

NOTES ON *TRYING TO KISS THE MOON* AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN DWOSKIN

If you ask a film maker to produce his autobiography he will invariably think of writing the book, but not if he, believing that visual images are more potent than words, uses the camera and film making as an intimate and integral form of self and shared expression. For Stephen Dwoskin, the film camera becomes an extension of self in a way that few, if any, film makers achieve and never is this more evident than in his recent work, *TRYING TO KISS THE MOON*.

The film as an extension of self and the self as an extension of film is an idea which springs naturally out of 20th century philosophy and art. Dwoskin's autobiography relates to at least three of the major art movements such as the impressionists and post impressionists, who liberate the artist and the audience from narrative, static, figurative imagery to the wider appreciation of natural experience through the use of new pigments and a proper understanding of light, and the German and American expressionists, who dare to explore the emotions of the inner landscape and a shared human experience described through paint. These movements in art are reflected in the major preoccupations of European philosophical debate questioning traditionally held views on the perception of physical phenomenon and outmoded concepts of time and space. Considering Dwoskin's work against the overall pattern of Western culture this century we see him as an innovator; an artist who takes up the cultural pointers of the past and moves to new heights of invention.

The use of the film as camera as a means of expressive interaction can be seen throughout Dwoskin's body of work in early films like *Chinese Checkers*, in which the faces of the two girls react to the camera and the camera to the faces and in later works such as the Channel 4 biography of Bill Brandt in which the still cameraman confronts the film cameraman with, just as they have been in life, the actual implements of their craft, their cameras, becoming an integral part of the story. There is no distancing the narration from the visual in a divorced non-reality; the tools of creation are seen cleaved to the user as an extension of the body and the frontiers, therefore, between fantasy and fact -- fact and fantasy (just as in life) are ambiguous and artistic statements more impactful.

The film *TRYING TO KISS THE MOON*, has a non narrative structure in which the past becomes the present and the present the past. Sequences of film shot by Dwoskin's father in the early 1940s are juxtaposed with material from different times of the artist's life and form a rhythm which creates a trance-like feeling in the viewer, when 'normal' concepts of time slip away and the whole tapestry of Dwoskin's life unfolds. Relatives seen on film in the 1940s are now either seen or spoken to in an abstracted collage of sound and vision. A family snap shot is stroked by the hand of the film maker's mother, the hand itself being more descriptive of the passage of time than the words spoken on sound over.

It is likely that Dwoskin's father's serious hobby of making family movies influenced him from an early age with the concept of the camera as life and life as camera.

A two year old, who simply wants privacy playing in the garden, turns a resentful eye upon his father's imposition and at an early age learns the power of film when he expresses his feelings to the lens.

The silent home movies throughout his years of growing up seem to develop in Dwoskin an understanding of his own, and other's emotional truth and artifice - whatever the event, it is recorded on film and in the developing child's mind has no relevance if it is not. One of the strongest sequences in *TRYING TO KISS THE MOON* is when Dwoskin's father visits the hospital in which his son recovers after he contracts polio. The father's despair is shown in the way the camera sweeps the interior of the ward in which his son sits up in bed trying, with little success, to inflate a balloon.

Continued...

The silent tension is shattering in the original home movie and the early film is made even more painful by Dwoskin's addition of an extraordinary abstracted verbal and musical soundtrack; a skill for which the film maker is well known and which permeates and supports the autobiography like a delicate framework; the sound like the visuals make total sense through their incoherence.

The impact of being paralysed at puberty for a private, intelligent boy doesn't take much to imagine, Dwoskin describes this by showing a short sequence of his mother trying to mop up his nosebleed and then her face, with its lost expression, turning full to the camera. His father's camera work takes on another meaning in the post puberty polio days of his son's life, when father and son explore the new parameters of existence - a new frame of reference and they do it through the use of celluloid, what else?

Lying in a hospital bed has very little going for it as a way of life, unless you like to read and watch and listen and Stephen Dwoskin, the boy isolated from the normal distractions of growing up, observes and reads and thinks about life - mostly people and what they feel and how they express themselves with their bodies as well as words. A naturally tough, clever and private person under these conditions, graduating out into the world of American expressionism, pop and op art of the late '50s and '60s, fights his physical disability and turns it into an artistic life raft. A thorough knowledge of the emotions and the body is the bedrock of, first his painting and then his film work.

The painting becomes a way of learning about the emotions as they are expressed through colour and his father's legacy of home movies and the cine camera offers the final solution to combining movement and colour in expressing the inner landscape of the heart, the mind and the soul; all such a film maker must do is to put people in front of camera and ask them to be themselves. In the New York hot house of Ginsburg, Kerouac and Method acting, Warhol and Lean/, the teenage Dwoskin finds the cultural freedom he needs to make his unique filmic statements, which have very little to do with the massive budgets and popular concepts of American film industry and everything to do with small budgets, social criticism and underground art. As an artistic anachronism he turns inevitably to Europe to follow his star. One suspects he chooses England because living in the Molting Hill Gate multi-racial environment of the late '60s and early 70s allows the private, largely isolated process of watching, listening and thinking to go on and at his house in Ladbroke Grove, film as life and life as film is finally brought to its proper realisation.

In the autobiography, *TRYING TO KISS THE MOON* Dwoskin weaves his tapestry of fact and fiction in a delicately balanced picture of his life. The shots of his present creative environment in South London from the wheelchair are a moving statement of the inevitable limitations of physical disability and the final sequence of trying to get the full moon in focus through the trees and in the night sky, is painful in the extreme, but the interwoven sequences of unique creativity, both in life and in film tell the real story of the most profound personal and artistic ability.

end

Ros Mitchelmore October 1994