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"Wonderful Things": Surrealism and Egypt

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"Death by Amnesia": Maya Deren, Egypt, and "Racial" Memory

Terri Geis

In her work of the 1940s, American filmmaker Maya Deren undertook a profound exploration of the connections between memory, identity, and ancestry. This work drew on such varied phenomena as the psychological condition of amnesia, the philosophy and archaeology of ancient Egypt, and the concept of "racial memory" ("Prospectus" 294–295). A central focus of Deren's pieces was the male body, especially the black male body. This body of work existed within a nexus of artistic projects in New York that were strongly informed by dialogues on Black American and African-Caribbean cultures and identity, including the Broadway musical *Cabin in the Sky* (1940) and André Breton's text *Arcanum 17* (1944).

For Deren, as for Breton and for Katherine Dunham (the choreographer of *Cabin in the Sky*), Egyptian myths – especially that of the god Osiris – served to express the terrors of loss of identity, of the broken, scattered body, and of death, but also the hope of the reconstructed, reborn body and the memory (or fantasy) of an ancestral legacy as a means of liberation. As I will show in this essay, the fragmented nature of Deren's artistic process resulted in explorations that are arguably more ambiguous than those of Dunham or Breton. Deren's interest in Egypt reflects both the general intellectual climate in which she lived and her specific fascination with Egyptian mythology and artifacts, but her resulting works do not neatly fit into straightforward theoretical frameworks. Like the anagrammatic structure through which Deren arranged her artistic manifesto, they are outside of the "linear logic to which we are accustomed" (*An Anagram of Ideas* 555).

The story of the death of Osiris is most comprehensively recounted in the Greek writer Plutarch's text from the second century AD, *De Iside et Osiride (Of Isis and Osiris)*. Osiris, in deadly rivalry with his brother Seth, is tricked into climbing into a box, which Seth throws into the Nile. Osiris's wife/sister Isis sets out in search of the box (now Osiris' coffin) in order to give him a proper burial, and after finding it in a tree, hides it in a swamp. However, Seth finds the box and chops his brother's dead body into fourteen pieces, which he scatters throughout Egypt. The devoted Isis once again sets out to find the pieces of Osiris, which she reassembles, and Osiris becomes ruler of the

underworld. Jan Assman, in his examination of the myth and its significance within Egyptian belief, asserts: "The image of death as dismemberment is derived (a) from the Egyptian image of the body as a multiplicity of members joined through the connective medium of blood into a living unity and (b) from the counterimage of redemption from death through collecting, joining, uniting, and knotting together" (26).

Unsurprisingly, the story of Osiris – with his body dismembered and scattered throughout Egypt – has often appeared within the work of diaspora poets and artists, including those of the Négritude movement in the 1940s. Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet and close colleague of Breton, alludes to the myth in his 1949 poem, "Dit d'errance (Lay of Errantry)" published in his series *Corps perdu (Lost Body)*:

> Long ago oh torn one
> In bits and pieces She
> gathered her dismembered one
> and the fourteen pieces
> took their triumphant place in the rays of the evening (257)

As Janis Pallister has noted, Césaire's *Corps perdu* "refers not only to the scattered and mutilated race but also and more specifically to the poet's body – Osiris-like, orphic" (34).

Deren, part of another diaspora community, was born on 29 April 1917 in Kiev, and immigrated to New York with her family at the age of six due to the threat of the pogroms against Jews. The myth of Osiris appears in her 1942 poem, "Death by Amnesia." In this work, the mutilated body of Osiris is recast from the perspective of a contemporary psychological condition. The poem was based upon two documents that were later found together in Deren's files: notes she had taken on ancient Egyptian beliefs about the different physical and spiritual aspects of human beings, and an undated newspaper clipping about an amnesia patient found wandering the streets of New York City.

Deren's notes (taken from an unknown source) outline the many physical and spiritual aspects of man:

> Man, according to Egyptian belief, was a being composed of many parts. He possessed a corruptible and a spiritual body; a heart, the centre of will and feelings (Ab); a soul (Ba) which was capable of a second death; a spirit or 'intelligence', something 'shining palpable and immortal' (Khu); a shadow (Khaibit); a double (Ka); and Sekhem, interpreted as 'vital power.' (Clark, Hodson, and Neiman, 1988 66)

The notes conclude with the observation that man "also had a name," and that "the obliteration of a name meant annihilation for its owner" (66). This final observation provides the thematic link to the seemingly unconnected

newspaper clipping that reports on a "mild mannered young man" who approached a police officer on the street to ask him, "'Can you tell me who I am?'" (66). The report gives the usual descriptive details for a missing person, including approximate age (26), height (5 feet ten inches), weight (160 pounds) and clothing (tweeds and a tie). The newspaper also notes that the man was taken to the missing persons bureau, but detectives had not yet determined his identity.

Deren's poem "Death by Amnesia" superimposes the ancient Egyptian view of man onto this contemporary incident:

> Accompanied by *Ka*, his double,
> and followed by *Khaibit* (shadow)
> to whom he had long grown accustomed,
> he walked down Broadway in a brown tweed coat,
> brown slacks, white shirt, and figured tie. (65)

Deren envisions the amnesia victim as having bare feet covered in mud, "Yes, of the Nile – *that* he remembered" (65). She describes the reactions of the different aspects of the man to his condition:

> The face of *Ab,* the heart within him, reddened.
> Being but twenty-six, the soul, *Ba,* slumbered,
> having a second death to count on, was unworried.
> The five-feet-ten of flesh within them carried
> the deathless *Khu*, the shining spirit;
> while *Sekhem*, vital power, pervaded
> all hundred sixty pounds upon the pavement. (65–66)

When the man's *Kaibit* and *Ka* suddenly disappear, with a "last breath," he cries, "'WHO AM I?'" leaving the poem's narrator to wonder:

> What is the word, the name which held together
> Ab, Ba and Ka, Khaibit, Khu and Sekhem
> Exploded to the wind like ashes? (66)

While the poem is slightly awkward in its construction, the juxtapositions are intriguing. Ancient beliefs become a means of examining psychological stress and alienation within contemporary urban society. Memory and identity are terrifyingly "exploded to the wind like ashes," a scattering that recalls the dismembered body of Osiris (66). As in the ancient Egyptian concept that Deren's notes emphasize, the modern man in New York has been annihilated by the loss of his name. Instead of the devoted Isis, it is the police department that must attempt to put the pieces of the man back together.

Deren had personal experience with the significance of name changes; her family officially shortened their name from Derenkowsky to Deren once they became naturalized citizens of the United States in 1928. When "Death

by Amnesia" was written in 1942, Deren may have been dwelling heavily upon the importance of a name to identity. In the following year – that in which she created her first film – she would change her own name from Eleanora to Maya. Deren's poem may partially allude to the Jewish exodus from Egypt as well as contemporary cycles of violent persecution, genocide, and exile including the pogroms and the Holocaust.

The symbols of ancient Egyptian culture as an organizing structure from which to reflect upon ancestry and contemporary identity also marked another project Deren had been involved with prior to writing "Death by Amnesia." From late 1940 to early 1942, Deren worked as a secretary for Katherine Dunham, a prominent African American dancer, choreographer and anthropologist. Dunham's choreography, described by Franklin Rosemont as prefiguring the Négritude movement, often utilized the fieldwork that she had carried out in Haiti and Martinique in the 1930s (25). As Catrina Neiman has noted, Dunham "provided a considerable example for the synthesis Deren herself would seek in art and anthropology," although this was an influence that Deren never publicly mentioned (5).

During the first half of 1941, Deren toured the United States with Dunham and her company as they performed *Cabin in the Sky*. The musical, which had premiered on Broadway the year prior, was a George Balanchine production, with a close collaboration between Dunham and Balanchine on concept and choreography. With an all-black cast, *Cabin in the Sky* draws upon the story of Faust: the lead character, Little Joe, is murdered due to gambling debts but given six months to redeem himself and possibly enter heaven. Dunham appeared in the musical as the sultry temptress Georgia Brown. As Dunham's assistant, Deren was often charged with organizing accommodation for Dunham and her troupe. The tour would have provided Deren with first-hand experiences of the injustices and indignities of racial segregation, as "a favorable reception on stage and a negative welcome in hotels were nearly the norm for 'negroes' travelling across America" (Clark, Hodson and Neiman "Secretary to Katherine Dunham" 421).

The second act of *Cabin in the Sky* included a musical number called "In My Old Virginia Home on the River Nile." A reverie on ancestry, the song portrays a fantasy of escape from oppressive conditions, opening, "My people are no ordinary people, I'll have you understand. My people was extraordinary people from Egypt land." Envisioning a return to a paradise in an Egyptian landscape, an "ancestral home," the song calls out the major landmarks of ancient Egypt: "…our kids will have pyramids to climb… You will be just as beautiful as Cleo-patra … And when I get back that old Sphinx is gonna smile." Whimsical in tone, the singer declares, "Stead of mammies, we'll hear mummies softly hum… You will meet my granpappy, Ole king Tut'n-Kahmen." The song ends on a strong note of pride, "And a brown skin gal like you is the proper style, in my old Virginia home upon the Nile" (Latouche).

While the song contains a high element of kitsch, it can also be argued that this Broadway musical number bears the influence of the Harlem Renaissance. The lyrics specifically call to mind Langston Hughes' earlier poem from 1921, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which profoundly reflects upon the enforced diaspora of enslaved Africans:

> I've known rivers:
> I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
> Flow of human blood in human veins
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers (4)

The rivers include those of Egypt and the American South:

> I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
> I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
> went down to New Orleans (4)

Dunham was not responsible for the lyrics of "In My Old Virginia Home on the River Nile" (they were written by John Latouche). However, in interviews conducted by Constance Valis Hill in 1999 and 2000, the choreographer described her contribution to the song's concepts, as well as its intentions from the perspective of race:

> I think that, in trying to escape some of the racism that we were bound to feel in appearing in material that was audacious and new, I was looking for ways that would take us out of the stereotype of "My Old Virginia Home." [In all my] performances on Broadway, [in] everything [I did], I would draw shamelessly from my anthropological background. (Valis Hill 240)

Dunham reflected that, "I think that [the song] preceded our Afro-American attitudes of today … It's always been there, but I think that it was a little timid about bringing itself out until we did it" (Valis Hill 241). *Cabin in the Sky* also included an Egyptian-themed ballet within which Dunham wore a headdress modeled upon the famous bust of Nefertiti in the collection of the Egyptian Museum of Berlin. Judging from photographs of the ballet, it appears that Dunham's choreography involved stylized movements resembling those in ancient Egyptian painting.

Examined together, "Death by Amnesia" and "In My Old Virginia Home on the River Nile" function as image and counterimage, much like the ancient Egyptian beliefs concerning death and the body described above by Assman. Deren's "Death by Amnesia" uses Egyptian concepts to express modern alienation and fragmentation of identity ("the body as a multiplicity of members"). In counterimage, "In My Old Virginia Home on the River Nile" celebrates Egypt as a symbol of power, a means of overcoming oppression by asserting/returning to roots in one of the ancient world's most advanced and

respected cultures ("collecting, joining, uniting, and knotting together"). The River Nile within *Cabin in the Sky* serves as a means of symbolic transportation to one's ancestral source. In contrast, within Deren's poem it appears only as patches of mud on feet, traces of an unclear past.

Deren's poem and the *Cabin in the Sky* production also hold intriguing connections with a film project she carried out a few years later, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945). For this short piece, Deren collaborated with the African-American dancer Talley Beatty, filming sequences of the dancer in different interiors and natural landscapes that were then edited together to give the appearance of a seamless performance. In a piece for *Dance* Magazine, Deren outlined her goals for the project: "I intend this film mainly as a sample of film-dance – that is, a dance so related to camera and cutting that it cannot be "performed" as a unit anywhere but in this particular film" ("Choreography for the Camera" 266).

Deren had met Beatty through her work with Dunham; he began to study with Dunham at the age of fourteen and danced in many of her productions, including *Cabin the Sky*. Dunham specifically mentioned Beatty in her later musings on the significance of the song "In My Old Virginia Home on the River Nile," recalling that, "Talley Beatty, because of his structure, his beautiful, fine looks, practically Egyptian, fell into the River Nile feeling" (Valis Hill 240). In an interesting parallel, Deren chose to film an important scene for *A Study in Choreography for Camera* in the Egyptian Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The camera captures Beatty dancing across the long court filled with sculptures, followed by a close-up of his head and torso, turning in seemingly endless pirouettes in front of a stone sculpture of a multi-headed Buddhist deity. As Deren explained, while Beatty repeatedly turned, the camera speed was first set at "extreme slow motion" and gradually changed to "extreme acceleration," creating a movement that "begins with a dream-like quality and ends up with the blurring of a machine part" ("Choreography for Camera" 266). As Beatty's turns increase in speed, his face begins to appear as part of the stone sculpture, or alternatively, as the sculpture coming to life.

Despite the shared references to Egypt in connection with Beatty Deren sought to clearly differentiate her work from Dunham's, as suggested by a letter she wrote to the choreographer asking her not to use stills from *A Study in Choreography for Camera* as promotional materials for her dance troupe ("Letter to Katherine Dunham" 282–283). Furthermore, on the same day, Deren wrote a letter to Beatty in which she commented, "I thought it important that this was one of the rare cases when a Negro was presented, not because he was a Negro, but purely and simply because he was an artist" ("Letter to Talley Beatty" 281). In her discussions and writings on the film and the use of the Metropolitan's Egyptian Hall, Deren emphasized that the choice was due to technical needs, noting the desirable natural light within

the expansive space. While Deren filmed Beatty in the Egyptian Hall, her choice to focus on a Buddhist sculpture subverted any direct notion of Beatty as encountering ancestry through the Egyptian past. Deren never mentioned any symbolic or cultural significance of the location or the featured sculpture, although the latter appears in her detailed shooting diagrams so was clearly not a random inclusion.

However, it is likely that the Egyptian Hall and its artifacts indeed served as a way of advancing Deren's themes through symbolic resonance. Deren's notes and projects from the first half of the 1940s regularly demonstrate her intention of utilizing art objects and displays in museum and gallery installations as a means of elaborating the concepts in her films. For example, in Deren's unfinished film *Witch's Cradle* (1943) she sought to depict an encounter of a young woman (Anne Matta Clark) with surrealist sculptures and paintings in Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. Deren later noted that, "This film […] treated the paintings and the works of art so much as realities, as alive and immediate as the personages who appear in the film" (Clark, Hodson, and Neiman 1988 151).

The sculpture featured in *A Study in Choreography for Camera* represents the Esoteric Buddhist god Hevajra, who is often depicted with sixteen arms and eight heads, in the act of dancing. The sculpture, which is a fragment and likely unfinished, is from the ancient Cambodian site of Angkor Thom. It is thought to be from the site's East Gate, known as the Gate of the Dead, where the sculpture's "mutilated" lower half may survive ("Bust of Hevajra"). Deren would have appreciated the sculpture's connection both with dance and ancient rituals of death, as well as its seemingly contradictory qualities as a fragment that nevertheless contains an overabundance of heads. The combination of the Egyptian Hall and the incomplete, multi-faced figure calls to mind to the fractured identity previously explored by Deren in "Death by Amnesia." *A Study in Choreography for Camera* creates a complex web of associations in which unity and memory of ancestry is once again thwarted.

In New York in the mid-1940s, concepts of the fragmented body and the reunified body also permeated the work of André Breton, as seen in his text *Arcanum 17* (written over a three-month period in the summer and fall of 1944). In April of 1945 – the same month that Deren began to shoot *A Study in Choreography for Camera* – she photographed Breton and Marcel Duchamp in front of the Gotham Book Mart window display, "Lazy Hardware," which Duchamp created for the promotion of *Arcanum 17*. One of Deren's photographs captures the window reflections of Breton and Duchamp, framed to appear on either side of the display's central component: a headless female mannequin with a faucet attached to her thigh. Alongside the sexual connotations of this mannequin's phallic attachment, Duchamp may have been humorously alluding to the central figure of Breton's text. *Arcanum 17* refers to the Major Arcana of the tarot; number seventeen is the morning star, which is depicted as a young goddess pouring water out of two urns.

In 1944, Breton was exiled in New York, witnessing the violence of War World II from afar, and newly involved with Elisa Bindhoff, whose young daughter had recently died. *Arcanum 17* reflects upon destruction, displacement, and grief from both political and personal perspectives. Within the text, the tarot's morning star goddess – a symbol of hope – assumes many forms, including the water sprite Melusine and the Egyptian goddess Isis. Breton's use of Egyptian myth in *Arcanum 17* resulted from his increasing interest in occult texts, including the work of the nineteenth-century French writer and magician Eliphas Lévi, which asserted Egyptian origins for the tarot. Breton's documents related to *Arcanum 17* include notes on the writing of Antoine de Court Gébelin, which directly linked the seventeenth tarot card to Isis.[1]

The myth of Osiris and Isis served for Breton as a means of examining the cycles of despair and renewal that accompany loss:

> Are we saying that nothing is ever found again? but that depressing certainty quickly summons another that compensates for it, more than that, it can reconcile the mind to the former, and that second certainty is that nothing is ever lost. The papyrus launch carries the goddess all over the seas. But, do what she will, the adored body of he who was her brother and spouse will no longer flash before her eyes with its sovereign poise. She is condemned to reassemble the fourteen scattered pieces of that body that was the seat of infinite beauty and wisdom… (113–14)

Breton also envisions himself as a witness to the rites of the ancient mystery cult to Isis and its symbolic reconstruction of Osiris: "Trembling, I'm witness to the sublime artifice possessing the means to carry out the enigmatic, inviolable law: what has been disassembled into fourteen pieces must be reassembled fourteen times" (114). The myth allows Breton to reflect with hope, "It's there, at that poignant moment when the weight of endured suffering seems about to engulf everything, that very excessiveness of the test causes *a change from a negative to a positive value"* (119).

Seeking to use this knowledge to console the bereaved Elisa, Breton notes that at times the only means is through the incantation of a "magic spell": "The one I decide to confine myself to, the only one I judge acceptable […] consists in these words which, when you start to turn your head away, I just want to lightly brush your ear with: *Osiris is a black god*" (121). Breton's chosen spell refers to Lévi's account of the Eleusinian mysteries, this "enigmatic phrase" serving as the last secret revealed to initiates (118). For Breton, the phrase – and more generally the Egyptian myth – is a symbol of the regenerative power of love. He proclaims to Elisa, "My love for you is reborn from the ashes of the sun" (120).

At the same time, Breton views the phrase "Osiris is a black god," and the ashes of death and destruction as a means of igniting rebellion against

political oppression: "it's a spark in the wind, but a spark in search of a powder keg" (120). Breton's choice of words, his invocation of a "black god," links his concepts in *Arcanum 17* to his essay on Césaire, "A Great Black Poet," which was first published in the journal *Tropiques* in 1944. After meeting Césaire in Martinique while en route to New York in 1941, Breton began to view the poet and his work as marking the new direction for the surrealist movement. Breton states of Césaire:

> That first fresh, revitalizing breath of air capable of giving back our confidence is the contribution of a black man. And it is a black man who handles the French language as no white man today is capable of handling it. And it is a black man who is the one guiding us today into the unexplored, seeming to play as he goes, throwing ignition switches that lead us forward from spark to spark. ("A Great Black Poet" 88)

Breton's words speak directly to the inherent conflicts of Afro-Caribbean identity in the French colonies. As Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride have explained, "According the dominant terms of the day, to become an intellectual, one renounced blackness; to embrace blackness was to ignore one's training. How can one accommodate the seeming impossibility of one's existence?" (30) Césaire saw surrealism as "a weapon that exploded the French language," and also as a means of "disalienation," allowing one to dig deep within and reclaim a "profound being," an experience not so much of reinvention but remembering (*Discourse* 67–68). In turn, Césaire's work was viewed by Breton as the necessary "powder keg" capable of simultaneously dismantling and creating.

Breton's use of the Osiris/Iris myth is centered neither on a fragment (the dismembered body) nor a whole (the reunified body), but both at the same time. From the new perspective of exile in the Americas, he uses the death and rebirth of Osiris to reaffirm the surrealist ideal of the "supreme point," that place "at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past, present and future . . . cease to be perceived as contradictions" ("Second Manifesto" 128). At the same time, Breton was aware of the significance of commemorating specific historical moments; in Paris after the war he would serve alongside Katherine Dunham on the Touissant L'Ouverture Committee, which marked the anniversary of France's abolition of slavery (Rosemont 25).

Deren shared many important interests with Breton, including, most importantly, African-Caribbean culture and ritual, but clearly also Egyptian myth. Perhaps in part because of this, Deren regularly sought to distance her work from surrealism, for example stating in an announcement she sent along with materials for screenings: "The preoccupation with conscious control of form which is involved in the making of these films is obviously at variance with the surrealist esthetic of spontaneity…" ("Notice to Director of Film Screening" 402). Deren and Breton's differing approach to Egyptian material

culture exemplifies her argument. The famous wall of Breton's office at 42, rue Fontaine, preserved at the Centre Pompidou, included several Egyptian pieces; Katharine Conley has asserted that his collection's "juxtapositions and recontextualizations allowed for flourishes of automatic expression that perhaps speak more loudly than the essays, poems or objects he produced" (141–142). In contrast, in 1945 Deren conceived of a film that would examine the Metropolitan Museum's collection of Egyptian art, the installation of which exemplified the organization and historical emphasis of traditional modes of display.

Written during or slightly after the filming of *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, Deren's proposal to work with the Met's Egyptian collection continued her exploration of memory and ancestry. In May 1945, Deren sent the proposal to someone named Suzy (thought to be Susanna Wilson, former wife of the surrealist sculptor David Hare). In an accompanying letter, Deren explained that she sought to avoid presenting the Egyptians as "strange" ("Letter to Suzy [Hare?]" 294). Given Deren's longstanding interest in the occult – also shared with Breton – this comment was perhaps intended to distinguish her project from *Arcanum 17*. Instead, Deren's film would prompt in the viewer "an energetic act of racial memory," that would be like "that illuminating feeling you get when, for example, you might suddenly remember your grandfather" (294). Deren reflected that this sort of memory was constructed through a complex web of everyday images and associations: "First there is the image of the man in some characteristic posture you inevitably associate with him. Then gradually, you recollect a pipe he used to smoke, the time he got angry at you, the stick he whittled, etc. And so, by associations, you reconstruct about him his entire world" (294).

In her proposal, Deren emphasized the difficulties of sympathetic identification with Egyptian culture, due to its "ideological approach to life which differs radically from contemporary ideology"(294). Her solution was to "regard the Egyptians as our ancestors," which would inspire a "familial bond" and thus "a sympathetic, active desire to understand them" (295). Deren felt that it was through the Egyptian philosophy of the afterlife that one could approach the culture and its objects, noting that, "The Egyptian tomb, like a home, is designed for life" (295).

Deren's proposal did not specify the Egyptian artworks in the collection that she wished to film. However, judging from her description, it is likely that she wanted to film the mastaba tomb of an Egyptian dignitary, Perneb. The tomb, from the ancient cemetery Saqqara, dates from ca. 2381–2323 B.C. It has been on view at the museum for over eighty years, and allows visitors to enter inside and walk through the tomb's different spaces, encountering reliefs of Perneb, hieroglyphic inscriptions that describe his role in the royal court, and elaborate painted scenes of food offerings.

As with Deren's previous exploration of Egyptian symbols, her proposed film project focuses upon fragments. The history of the tomb of Perneb entails an Osiris-like scattering of its contents, followed by a journey of its dismantled parts to a new country. The decoration of the tomb is thought to have never been completed, and by the time of its excavation had already been ransacked, with stolen objects including the mummy's ornaments from the burial chamber. The life-size statue of Perneb in the tomb's *serdab* (statue chamber) was broken up by thieves and likely carried away as firewood, "leaving on the floor […] a fragment of the head of the cedar statue and an arm and a foot from the smaller ones, as evidence of their work of destruction" (Lythgoe 23–4). In 1913, the entire tomb was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum from the Egyptian Government, dismantled piece by piece, loaded into crates, carried across the desert to Cairo on camels or by train, and then shipped to New York, where it was reassembled.

The tomb clearly could provide a strong metaphor for exile and immigration. Yet in contrast to the fracturing of memory and identity found in the poem "Death by Amnesia," Deren sought in her film proposal to use pieces to build up a whole, to recapture "a profound racial memory." Writing of her plans to film the tomb, Deren compared its maze-like interior to the symbolic maze of man's memory: "As we begin by probing through the mazes of our own memories in search of a distant experience, so actually, the camera would begin by penetrating the mazes of the tomb, exploring its tunnels and illuminating its recesses" (295). The contrast of fragmentation and unification would be further developed in Deren's major writing on film from the following year, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film.* Here Deren returned to the concept of lost memory:

> Total amnesia, although less spectacular than many other forms of mental disorder, has always seemed to me the most terrifying. A man so reduced to immediate perception only, has lost in losing experience, all ability to evaluate, to understand, to solve and to create – in short, all that makes him human. (561)

Much as Deren envisioned a maze-like procession into "racial memory" in her film proposal, *Anagram* continues on to describe man's "horizontal" capabilities of memory, in which he "has access to all of his experience simultaneously" (561). And for Deren, it was through the camera examining certain objects that man's memory could extend beyond knowledge of his own varied recollections into wider understanding of civilization. In 1946, she reflected on her filmmaking efforts, "My problem then becomes to discover in the various cultures or artifacts such force that they carry the entire culture in their arms […]" ("Letter to Gregory Bateson" 17).

While Deren regularly sought to differentiate her projects from those of Dunham and Breton, her film proposal shares with their work a desire to examine redemption from death through an incorporation of the image of (to

return to Assman's description) "collecting, joining, uniting, and knotting together." Deren's proposal described the encounter with Egyptian man at the heart of the maze:

> […] we find this figure at home, as it were, and as he speaks to us of various things, we become gradually aware of the objects around him […]. Little by little the richness of his life would unfold around him, until the nature of his world becomes strong and clear in its outlines. (295)

Exile and fragmentation give way to the image of a figure in his own home, his world strongly delineated in its outlines, even centuries after his death.

Deren never made her film about the Metropolitan Museum's Egyptian collection.[2] In 1946, she instead began the extensive ethnographic field work in Haiti on Vodoun rituals that would result in 20,000 feet of film and the 1953 text *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti.* This first-hand experience of ritual possession brought to Deren a different understanding of memory, identity and death, with the obliteration of the self facilitating a full unification with ancestral knowledge. However, Deren's interest in the Egyptian afterlife continued to be visible when she wrote in *Divine Horsemen*:

> Death, as the edge beyond which life does not extend, delineates a first boundary of being. Thus the ending is, for man, the beginning: the condition of his first consciousness of self as living. Death is life's first and final definition […] The hero of man's metaphysical adventure—his healer, his redeemer, his guide and guardian—is always a corpse. He is Osiris, or Adonis, or Christ. (23–24)

Through the many incorporations of the Osiris myth within the artistic dialogues of the 1940s, the Egyptian god served as a guide to the exploration of memory and identity, a reminder of the agony of oppression and displacement, and a spark igniting social change. Dunham, Breton, and to a certain extent Deren may have considered Osiris's most important role as that outlined for him within *The Golden Bough,* James George Frazer's study of myth and religion: bringer of enlightenment to society (421). For Deren, however, the prospect of loss and decline through amnesia was an ever-present alternative.

Notes

1. See "Court de Gébelin, Notes de André Breton pour *Arcane 17*," in the file "L'Amour fou, Arcane 17, Les Vases communicants," on the Web site devoted to documenting Breton's collections and papers: www.andrebreton.fr.

2. Deren did, however, continue to study the art and artifacts of ancient Egypt. A letter to Deren from a curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art dated 9 May

1951 responds to Deren's inquiry about a bronze statuette of the god Khonsu in the Museum's Egyptian collection. Khonsu's role within the Egyptian pantheon appears to have been related to the nightly travel of the moon. Deren's interest was perhaps due to the film she began in the following year, *The Very Eye of the Night* (1958), in which figures representing Greek deities dance across a night sky full of stars. See the Maya Deren Collection, box 3, Folder 12, Boston University, Howard Gottlieb Archive, Special Collections, Boston.

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