Avant-gard filmmaker Maya Deren's feminist film At Land, analysis, and comparison

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Abstract. Shortly after the french new wave movement, avant-garde films during the 20th century with black and white colors create a spark of feminist ideologies. They successfully achieved their original goal - anti-Hollywood filmmaking - through films with not simple action and adrenaline but rather ones with depth and aesthetics. Maya Deren's films, specifically, reflect her own experiences as an artist and feminist director with many metaphors and foreshadowings to uncover the true depth behind the aesthetic of gestures. During this style of filmmaking, different cinematic skills and the progress of films in the avant-garde genera became more sophisticated ideas and filmmakers appear on the screen. This is when *At land* appears, it was not only a well-known black and white film but also a representation of progression in people's feminist views and appreciation of subject matter in the film industry. Maya Deren used this short film to illustrate a woman's life which we can relate to almost 80 years after the film was produced.

Keywords: Feminism, Cinema, Maya Deren, Avant-garde, 19-century cinema, At land, Meshes of the Afternoon.

1. Introduction

This paper examines Maya Deren's short film, At Land. Using this as its main focus, the paper undertakes a comparative discussion of avant-garde films and their influence. Using one example as the focus will provide a qualitative case study of feminist film cinema. As feminist ideologies evolved throughout film history, the way directors portrayed feminism has differed. The leading cause of such changes is not a personal preference but the influence of larger factors, such as social background, education level, public awareness, and (most importantly) alterations in how people perceive the film.

Most changes begin with a small group of individuals trying to detach from the prevailing trends in their society. In terms of dominating film production, Hollywood has been the primary force in establishing the conventions that avant-garde cinemas have rejected. Hollywood rose to prominence beginning in 1910 and has dominated the film industry since then. Eye-catching action, glamorous special effects, and charismatic actors are common features that have made Hollywood financially successful.

In the 1920s, a small group of French theorists - Louis Delluc, German Dulac, and Jean Epstein - sought to create 'avant-garde films'. These pioneers developed what they thought of as anti-Hollywood films, the purpose of which was to escape the limits of tradition. They wanted to make films that offered more than simple pleasure. Instead, they wanted films to make statements on political and social issues. This paper focuses on Maya Deren (1917-1961) - one of the founders of old avant-garde films. Some of her most seminal works include *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) [1]. These works in black and white experimented with surreal conceptions of visual representation. They utilize amateur actors, manipulations of gesture and body, intense music, and various images. It's often believed that Deren's greatest works were inspired by poetry, especially the work of T.S. Eliot. Among all of her films, *At Land* (1944) presents an outstandingly intricate illustration of the central features of her work [1].

Although not as famous as 'Meshes of the Afternoon' and other films she produced, 'At Land' is incredibly fascinating. This film is highly polished: each shot is carefully constructed with important symbols. And yet, the film cannot be reduced to obvious symbolism. As the following quotation from

her makes clear, Deren was well aware of how her work engaged with and stood apart from other Modernist movements that championed the image: “For the Symbolist, the image is a point of departure for mysterious distances, whereas the Imagist departure is limited to the vision behind the word or image.” At Land is a visual representation of art and literature that unfolds an Odyssey of a woman discovering self-identity. The film expresses Maya Deren’s views of feminism (or the life of a woman).

2. At Land and Film Techniques

The year 1900 marked the beginning of the action film industry. Within roughly one decade, Hollywood had established itself as the center of filmmaking. One decade after, in the 1920s, a group of avant-garde theoreticians emerged to challenge the conventions that the Hollywood system had already instituted. Led by French theoreticians Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, and Jean Epstein, this avant-garde movement wanted to create experimental cinema that rejected Hollywood’s limits [2]. Throughout film history, directors like Stan Brakhage, Louis Bunuel, and David Lynch have pioneered forms of cinema that challenged Hollywood’s model [2]. To better understand this, there are 3 stages of avant-garde films, which will be analyzed in the next section.

2.1. Three Stages of Avant-Grade Films

The first one is a subjective film and the main influence came from the work of modernist painters in the early days of the avant-garde movement. The subjective film shows an omniscient point of view that conveys only the plot and no emotional perspective [3]. This is similar to a third-person narrative.

The second one is pure cinema. This developed under the influence of Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory and Bertolt Brecht's distance theory. Pure Cinema reveals the structure and materiality of the medium [3]. It pays attention to the virtuosity of the film. In a pure film, the audience does not prove the film’s narrative structure.

The third one is surrealist film. This mode of filmmaking puts counter-cinema theory into practice by perverting the dominant cinematic language. This is the stage where the first two stages of the avant-garde, which usually lead to repressed irrational dreams and fantasies, collide [3]. Surrealist films do not simply retell dreams or stories but replicate their processes through illogical interruptions and disturbing imagery, uncensored by normal conscience or morality. Editing is an important device in surrealist films. Like dreams, many surreal films resist interpretation. As in real dreams, the characters in surreal films show a lack of will, even certain helplessness [4]. The cinematic theory that inspired many surrealist filmmakers explored the relationship between reality and naturalistic conventions, the viewer-screen relationship, editing styles, subjectivity, the psychoanalytical potential of a film, auteur cinema, and the semiotics of film [3]. Therefore, Avant-garde filmmakers attacked narrative understanding, subjectivity, and representation. They explored the effects of quick editing, disorienting shots that disrupt time and space, and discontinuity [3].

3. Surrealism

3.1. The establishment of simulation model

The surrealist practice embraces loss of control and complete submission to the dream state [4]. To achieve this effect, editing is decisive. In At Land, Deren uses match cuts to create strange cinematic effects. For example, at one point in the film, the female character pulls driftwood onto a conference room table. The unity of movement cinematically connects these two separate spaces [5]. In traditional narrative films, editing creates one coherent space for the audience. Moving from an exterior space to an interior one, for instance, depicts the world as seamless. However, in avant-garde cinema, the unity of movement connects multiple spaces but creates inconsistent and abstract ideas for the audience [5].

The second technique that avant-garde filmmakers use is the point of view (POV) [6]. In a traditional narrative, shots from a character's perspective align with the shots of what the character sees. Typically, shots of this kind are used to create a sense of logic by exposing a character's point of view to the audience [4]. In the avant-garde, viewpoint shots are often illogical and express a character's subjective thoughts. In Germaine Dulac's La Souriante Madame Bude, shots from M. Beudet's perspective are juxtaposed with imaginary shots [6]. A fantasy is created: a tennis champion is attacking her husband. This POV shot shows the character's state and his reaction to that condition.

The last technique avant-garde cinema uses is point-of-view shots that create abstract illustrations. At the end of At Land, Deren steals a chess piece from two women on a beach [4]. This is followed by a shot of Deren standing behind the women, looking in one direction. After this shot, we see Deren running with the chess piece. This final shot is from the women's point of view [4]. After this, the film shows Deren collecting rocks. This is followed by a shot of her running, which is taken from the point of view of Deren collecting rocks. Deren is then seen crouching on a rock formation. Another POV of Deren running follows this shot. This sequence of alternating shots of Deren and her point of view unites a single time and space while multiplying a single character. For example, the overlapping scenes of the protagonist in different surroundings create storylines that intersect with each other. This use of editing stands in contrast to a similar effect achieved in Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) where Deren uses a circular storyline to illustrate the crime scene [7].

4. Maya Deren

The techniques used in the films are not only significant due to the avant-garde film wave, but also the director's influence. For example, Jonas Mekas's film style and editing techniques differ from Maya Deren's [8-10]. The movements and motion control of the character's figure in Jonas Mekas's films are comedic and exaggerated. They impel the plot forward. On the contrary, movements in Deren's films take the form of simple gestures that express the mood the characters are in. Even though that is the case, they are still carefully designed aesthetically [4]. This is because Deren started her career as a dancer and choreographer. Her short film, Ritual in Transfigured Time, along with studies of body language and gestures pushed her further towards her career as a director [8]. It is not widely known that she was also a poet, writer, and photographer. Deren's writing remains relatively obscure in film theory, and her films are rarely shown outside of experimental or feminist film courses [9]. But the skills she developed through dance, study, choreography, and other art served as a base for her later success.

In her lifetime, Deren created seven short films, each significant. All had a large significance in culture and identity despite their neoteric techniques [11]. At Land followed after her most famous film, Meshes of the Afternoon. The main character in At Land interacts with elements of nature, including rocks, sand, plants, and water [11]. Each element triggers the plot and the character's inner emotions. Starting as a naive spectator of society, the central figure of the film struggles to understand society's underlying conventions. A shot of her crawling on the dining table signifies her inability to adapt to or absorb social life. A second illustration of the women's detachment occurs when she observes the two women playing chess [9]. She snatches the chess piece away, which represents her escape from the world. Deren was always intrigued by objects that had surrealist elements or potential. In this film, she chose chess as a central image [11]. The lost chess piece symbolizes her deviation into the distance along the liminal space of a timeline. It also symbolizes her regaining her independent identity. This aspect can be identified with the figure of the bride who is present in Ernst and Duchamp's works [8]. While the main character in Meshes is quite passive and gives up on his dreams, in At Land he is a powerful magical figure who can control any situation he finds himself in [12].

5. Symbolisms in “At land”

There is no continuity in the film's disjointed dream story, similar to her more well-known work ‘Meshes of the Afternoon. A woman walks up a flight of stairs inside a house, where she unexpectedly emerges from a window, wrapped in soft translucent curtains and caressed. After capturing her distorted reflection in a polished knife, she is strangely blown in different directions by the wind in a claustrophobic space, floating in the air, hanging on objects, and finally, on walls. Hanging in a crucified position. Deren poetically described the intertwining worlds as “a crack letting the light of another world gleam through.” [12]

Another symbol is the interior of a house that resembles the world where the main character is trapped. Here too there is a world outside of landscapes and coasts where she gains power and acts with security [13].

In the "human" world, she holds a cat in her arms and even begins to move like a cat [4]. Cats are traditionally associated with witchcraft, and the main character draws her power from the kingdom of animals and nature [14]. There are references to the Moon Tarot card, which carries the occult meaning of the journey of initiation through all stages of evolution [14]. This combination of images constructs the main character as an animal who submits only to nature.

As a feminist director, Deren not only presented feminist ideologies through the protagonist but also through the two women playing chess on the beach [14]. Though the chess game seems to be the leading symbolism, the protagonist cast a spell on them. This allows to let her steal back the lost chess pieces and run away. In the final image, she runs into infinity with her arms raised triumphantly above her head, a pose used in many cultures to signify a single, powerful goddess or priestess [15]. The two women, therefore, represent women in human society who are trapped in the game, unable to escape as the protagonist did [15].

6. Conclusions

This paper is conducted with research that started with strong feminist directors who expressed their ideologies through smartly conducted films, which draws attention to Maya Deren’s unique style of filmmaking, viewing her feminist ideologies through the lenses of famous works such as ‘Meshes of the afternoon, and ‘At land’. This leads to the discovery of Avant-guard filmmaking, along with the progressions of this era.

Maya Deren is a very influential and representative figure in avant-garde cinema. A profound feature of her is the aesthetic scenes that create a special connection between reality and surrealist symbolism. Her second work, At Land, reflects the idea of disconnected worlds and the transition from young girls to mature, strong, intelligent women. Deren uses concepts of time, space, and physical movement to emphasize the evolution of female authority, continuity, and success over the ever-changing and unreliable male character. This film, different from the popular action films of the time, hinted at the infinite possibilities of cinema and the ideology embedded within it. Despite the previous subject matters discussed in the paper, further research could be done on Maya Deren’s use of music and soundtracks, since they are the main media used to replace the space for dialogues. They illustrate emotions and the director’s views just as much as the shots themselves.

The entire era of Avant-gard films represents revolts against mainstream Hollywood films that focus on actions and catching people’s eyes. Therefore, it’s more than simply a revolution of films, it is a revolution of the cultures and ideologies of the public. Directors are no longer obligated to entertain and earn money, and viewers are no longer restricted to gender stereotypes, gender roles, and the oppression of women. It communicates the suffrage of women, pointing out the importance of feminism. This is most successfully shown in the films of Maya Deren, specifically ‘At Land’.

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