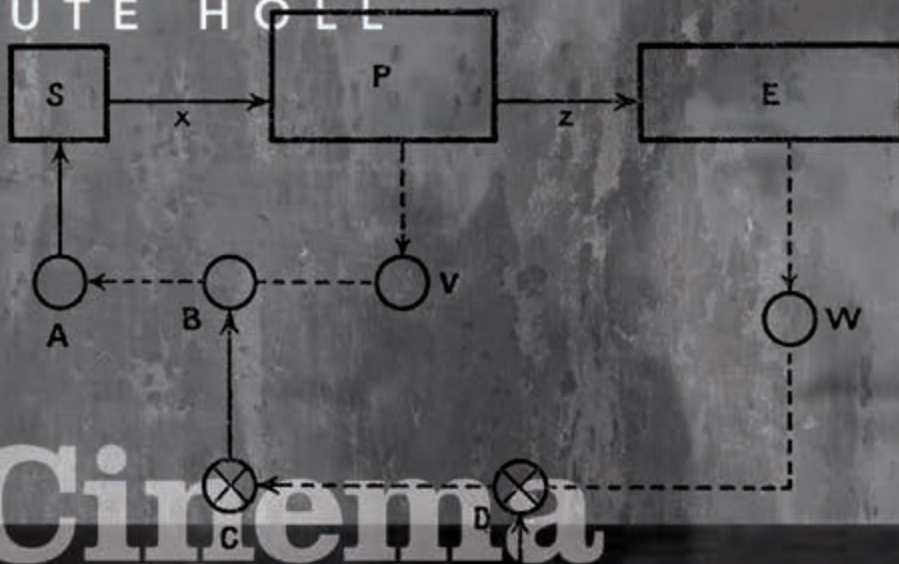


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Cybernetics

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RECURSIONS

## Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics

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# Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics

*Ute Holl*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Foreword

Fade into Black

*Pasi Valiaho*

*Goldsmiths, University of London*

*Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* is driven by a refrain. The paths and forks of the book's reflections always return to a primal scene, a "ritual", as Ute Holl calls it, which keeps appearing in different guises: the "passage into the darkness of the cinema" that begins as soon as the lights of the movie theatre are turned off. This primal scene retains its familiarity to us. Despite the fact that televisual screens have rendered their occurrence as virtually superfluous, we can still remember and experience those anticipatory moments of becoming enveloped into the movie theatre's artificial blackness before the film projector begins its duty of casting movements of light and shadow on the screen's blank surface. *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* reminds us how this "passage" bears particular anthropological significance. The movie theatre's darkness is one in which the faces of our loved ones become covered with the strangest masks, and we grow either closer or more alien to ourselves.

*Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* can be read as a detective story: Who turned off the lights? What happened when the darkness fell for the first time? The book engages a range of actors from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> to divulge the necessary clues. Readers should be notified, however, that its protagonists are not the usual (male) figures of early cinema and the Hollywood movie industry but instead scientists as well as scientific and experimental filmmakers. Rather than the Lumière brothers, Alfred Hitchcock, Steven Spielberg, the Wachowskis, etc., the *dramatis personae* that for the most part populate the following pages include Maya Deren, Jean Painlevé, Jean Rouch and Dziga Vertov, in addition to numerous (more or less well-known) figures from the history of the life sciences as well as anthropology, including Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, Etienne-Jules Marey, Gustav Fechner, Hermann von Helmholtz, Vladimir Bekhterev, and the Harvard psychologist of German origin, Hugo Münsterberg, who published one of the first theoretical studies on the "photoplay" in 1917. *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* takes the reader to a journey that spans a range of different sets (seen as if from a bird's eye view, through a virtual camera flying over different locations): Bali (where

Mead and Bateson did their fieldwork with film cameras and typewriters), Albert Londe's photographic studio at the Salpêtrière in Paris, Marey's physiological station in Bois de Boulogne, the international symposium of neuroscientists and psychologists at Wittenberg College, Ohio, in 1927, Deren's house in Los Angeles where *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) was filmed...

*Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* in a sense rewrites film history. Its stakes are nothing less. But instead of debating the historical record (who did what when), the book's implicit concern is on how these questions should be posed. Rather than merely telling stories about how cinema was conceived by various inventors and has been used by artists and entrepreneurs, *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* is preoccupied by what the medium of film has done to us, how the cinema has changed us. That is what the mystery of darkness is about. The book thus refocuses the lens through which we look at the past; it adjusts our conceptual understandings and approaches. Under Holl's scrutiny, cinema doesn't appear as a medium of mass entertainment, not even as a particular aesthetic form per se, but above all as an "anthropological machine" the stakes of which involve articulations between human and animal, conscious and unconscious, or speaking being and living being.<sup>1</sup> Above all, *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* explores the film medium's place and meaning in the scientific and technological upheavals of the twentieth century that came to radically reshape our composition.

A key thread of the book's narrative fabric is to show how cinema was born out of the spirit of the experimental scientific laboratories developed in the nineteenth century. "The unknown avant-gardists of film history", Holl's cogent observation goes, were in fact "natural scientists". It was the forerunners of modern neurology, physiology and psychology that first came up with techniques of probing perception and consciousness, and above all the "limen" that separates conscious mental states from non-conscious ones. After initial experimentations in the lab, commercial and artistic applications, which capitalized on cinema's liminal psychology, followed. Jean-Martin Charcot's and Albert Londe's visualizations of the movements of so-called hysterical female bodies at the Salpêtrière in Paris, for instance, provided the breeding ground for Lillian Gish's performances in David Griffith's films. Gustav Fechner's three-year state of trance, which the founder of psychophysics induced himself into with excessive experiments on afterimage effects, amongst other things, might just as well describe the somnambulists flocking to watch Griffith's dramas, or alternatively today's video game players.

Throughout *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* one can hear the echo of Friedrich Kittler writing in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (originally



published in 1986 in Germany): “Since its inception, cinema has been the manipulation of optic nerves and their time”.<sup>2</sup> Kittler’s insight was to show how technological recordings and reproductions of acoustic and optical “data” have critically changed the “state of reality.”<sup>3</sup> For Holl, likewise, cinema performs an experiment on our being; on what can be sensed, imagined and dreamt. Conceptually, *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* is firmly grounded in the German-speaking tradition of media and film theory, and proves what this tradition of scholarship is capable of doing with its vigorous mixing of philosophical thought with a sustained inquiry into and critique of cinematic (and other medial) modes of being and thinking. Film comes here across as a cultural technique the research of which, to borrow Bernhard Siegert’s words, “amounts to an epistemological engagement with the medial conditions of whatever lays claim to reality.”<sup>4</sup>

Cinema had its throne as *the* medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century capable of dictating how we are able to perceive and conceptualize the world. Cinema had the power, to paraphrase Kittler’s words, to “define what really is.”<sup>5</sup> Holl investigates this power by deftly drawing conceptual parallels between cinema and cybernetics, parallels that have largely remained to be explored, one might surmise, simply because they perhaps aren’t the most obvious. Whilst cinema, at first sight at least, comes across as a technology of the industrial era, belonging to the family of mechanical apparatuses that includes the steam engine, the bicycle, the train, and the clock, cybernetics is an invention of the Second World War, of (electronic) signals and computation. Whilst cinema was originally conceived by the Scientist and then quickly appropriated by the Capitalist, cybernetics belonged in its very beginnings to the General, that is to say, to the military-industrial complex. Norbert Wiener’s “anti-aircraft predictor” (built in 1948) was one of the first incorporations of the cybernetic idea of modeling and controlling a system’s behavior and particularly its future states. How does this compare with film, a technology we normally associate with storage rather than anticipation, pure recording rather than feedback? The common denominator can be found in the etymology of “cybernetics”, that is to say, governance and control. Both cinematic and cybernetic systems link living beings with machines and in so doing administer and regulate human cognition and behavior, or in other words, the movements of bodies and souls. Both “feedback” into our nervous systems and brains. “The cinema is thus a good place to examine cybernetic processes, since the links between nervous systems and apparatuses have constantly been synchronized, aligned, and optimized in its history”, Holl writes. Synchronization and optimization of the senses and psychic life coupled with the mechanics of the film apparatus

– this is the operating function of the feedback loop between the spectator and the screen that is established in the dark of the movie theatre.

Cinema's power, then, is not merely located in the contents of its imagery, however moving, luring or explicit, but in the exchanges, repetitions and relays that take place between the movie machine and our nervous systems and brains. Cinema is a machine for controlling and regulating our impulses, sensations and emotions. But above all – and this is the point that recurs in *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* like Karl Marx's ghost in our neoliberal nightmares – cinema is a machine for shifting and displacing the consciousness, and for “inducing trance”. Combining film experience with the trance state is the second key innovation of the book, in addition to refocusing on cinema through the lens of cybernetics.

“Trance”, Holl writes, “as a dissolution or diversion of the consciousness under the impact of certain technologies, is the gap in film theory.” Much ink has indeed been spilled on the unconscious mechanisms of film spectatorship; on the dream state induced by film viewing, on the mirrorings, misrecognitions and identifications that arguably take place in the movie theatre's darkness. In the film theory of the 1970s, the moviegoer was even reduced to an infantile of sorts. *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* does point towards a similar kind of loss of control in the spectator's position as soon as the lights in the movie theatre are turned off. But rather than mere regression, the idea of trance designates here how the spectator's self-regulatory system yields control to external forces – the sheer force of movement, light and shadow on the silver screen taking charge of inner physiological and mental events. This means the emergence of alternative bodily and psychic states, affective and emotional conditions, within the individual. In this respect, Holl's analysis can be seen to converge with recent attempts at re-conceptualizing cinematic subjectivity, which seek analogies between the filmic apparatus and hypnosis in particular.<sup>6</sup> Here, the power of cinema is considered in terms of suggestion, even possession, which opens our minds, not simply to external control and machination, but also to new dispositions and capacities.

In this respect, trance indeed appears in what follows as an ambiguous concept, a concept with at least two faces. On one side, it is a question of “command and control” – the movie machine's steering of our nerves and psyches like the God sending orders by means of rays of light to Daniel Paul Schreber (the [in]famous case of paranoia “treated” by the psychiatrist Paul Flechsig and theorized by Sigmund Freud, and later Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). But on the other side, trance gestures towards ruptures, erratic tics and fits within the dominant order of things.

We might get a better grasp of this ambiguity by taking a brief look at the Hauka movement, which began among the Songhay people in Niger in 1925 and was popularized for the Western audience in Jean Rouch's ethnographic film *The Mad Masters* (*Les Maîtres fous*, 1955). Rouch's cinematic works play a key role in *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics*, as they, according to Holl, tinker "with the technology until new imaginary spaces start to emerge, in which mental states are realized that are non-integrated." The Hauka is a famous example of such "non-integrated" as well as ambivalent states. The participants would dance and become possessed by the spirits of their European colonizers – military officers, administrators, governors, and so on. The proceedings would be physically intense, as Paul Stoller describes:

The pulsations ripple like waves through Istambula's [a Hauka medium's] body. He extends his arms and spins around like a top. He grunts and howls. Saliva flows like lava from his mouth. Barbara Mossi and the general join him. The tempo is quite fast; the beat is intense. One by one the Hauka throw their bodies in the air, landing on their backs with thumps.<sup>7</sup>

Possession means here complex acts of mimicry whereby Hauka mediums would not only imitate the gestures, fashions and manners of their "civilized" colonizers, but also the ways in which the colonizers aped the "savage" colonized. It means dialectical play with identities at an uncertain threshold between them and us, self and other. Michael Taussig calls this kind of performance "mimetic excess" – excess whereby the hegemonies of domination can at least momentarily be suspended, perhaps even annulled, and which provides "opportunity to live subjunctively as neither subject nor object of history but as both, at one and the same time."<sup>8</sup>

Could cinema be capable of holding such subjunctive and excessive powers? Can it give rise to spectators who are "possessed" instead of being "possessive"? *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* will not give readers any definitive answers; who could? But by probing into the cinema's and our psyche's liminal states, the book makes a strong case for reconceptualizing what the politics of cinema can mean. This is a gesture that several of the book's German companions have shunned – their inquiries into how differentiations and separations are brought about often forgets the question as to how orders of things could be changed, that is to say, the question of political agency. Simultaneously, it avoids reiterating the well-rehearsed critiques of "ideologies" and "representations" so dear to Anglo-American scholarship. Liminal states hold the germ of excess and transgression – this

is how we might encapsulate the “surrealist” politics of cinema that *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* outlines.

*Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* shows that the passage into the darkness of the movies definitely compels us to let foreigners in. When the film ends, the lights are turned on, and we hurry towards the exit, the spirits of the silver screen gradually leave us, dissipating into the air. But during those 90 minutes or so, we have, potentially at least, been possessed to mime ourselves and the world around us differently. Thanks to the movies, the spirits will always be here, with us, in us.

## Notes

1. I borrow the notion of “anthropological machine” from Giorgio Agamben; see especially Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 33-38.
2. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 115.
3. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 3.
4. Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 14. See also the “Cultural Techniques” special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, ed. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Ilinca Iurascu & Jussi Parikka, vol. 30, no. 6 (2013).
5. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 3.
6. See Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du cinéma: Hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009); Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotics Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
7. Paul Stoller, “Embodying Colonial Memories”, *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 634-648, quotation on 635.
8. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 255.

## Preface to the English Translation of *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics*

Returning to *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics*, my study on cinema as a cultural technique of trance and transformation, on the occasion of its translation into English some fifteen years after the German edition, I was surprised to discover that the book exposed new and unexpected impacts in a fundamentally changed media environment. Under the new circumstance it has, as it were, become a new book. The study's research into historical relations of anthropology, psycho-physiological studies and experimental film culture produces unforeseen ramifications in the light of recent developments in media technology and media practices. Therefore it will definitely contribute to the fields of media theory and specifically cinema studies, albeit differently than when it was first published.

Cinematic perception, in fusing single frames into an imaginary continuity of moving images had, according to Marshall McLuhan's diagnosis, been a useful vehicle to travel from the mechanical Gutenberg Galaxy into the 20<sup>th</sup> century's Turing Universe of an electronically composed perceptive continuum. In the current condition of digital data processing, cinematic perception might turn out to be even more indispensable in the attempt to come to terms with the reorganisation of our senses under a 21<sup>th</sup> century's regime of electronic media. The algorithms that organize data for moving images cannot be perceived for themselves, but only in what we perceive as effects, which appear due to transformations of streams of data between electronic devices. Since cinema itself has once and for all left its classical setting in movie theatres to spread across electronic meshes and across individual or shared screens, its specific entanglement of physical cultures and wishful hallucination returns as an issue with ever more insistence. Former meshes of the afternoon have turned into omnipresent meshes, into a permanent mode of trance, as it were, disorganizing and disturbing what we perceive as presence or absence.

It is only now, since technical devices, cultural bodies and physical behaviour have progressively merged, that my book's basic argument has become common experience: The act of cinematic perception connects a whole set of elements, technical as well as cultural, topological as well as historical orders, so that the filmic image can never be located as such but only considered in its effects, on different screens, in different viewing cultures. The book *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* proposes a genealogy

of cinematic experience which, as I see it, turns out to explain even more of the ambivalences of communication and control in social and personal media today than it had done for the critique of the old mass medium which was still the dominant type of viewing film's when the book was written. Rereading my study I was astonished to find that in the light of the latest developments of technical devices its assumption that technical media carry the threat of social trance and oblivion, while also providing perspectives of cultural transgression and the transformation of alterities proved sustainable. Or rather, it seems much clearer today than when Hollywood's model of the cinema was considered classical, its apparatus homogeneous and its impact compulsory. In today's cinematic devices from personal pads to gigantic screens on urban architecture, the issue of feed-back, of senso-motoric integration or disintegration of bodies and screens – or cameras for that matter – is obvious to every user. The history of the cinema as an interface is a central thread in the book.

Venturing back into the psycho-physiological experiments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I set out to discover a common history of technique, laboratory studies of behaviour and desire. In this sense, the book seemed risky in a methodological perspective. In a fortuitous encounter of luck and serendipity I found these fields connected in the work of experimental filmmaker Maya Deren. Following her biographical cues, I traced the genealogy of cinematic experiments into the psycho-physiological laboratories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and discovered close bonds between scientific experiments of psychologists and scientists on the one hand and the studies of trance, possession and altered states on the other. At their interface, major and resilient filmic topoi emerged, the mad scientist as well as the hysteric clairvoyant. Cinema's history in the field between avant-garde film, 19<sup>th</sup> century experimental psychology and anthropology had been discussed before. But a study on trance and feed-back in cinematic perception also shows that not only plots and content derive from cinema's prehistory, but also their technical adaptations to the minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> and now, differently, to the minds of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Maya Deren's work does not only link the fields of psychology, anthropology and experimental cultures, she was also acquainted with a concealed network of counter-psychological thought. Through her personal relations to Soviet Psychology I discovered the strange networks of knowledge established by Vladimir Bekhterev, who turned out to link experimental practices connected to names like Paul Flechsig, Jean-Martin Charcot, Dziga Vertov, Walter Cannon and finally Jean Rouch and Gregory Bateson. Cybernetics as historically established feed-back relations or interfaces

between the nerves, the senses and the minds on the one hand and technical devices on the other – a context concisely called cinema-eye, *kino glaz* by Vertov –, relations that at the same time escape the conscious perception of users seems to be a very old project, which is taking possession of newer cultures of seeing and listening only now, in the presence of personal and personalized screens.

Maya Deren's invitation to follow the Voudoun divinity Legba into the darkness and towards the cross-roads of cultures and ecstatic practices also led my studies. The path of research has thus lead from cinema's darkness into the flicker-lit set-ups of laboratories and to utopian and dystopian models of technical devices connecting instruments and physical bodies. To day, the darkness of the movie houses is only a memory of a trance technique which is about to disappear. When writing the book, gramophone, film and typewriter had just been replaced by Walkman, digital video formats and personal computers. The culture of I-pods, smart phones and pads as well as of streamed data which form into personal audio-visual viewing dispositives was just on the verge of breakthrough. Once they reached their subjects, they increasingly reduced them to consumers. Deren's call for appropriating technical skills and devices in the service of revolutionary and ritual cultural forms seems to be right on time now. Gregory Bateson had hoped that the notion of gods meant nothing far out but the implementation of ecological thought against the competition of capitalist society. I kept returning to this hope in the presence of ever more drastic exploitation of people and continents. What sort of hybrids we have become under the rule of the new and colder race of gods – as William James had predicted – will have to be inferred as extension of the book at hand.

As opposed to the studies of the Canadian School of media theory, contemporaries of Maya Deren she had not really taken notice of, Deren's thinking was concerned with syncretistic and unknown cultures rather than with the decline of a Western world of literacy. And compared to the Canadian School her work was inspired by feminist attitudes. Film studies, and specifically in Germany, insisted that cinema is a form of thinking liberated from the obligation of assuming philosophy's single and disembodied spirit – *Geist* – in favour of the multiplicity of heterogeneous forms combining different views, gazes, bodies and minds. In this feminist culture of film studies to which my research owes its foundations, Deren's work provided crucial forms of knowledge. This farewell to the formation of a singular form of mind will also have to be reconsidered in the presence of cinemas on multiple screens.



Now that feed-back loops between technical devices, cultural and physical bodies have merged as an every day experience, the book's basic assumption does not seem as risky as it used to: The film's images are not projected elsewhere, but come into effect in the cultural conduct of societies as well as of single subjects. The ontology of the filmic image has to be studied in our own forms of behaviour. As subjects, we prove to be interfaces of historical and cultural techniques as well as of discourses of sanity and legality as they are modified by the historical modes of cinema's aesthetic procedures. But even in the presence electronic data processing, cinematic experience will allow us to reflect, perceive and negotiate our culturally hybrid status. In terms of media theory this implies that it is not the search for simple materiality which will prevent us from following endless routines of hermeneutic odysseys, but the perception of historical relations between material and cultural techniques, conscious or unconscious.

Apart from all such new and unforeseen impacts, rereading *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* now had another effect which might qualify as a central concern of media studies' methodology: Wistfully I remember the audacious research and writing in the wake of Friedrich Kittler's provocations, with or against the vortex of his own work. This is true for interdisciplinary conjunctions and conjectures as well as for political conclusions related to strategies of subjectivation in technical environments. These approaches once were alien to academic studies. Even if I thought of my research as proceeding in a strictly discourse-analytically structured manner, it was at the time considered risky and rejected by classical German film studies. Today, this work is read as basic research into cinema's aesthetic history. If nothing else then, the book is a good example of the pleasure that is connected to venturing into a field that is not academically established, or the excitement of inventing a new set of questions. Thus, the forms of research which are now called New German Media Theory were mostly establish at the crossroads of existing discourse networks and mostly at night. It was about exposing interrelations of disciplines and cultural practices, deliberately without being caught in the trap of technical determinism. This might, after all, qualify as the central concern of media studies' methodology.

If there was an initial goal of the text at all it would have been to describe cinema as an experience of producing new perceptual forms and habits, new forms of conduct and behaviour which would allow for social homeostasis – call it peace or not – to be realized beyond disciplinary means. While German media theory seems to be inevitably linked to technologies of war and disciplinary data processing, my studies were at the time very much

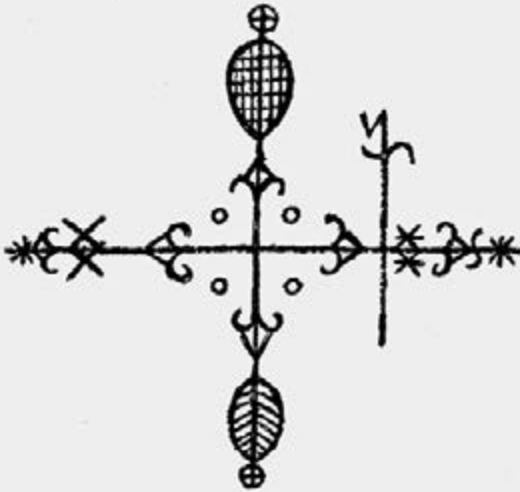


motivated by the will to find inventive and emancipative forms of media practices, to discover new forms of communication capable of resisting the regimes of control, and to reconstruct a discourse history of the unconscious in cinema, which would expose the tiny messianic force of an equilibrium between human beings and apparatus. It is here that the book seems have developed its most antiquated facet.

The book is itself a node in a larger network of studies, and while it is impossible to name all the names necessary to explain its edges, there are some that have specifically formed its meshes: the feminist film theory of Heide Schlüpmann, and Friedrich Kittler's media theory, two antagonistic positions which become really explosive if their forces are joint. Jutta Hercher introduced me to Maya Deren's cinema work. Bernhard Siegert rescued the research project early on dropping terms like cultural techniques. That the book exists at all is owed to Rike Felka and Erich Brinkmann who took the risk of publishing it in the first place, and to the editors of the New German Media Theory who chose it to become part of a great series. That the English version exists at all is owed to the brilliance and elegance of Daniel Hendrickson, himself a man at the cross-roads of the arts.

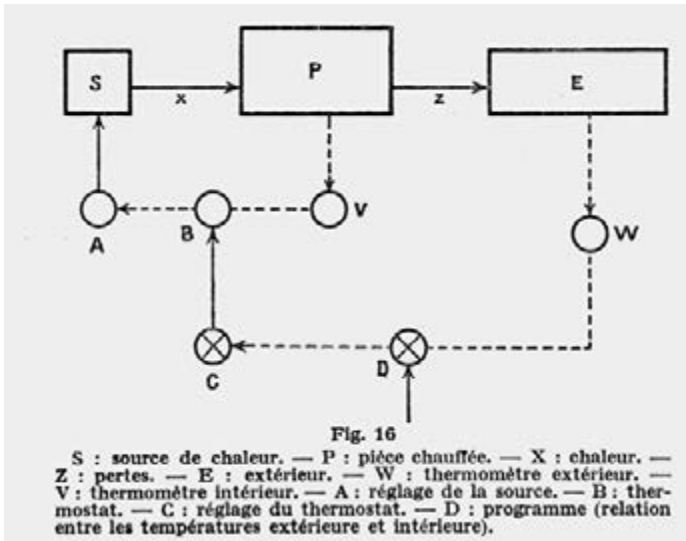
I am extremely happy that the book will be published towards the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Maya Deren who was born on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1917.

Legba—The Old Man at the Gate



VEVER FOR LEGBA

Legba – life – is the link between the visible mortal world and the invisible immortal realms. He is the means and avenue of communication between them. (...) Since he stands at the cross-roads, he has access to the worlds on either side, as if he were on both sides of the mirror surface which separates them. – Maya Deren, 1953. In: *Divine Horsemen. The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York 1973. p. 97.



La Cybernétique n'est pas une Super-Science, le cybernéticien n'est pas un Super-Savant: ce sera bientôt un spécialiste comme les autres, installé en un carrefour, mais non pas pour faire la loi. – G.Th. Guilbaud 1957. In: *What is Cybernetics?*, London 1959. p. 28.

## In the Beginning

In the beginning is the darkening. Indiscernible. Drifting into twilight. Attention gets lost in the space. Darkness comes back through the depths. Shapes and boundaries blur. Inside and outside are indistinguishable. Desert, void, blind land between sundown and night. Like closing the eyes. Departing from oneself. Back to the beginning. And then radiating, shimmering, brightness, reflections, flickering. The trickling of light.

Effecting the passage into the darkness of the cinema in such a way that the spectator does not perceive it, this is the art of the film projector. The ritual is prescribed, the use of light and sound in temporal succession is fixed. First the footlights and the stage lights are dimmed, then the light in the audience is brought down and slowly the first curtain is opened – at the same time the projectionist in the booth gets the film rolling, turns on the lamps, opens the shutter, and turns on the sound, which fades in to replace the music in the theater. The projection beam shoots through the room, the studio credits become visible, which is synchronized to transition in the waves of the receding curtain. “The spectator should never see the bare screen. This is why the first decorative curtain, synchronized with the architecture of the space, only opens as the projection starts, revealing the action of the film.” (Hochmeister, *Handbuch für den Filmvorführer*) The technical instruction means that the picture in the cinema, the action, the projected emotions are not allowed any fixed location.