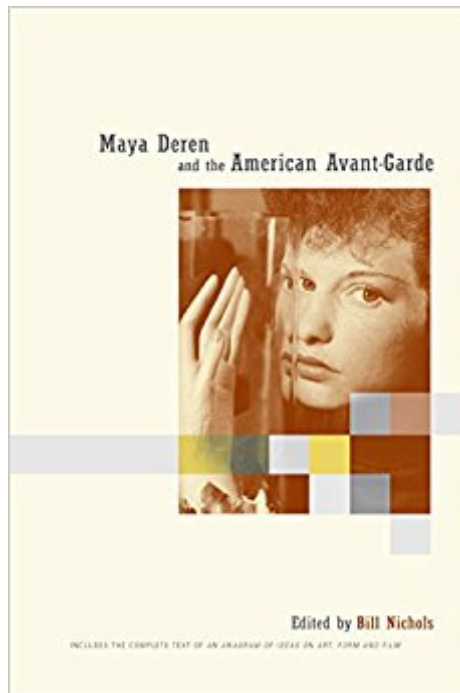




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# Maya Deren And The American Avant-Garde



## Synopsis

Regarded as one of the founders of the postwar American independent cinema, the legendary Maya Deren was a poet, photographer, ethnographer, filmmaker and impresario. Her efforts to promote an independent cinema have inspired filmmakers for over fifty years. *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) ranks among the most widely viewed of all avant-garde films. The eleven essays gathered here examine Maya Deren's writings, films, and legacy from a variety of intriguing perspectives. Some address her relative neglect during the rise of feminist film theory; all argue for her enduring significance. The essays cast light on her aesthetics and ethics, her exploration of film form and of other cultures, her role as (woman) artist and as film theorist. *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* also includes one of the most significant reflections on the nature of art and the responsibilities of the filmmaker ever written--Deren's influential but long out-of-print book, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, in its entirety. Among the topics covered in this volume are Deren's ties with the avant-garde of her day and its predecessors; her perspective on vodoun ritual, possession ceremonies, and social harmony; her work in relation to the modern dance tradition and its racial inflections; her thoughts, written in the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about science, including how form can embody moral principles; the complex issue of the "woman artist" in an avant-garde dominated by men; her famous dispute with Anaïs Nin; and an exploration of issues of identification and desire in her major films. As the first critical evaluation of the enduring significance of Maya Deren, this book clarifies the filmmaker's theoretical and cinematic achievements and conveys the passionate sense of moral purpose she felt about her art. It is a long-overdue tribute to one of the most important and least written about filmmakers in American cinema, an artist who formulated the terms and conditions of independent cinema that remain with us today.

## Book Information

Paperback: 333 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; *Deas on Art, Form*, a ed. edition (October 1, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520227328

ISBN-13: 978-0520227323

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.1 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #905,145 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #145 in [Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Mayan](#) #2939 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Movies > History & Criticism](#) #3094 in [Books > History > Americas > Native American](#)

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"Finally, after all these years, a book from a major American academic press about a major figure from the American film avant-garde! Leave it to Bill Nichols, whose books on documentary have been a major service to the field of independent cinema, to offer us not only a new set of readings of Maya Deren by Annette Michelson, Maureen Turim, Lucy Fischer, Jane Brakhage Wodening, and others but also to retrieve from obscurity Deren's own *Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*. It's about time!"  
—Scott MacDonald, author of *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place*  
"If you thought Maya Deren equals *Meshes of the Afternoon*, this volume demands you junk that reductionist view to join a more expansive, significant exhumation of her legacy deploying an exhilarating multiplicity of methodologies and concerns. This wide-ranging, virtuoso volume torques the myths and legends clouding Deren to restore her as a major force in oppositional American film culture, on par with Vertov, Eisenstein, and Godard."  
—Patricia R. Zimmerman, author of *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*

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I needed the book for research for a school paper. It was very informative. Helped me earn a good grade.

Amazingly, this is the first major collection of critical essays on Deren's work in years. It is not easy-going. I would never assign it in an intro class or for an overview. Watch Martina Kudlacek's brilliant and engaging documentary "The Mirror of Maya Deren" from 2003 (get it on netflix) for a great simple overview of her career. Then look at the first two chapters of P. Adams Sitney's "Visionary Film" (multiple editions - get the cheapest used) for a more sophisticated reading of her major works. If you're still wanting to go further after that, this book offers a range of dense analyses of different aspects of her career, from ethnographic perspectives to her problematic relation with Feminism, to her idea of avant-garde vs. hollywood film, and so forth.

Unless you really need to impress a hippie boomer professor with Avant-Garde verbal overkill I would urge you to just take Deren's films at face value and make your own, rather than wading through her dreary overwrought prose.

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