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# VIDEOFORMES

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## Focus

### Stephen Dwoskin

#### ***Stephen Dwoskin : praise for a quest.***

#### *Another's body as one's presence.*

*« The anatomical foundation which would be the neutral part of the body, how to limit it, in order to better define the sensuality that moves it and transcends it ? »*

Initiation à la haute volupté – Isidore Isou

*« Our ambition is not to list the countless possibilities of integration and disintegration to which desire crafts the image of what is desired. »*

The Anatomy of the Image – Hans Bellmer

Since the 1960s, Stephen Dwoskin has obsessively examined the relationship between the feminine body and the masculine perception. He uncovers the most disparate rituals, the performances that are both extraordinary and minimalist, the least-shared intimacy, the infinite series of possible abstractions. For almost fifty years, Dwoskin's work has continually disturbed, even scandalized. It has been accused of misogyny or pornography and, at the same time, has profoundly affected viewers, upset them, and undermined their approach to the body being filmed.

Throughout the fifty-some films made up to now, Dwoskin has constantly worked the image of women from a specific and unique point of view: his own, that of a handicapped man, suffering from poliomyelitis since childhood. His personal condition is therefore

always at the origin of each of his cinematographic creations, which are deeply autobiographical. The films by Dwoskin embody a quest and an inexhaustible investigation of the feminine body that originate from his own masculine body, according to his own physical possibilities using the camera. These fifty films constitute the story of what is visible of these women and accessible to the body of the filmmaker. In looking them over one after the other, a unique representation of the feminine body is laid out in front of us, almost exclusively silent, strictly subjective and yet the most vast and nuanced ever seen: it might reach the highest level of abstraction in the history of cinema.

The images, lengthened insistently with an unyielding persistence in the long series of films made, are at odds with words, which are rare: the depiction of

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women develops all the nuances of strictly visual communication, along with sound for the most part minimalist, significant counterpoints of the vision.

Finally, this representation of the female body is radically insubordinate to the politically correct: with hardness and without restrictions, it deals directly with scopophilic pleasure as well as with man's desire of women; it was the first to problematize the masculine view of the female body<sup>1</sup>, bringing to the forefront the idea of reciprocal danger contained in the relationship between the one who looks and the one who lets herself be looked at. His representation of the feminine body is situated far from the established sexual gradations established by genre studies, but it nonetheless lays out infinite possibilities that are fragmentary, sensitive, and relational. This portrayal shows, without subtlety or restraint, the gentleness and cruelty of the desiring look upon women or, better, it confronts the viewer with the implications of both the sublime and aggression that are inscribed in the look, and with the profound ambiguity of the exhibition-vision relationship. Short films such as *Alone*, *Take Me*, *Moment*, *Trixi*, *Girl* and the feature film *Dyn Amo* are brilliant examples.

A constant tension – a subtle balancing act that is always unstable and liable to dissolve – is the watchword of these figurative investigations. During the actresses' different performances, in the progressive unveiling of the filmmaker's body, throughout the films, an always riskier and excessive

testing of the viewer is established. The triangle of the mechanism put in place (filmmaker, actress, and the viewer who is taken in his individuality) is tightly maintained, the dialogue between the three participants, through the means of the visual experience, represents what is most personal and distressful. Nevertheless, all that constantly risks taking us to pure abstraction: the presence of bodies as an epiphany of the material immanence of the flesh is a sudden, explosive, and subjective revelation for each viewer, a revelation that verges on the opening onto the infiniteness of conceivable imagination. The most recent films *Oblivion*, *Nightshots* (1, 2, 3) and *The Sun and the Moon*, in which Dwoskin uses a digital camera, are both a fascinating and terrible battlefield where the materiality of bodies projects us without stopping towards the imagination arising from their representation, towards their plastic dissolution.

Even in the films that do not directly show a man looking at a woman who is revealing herself in front of the camera, the fundamental point of Dwoskin's research lies in the exploration of what emerges from the action of filming, of the subjective experience (of the filmmaker, of those in front of the camera, of those who watch the film) becoming an integral part of the simple recording. Sensitive immersion, that a vision so subjective and in a prolonged period of time leads us to feel, greatly modifies our connection to the images, asks us about our possibility of reaching the visible part that eludes us. By asking questions about the world and existence (presences, bodies, relationships, desires, illness, solitude) through the vision he has of himself through the camera, Dwoskin also asks about the vision of oneself, the act of filming and

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<sup>1</sup> Dwoskin's first films amply contributed to the writing of Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual and other pleasures* (United States, Indiana University Press, 1989, p.57-68) that started the debate on the ideological implications linked to the place feminine characters have in classic cinema.

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acting in front of a camera. And the images created by Dwoskin play at pushing the limit of what is visible even farther: more fragments, more off-camera, more imagination.

This questioning of what is visible is already contained, through an amused approach and rhythmically uneven montage, in *Asleep*, the first short film by Dwoskin, in 1961. The cadre is concentrated on feet sticking out of a blanket<sup>2</sup>, the very rapid montage and music, similar to that accompanying silent films, follow the dance of these feet that acquire an independent life, their own expressivity, exhilarating, and are at the same time transformed into a growing abstraction thanks to the insistence of the cadre and the tireless rhythm of movement.

At the beginning, Dwoskin was the quintessential anti-Warhol since his images were never created in order to be experienced by the viewer as "wallpaper", a decorative object in a space. On the contrary, Dwoskin's films draw on a dimension of rhythm and of subjectivity to which you cannot avoid. The intensity of each film requires an active mental participation of the viewer, a descent into this period of time that takes us over, that profoundly changes us, and that forces us to intimately explore while we sift through the images and are captured by them.

In *Me, Myself & I* (1968), Dwoskin shows a couple confined in a bathroom. The genesis of the research on the relation between what is visible and imaginary

<sup>2</sup> The ploy of the film also consists in surprising us when the blanket is pulled "and that we" get a glimpse of the actress's legs, but the entire body will never be ours to see.

is found in a continual work on body movements, on the interstices of determinations, on the sketches of actions in a precise direction, that always call into question a sort of diegesis or a logic of acts a viewer would like to find there. In the same way, a large place is given at the start to bodily details (mouths, eyes, hands, etc.) and to the fragmentary montage that captures movements, gestures, and expressions as they evolve. The dispersion, the lack of logic and of chronology contained in these fascinating movements alternate daily necessities and the absurdity of accomplished activities. The vision is pushed even farther in a mental space that continually returns to something else, to other intimate and subjective situations. For the viewer, in fact, the experience of watching the film is a perpetual wait, mixed with the pleasure of a progressive immersion in the cracks left by concrete intentions, in the intimate space opened by long exchanged glances.

In Dwoskin's films, all is contrast, paradox, disorientation though strong and unitary experimental ventures in which shots, rhythms, lights, and sounds are magnificently mastered, destined to engender in the viewer all the intrinsic dimensions to the act of watching.

In *Dirty* (1965-1971), the blinking of refilming, the slow motions and freeze frames work on the apportionment of the two actresses' bodies, create an opening on original emotional meanings, others in relation to anatomy. The images of these two female bodies reveal a new logic of desire: the materiality of film, showing scratches, grains, and jumps between photograms, integrate the discovery and approach to the sensual intimacy of the two protagonists, the

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plastic work on bare surfaces and on movements prompt the amazement of the sudden appearance of the two girls. The wonder of the act of filming as a creation of the print of the body becomes an affirmation of the beauty of what is representable and is combined with the appearance of, on one hand, the limits of what is visible, and on the other nakedness as a space of the unknown and the emotionality of figuration. The carnal covering opens itself to subjectivity, to the scopophilic desire that the blinking materializes.

Moreover, the process, very often reiterated – notably in the first short films – of the physical and psychological unveiling of the actresses profoundly changes the work of representing female nudity.

The originality of filmmaking thoroughly explores the conception of eroticism and arousal, by criticizing from the inside the pornographic clichés and the usual sexual positions.

Several of Dwoskin's films show the relationship that is created in real time during filming between the filmmaker and the subject being filmed. All his works, notably the monoformal ones in the first period, depict nudity as an unveiling of the psychological condition of the actresses: *Girl* (1975) is the work that pushes this process to the extreme.

In all of Dwoskin's films, we can thus find the use of all the representative possibilities of this "*glissement of being*" expressed by Georges Bataille. According to the intention of the filmmaker himself, the unveiling of the actress corresponds to a veritable psychological baring. Dwoskin, through "film torture" carried out by means of insistent pressure of the camera, wants to reach the essence of the subject being filmed, enabling her to free herself from her imposed role.

With this perspective, the camera therefore becomes the trigger of an intense awareness the woman has of her body and identity. At the same time, this liberation happens with the viewers, pushed to question their view, their approach to the bodies filmed, and in the end their own corporality.

Still in line with Bataille's theory, the view of the filmmaker develops a certain cruelty: how to consider then this physical and psychological baring of feminine figures?

Whether it be a woman who is suffering (*Girl*) or who has an orgasm (*Take Me*), the fixed shots and work over the long term reveal the desire to experience the body of the other, to put it in danger and to question each person's position in this action.

The cinema becomes here an instrument to unmask women and men socially, to abolish the conventional dynamics of desire, of eroticism or of the monstration of sexuality and to bring out something else from the bodies filmed, thanks to the place given to different subjectivities. In this perspective, the cinematographic act claims to be a humanist approach that is open to dialogue. Dwoskin's film work has always tried to make sense of the intimate emotive implications of the *mise en scène* of each chosen individuality, implicating them in a larger and more universal approach to sexuality and the human condition.

In this humanist perspective *Intoxicated by my Illness* (2001) proves to be a major work, both dense and flowing, gentle and harrowing.

For the first time, Dwoskin uses a digital camera for which the lightness and technical possibilities correspond to his physical abilities for filming and to the complexity of the intention to share his

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experience of fragility and human vulnerability in sickness. In filming his long hospital stay due to a worsening of his health, the filmmaker expresses his view of himself, of his interior condition linked to the illness. It is an intimate and biographical sequel to the documentary on pain (*Pain is...*) made in 1997.

The dimensions of desire, of dreams, and of sexual pleasure are mixed with those of the experience of pain and physical suffering. The complexity of the images created through blurring, double exposures, imbedded images, divided screens, and moments of direct takes are confronted with the ample dramatic presence of music playing a role of counterpoint and accompaniment of the vision.

Illness and physical immobility contrast with sexual desire, pain contrasts with pleasure, dreamlike imagination with the immanence of "real" bodies and medical treatments, the nudity of bodies with hospital uniforms, the melodies and voices of opera with the repulsive noises of medical devices. In that way, a tension is created that stratifies on one hand the images in what they are conveying in terms of gentleness and hardness, and on the other hand, music in its alternation between lightness and gravity in making infinite variations on states of awareness, of communicated feelings. Starting from a condition of immobility and silence, through a complexity of his vision of himself and of others (the other patients, the different women who surround him and bring him medical or sexual care), Dwoskin brings about a moving and powerful intensity, his interior monologue converses with our subjectivity, our imagination, our bodily experience, of pain and pleasure. And in that, the female bodies sway from fact to dreams, materiality and opaque appearance.

The approach based on an image articulating the interior monologue of the filmmaker is amplified and renewed in films that question memory: *Trying to Kiss the Moon* in 1994, *Some Friends (Apart)* in 2002, *Grandpère's Pear, Dad* and *Dear Frances (In Memoriam)* in 2003 constitute poetical portraits that work the past, memory, often using home movie material.

In *Dad*, with an elegiac attitude highlighted by the music of Charles Ives, Dwoskin combines the chronology of images, slows down and decomposes the movements, works inside the cadre, goes from color to black and white and vice-versa, formulating a thought on reminiscence, the traces of an experienced presence, the memory of his father, of his own childhood, of his body before he contracted poliomyelitis.

The images – that of his father, eloquent and touching, and his own, a child in the United States, walking and playing – are images and rediscovered presences, investigated by a filmmaker's view that meets that of a father and son in front of the camera, speaking to them. The argentic material of photograms of the past is reworked with the digital image of the present, from the inside it questions bodies, movements, rhythms, and thus, in the same motion, it probes the rhythms and movements of memory, the emotions born of absence and loss.

The plastic and formal work makes the connection between the argentic images-trace and the images-view made digitally underlies a concrete modeling, sensitive to the material from which the presences come. This elegiac portrait arises from an intimate

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meditation created from parts of photograms, becoming a subjective visual melody, private and yet always forcefully receptive to others, always destined for a share of composed sensations.

Thanks to intense work on the material of the image, every portrait and gesture filmed by Dwoskin transforms into a prodigious and captivating presence. An example is *Phone Strip* (2007), one of his most recent short films: after making it with a cell phone, Dwoskin wanted to over-pixelize the image in order to bring out the material one more time, in order to remind us that in his work it is always about a body that is investigating other bodies, real matter that works dreams, desires, and imagination.

In *Phone Strip*, the experience of a relationship carried out through the camera is renewed. The face is revealed, questioned, it lets itself be surprised and surprises the filmmaker. And from this investigation-experience springs, once more, something like the "overly-visible", going beyond the print of appearance, showing the traces of two interiorities that meet, that communicate, and that thoroughly envelop the viewer in this unending tension: Stephen Dwoskin's tireless quest.

*"Others who are apparent in the face, pierce, in such a way his own plastic essence, like a being who opens the window where his face was already drawn. His presence consists in undressing the form in which it had already been manifested. His manifestation is a surplus on the inevitable paralysis of the manifestation. That is what we are describing by the formula: the face speaks. The manifestation of the face is the first speech. Speaking is, before anything else, this way of coming from behind*

*one's appearance, from behind one's form, an opening in the opening."*

Emmanuel Lévinas, *Humanism and the Other*

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Translated from French by Kevin Metz

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## Program

**Asleep** / 1961 / 4'

**Me, Myself and I** / 1967 / 18'

**Dirty** / 1965 / 30'

**Intoxicated by my Illness** / 2001 / 41'

**Phone Strip** / 2007 / 8'17"

