

# Maya Deren and Her Successful Integration of Dance and Film

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The topic of dance films could not be discussed without mentioning Maya Deren. A dancer, ethnographer, philosopher, and “visual poet”, Maya Deren is said to have given birth to the American avant-garde film movement.

Born Eleanora Derenkovskaya on April 29, 1917, in Kiev, Ukraine, (the year of the Russian Revolution), she was a revolutionary [innovator](#) from the start. She was born to her beloved mother Marie Fiedler and father Solomon Derenskovsky. In 1922 her family left the Soviet Union for America. They settled in Syracuse, New York.

By 1928, her father had shortened their name to Deren. Maya’s childhood name was Elinka. As a young girl, Elinka hated her legs. She had a rather stalky build for American standards, and because of this, she loved to [wear](#) boots. At age ten she gave herself the nickname of “Bootsy.” Little did she know where those stalky legs would take her.

Deren attended Syracuse University to study journalism. This is where her interest in film was first sparked. During this period, she began to write poetry, served as the national [secretary](#) of the Young Peoples Socialist League, and met her first husband, Gregory Bardacke. Although her marriage did not last long, Gregory helped her to develop a strong interest in politics, an area in which she would continue to participate. Deren completed her B.A. at New York University in 1936. She then went on to earn an M.A. in English literature from Smith College in 1939.

It was her next move that introduced her to the world of dance. She found a secretarial job working for African American dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham. With Dunham, Deren toured with the road show of *Cabin in the Sky*.

While on tour, she met her next husband and life long inspiration, Czech filmmaker, Alexander Hackenschmied, later known as Alexander Hammid. It is her union with Hammid that allowed her to combine her interests and begin to create films.

From an inheritance she earned from her father, she bought a second-hand 16mm Bolex camera. With this camera, Deren and her husband created her first and most famous film *Meshes of the Afternoon* in 1943. By this time, Elenora had shortened her name to Maya, the word for “veil of illusion” in Hindu mythology.

Deren went on to create many more avant-garde films integrating dance, mise-en-scene, and the art of montage.

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