

# RED VELVET SEAT

Women's Writings on  
the First Fifty Years of Cinema

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with Ingrid Periz



VERSO

London · New York

Allegro! How suitable that it should be followed by *Il Penseroso*. Life is sunshine and shadow. "And then—Half an Hour Later"—the dashes are not our own—we know the worst. "Adagio Cantabile, Segue into Dramatico Andante." Cantabile means singingly. Perhaps, on second thought, it was not so bad as we feared when we first got excited. Maybe Charlie had honorable intentions, after all, with Miss Gordon, and has made the girl superlatively happy. Singingly—life is not so bad. We get hopeful; if the cantabile on the cue-sheet had been replaced by a *patetico* we might still have grounds for our opening suspicions, but this play has a happy ending; we can see it from here. Cantabile told the tale.

A *valse triste*,  $\frac{3}{4}$  a dram. Tension, 9-8—this must be Mr. Scully again; that was his batting average—and a *moderato*, 4-4, finish reel 5. An even balance prevails at the last moment of the cinema, from which we infer a promise of marriage is received and carefully retained. A little excitement precedes its coming—dram. Tension—and a little sentimentality comes before that. A *valse triste* is a very moving strain of music. All get ready for the final embrace. Five hundred feet more and it comes twenty feet long.

What would we do without music? We would be bereft of one of our greatest sensory advisors. Her *One Mistake*, melodically speaking, is a successful one. In her second and third she could do no better, we are assured. Miss Gordon must rest content. One is often enough for any one—but a cinema star.

[*Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis), 21 July 1918, section 5, pp. 33, 38.]

## Magic is New (1946)

Maya Deren

"I am making a 16 mm film. I understand that, in order to use a tripod in Central Park, I need a special permit."

"That's correct," the girl at the information desk said. "You can pay your fee and get your permit at the third office down the hall."

"Oh, I didn't know there was a fee."

"Oh, yes, all commercial photographers must pay a fee."

"But I am not a commercial photographer."

"Amateurs don't need permits, as long as they do not use a tripod, clutter the walks or frighten the animals in the zoo."

"But I have to use a tripod for these shots."

"What kind of films are these?"

"I suppose you could call them experimental."

"About what kind of experiments?"

"They are not about experiments. They are themselves experiments—experiments with the form of film itself."

"Whom do you work for?"

"For nobody. That is, I work for myself."

"Then it is a hobby?"

"Well, not exactly. The films are shown at universities and other places."

"Then they are educational documentaries?"

"Well, no. They are certainly not documentaries. Or rather, they are documentaries of the interior, in a sense. And they are educational only in the sense that art is always educational."

"What did you say?"

"I said that ... well, perhaps I had better see the educational division."

She was glad to be rid of me. At the educational office we covered approximately the same ground and tried to go on from there.

"What is the purpose of these films?"

"That's a little difficult to explain. Really, there is no purpose, except to make a film."

"Well, in that case, they're commercial, entertainment films. You can get your permit and pay your fee at the third office to the left of the foyer."

"But they're not commercial and they don't mean to entertain, exactly. That is, I don't make them to make money. As a matter of fact they cost me money to make," I said frantically.

With the attitude of someone trying to prevent a scene, the girl pulled herself together to deal with me as gently as possible.

"Suppose you tell me what they are about."

"Well, that's a little difficult to explain. They're not about any specific subject." I tried again. "You see, they are about the inner experiences of a human being."

"I see. Well, now, this one, for instance. What is the story about?"

"Well, there is no literary story. You see, I believe that cinema, being a visual medium should discover its own, visual integrity—in cinematic terms."

"What was that?"

"I said, it's hard to explain in words because it's so visual."

"I see. Now which part of the park did you want to photograph?"

"It doesn't really matter. The least traveled parts. It isn't the park so much. It's a matter of having a countryside-like background without actually having to take my friends, who are in it, out to the country."

"Then it's a film about your friends."

"Well, not exactly. They're doing the acting for me."

"So there is a plot. What is the plot about?"

"No, there isn't a literary plot."

Her patience was growing thin.

"Look, Miss ... er, Deren. I am trying to help you out. I have to fill out this questionnaire for your permit. Maybe we could get at it if you tried to tell me why you make these films?"

"I wonder myself. It's awfully hard work sometimes."

My attempt at levity fell completely flat. There was a long pause, during which we stared at each other helplessly. Then, speaking slowly and distinctly, as if to a foreigner who had just landed in America, she said:

"Miss Deren, I have to fill out the blanks on this questionnaire in order to have the permit signed by the proper authorities. I cannot give you a permit unless you can say something about the films which I can write down. Do you think you can say anything about the films which I can write down?"

"Write down 'psychological,'" I said desperately. "It won't take long and I won't clutter the walks and there are just a few people in the scene. Just write down 'psychological.'"

She looked at me intently for a moment.

"Yes," she said, half to herself. "That's what it is ... psychological."

"Miss Deren," she called after me as I was leaving, "do they wear ... normal clothes?"

"Yes," I assured her, "Everything will be quite normal."

This conversation, which took place last summer, brought forcibly to my attention the fact that, after three years and five films, I still had no succinct term or formula to describe their nature. My work has constituted an exploration of the medium of film rather than the fulfilment of a preconceived goal. I am fascinated precisely by those aspects and methods of cinema which are as yet undefined and rarely exploited. I am concerned with it as a creative art form, and so I have tried to work as an artist, and independently of all the terminology, methods and institutions which are already established.

In the beginning I was ignorant also of the material and physical problems of film production, which begin after the creative labor of conceiving the film is already achieved. And I am convinced that this foolhardy naiveté is to some extent responsible for the fact that the films have actually been made. Now, after considerable experience, I deliberately ignore the infinite number of complications which threaten the production of a film. For I have found that the first shot is always the most difficult; once one has plunged in, the problems can be dealt with as they come up.

I have met numbers of talented people who tell me of scripts which they have written and filed away as a "some time" project. They await financial backing, for most people have permitted themselves to assume the prerequisite of an elaborate budget to provide for much film, complex studio sets, intricate equipment. There is, moreover, no institution which at the moment subsidizes cinema as an art form, in spite of the fact that it is more expensive than most other art forms.<sup>1</sup>

My films have been paid for by that part of the personal budget which is usually set aside for entertainment, such as going to the movies, and the fund for small luxuries. The limitations of such a small budget can be compensated for by the exercise of imagination and ingenuity and physical exertion. Instead of attempting

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to pay salaries to professional actors, I use my friends and act in the films myself. And since the burden of the meaning and the emotional projection of the film is carried actually by the visual effects of the camera and cutting, I have found these non-professionals more than adequate to my needs. Instead of dreaming up a set which would cost hundreds of dollars to build and more hundreds to light, I conceive the films in terms of interesting landscapes and locales which, though sometimes accessible only by great physical effort, are always convincingly real as well as naturally lit, and all free for the asking. As for interiors, I have turned my own home into a studio, photographed in the apartments of indulgent friends, worked in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the unrented ballroom of a hotel.

The equipment, also, is extremely simple, and here especially imagination and ingenuity not only compensate for its seeming limitations but, on the contrary, the very absence of gadgets and mechanical paraphernalia inspires an exploitation and creative use of some of those basic capacities of the camera which, being so taken for granted, have been greatly neglected by professionals. Furthermore, when the mechanical means remain simple, the camera does not become a monster which reduces the artist to impotent awe.

Free time is another thing that these "some time" scripts are waiting for. Yet the first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, was photographed in two weeks. *At Land* was shot on weekends, over the course of three summer months. And the dance film was photographed whenever Talley Beatty, who dances in it, had some spare time left over from teaching classes, taking classes and rehearsing for a Broadway production.

Or perhaps the prospective film is postponed until one can "learn some technique." This is perhaps the most destructive of all misconceptions about film. The actual operation of a motion picture camera is very simple and consists largely of pressing a button. All the rest is achieved best if it is developed, as one goes along, in answer to some requirement of the imagination. There is nothing more deadening to the development of a form than the technician who takes his instrument and its means so much for granted that he never attempts anything new.

In the final analysis the only critical requirement is the determination to make a film. Only an obsessed determination can account for the kind of effort which my films have sometimes required of me. I have spent hours walking the midsummer pavements of New York, tracking down a hundred-foot roll of film in the midst of the film shortage. For each scene of *At Land*, Hella Hamon and I had to carry the equipment two and a half miles (part of it over sand dunes) and row an hour and a half in order to reach this desolate but beautiful beach.<sup>2</sup> I have stood in October ocean water for hours to get certain tidal effects. It was inevitable that in some of these most uncomfortable moments I should ask myself with considerable anguish, "Why, oh why do I do this?"

I am driven by that which motivates any artist or writer—the conviction that his medium has infinite potentialities for conveying his particular perceptions of life. And because I came to cinema not as to an industry in which to find a lucrative position but from a background which had included a preoccupation with poetry, dance, music, I brought to it some of these basic esthetic criteria.

What particularly excited me about film was its magic ability to make even the most imaginative concept seem real. For if the tree in the scene was real and true, the event which one caused to occur beneath it seemed also real and true. And so one could create new realities which, being rendered visible, could stand up to the challenge of "Show me!" We are moved by what we see, according to how we see it. And the film maker, by controlling what the audience sees, is also, therefore, in control of what the audience feels. The creative effort should be directed not at making a thing look like itself, but at using the capacity of the camera to make it look like what the audience should feel about it. Here was a medium which, instead of being bound by the astronomy of clocks and calendars, could make manifest the astronomy of the heart and mind—that which knows an evening as endless, or the walk back always being shorter than the first walk there. Here was a medium which could project in real terms those inner realities by which people truly live. For we act and suffer and love according to what we imagine to be true, whether it is really true or not. And since the cinema seemed peculiarly qualified to project those inner realities, I had always been impatient with what I felt was a criminal neglect of that potent magical power.

It was in such a mood of impatience that I met my husband. I was at a Hollywood cocktail party where a sympathetic friend, wishing, no doubt, to avert a scene in which I would vehemently denounce the star and story approach to film, introduced me to Alexander Hackenschmied who, as my friend put it, "would probably agree with me."<sup>3</sup> He had been making films for over ten years in Czechoslovakia but was known here largely as codirector and photographer of the documentaries, *Crisis*, *Lights Out in Europe* and *Forgotten Village*. We did agree, profoundly, in our concept of the direction that film should take. No doubt this encouraged us to discover other agreements, which culminated, so to speak, in our marriage.



It was not until 1943, two years later, that we acquired a small, 16 mm camera. Since Sasha was working during the day, my original intention was to make a film by myself. I started out by thinking in terms of a subjective camera, one that would show only what I could see by myself without the aid of mirrors and which would move through the house as if it were a pair of eyes, pausing with interest here and there, opening doors, and so on. The beginning developed into a film about a girl who fell asleep and saw herself in her dream, and it soon became obvious that I could not both photograph and act myself, so I waited until my husband was free to develop the concept of the film and execute it with me.

*Meshes of the Afternoon* does start with a subjective camera sequence in which only the feet and shadow of the girl are visible. For the rest the film is the result of one of those perfect collaborations in which an idea advanced by either person is spontaneously accepted by the other or immediately reconsidered and rejected by both. It was a far cry from story conferences in which the sensitive and delicate intuitions which give real vitality and meaning are somehow lost under the welter of arguments, justifications and analyses. *Meshes of the Afternoon* is concerned with

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the inner realities of an individual and the way in which the subconscious will develop, interpret and elaborate an apparently simple and casual occurrence into a critical emotional experience. It is culminated by a double ending, in which it would seem that the imagined achieved, for the protagonist, such force that it became reality. Using cinematic techniques to achieve dislocations of inanimate objects, unexpected simultaneities etcetera, this film establishes a reality which, although based somewhat on dramatic logic, can exist only on film.

That summer my husband went to work as motion picture director for the Overseas Motion Picture Division of the Office of War Information, and I decided to go on by myself here in New York. *The Witch's Cradle* (which was never completed for various reasons) was photographed in the Art of This Century gallery, where the architecture, designed by Frederick J. Kiesler, and the paintings and objects by the foremost modern artists seemed to me to constitute a strange, magic world.<sup>4</sup>

This effort to make a film quite by myself—to direct, photograph and light it without any assistance or previous experience—served as an invaluable lesson. In the first film the task of lighting and photographing in such a way as to realize on the screen the vision we had conceived, had fallen to my husband. In the course of this second film I began to understand, at first hand, how important every visual detail is in those films which rely entirely upon the visual image to convey meaning and continuity, rather than upon some plot behind the image. I came to understand the difference between contriving an image to illustrate a verbal idea and starting with an image which contains within itself such a complex of ideas that hundreds of words would be required to describe it. This is the central problem of thinking in cinematic terms, for our tendency is to think in verbal terms. One writes: "She felt frightened and alone." But the impact of this statement lies in the word-idea of "fright" and "alone" and the image contrived to express that would always be less satisfactory than the verbal statement. On the other hand, if one begins with an image of a small person standing in the corner of a large room, which is made to seem empty by dusters thrown over the furniture, this conveys, in a visual moment, a whole complex of ideas which would take many contrived sentences to describe.<sup>5</sup>

I pondered these problems and by the following summer I was anxious to develop the idea of cinematic magic in terms of space and time, for film is a time-space art. I was fortunate in meeting Hella Hamon who, although attending City College during the week, was anxious enough to learn about film to spend all her summer weekends as a camerawoman. *Land* strives for the elimination of literary-dramatic lines and tries to discover, instead, a purely cinematic coherence and integrity. It presents a relativistic universe—one in which the locations change constantly and distances are contracted or extended; in which the individual goes toward something only to discover upon her arrival that it is now something entirely different; and in which the problem of that individual, as the sole continuous element, is to relate herself to a fluid, apparently incoherent, universe. It is in a sense a mythological voyage of the twentieth century. This sense of the active, fluent universe was achieved largely by the technique of beginning some simple movement in one

place and concluding it in another. Thus the integrity of human movement was used to relate unrelated places, and this concept was even further developed in the dance film which followed. *A Study in Choreography for Camera* was made by Talley Beatty as dancer, and by me as director and photographer. I had felt that in most dance films the restiveness of the camera—with its closeups, its views from the wings, etcetera—served merely to destroy choreographic patterns which had been carefully conceived for a theatre stage space and a fixed-front audience. In this film, on the other hand, cinematographic space—the entire world—becomes itself an active element of the dance rather than an area in which the dance takes place. And the dancer shares, with the camera and cutting, a collaborative responsibility for the movements themselves. This results in a film dance which could not be performed except on film.

I am now engaged in a new film, as yet untitled, which is the most elaborate of my productions.<sup>6</sup> In order to be able to concentrate creatively on the direction of the film, I have had most of the acting done by friends. It is only in the increased number of actors and in such physical details, however, that this film is more elaborate. What still inspires me most is the capacity of cinema to create new, magic realities by the most simple means, with a mixture of imagination and ingenuity in about equal parts.

For example, to achieve on film the sense of an endless, frustrating flight of stairs, the great Hollywood studios would probably spend hundreds on the building of a set. You, however, can do it for just the price of the film required to photograph any ordinary stairway three times—the first angle shows all but the top landing, the second angle shows the flight without any landings included, and the third angle shows the flight with the top landing. If the actor climbs the visible portion of the stairs three times at a consistent rhythm, you will succeed in having created a stairway three times as long as the real one. By such exercise of ingenuity, using even the most modest camera and equipment, you can create whole worlds for just the cost of the film.

For more than anything else, cinema consists of the eye for magic—that which perceives and reveals the marvelous in whatsoever it looks upon.

[*Mademoiselle* (New York), January 1946, pp. 181, 260-65.]

### The Movies and Reality (1926)<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf

People say that the savage no longer exists in us, that we are at the fag-end of civilization, that everything has been said already, and that it is too late to be ambitious. But these philosophers have presumably forgotten the movies. They have never seen the savages of the twentieth century watching the pictures. They have never sat themselves in front of the screen and thought how, for all the clothes