

Sydney L. Auriemma

Professor Blazer

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The meaning behind *Meshes of the Afternoon*

There is a mystical and time-bending reality that comes with watching Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*. The viewer watches on as the main character of the film, a determined and curious woman, goes round her home in circles. The woman follows around a beautiful flower, and a tall dark figure with the face of a mirror, and never ceases to question why she is chasing in the first place. After all, the woman could potentially learn more about the situation by pausing and questioning her actions. The meaning behind *Meshes of the Afternoon* is that life can become repetitive if you do not break the cycle. In other words, change and growth is essential to living a fulfilling life. When it comes to interpreting this masterpiece, there are 3 main routes one could take. The first being psychological, which defines the film as the main character looking for her inner self. The second, being about gender roles seen inside of a broken marriage. The third and last being about death, more specifically killing parts of yourself that do not serve you any longer.

The Director of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya Deren, is a highly revered filmmaker who made quite the impact on early avant-garde experimental film in America. She is considered by many as a pioneer of this genre. In the scholarly textbook used in within this course, Kristin

Thompson describes her success by explaining that, “She achieved recognition with two films made in wartime, won a prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and became the emblematic figure of the American avant-garde...lecturing mesmerically, she inspired an intellectual public with a new respect for artistic film” (Thompson 433). It is understood that within her work, specifically within *Meshes*, she wanted her audience to think. The double-meaning and repetitive nature of the film is purposefully done that way. However, it does become a challenge when trying to decipher the meaning and her motivation behind creating it. As author Sarah Keller states in her article about Deren’s filmmaking style, “The film’s very loose narrative sense is steeped in the aggravations of dreamscapes, where lingering attention to odd details and repetition delay forward movement” (Keller 81). There is something to be said about Deren’s intention behind the repetitious loops, which still can be correlated to the three meanings introduced before. Additionally, Deren packs meaning into the film, not just with the style of the cinematography, but how she incorporates loaded symbolic items throughout the film. For example, the knife could represent violence, death, or sharpness all at once. Since this is just one of many examples, more explanation is necessary to accurately discuss every meaning presented within *Meshes*.

The first route of meaning that will be discussed is the psychological meaning behind *Meshes of the Afternoon*. In this context, the psychological meaning is expressed in the film as a switch between the hero's conscious and unconscious mind. While interpreting *Meshes* through this lens, the film in and of itself is meant to portray the inner mind of the main character. Meaning that the repetitive loop she walks through can be seen as some type of disassociation or psychosis which removes her from reality. In this instance, the dark hooded figure is perceived as the hero’s innermost self. The face of the figure is a mirror, which is a clear example of symbolism, alluding toward the hero desperately chasing after her most authentic identity.

However, knowing she is never able to catch up with the mysterious being, this can be understood as her never being able to see herself within. Additionally, the other symbolic items used throughout the film changed while viewing it through a psychological lens. The flower, which appears repeatedly, is seen as a symbol of the main character's inner femininity, representing the fragile beauty that can be fleeting at times. This is why the dark figure, seen as her inner self, holding the flower, and moving faster than the hero can keep up with is representative of her being disconnected from herself, including her femininity. Next, the knife is interpreted through this perspective as an inner violence or hatred toward herself. This could explain why the character eventually dies from suicide at the film's end. Finally, the key, which is pulled from the main character's mouth a few times throughout the film, is quite the wild card. It could be seen as an answer, or a solution to an issue. However, the character never finds the lock, or the place to which the key leads. This can be interpreted as the woman approaching a dead end, and though she has the key, she is unaware of where it goes. All these symbolic meanings combine to form the plot line of which this woman is mentally unstable, is desperate to access her inner self, but alas is unable to. That explains additionally that due to the circumstances of which she feels stuck in a repeating loop in desperate search of her true identity, she must remove herself from the equation to end the chaos. Thus, resulting in her own suicide.

Meshes of the Afternoon can additionally be interpreted as portraying gender roles in society, at the time. This is important historically, given that this film was put out in 1943. This film was extremely progressive and feminist for its time. As Theresa Geller states in her article written on *Meshes*, as it pertains to personal cinema and avant-garde, "As a film that openly engages with the ontology of sexual difference, *Meshes* deals with the unconscious and pre-symbolic traumas

that trouble the unified subject” (Geller 142). In other words, the use of gender in *Meshes* was an intentional, and a considerably integral part of Deren’s vision. In this film’s perspective, the symbolic items used are seen as sexually charged and representative of patriarchy. The flower in this circumstance is seen as a symbol of the main character’s feminine virginity, understanding that it is so frail and easily ripped away in a sexist society. This is meaningful since the dark hooded figure takes this flower and stays ahead of the main character’s reach the entire film. The dark hooded figure in this interpretation is seen as a physical manifestation of patriarchy. Adding slightly more of a twist into the meaning, the mirror upon the figure’s face can be understood as the male gaze, since a mirror can only reflect directly back onto the woman. Furthermore, the figure can represent the main character’s husband, given that the couple is part of an unloving marriage. Due to the lack of love between them, this could explain why each day seems to loop over and over. The key in this instance could be seen as some type of sexual innuendo given the idea of a lock and key belonging together. However, the knife could be interpreted either as hatred the woman has inside the marriage, or the violence that patriarchy displays toward women. To provide more context toward the meaning of these symbols, Geller comments on the items in terms of gender by stating;

The paper flower, the signifier of sexual difference, is transformed into a knife through jump cut editing, a knife the woman wields to tear into both the male spectator and the filmic space itself. By putting the knife through the face of the viewing subject, Hammid, the phallic male, Deren performatively rejects the traumatic history of sexual difference. It is the Imaginary, referenced in the cut to the ocean, a symbol of boundarylessness, which lies behind the Symbolic order and its violence to Woman. (Geller 147)

To be clear, it is not certain that the husband in this narrative is the villain, but the wrongdoing being called out is that of society, for continuing to uphold gender roles. Altogether,

it can be understood that the unhinged and circular nature of the film can be perceived as a woman's struggle through an unloving marriage, while also confronting gender roles.

Lastly, the third way in which *Meshes of the Afternoon* can be interpreted is a portrayal of death. Considering that the film ends in the main character's suicide, the death related interpretation could be relevant toward themes of doom and despair. The dark hooded figure in this instance is seen as death itself, beckoning the woman while simultaneously staying just out of her reach. This could be representative of the presence death has in everyone's lives, considering its eerie and lingering movement throughout the film. The woman, having seen the dark figure take the flower, knew there was trouble since the flower in this case represents life. The flower represents life because it comes directly from Earth, the source of all life. It is noteworthy that each character in the film interacts with it at some point, exemplifying how life ties itself to all things. Death is metaphorically holding the main character's life in its hands, and it is untouchable due to its finality. Therefore, the repetitive and uncomfortable scenes that follow portray the main character's denial toward her own demise. Though it is unfortunate, she is ultimately meant to die on that day, and the audience is presented the ambiguous process between life and death. As author David Rhodes claims while discussing the multiple interpretations of *Meshes*, "the inescapable pull of its spiraling structure and its eerie play with the border between reality and artifice" (Rhodes 139). The dream-like and loose qualities of *Meshes of the Afternoon* tie closely with what could be psychosis that the woman must be experiencing while facing her demise. Coupled with the symbolism of the flower, the knife ties into this version of the story by representing a means of death. As well as the knife, at the end you can see many shards of a

mirror broken surrounding the woman, which can also show a means of bad luck. This shows a juxtaposition between the mirror upon the figure of Death's

face, and the broken pieces surround the woman's dead body. The key is of unknown purpose within this interpretation, it could be representative of an idea the woman has, grim enough, to end her own life. The husband does not have much of a role in this story either, given his absence until the end.

Overall, this film is a work of art. The pure genius that is Maya Deren is exactly the reason *Meshes* can be interpreted in so many diverse ways. She created it intending to urge her audience to think. To quote Sarah Keller, who researched and authored an article about the purpose and motivation behind Deren's work;

To increase the sense of vexation, of aborted progress, the sequence repeats three times during the course of the film, privileging certainty and obstruction over the clean lines of a standard dramedy arc. Although the scene contains the residue of a narrative development, it unfolds in a manner that eschews closure to embrace an untidy, often anxious openness. Deren's work more generally invokes a "frustration of climaxes," as the epigraph of this essay proposes, to build a "tension plateau"—a circuit that builds meaning through resonances rather than resolutions.

(Keller 77)

To reiterate, the tension Deren builds within *Meshes* is purposeful, and coincidentally builds more to the meaning and underlying philosophy of the film. To add more context behind the film and Maya Deren as a director, it is important to discuss her individual style and purpose behind creating films. Given that Deren is such a well renowned director, it is surprising that she has culminated only 75 minutes of film total. Sarah Keller goes in-depth within her article about the

beauty behind Deren's use of inconclusion. She goes as far as to claim that "...incompletion is one of the guiding stars of her aesthetic" (Keller 76). Furthermore, the goal behind *Meshes* was said to, "mobilize some key issues, including her exploration of subjectivity and her manipulation of images in the name of creating new realities through cinema, but each does so with different implications for her practical and theoretical work as a whole. Embracing incompletion. Deren constructs open-ended film texts" (Keller 78). The intentional creation and rule-bending behind Deren's film is precisely why the meaning of *Meshes of the Afternoon* can be interpreted in so many ways.

Can life become repetitive if one does not work on themselves or make a change? *Meshes of the Afternoon* responds to this question with a definite affirmative. The main character's continued lackadaisical attitude and helpless approach can be considered as leading her to her own death. Though the finale is unfortunate, reflecting on how the story could have ended differently is an interesting endeavor. Imagine, if the woman had caught up to the figure, or attempted speaking to her other selves, or had done anything differently than all the repeated times before, the story could have ended with her alive. Regardless, the central meaning of the *Meshes* can apply to the three interpretations discussed, no matter which perspective is taken. In the psychological-based interpretation, the thesis can be read as aiming toward self-growth in terms of mental health. Since the hooded figure represents the woman's innermost self, she could have saved her own identity and well-being if she had taken a moment to reflect and tune in with her own needs and desires. The same goes for the second angle taken, which pertains to gender roles and the perspective of a woman within a loveless marriage. If the woman could have stopped for a moment and considered leaving her husband, or even rethinking her place within the patriarchy, she might have found an inner peace and confidence. Afterall, the patriarchy only has the power

that you submit to it. The act of releasing attention toward the male-gaze and society's expectation of gender roles can be the most freeing realization. In the act of breaking the cycle, the main character could have benefited immensely through means of change. Lastly, the interpretation taken upon the film through the lens of death is related to the thesis as well. Furthermore, if one were to constantly live in fear of their own demise, the days would likely begin to run together and last forever. That hazy and fearful position is certainly portrayed within Deren's film. Once again if the woman had taken time to process those feelings and face the ultimate fear of her death, she ironically might have been able to avoid the death she inevitably suffers, suicide. Concisely, change and self-reflection could have saved her life, which is why Deren created the film in this way. *Meshes* is a tragedy that each audience member could understand to an extent. Society is no stranger to feeling trapped within a situation and solely seeing death as an escape. That of which is exactly why this film was created, to persuade those who may relate to main character of the film to take a moment and question why their lives may be so repetitive, and to consider how they could potentially break out of such a vicious cycle. Life is a beautiful and precious thing, though sometimes it can feel exactly as how Deren paints it within *Meshes*. Moreover, working on oneself to grow and become better is the ultimate prevention from a repetitive and hellish life.

To conclude, the most accurate perspective in deeper meaning and accordance with the film's meaning is that of death's lens. It seems the most fitting since the hooded figure itself is quite eerie, and the woman is equally intrigued and scared by its presence. The same view is comparative to humanity since no one can fully understand and grasp death in its entirety. The lines between truth, fear, and destiny become entirely blurred when death enters the conversation, and Deren recreates that same capacity within *Meshes* for this taboo and universal

occurrence. The only drawback to this conclusion could be the argument of importance within the film having to do with gender. There is no doubt that this is a feminist and ground-breaking piece of its time, and it would be a valid reason to deny the validity of death's interpretation.

Geller strongly agrees that the meaning of *Meshes* is all about gender, saying that "How this piece deals with the figure of Deren reveals the ambivalence feminist film historians have in constructing the history of women in film, and specifically the influence women had behind the camera on the ontological questions raised concerning the image of Woman in front of the camera. Mulvey openly claims that "Maya Deren's pioneering work in the United States during the 1940s had earned her the title 'Mother of the Avant-garde,'" and that both Deren and Germaine Geller, Dulac's "intermingling of cinematic movement and interior consciousness interested feminists and avant-gardists alike" (Dulac 202, Geller 153-154). Though the perspective of feminism and its quarrelling with gender roles is important, the death lens is still a sound argument applicable to this conclusion because the main character's experience within the film, in terms of death, can be relatable and understood by many. Deren sends a message within *Meshes of the Afternoon* that can be accepted as an understanding that you may feel like death is the only escape, but your story does not have to end as the main character's does. The mirror upon the hooded figure's face is an encouragement to face one's own fear of dying head on, quite literally. As author David Rhodes states while providing a supportive description of the film; "Maya Deren is already at the heart of the film, embodying a somber young woman who keeps encountering her own doubles in a series of journeys with an unsettling dark conclusion. As Deren wrote about the film, "you have to come a long way—from the very beginning of time—to kill yourself" (Deren 86, Rhodes 140). Deren knew exactly what message she wanted to send through *Meshes* and made a big socialist statement in doing so. Though this film was

created 80 years ago, it is impeccable that so much theory and philosophy can be drawn around it and back to the present time. That historical context exemplifies that death has always been a difficult idea absorb and accept into one's life, without causing a looping reality of frantic and anxious energy. To reiterate, it is important to remember that self-reflection and making changes in one's life can actively prevent death. Thus, life can become repetitive if you do not break the cycle. In other words, change and growth is essential to living a fulfilling life. Death is the one of the harshest and most confronting phenomena for humanity to face, and Daren displays the utmost importance there is to express ideas and realities around it to enable human progression and connection. The life of every person on this planet is precious, and it is important to produce film and other types of media that communicate that.