

reviews

"Film Is. . ."

Film Is ...

by Stephen Dwoskin

The Overlook Press, Woodstock, N.Y./268 pp./\$15.00 (hb)

Two years ago in these pages (*Afterimage* vol. 1, no. 9) I tried to survey some books which I felt represented the best possible verbal introduction to the art of independent film. While conceding that the written word can never substitute for or completely explain a visual experience, I felt that because books are far more accessible to most people than non-commercial films they could be fruitfully employed to direct their readers to works of which they would not otherwise be aware. There were at that time two general introductions to the field in print, Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1967) and *Experimental Cinema* by David Curtis (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971). Both books had their strengths; neither, to my mind, was an altogether satisfactory account of its subject.

Since then, the publication of P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (reviewed in *Afterimage*, vol. 2, no. 5) has given the art of personal film its first sustained critical scrutiny, but Sitney disclaims the responsibility of providing a general survey of the field. His method is to concentrate on certain thematic tendencies of particular interest to him. Thus, while his book set a new standard of critical intensity, it proved no real addition to Curtis's and Renan's subject, the overall history of the medium.

Into this void has now come a book which I think provides as much as one can reasonably expect from a single author. *Film Is ...* by Stephen Dwoskin, subtitled *The International Free Cinema*, functions both as the kind of survey Curtis and Renan attempt while exploring responses with some of the thoroughness that characterizes Sitney's writing. For those with no previous acquaintance with the field of personal film, Dwoskin's book seems to me the best place to begin.

Film Is ... consists of two parts. The first is made up of "Early History" and "Contemporary Background," two long chapters which together provide the kind of historical account offered by Curtis's *Experimental Cinema*. There is a different feeling to Dwoskin's survey, though, a quality missing from the earlier book which I am hard put to exactly describe. It is somehow connected, I think, with the fact that Dwoskin is himself a filmmaker. An American by birth, a Londoner by choice, he has, over the last decade or so, come to be considered an important film artist. While his films have rarely been seen in this country, he did appear in New York last year at the Millennium Film Workshop and the Museum of Modern Art, and the work he showed on those occasions left little doubt as to his stature as a filmmaker. Although I was not lucky enough to have been at those screenings, the reactions that I received second-hand were in my mind as I read the first chapters of *Film Is ...*

Curtis, in his treatment of the history of personal film, catalogues artists and their work in a way that, for all his inclusiveness, does not seem particularly devoted to the medium. One can imagine substituting the names of poets or painters or composers for those of filmmakers without in any way changing the tone or manner of the book. *Experimental Cinema* could then be "Experimental Poetry," "Experimental Painting" or "Experimental Music" with no alterations of form or approach. With Dwoskin's book, no such interchangeability exists. There is never any doubt that the author's relationship to his subject is an obsessive

and encompassing one. There is not the slightest academic flavor to the historical material in *Film Is ...*; the author is clearly dealing with the vital roots of his own creative life and not simply with chronological data.

There is a sensitivity also to people, characterizes Dwoskin's account. Where Curtis has a propensity for listing titles alone, Dwoskin seems more aware of the human effort that produces a title. This too would appear to stem from his being a filmmaker himself. Painfully aware of the personal hardship involved in working with expensive material without commercial backing, Dwoskin never sees films as an inevitable cultural phenomenon but rather as the lucky result of an artist's always perilous struggle with infinite limitations. The tendency among many chroniclers of art history in general to treat creative work as an almost agricultural process, sown and nurtured by artists, harvested regularly year after year surfaces occasionally in Curtis's book. A film artist knows that there is no such immutability to the process, and it is that consciousness that Dwoskin brings to his history.

Sheldon Renan's *Introduction to the American Underground Film* does not lack this attention to the human behind the film, but the parameters of its inquiry are far narrower than Dwoskin's. Renan's main handicaps have, through no fault of his, worsened since I described them two years ago. First published in 1967, the book's age precludes its completeness more and more with each passing year. Likewise, the fact that it treats only activity on our shores. While the pre-eminence of American filmmakers in the two decades following the war cannot really be challenged, that pre-eminence has diminished every year over the last decade making Renan's book progressively more insular. Yet simply adopting a strictly international viewpoint, as Curtis (an Englishman) does, is not really the answer. Despite the fact that personal filmmakers are now active all over the globe, the energy with which the field has exploded can still be traced to American sources. This puts Stephen Dwoskin in an exceptionally good position to write this book. Like his subject, his passion and his roots are American, but his current scope and outlook are international. He can feel more directly than Curtis the spirit of the new wave of personal filmmaking that began in America, but, unlike Renan, he in no way limits his discussion to national boundaries.

The second part of *Film Is ...* balances historical survey with an extended, highly personal, account of Dwoskin's "Memories of Films and Filmmakers." The combination is a most felicitous one, for it offers the reader in a single book what he would previously have needed a number of books to acquire. If the first chapters of *Film Is ...* equal and perhaps surpass the work of Curtis and Renan, the book's second half bears a similar relationship to two more subjective accounts of the field, Sitney's *Visionary Film*, mentioned earlier, and Jonas Mekas's *Movie Journal*. Of course while an objective survey can be evaluated objectively, a work of intuitive personal response can only elicit like responses from its critics. My own feelings about both Sitney's and Mekas's books are very positive, but I also feel that here, too, Dwoskin has something unprecedented to offer.

As I mentioned earlier Sitney's book made no claim to comprehensiveness; neither, I think, would Sitney argue that his speculations had any absolute authority. Clearly his interests run strongly to "structural" film and, for that reason, more simply lyrical and diaristic works are not treated at length in *Visionary Film*. In Mekas's *Movie Journal*, the approach is even more idiosyncratic. The politics of the New York avant-garde in the '60s dominate the book every bit as

much as any film. The book, then, functions as an invaluable document of the total milieu that produced many important films, but again lacks a broad scope. Finally, with only a few exceptions, both Sitney and Mekas deal exclusively with American work.

While it is doubtful that Dwoskin undertook his "Memories of Films and Filmmakers" with the specific intention of addressing himself to the shortcomings of previous books, he nevertheless does accomplish something along those lines. His interests are extremely wide-ranging; no clear prejudice for any specific vein of personal film is evident nor does nationality restrict the breadth of his discussion. He gives attention equally to activity in all parts of Western Europe, and includes American work from both coasts. Best of all, he shares with Mekas the passion of a participant, never seeming to be a detached observer. Without embarrassment he cites his own films where he feels that they represent significant explorations. This would seem a dangerous trait, especially for a film-

maker not widely known, but Dwoskin does it with such naturalness that one never suspects him of self-promotion. Reaction to his work from other quarters suggests that, if anything, he has been too modest in his treatment of his own work.

In an expanding, constantly changing creative medium, there will, of course, never be a definitive book, and I won't make that claim for *Film Is ...*. But in a field where books will probably always be more accessible than the subject they describe, any addition to the existing literature has a special significance. The fact that Dwoskin has gone so far towards meeting the gaps and failures of earlier books magnifies that importance. It is sad that the book appears in this country under the aegis of such a small publisher that really extensive distribution is unlikely. Yet, as least theoretically, it is available to anyone with \$15, and eventually its quality may be widely appreciated. For the sake of personal film, I hope for the best.

—Scott Hammen

Stills from three discussed in *Film Is ...*: top, from Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, 1966-7; middle, from Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, 1957; bottom, from Maya Deren's *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, 1946.

