

Keywords: Stephen Dwoskin (1939-2012), autobiography; experimental film; home movies; memory; Jewish; disability

Abstract

In this article I discuss the three experimental autobiographical films that Stephen Dwoskin made between 1994 and 2003; *Trying to kiss the moon* (1994), *Some Friends (apart)* (2002) and *Francis in Memorium* (2003). I first met Dwoskin at the Royal College of Art film school in London where I was a student in the 1970s and he was a part-time tutor. We were both Jewish with very different personal histories and experiences, but after I left the RCA he became a close personal friend. As a disabled American ex-patriat man he spent most of his adult life looking at the world through a camera lens, filming his friends and lovers, building an archive of footage that form part of these films, supplemented by the extensive home-movie footage filmed by his father, Henry, a carpenter. My analysis of his films is therefore coloured by my own personal recollections of him.

Dwoskin and Me:

halting the flow of time

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging [...], he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden with the earth: the images [...]

that stand-like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery-in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding.

Walter Benjamin (1979)

Introduction

In this article my aim is to explore through textual readings, filmic strategies, techniques and tropes deployed by the American Jewish filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin in the construction of three of his autobiographical films, *Trying to kiss the moon* (1994), *Some Friends (apart)* (2002) and *Francis in memorium* (2003). Dwoskin's authorial presence is strongly represented in all his films – in many his presence is encribed by implication through his use of a subjective, hand-held camera, tight close up framing with zooms in and out, towards and away from bodies and faces – and many of his later films are explicitly autobiographical. A camera was never far away from Dwoskin's hand and eye. He spent most of his adult life looking at the world through a lens, filming his friends, lovers and the world around him, building an archive of footage that formed part of his later films. He was an obsessive collector – of images, photographic and computer technology, of model vintage cars. Filming and archiving moving images of his friends, lovers and acquaintances was a normal and everyday act for Dwoskin, long before YouTube, smartphones and the internet made constant filming ubiquitous. David MacDougall notes that for a filmmaker the act of looking through the lens at the world around them is different to how we may ordinarily see the world: “The camera is both an instrument and an instigator of dislocation. It changes the filmmaker's visual and social perspective. In the process it becomes a guide in more than one sense, able to lead the filmmaker across the frontiers of culture, class, age and gender [...] Acts of looking satisfy our desires and answer to a variety of needs, whereas seeing serves chiefly as a means of navigation and recognition” (MacDougall 2019, 14-15).

Many of Dwoskin's autobiographical films were constructed through his personal archive of images, consisting of shots of his friends, extracts from his films and the extensive reworking of an archive of home movie footage shot by his father, Henry, a carpenter. Henry filmed his family and relatives in Brooklyn and at the hospital where Dwoskin spent a long period receiving treatment from the effects of polio which he contracted when he was nine years old. This led to a severe physical disability that affected his legs and lungs and for the latter part of his life he was forced to use a wheelchair. For Dwoskin, access to Henry's personal film archive of his American family was a source of celluloid gold. Darragh O'Donoghue speculates that Henry's own filmmaking may be compensation for the unhappiness of his work life: "Dwoskin's later recollections about the unhappiness of his father at work, where he was an active union official, suggest that home movie-making was Henry's attempt to create a world in his own image, countering a real world where he experienced a lack of agency and the failure of his political ideals" (O'Donoghue 2018, 77). Dwoskin was fascinated by bodies, mainly female and as he grew older he also became fascinated by the disintegration of his own aging disabled body. O'Donoghue sees a parallel in Dwoskin's interest in documenting his own life and those in his personal world through the fragile material of film celluloid. He notes that: "the late auto/biographical works deal with the body of film itself – the vulnerable, decaying body of celluloid, smelling of vinegar. This celluloid is immaterialised into digital form, trapping the immaterial bodies of family and friends – and Dwoskin himself – long dead or irrevocably changed" (O'Donoghue 2018, 68).

Early Lives

Dwoskin was a tutor at the Royal College of Art film school in the 1970s where I studied filmmaking for three years. He became a close friend of mine. We were both Jewish,

but neither of us were paid-up members of a Jewish diaspora. I also met Henry, Dwoskin's father at Dwoskin's home in West London and knew many of Dwoskin's friends and former students. I discovered when I saw them that I am in two of his autobiographical films, *Trying to kiss the moon*, made in 1994 and *Some Friends (apart)*, made in 2002. My understanding and reading of his autobiographical films is therefore inevitably coloured by my memories of him. While Dwoskin and I did not discuss our shared Jewish identity, the sense of his contested identity permeates his autobiographical films. In *Trying to kiss the moon* it is evident from the home movie footage that he came from a close-knit family, but Jewishness does not appear as a topic. However, Donoghue points out that other films did explicate his Jewishness: "the autobiographical films from the early 1990s coincide with the first direct references to Jewishness in his work, for instance, footage from the Nazi concentration camps in *Face of our fear* and *Pain is*" (Donoghue 2018, 77). As Dwoskin grew older his feelings about his contested identity became a subject of reflection. As Stuart Hall points out: "I do not know of any identity which, in establishing what it is, does not, at the very same moment, implicitly declare what it is not, what has to be left out, excluded." (Hall 2001, 40) It is unclear to me why Dwoskin decided to stay in Britain rather than return home to America after his Fulbright scholarship to Britain ended. To have come to Britain, travelling alone on a sea voyage of five days shows a significant depth of determination for a man with a serious physical disability. In *Trying to kiss the moon* Dwoskin muses in voice-over about this voyage from New York to Britain. In a sequence consisting of a woman's legs dancing and images of beautiful women, his voice-over says that at first he was lonely during the voyage, but then he was consoled by encounters with two women; a redhead who banged on his door at 2am and, rather poignantly, he remarks that he could not get to the door to let her in; the other, he tells us was a violinist in high heels who performed on the ship. We may judge that Dwoskin is an unreliable narrator; he does not provide any substantial evidence to back up

his claim that these events actually occurred. Since his autobiographical films are subjective and experimental in their construction, they avoid any constraints of certainty and reliability. As Marcia Landy argues the experimental film “bypass[es] the demands for veracity, evidence, and argument” (Landy 2001, 58). Dwoskin’s voiced account of his romantic encounters with beautiful women in *Trying to kiss the moon* inscribes his identity as a man deeply fascinated by beautiful women and, he insists, they with him.

Neither wholly British nor wholly American in his identity, Dwoskin nevertheless, retained a strong Brooklyn accent throughout his life, and, as his reputation grew as an independent and controversial filmmaker in his representation of beautiful women, he maintained connections with friends all over the world. It is difficult to judge whether Dwoskin saw himself as an ex-patriate, as an emigre or as an exile; perhaps he was all of these. As an exile he may well have felt the plurality of vision, a straddling of multiple camps, that Edward Said refers to: “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home, exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that to borrow a phrase from music is contrapuntal. [...] Both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual occurring together contrapuntally” (Said, 2002, 186). Eleanor Byrne convincingly remarks that: “The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever” (Byrne 2009, 18). In *Trying to kiss the moon* Dwoskin’s voice-over considers his perceived sense of a contested identity: “Never fitted in, because the America I know doesn’t exist any more”. When the attack on the twin towers in New York occurred on September 11th, 2001, Dwoskin and I were sitting talking in his kitchen. The television was on, but the sound was turned down. We both suddenly noticed a drama playing out live on television, watching in stunned silence as the first plane flew silently into one of the towers. Dwoskin’s

reaction turned quickly from shock into profound anger, almost as though this was a personal attack on him. Despite spending the majority of his life in Britain, he maintained a deep sense and attachment to his American identity. In fact, a continuing sense of loss and nostalgia for his imagined past permeates Dwoskin's autobiographical films.

The Royal College of Art (RCA)

My own secular Jewish family was dysfunctional owing to my father's repressed homosexuality; my parents separated, divorced and came back together several times. My childhood was itinerant, moving from place to place as my parents' fortunes went from luxury to poverty seemingly overnight. My father was absent from my life for most of my teenage years after he went to live in southern Spain. I left school at fifteen with few qualifications and after working in a series of dead-end jobs became a single parent. Eventually, I enrolled on an art foundation course, acquired a degree in Fine Art and arrived at the RCA film school. My time at the RCA was transformative for me and when I left in 1977 my outlook on life had changed completely. I had made several experimental films, was the London secretary of the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) and a politically active Trotskyist and socialist feminist.

At the start of my time at the RCA all the full-time tutors were male, white, middle-aged and industry orientated. In my class of twenty students, just three were women. I was determined that being a single parent would not deter me in my ambition to become a filmmaker. I found the most interesting tutors were not the middle-aged white men, but the part-time tutors, filmmakers whose practice was experimental, including Peter Gidal, Noel Burch and Dwoskin. The head of school, Stuart Hood was a Trotskyist. Dwoskin arrived at the RCA when I was in my second year. He struck an impressive figure, with a massive

upper torso, long black hair, and wooden crutches. I thought he resembled a very large spider. He was very softly-spoken, with a broad Brooklyn drawl I found hard to understand, and chain-smoked Gauloise cigarettes which he took out of a crumpled packet tucked into a pocket on the front of his blue denim shirt. Many of Dwoskin's daily routines and habits were formed as a result of the discipline of the military school he was sent to at the age of seven, and the many months he spent in hospital with polio when he was nine years old. He was a creature of habit, a night owl, working long into the night and rising late. His diet was basic. Steak, bagels, a very few vegetables, large pots of coffee, and I remember he always ate his evening meal at 6pm. He had a fatalistic approach to his disability and said often to me that polio, a muscle wasting disease and the cause of his disability – was still an unknown virus in its long-term effects, and he did not expect to live to a ripe old age. He gave me the sense of a man in a hurry and he certainly lived life to the full, rising well above the limitations of his disability. When he appraised my work, he was more interested in discussing our shared personality traits – we were both Capricorns – than in giving me film critiques. He had constructed his life to overcome most of the physical limitations of his disability; he came to parties, drove an adapted car and had frequent relationships. He had a film cutting room in his house where he shot many of his films, and any funding he received was immediately translated into the purchase of film equipment. Generally, his professional and personal world revolved around his home and he was loyal to the people who supported him in his work and in his daily life.

At the RCA Dwoskin was contemptuous of the industry-focused lecturers and socialised with the students and other part-time tutors. He considered himself to be an artist and an independent filmmaker: “In this context the term independence may be defined as the occupation of a space that is in political, cultural and economic opposition to the dominant

mode of film production and distribution” (Daniels 2019, 34). Many of his current and former students worked on his films and most of them became close friends. In his book, ‘Film Is’, a survey of independent experimental filmmaking published in 1975 he wrote: “Because many independent film-makers are inspired to make films by a personal urge to express themselves and have never been connected with the cinema industry or conditioned by it, they revitalize film language. Their exploration of the visual language enriches our seeing, just as poetry enriches ordinary verbal language (Dwoskin 1975 167).” Dwoskin’s films are unique and personal although I saw no evidence that they influenced RCA students directly, probably because they were so personal. However, he made it seem entirely possible to make experimental films independently, at a time when it was almost impossible to enter the film industry or broadcast television unless you were a member of the trade union, the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT). You could not obtain membership of the ACTT without a job and you could not get a job unless you were a member of the union. And there were very few women in technical, production or directing roles in the film industry or broadcast television.

Dwoskin was politically oppositional and proud of his grandfather, Boris who fought in the Russian Revolution. From the start of his career as a filmmaker he aligned himself with other independent filmmakers and artists, first in New York and then as a founding member of the film-makers cooperative which began in a room at the back of the Better Books bookshop in central London. In November 1974, he was present when a group of 50 independent filmmakers met at the RCA film school in the wake of a TV programme on independent cinema hosted by the presenter Melvyn Bragg which was broadcast on BBC2 television. I was at the meeting as were many RCA students. The BBC programme did not show the films in their entirety, instead showing clips lasting between just 30 seconds and

five minutes. Outraged by this perceived ‘tokenism’ the group wrote a joint letter to the BBC demanding that the films be shown in their entirety. The head of BBC2 Aubrey Singer dismissed this demand outright stating that he was not going to have those types of films on his channel. This rejection led directly to the founding of the IFA in 1976 as a national organisation of independent filmmakers, distributors and film theorists. IFA groups sprang up all over Britain. Their primary aim was to gain access to the ACTT, which still maintained its protectionist stance against new entrants to its membership. I was an active member of the IFA during my time at the RCA. Dwoskin also fully supported its aims, but he kept his distance from meetings.

In the 1970s Dwoskin’s distinctive approach to filmmaking meant that he was both inside and outside the two central movements in independent cinema; artist filmmakers — who generally embraced non-narrative structuralism associated with the London Filmmakers Cooperative — and the IFA, which was associated with more explicitly activist films often produced by film collectives, or films that experimented with narrative disruption and discontinuity, long takes, or Brechtian distantiation. These latter were associated with filmmakers like Jean Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, or Jean-Luc Godard, or in Britain the films of Berwick Street Collective such as their documentary, *Night Cleaners*. Dwoskin seems to have had no interest in either foregrounding visual effects or filmic reflexivity in his practice. In ‘Film Is..’ he wrote, that: “Film can be described or explained only in terms of light and optics: visual effects. But if we are too aware of the effect (what is it, or how it is done) we are drawn away from the overall statement for the sake of a detail. [...] Although film-makers may explore or ‘experiment’ with effects created by particular kinds of image, the experiment is over when the film is complete” (Dwoskin 1975, 166). This view might be

seen as a dig at the theories of anti-narrative structuralism and in particular, his American colleague at the RCA, the structuralist filmmaker, Peter Gidal.

After the RCA

After leaving film school in 1977 I maintained my friendship with Dwoskin. For a decade I moved away from filmmaking but in 1987 I accompanied him to Rotterdam film festival. Paul Willemen, a film theorist and former colleague of mine in the IFA was at the Rotterdam festival and subsequently helped me to put in a funding application to South West Arts to make a short fiction film, *I'm In Heaven*. South West Arts shortlisted my application, but at my interview, they watched my feature length experimental student film, *Debauch* and my application was rejected. However, they told me to apply again for funding to complete the film if I shot it. This was quite an ask in the days of expensive 16mm film, but I decided to make it since I thought it was my only chance of becoming a filmmaker. Through a form of physical crowd-funding (a party at the location) and the support of Dwoskin who shot it, and my former student friends we made it. I was influenced by Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23 Quai de Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), which gives an account of three days in the life of a Belgium middle-class woman, the eponymous Jeanne Dielman. It was shot in long takes documenting the minutiae of her daily life. *I'm In Heaven* tells the story of Rachel, a middle-class woman estranged from her orthodox Jewish family. She has confined herself to a small apartment at the top of a tower block in a near-derelict council estate in south-east London. Shot in long takes with little dialogue the film documents Rachel's daily life as she carries out pastiche rituals of Jewish mores. The shoot which lasted almost a week was located in an empty council flat in a tower block. It was lent to me for a week by a friend just before he gave up the tenancy. Dwoskin offered to shoot it. The shoot was organised almost entirely around his daily routine. Making a special effort to get up earlier than usual he

arrived late every day. Fortunately, and unusually the lift worked throughout. However, there were other problems. The 16mm camera borrowed from the RCA was old and extremely noisy even when blimped. Out of the comfort zone of his usual hand-held camera, Dwoskin was uncomfortable with the large tripod which was hard to negotiate around his crutches. While the rest of the crew had vegetable stew, prepared by a non-filmmaker friend, Dwoskin demanded large quantities of meat every day, preferably a steak which had to arrive at 6pm.

There were other more serious problems: the 180-degree rule to obtain an eyeline match between characters was something of a mystery to Dwoskin and also to the crew. As students we had not been taught, or perhaps did not listen to our tutors' explanations of how to achieve narrative continuity. The crew endlessly debated which side of the imagined line to place the camera; despite our best efforts not a single dialogue sequence had an eyeline match. In the event, the resulting spectatorially disorienting spatial effect seemed to me to be entirely appropriate in evoking an approximation of Rachel's mental health problems. The film was edited by Anthea Kennedy, a fellow student who became a long-time collaborator of Dwoskin's. Eventually, I received the completion funding and the film was screened at many film festivals and won an award at the Huesca short film festival in Spain.

Dwoskin's early films

At the time Dwoskin was teaching at the RCA in the 1970s he expressed his personal preoccupations with bodies, pain and separation in his films. Dan Kidner remarks that "In *Central Bazaar* we see bodies dance, stumble, collapse, threaten each other, submit to each other's embraces, cry and scream, but not for the purposes of expressing a particular human drama in a narrative, more to remind us that we too are embodied". Since most of these bodies are women, often unclothed, his films were voyeuristic at a time when feminist

studies was growing. Voyeurism of women's bodies, performing to camera and with each other, was a central theme of his films throughout his career, possibly stemming from the sexual passivity he told me he associated with his own body and his intense fascination and fear of the female's sexually active body. However, Dwoskin's films problematise the question of the voyeuristic spectator often through the gaze of the filmed subject back into the camera thus positioning the spectator as an imagined subject of the film. Willemen argues that in Dwoskin's films, looks, including the look of the spectator are foregrounded and the spectator is therefore not enabled to imagine themselves invisible; constituting the spectator as a visible subject thus reduces the pleasure of the purely voyeuristic (Willemen 1994). It is not difficult to see the logical progression of Dwoskin's later move into the reworking of home movie as found footage. Home movies make great use of social engagement between familial subjects and they are often filmed performing for the camera. In Dwoskin's case he inherited an extensive archive of home footage shot by Henry after Henry's death. Henry's interest in filming his family may well have sparked Dwoskin's initial interest in filmmaking as an extension of his painting and graphic work. Dwoskin was familiar with the films of Jonas Mekas and other American avant-garde filmmakers who documented their own lives. Jim Lane points to several events that led to the development of autobiographical documentary films in the late 1960s in America: "First, the autobiographical avant-garde film of the sixties paved the way for self-inscription in documentary. Second, autobiographical documentarists rejected the realist conventions of the popular American direct cinema of the same period. Third, the reflexive turn in international cinema strongly influenced experimentation in documentary" (Lane 2002, p.8).

In 1994 Dwoskin completed the first of his directly autobiographical films, *Trying to kiss the moon*, inspired by, and incorporating extensive footage from Henry's archive of

home movies. By this point the situation for independent filmmakers had completely changed in Britain. The organised women's movement had faded away, the IFA had disbanded having had most of its demands for union membership and access to Broadcast television met, and the London Filmmakers Cooperative had morphed into the Lux and no longer acted as a distribution hub for all independent filmmakers. The world had changed for independent filmmakers.

Three autobiographical films

In her analysis of the home movie Vivian Sobchack (she uses the French term *film-souvenir*) draws attention to the difference between the spectator's receptivity to the familiar and the unfamiliar. The pleasure for the spectator in watching home movies where places and people are familiar she argues, is that it allows their imagination to wander from the events on the screen towards a known past event or an absent person to give a sense of nostalgic identification and pleasure. Without this sense of familiarity, other people's home movies may appear to the spectator as an unsatisfying documentary (Sobchack 1999, 247-249). However, Dwoskin deployed filmic strategies and devices in his autobiographical films that prevent them being viewed as familiar to us, even when we may recognize some of the subjects. They are constructed with fragmented poetic narrative structures that move away from the directly mimetic while retaining ghostly auras of the subject, and extensive use of long slow-motion sequences also allow contemplation of the image. He used an archive of existing footage, either his father's home movies or his own archive of films and videos and extracts from his films, coupled with new footage of his surroundings in his daily life. Much of the footage was refilmed, slowed down and sometimes speeded up and consists of different formats and quality.

In the reworking of his father's home movie footage in *Kissing the moon* and two later films consisting of extensive shots of his friends and lovers, *Some Friends (apart)* and *Dear Frances in memorium*, Dwoskin often comes very close to the creation of further home movies. Home movies generally consist of friends and family in their daily lives, on holiday or engaged in communal celebratory events that are designed to create an inscription of their own family history, with a perceived aim of creating a deeper sense of familial identity; central to many home movies is the subject's look into and performance for the camera. However, Dwoskin's films are not home movies. The images of friends and family in their daily lives are transformed through the extensive manipulation of film speed and the effect of re-filming and shot repetition, from home movies into highly constructed films that inscribe a deep nostalgia for a lost past. Dwoskin's created multiple self, author and subject, seer and sometimes seen, at different points of his life does not serve to provide an authentic mediation of familial and other close relationships but uncertainty; a dispersion of meaning that may allow the spectator to speculate on what has been seen and heard. The title is the only key to the fact that the subjects in *Some Friends (apart)* which he made in 2002 are all his friends or lovers. The film is constructed through extensive shots of his friends looking into the camera, just as the subjects in a home movie often do, but the shots show subjects who are framed and lit, and even when the image is softened and blurred by the effect of the speed of a slow shutter or slow-motion, the hand-held camera is purposeful; the effect is one of familiarity, and intimacy with the subjects is often underlined by a friendly protest at being filmed; the spectator has a strong sensation of the body behind the camera looking.

Dwoskin always acquired the latest film technology and experimented with their abilities. In 1989 hi-8 analogue video cameras were introduced. He bought one at once. When standard-definition digital video cameras arrived, he bought one of those. Since he was unable to leave his house very often due to his disability, his friends came to see him and were invariably filmed, all these images adding to his extensive film archive. In his three autobiographical films he used analogue celluloid footage from his father's archive of home movies, his own archive of films and videos and extracts from his feature films and produced new footage. Much of the footage is re-filmed, slowed down and sometimes speeded up. At the heart of this strategy is the use of repetition, of images, gesture and sound to allow a reconsideration of the film's discourse. According to Giorgio Agamben "Repetition is not the return of the identical; it is not the same as such that returns. The force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was" (Agamben 2002). In these films the organizing voice is split between an enunciative trace of the original footage, such as the type of film stock or analogue or digital video, titles, framing and aspect ratio and a second, overriding method of associational editing, including the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, titles, stills, re-filming and variations in footage speed and lengths of shots (Arthur 1999/2000, 60). The trace of the past in the present in the completed film leads to a kind of ghostly haunting. In this way the mimetic is transformed into poetic evocation while the repetition of footage and reframing of the narrative structure allows for a new reading of the original texts.

Dwoskin's familial and personal exploration began with *Trying to kiss the moon*. His birth date is announced in a title. However, confounding our expectations that this will be the start of a conventional autobiographical journey of Dwoskin's life, the film then cuts to a cassette player and a voiced exchange of letters between two middle-aged men musing on

their lives. Fragments of this conversation are woven through the film. The film is composed of discontinuous fragments of events; Dwoskin himself as a child, with his family before and after he is disabled. We see how he was before he was disabled running towards the camera. We see him ill with his mother or perhaps his nurse. We see him learning to use his crutches, struggling to get into a car, perhaps for the first time. There are unconnected fragments of exposition. In one sequence we see black and white images of his grandfather, Boris play-wrestling while Dwoskin's voice-over says he took after his Russian grandfather. We are left to consider this possibility. His voice-over affirms that now his identity lies in his being a filmmaker: "everything always feels transient with other people, work is the continuity, without the work I feel very lost....I'm actually quite a private person".

In *Some Friends (apart)* made in 2002, footage from Dwoskin's personal film archive from many different periods of his life is edited into the film without textual explanation and none of the 'friends' are identified. Unlike *Trying to kiss the moon* there is no sync sound. The film has a succession of elongated shots of (mostly) women in interiors, usually a domestic setting, looking, often with a smile into the moving camera, until it cuts abruptly to another shot; sometimes just a few frames after the point at which the subject is beginning an active movement of the head or body away from the camera. Sometimes the shot is repeated and sometimes, but not always the subjects reappear later in a different setting. Intercut are shots of exteriors, generally through a window at different times of day and night to a garden, in different seasons, and the occasional plane, sea or a boat. A clock with no hands underlines the fact that there is no temporal consistency in the film. This clock also appears in *Trying to kiss the moon*. The sensation of slowing motion is created mainly through the use of a slow shutter speed. On analogue standard-definition video cameras, a slow shutter speed at around three frames a second, instead of the normal speed of 24 or 25 frames a second, creates a

softening of focus and a ghosting effect, a bleaching of exposure that appears almost, but not quite like over-exposure; this creates a distancing effect away from the directly mimetic.

Rachel Garfield describes *Some Friends (apart)* as: “a wistful piece, reflecting on nostalgia and loss. [...] What struck me about this film was the way the camera played with the subjects and the way his friends would yield to the look of the camera.” The effect of the extreme elongation of the shot is, as Garfield states to “re-dramatise” the subject’s look, caught by the camera. “Dwoskin would take snippets of old footage, looking for the moment when, on filming his friends, ‘the eye picked up the camera’ and stretched that moment. A three second clip would become a minute long, for example. In stretching that moment Dwoskin would ‘re-dramatise’ the look” (Garfield 2007). I appear in this film for a few seconds. Framed in tight close up, my head slightly angled towards the camera, only one eye visible, I look into the lens (and towards the spectator) with a half-smile. I speak – something inaudible since there is no sync sound – and as I begin to move my body, the film cuts to another shot of a different woman. The effect of the extreme elongation of the shot and the close framing of the face transforms the original shot into a close exchange of deliberate looks, my look and the camera’s look, at the details of my face. I do not recognize myself, perhaps it is not me I think. These types of shots of faces and bodies are repeated throughout the film. In slightly different angles and framing and camera movement, without sync sound the spectator may imagine what is being said or heard; it is the non-diegetic music which binds the film together; where the essayist authorial filmmaker might use their voice-over to link temporally discontinuous fragments of narrative as I do in my own essay films, Dwoskin used music to create this linked effect. At one point another face is shot in extreme close-up; the framing slightly different to others. We see only an eye and part of a face and a video camera which is centrally framed, and the presence of the camera means we cannot read the

woman's expression. It is a woman possibly filming Dwoskin. However, the shot of Dwoskin is not in the film. The only shot of him is in an interior setting filmed at another different angle. In the final sequence he does appear again, this time in a wheelchair in a street on a sunny day in New York. He looks unsmilingly up at the camera, turns away, his lips move, perhaps an instruction to the camera person about how to film the shot, then turning back to us, gives an enigmatic smile. In this film Dwoskin transposes a methodology towards his subjects that he had used in his early films although the sequences are not deliberately staged and performed as they are in his earlier films. Darragh O'Donoghue remarks of Dwoskin's earlier films that "By looking out at the film-maker and implicitly at the future (still putatively heterosexual) male viewer, the (still putatively heterosexual) female performer could be said to return the gaze, make known her discomfort within the gender-based scenario and inspire guilt in the film-maker or viewer" (O'Donoghue 2018, 68). In *Some Friends (apart)* the subjects become unwitting performers who may experience discomfort through the gaze of the camera and the body behind it, while in the earlier films the subjects perform a fabricated discomfort. For the spectator the distinction is slight.

Through these varied filmic devices – the slowed-down shutter, the repetition of shot, lack of sync sound, in *Some Friends (apart)* Dwoskin created a non-realist, non-narrative performative exploration of the camera's look at the subject and the subject looking back, sometimes with an intimate implicit smile but sometimes with apparent discomfort, and the spectator looking at the result; the effect is quite removed from the effect of a home-movie. As Sobchack remarks, the more *unfamiliar* the images on the screen, the more closely the spectator must scrutinize what appears on the screen in order to gain specific knowledge of the film experience, and this means that: "the less likely we are to see beyond the screen's boundaries and back into our own life-world" (Sobchack 1999, 244). In *Some Friends (apart)*

it is through the final sequence located in the familiar iconic landscape of New York, and the appearance of the two subjects we saw earlier in the film as well as Dwoskin himself that we may gain knowledge and familiarity with the film; as Dwoskin is wheeled down the street, away from the camera, a finality is evoked in this sequence that allows us to escape back to our own life-world. However, in the filmed encounters with the camera in the main body of the film, there is also an ambivalence; the spectator may experience a discomfiting sensation of voyeuristic intrusion into the personal intimacy between Dwoskin and his subject.

The sensation of spectatorial discomfiture in *Some Friends (apart)* deepens in *Dear Francis: in memorium* made in 2003, after the death of Dwoskin's former lover, Francis. The film is constructed through extensive slow motion shots of a woman, who we assume is Francis; shots in black and white and colour, occur in varied locations and at different times; some shots are repeated, to form metaphorical motifs; a shot of Francis's face covered in drops of water, we might assume are tears expressing sorrow, but we might also ask whose sorrow? hers or Dwoskin's? This question remains unanswered. There is a repeated image of Francis asleep; occasionally a glimpse of Dwoskin himself on the edge of frame. The non-diegetic music is dramatic and its only pause are fragments of a woman's off-screen laughter which we assume is Francis herself. The film affords a strong sensation of temporal stasis and reminded me of the poet Denise Riley's book, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* which she wrote at intermittent intervals after the sudden death of her child. The book explores how her grief at the death of a child has given her the sensation that time has stopped. In *Dear Francis* the images are aesthetically beautiful, and Francis is a beautiful woman, but the spectatorial sensation is one of intrusion and shame, underlined by the music. We may ask who are memorials for? Here, we are aware that Dwoskin has inscribed the image of Francis for as long as digital technology may exist, but Francis herself will never see it. If those filmed

moments were private moments, not intended by Francis to be seen by the world, it could be regarded as a documentary about Dwoskin's grief and possible guilt and shame.

Conclusion

Dwoskin saw himself first and foremost as a filmmaker and his subject matter grew out of his personal preoccupations. As he grew older and friends died and his health grew worse he increasingly looked back on his life and when he was able to access his father's large archive of home movies it offered an opportunity to make autobiographical films. At the heart of his methodology in the making of his autobiographical films is the maker's pleasure in associative editing, cutting not according to a mathematical model but intuitively, when it seemed 'right'. His aim was to rework the footage to create films that bear only ghostly traces of the original and the extensive use of slow motion, use of silence and refilming helped to achieve a performative distantiation from the mimetic that were available to him in his earlier performative films. Slow-motion has a distancing effect often described as resembling a dream state. Andre Bazin considers that devices like slow motion convey a psychological state of the difficulty of achieving our ends that may often occur in dreams. However, the effect of slow motion is distinct from a dream, because dreams are about the expression of repressed desires rather than the formal quality of their images (Bazin 1997, 74). There was another central focus that was common to all Dwoskin's films in his attempt to capture the world around him through looking; and through looking and recording he inscribed signs of his own lived self into the films. MacDougall again: 'When interpreting a world with a camera, the filmmaker is also living through it' (2019, p.12) The act of filming allowed the sensation (for the filmmaker) that the camera was no longer a wholly separate object, but an extension of their own body that might allow them "to caress these images of the past, stilling, rewinding, reframing or reworking them in an obsessive desire to reach their

subjects, or [importantly] to halt the flow of time that has resulted in loss and change” (O’Donoghue 2018, 69).

References

Arthur, Paul. “The status of found footage”. *Spectator-The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television* 20, no. 1 (1999) 57-69.

Bazin, Andre. “The Life and Death of Superimposition”, *Bazin at work: Major essays and Reviews from the Forties & Fifties* ed. Bert Cardullo, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Benjamin, Walter. *One Way Street and Other Writings*. trans. E. Pephcott and K. Shorter. London: New Left Books and Verso, 1979.

Byrne, Eleanor. *Homi K. Bhaba*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Daniels, Jill. *Memory, Place and Autobiography: Experiments in Documentary Filmmaking*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2019.

Daniels, Jill, director. *Debauché*. 1976, Royal College of Art, 50 mins.

Daniels, Jill, director. *I’m In Heaven*, 1989, High Ground Films, 25 mins.

Dwoskin, Stephen, director. *Some Friends (apart)*, 2002, 30 mins.

Dwoskin, Stephen, director. *Dear Francis (in memorium)*, 2003, 18 mins.

Dwoskin, Stephen, director. *Trying to kiss the moon* 1994, Lux, 96 mins.

Dwoskin, Stephen. *Film Is...* London: Peter Owen, 1975.

Dwoskin, Stephen, director. *Central Bazaar*. 1976, Lux, 2 hrs 36 mins.

Garfield, Rachel. “Articulating a position through research: The practice-led PhD, a case study”, *Journal of Media Practice* 8. No. 2 (2007): 221-234.

Hall, Stuart and Sarat Maharaj. “Modernity and Difference” eds. Sarah Campbell & Gilane Tawadros, in *VA Annotations* 6, London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001.

- Kidner, Dan. "To independent filmmakers: Stephen Dwoskin and 'the international free cinema'" *Screen*, vol. 57, no. 1, Spring (2016): 95-102, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjw013>
- Landy, Marcia. *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*. London: The Athlone Press, 2001.
- Lane, Jim. *Autobiographical Documentary in America*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
- MacDougall, David. *The Looking Machine: essays on cinema, anthropology and documentary filmmaking*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.
- O'Donoghue, Darragh. "Grandfather's pear: Some notes on Stephen Dwoskin's archive and the role of auto/biography in his films", *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)* vol. 7. no 1, Intellect, (2018), 66-80.
- Riley, Denise. *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*. London: Picador, 2019.
- Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfiction Film Experience", Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds. *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 241-254.
- Willemsen, Paul. *Looks and Frictions: essays in cultural studies and film theory*. London: British Film Institute, 1994.