dancers into improvised confusion, where redoubled energy and agility are needed to return to stride. At these moments, marked by pirouettes or sudden leaps, the dancer is beset by a frenzy. Only then do the *Loa* — variously recognized as mysteries, saints, angels, supernatural beings — make their appearance.

Willing to sacrifice form for speed, Maya Deren didn't want to create a lyrical suite, but an art of paroxysm.

In the opening scene of *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, the trees tremble and leap in counterpoint to the body of Talley Beatty, the latter moving with grace equivocally situated between the stealth of a panther and the furor of Nijinsky. *Applied to movement — whose nature would be changed by a change in the speed of its performance — slow motion reveals the hitherto unseen sequence of discrete strains and stresses that compound it, thus bringing into reality that image of anguished frustration — otherwise experienced only in the nightmares of childhood — when our limbs are locked in terror of that thing that moves ever closer*. Was this arboreal trembling, like the tremolo of his tensed muscles, a sign of Deren's anguish or her volition? *The palpitating greyness grew darker; then — though I was still traveling with prodigious velocity — the blinking succession of day and night, which was usually indicative of a slower pace, returned, and grew more and more marked*. The effect of the cinematic flicker is a fear apocalyptic. One need not voyage to the year 802,701 A.D., like the Time Traveler in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, in order to find the dark side of existence — it occurs 24 times within every second of every film. So the cinematic flicker induces apocalyptic fear.

The projector, accelerating the advance of successive still photographic frames beyond the threshold of visibility, transforms the slowness of vision from a defect into the very precondition of its cinematic representations. The photograph is sacrificed for the film; the real is conquered and transformed. But there exists a residue, of which that slight,

nearly imperceptible flicker is the sign. Between each still image on the filmstrip there is blackness. Every second, proffering its 24 nearly identical images, also manifests 24 moments of the void, a nothingness into which the world disappears — an invisible yet monstrously present catastrophe. *Total amnesia, although less spectacular than many other forms of mental disorder, has always seemed to me the most terrifying.* She was gripped by a terrifying anguish, akin to Pascal's before the infinite immensity of the empty, fearful sphere that is the universe. As this nothingness is the very essence of cinema, Maya Deren knew that she would have to seek another solution to the problem of causality.

It comes to life out of the energy of my muscles. The immediate physical contact with the film, the nearness of the image, the automatic muscular control of its speed, my impulses and reactions towards the film translated themselves into muscular impulses. Deren's visceral imagination created its own simulacrum in the dance steps of Talley Beatty, remembered again as the banquet of the *manger-mort* gave way to the voodoo ceremony in which a priest intones a psalm for the dead:

Hé, âhé, hé ahé, hé hé hé!
Ti-mun-lâ yo, m'prale wété!
Ti mun là-yo là dlo!

The lamentations of the spirits who were to be taken from the waters were already heard as the pitchers, marked with sacred signs, were opened, and the disembodied souls of the dead were enticed inside, to a chorus of unintelligible mutterings, mumblings and scrapings. The pitcher bearers hopped or staggered in a vertiginous procession, carrying the containers of souls, placing each one on the altar of a particular god. The ceremony ended with a dance, the *banda*, to hasten the successful passage of the shades into the afterworld.

A few days later, the rites of the burning of the pitchers would take place. Afterwards, they would be replaced on the altars, and the dead ancestors would hereafter take on the existence of tutelary spirits, or of very minor gods.