

THE HUNGRY CINEMA OF STEPHEN DWOSKIN

The first striking impression created by the five-DVD set *Stephen Dwoskin* (Les Films du Renard, www.renardfilms.org) is the immense variety of modes and forms with which this director works—not only from film to film, but frequently within the same film. *Outside In* (1981), for instance, is nominally about the filmmaker's experience of his disability, stricken with polio in early childhood. But is it a personal reminiscence, a documentary, an essay film, a fictional recreation, a lyrical abstraction, or a dance/performance piece? It works through—as is often the case in Dwoskin's feature-length pieces—a series of self-contained tableaux, each one starkly set against those surrounding it, and each drawing upon a very different style of cinematic representation. Poetic associations flit from segment to segment, but it is left to the viewer to draw the lines and make the connections: the prosthetic apparatus into which Dwoskin laboriously straps his legs each morning is compared to both the everyday high heels with which women torture themselves, and the bondage-and-discipline gear that forms part of a sophisticated sexual “underworld” we see much of in his work.

More disconcertingly and provocatively, *Outside In* offers itself—via a wild prologue that mixes Jean-Luc Godard-style distancing with Benny Hill-style innuendo—as a comedy (“you might find it funny,” he mock-politely advises). In a burlesque-grotesque combo that goes way beyond the self-abasement we find in Luc Moullet's similarly off-center comedies, Dwoskin puts himself into scenes where he falls, slips, slides, is helpless, while those around him flounder, compound the problem, or miraculously come to his aid (and such angelic gestures of care often carry an erotic dimension in his work). This overt self-depiction of Dwoskin's, which forms one strand of his career, is very different to the type of cinema for which he is best known—that is, if he is known at all, because he is surely among the most criminally overlooked major figures in cinema history. (Take a glance, for instance, at his woefully inadequate IMDB entry.)

Dwoskin, in fact, may be recognized more for what has been written about him—such as an influential 1976 *Afterimage* essay by Paul Willemen on the “fourth look” in cinema, theorized from a careful viewing of *Dyn Amo* (1972)—than for his own prodigious work. Dwoskin's career begins in the

early-1960s Warhol Factory and continues unabated today, despite the near-death experience which is recorded, with typically paradoxical voluptuousness, in *Intoxicated by My Illness* (2001). Hailing from America but based mainly in Britain, Dwoskin, like those similarly magpie filmmakers whose paths he has crossed (Robert Kramer, Boris Lehman, Raúl Ruiz), has taken advantage of production opportunities all over Europe, bending all manner of commissions (collaborating with a dance company, documenting the work of photographer Bill Brandt, filling an experimental television slot for “hour-long single takes”) to his own artistic will, gradually exchanging 16mm for digital video along the way. Indeed, the very fact that this DVD set is the initiative of a small collective of innovative filmmakers in Switzerland (Véronique Goël, Claudine Després, Julien Schmid, Cathy Day, and Zaqueu Guimareas) points to Dwoskin's fundamental “statelessness.”

Willemen—like other prominent critics who, each from very different perspectives, have championed their friend Dwoskin, such as Raymond Durnat and Laura Mulvey—was right to zero in on “the look” or gaze as constitutive of Dwoskin's cinema. What characterizes his work, above all, is the irrefutable, hypersensitive, always volatile presence of the filmmaker's camera-eye: searching, curious, hungry for all the world's surfaces, human or otherwise. There is nothing disembodied about this gaze: its height, its point in space, its formidable grappling with lens and focus, frequently returns us to Dwoskin's position in a bed, wheelchair, or on the floor. François Albera, in a fine essay provided with the set, compares Dwoskin's body with a camera tripod—a hulking, difficult-to-manage contraption—thus squaring this camera-eye with the cinematic apparatus itself. But there is something more to Dwoskin's camerawork, and it goes far beyond even the most elaborate theory of the voyeuristic-fetishistic gaze. In his most agonizingly poignant films, like *Dear Frances, Dad*, and *Lost Dreams* (all from 2003), Dwoskin's images register not “ocular possession” but loss, distance, the fundamental otherness of all the beings who flicker past his camera and through his life. This rich DVD selection of Dwoskin takes in several key paths of his *oeuvre*: the black-and-white pictorial experiments of *Take Me* (1968) and *Dirty* (1971); hyper-modernist literary adaptations like *Tod und Teufel* (1973); rich collage films like the achingly autobiographical *Trying to Kiss the Moon* (1994); and hybrid documentary-fiction features



Behindert (left) and *Outside In*. © 1974, 1981 Stephen Dwoskin

such as *Pain Is . . .* (1997). Two more volumes, drawing out still further tendencies in his career, are promised.

One film included in this set was nothing short of a revelation for me. *Behindert* (1974) is an astonishingly intimate recreation of Dwoskin's time with actor Carola Regnier (who gives a hypnotically intricate performance of her own desires and vulnerabilities). This is Dwoskin's masterpiece. Indeed, I have come to regard it as the one of the greatest works in cinema history. Once again, it is structured in tableaux, almost classically so—from first glance to final parting, it is like the “stations of the cross” of a modern relationship; and is it accidental that it comes only a year after Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*? Like many of Dwoskin's pieces, it is a reflection upon his physical condition—the title could be translated as “hindered” or even “handicapped,” hence “disabled”—and the strains it poses on his exchanges with an able-bodied lover. But this is as far from a “social problem” or “disease of the week” telemovie as can possibly be imagined—as the perfectly judged long takes, coupled with the relentless drone-score by Gavin Bryars, attest.

Behindert remains Dwoskin's most daring and artistically successful attempt to splice his “first person” mode of cinema with a staged fiction—creating a kind of cubistic complexity from the constantly shuffled perspectives. The “fourth look” which Willemen intuited—not exactly the look of the characters, the spectator, or even the camera-eye, but some other, more forbidding look, like the gaze of society itself—hovers over the interstices between these images, these tableaux, these scenes from a relationship. From a film-history standpoint, Dwoskin's

breakthrough here is prophetic. Anticipating the ongoing novelistic autobiography of Philippe Garrel's work since the 1980s, *Behindert* plays a thrilling, almost vampiric game with the proximity of real-life experience to its fictive recreation—especially as its principals are the actual former lovers!

It is easy to bemoan the lack of attention which Dwoskin's work has so far received within the institutions of international film culture—to wonder why he is not routinely put up alongside Brakhage, Snow, Frampton, Rainer, and all the rest in the long-established Mount Rushmore of avant-garde cinema. Dwoskin himself seems to view this DVD project in a different, altogether positive spirit, with nothing of what would be an understandable *ressentiment*. Perhaps (as he reflected in 1981) the conventional cinema arrangement of a mass audience before a screen in a darkened hall was never really well-suited to his work, which “aims to take the viewer one by one,” in contradistinction to Hollywood which “aims to amalgamate the audience.” The new era of one-by-one or small-group viewing with computers and DVD is one that Dwoskin's brand of hyper-personal cinema has been awaiting. But in this context of home consumption, it will surely be a deliciously subversive counterspectacle—its variousness working against any standardizing amalgamation whatsoever.

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DVD DATA *Stephen Dwoskin 14 Films*. Director: Stephen Dwoskin. © 1968–2003 Stephen Dwoskin. Publisher: Les Films du Renard, 2007. €99.00, 5 discs.