

The Most Elementary Movements in the World

In 1953, Cinema 16 held a symposium on "Poetry and the Film." The speakers were playwright Arthur Miller, film critic Parker Tyler, poet Dylan Thomas and filmmaker Maya Deren; filmmaker-poet Willard Maas acted as chairman. Asked to speak on "the basic aesthetic principles of the poetic film," each put forth theories, the most astounding of which was Deren's concept of "'vertical' investigation." Disavowing qualities like assonance or rhythm as the defining characteristics of poetry, Deren instead focused on poetry's approach to experience – more precisely, she stated the "distinction of poetry is its construction." That structure is not horizontal (as in drama, which is concerned with development). Rather it is a

'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned in a sense not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means.

Panelist responses to Deren's stimulating ideas are laden with patronizing, if not belittling, confusion; whether these postures were motivated by sexism or disregard (or contempt) for the avant-garde, Deren's responses are quick, elegant and straightforward:

DEREN: I wish mainly to say that I'm a little bit flabbergasted at the fact that people who have handled words with such dexterity as Mr. Thomas and Mr. Miller, and Mr. Tyler, should have difficulty with such a simple idea as the "vertical" and the "horizontal."

THOMAS: Here we go up and down again.

DEREN: These seem to me the most elementary movements in the world and really quite fundamental.

Deren's expressive phrase names this program, a selection of 16mm films chosen because they each seem to inhabit the spirit of poetry: of vertical investigation and a poem's creation of "visible or auditory forms for something which is invisible, which is the feeling, or the emotion, or the metaphysical content of the movement" (Deren). The program begins with Abigail Child's "collaged poetics," whose soundtrack includes fragments of a conversation with poet Hannah Weiner; it continues with a rare film by poet Catherine Webster, whose writing was described by poet Jane Miller as having "a structure, syntax, and diction quite entirely her own. Her poetic line is primitive postmodern; that is, it accrues unabashed and unselfconsciously, then examines itself, jump-cuts, and trails off as ever-forward momentum or, to use her phrase, 'loose blooming.'" And on, with films from a range of artists working across nearly five decades, each with a distinct voice and style that I've combined here in both an attempt to consider them in the context of Deren's concept, and also with an eye toward their varying ways with montage. If structure is primary then editing is its essential technique – whether lyrical or dialectic, the shot-to-shot and image-to-sound combinations in each of these films construct meaning and experience in singular ways.

Relatedly, another inspiration for the selection and organization of these shorts is montage, per Amos Vogel and Cinema 16's provocative programming approach. A variety of short films can be

structured as if each were a meta-film ... in which one form of film collided with another in such a way as to create maximum thought – and perhaps action – on the part of the audience, not simply about individual films but about film itself and about the social and political implications of its conventional (or unconventional) uses.

– Scott MacDonald, *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society*

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Prefaces

Abigail Child (1981, 10 min.)

Crofter's Red Coat

Catherine Webster (2000, 6 min.)

A Mystery Inside of a Fact

Jonathan Schwartz (2016, 17 min.)

Starlight

Robert Fulton (1970, 5 min.)

The Forest is Offended

Stephanie Barber (2017, 2 min.)

Conscious

Julie Murray (1993, 10 min., silent)

Four Diamonds

Ute Aurand (2016, 5 min.)

Glass

Leighton Pierce (1998, 7 min.)

Rear Window

Ernie Gehr (1991, 10 min., silent)

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