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Ballet Black

In the annals of British film Stephen Dwoskin is most often associated with the emergent period of its experimental film culture. He is famously pictured alongside the founders of the London Filmmakers' Co-operative, and his book *Film Is* describes, with international scope and at times partisan views, the networks of Underground cinema which extended across Britain and Europe. His films serve not only as documents of the landscapes and attitudes of this counter-cultural milieu, seen in the dim interiors and naked protagonists of early works such as *Chinese Checkers* or *Girl*; but, across his long career, have reflected what AL Rees referred to as a 'psychodrama or inner life seen at the extreme.'¹

Behindert (1974) or *Pain Is* (1997), for example, reflect the complexities and frustrations of his own disability, following childhood Polio, through the intense and unspoken dialogues between nameless protagonists, and expressions of the thresholds of emotional and physical pain. The rigorous stare of his camera upon discomfited characters compelled the film theorist Paul Willemsen to draw psycho-analytic readings from his films². However, Dwoskin regularly expressed frustration about how the British, amongst whom he had made his home when a Fulbright scholarship for design brought him from New York in the early 1960s, were not interested in his work in comparison to the acknowledgement he received in France and Germany. The reason for this disinterest, Dwoskin believed, rested with the confrontational nature of his films, and a use of figuration and narrative at odds with the formalist focus prevalent in British modernism during the 1970s.

Furthermore, whilst Dwoskin might be drawn to depict the psychodrama of intimate relations in his own work, he was also interested in the attempts of other artists across the cultural field who grappled with similar questions. For example, in *Shadows From Light* (1983), he made a film portrait of Bill Brandt, investigating the elongated and distorted nude studies which the photographer shot towards the end of his life. Dwoskin's intimate

documentary of Brandt delineates an area of his work which receives less attention than his more visceral and sexually charged fictions. In Dwoskin's depiction of Brandt's elderly and solitary figure moving through the rooms of his house, we discern, I would argue, less the fourth gaze which Willemen delineates, than a gaze of historical resonance, directed at individuals who represented bodies of difference from prevailing norms. Indeed, the marginalisation that Dwoskin experienced as a result of his own disability impelled him to insist that marginalised bodies should be perceived beyond the physical conditions which others presumed limiting, and to be understood instead as having emotional and physical worlds as complex as any other body. As he stressed in an interview with Ray Durgnat, in relation to his films *Behindert* and *Outside In*: 'I don't want to make a picture that's just about physical difficulty as such. There is that about it, but what both films are really about is, what it does to relationships, how it makes you see the world and others differently. Most people...get very nervous about how to talk to you. They treat you as if you weren't there or were feeble-minded. Because you're on crutches.'³ Rees also makes an insightful link between the relentless stare - often upon women - characteristic of Dwoskin's films and the gaze which he endured for his own disability, writing that, '[T]o condemn his pictures of women is to ignore the artifice of the image - and to forget the specific fact that Dwoskin is himself someone who is started at (in life as well as art).'⁴

Thus, it could be argued that in his documentary work the analytical precision of the camera eye familiar from Dwoskin's other experimental fictions is tempered by a sympathetic gaze of mutual recognition, directed to subjects such as Brandt and others, as Dwoskin fixes in his sights bodies caught in the movements of history. For if Brandt's nudes are distorted through the tricks of the darkroom, it might be argued that the figures from the past who interest Dwoskin are those whose representation is distorted by society's homophobic and racial prejudices. And, particular for the purposes of this study, I shall fix in my sights Dwoskin's film *Ballet Black*, a documentary of the *Ballet Negres*, Britain's first black dance company, and the unmade film which Dwoskin proposed some ten years later, on the circle of bisexual poets and filmmakers responsible for the 1930 film *Borderline*.

Ballet Black was released in 1986, and continued the non-fiction focus of *Shadows From Light* of three years before. Indeed, in correspondence Dwoskin refers to *Ballet Black* as a 'documentary film,'¹⁵ and his proposal for a documentary on this forgotten moment in British dance history, may also have fitted well with the Arts Council's long standing support for documentaries on the arts⁶. But this is not to suggest a traditional conception of the documentary by any means. Whilst *Ballet Black* utilised the conventions of interview, narration and archival photography, it also challenged a chronological reading through the movements and form of dance itself. *Ballet Black* might be seen to have two purposes. Firstly it proposed a history of The Ballet Negres, using a documentary collage of images and voiceover to rehabilitate their significant contribution to black culture and dance in post war Britain. Dwoskin was made aware of this passed over history by his friend the actor Astley Harvey, one of the original company and a consultant on the film, and as Dwoskin put it passionately, in his funding proposal. 'Even though the Ballet Negres has become obscured into history, its influence had wide spread implications on the cultural world as a whole, and a very precise influence on contemporary dance. Apart from being the first ALL BLACK dance company (which, in itself, had strong influences), the group created a unique style of dance and music, which has never been repeated since.'⁷ Accordingly, *Ballet Black* chronicles the development of the dance company from its formation by the charismatic choreographer Berto Pasuka on his arrival in London from Jamaica via Paris in 1946, and the great success that it received both in Britain and abroad for its unique synthesis between classical ballet, cabaret and the idioms of Afro-Caribbean dance, orchestrated within dramatic scenarios. As Dwoskin described it: 'Basically it fused Folk Dance, Classical Western dance and theatre into one style of it's own.'⁸

But, secondly, Dwoskin conceived *Ballet Black* as more than an advocacy project. For his film goes further to lift The Ballet Negres out of its historical co-ordinates and into the contemporary context of the 1980s, replacing archive time with the temporal dynamic of the present through movement and event. Dwoskin went to great lengths to reconceive some of The Ballet

Negres's most well known works⁹, bringing together a new generation of dancers to perform the archive by re-interpreting key dances from the company's original repertoire. As Dwoskin explains in his proposal, the behind the scenes rehearsals would also be presented in the film: 'Throughout the film, this training and instruction will be filmed and become an intergrated [sic] part of the whole films structure.'¹⁰ By making the process visible Dwoskin could be said to introduce another reading of time, neither frozen by history nor bound by the temporal brevity of event, but found in the less perceptible increments of a Bergsonian 'duree reale', an unfolding duration reflected in the intense and accumulative process of learning which the dancers undertake at rehearsal.

The bridge which Dwoskin engineered was not only temporal, linking past and present, but also a dialogic one between different generations. For example, he invited one of Ballet Negres' original performers, Richie Riley, to work with the young dancers and help them re-stage the original works. The viewer witnesses, through their movements both in rehearsal and final performance, the embodied agency of Riley's living memory as original cast member, directing and reactivating that history through the movement of their bodies in dance. The film ends with the presentation of *They Came*, a powerful acting out and indictment through the use of gesture and tableau, of Christian complicity in the colonial incursions into Africa, in which the stylised dance and attire of Christian priest and African shaman present contrasting versions of spirituality. The movements of the performers are further echoed in the elderly bodies of the original company as, caught by Dwoskin's camera, they spontaneously dance for each other off stage at the reunion party that he organised for them. In this poignant montage of fast footwork and nimble turns embedded and embodied for thirty years, Richie, Barbara, Pamela and the remaining Ballet Negres dancers¹¹ are liberated from the gravity of history, as their bodies share a dance of mutual recognition for their contribution to its legacy.

Ballet Black also demonstrates Dwoskin's characteristic sensitivity to sound, not just in the discursive register of voice (extracted from past reviews, and

interviews with the original cast) that overlays the archive images, but also in its presentation of the original musical accompaniments of *The Ballet Negres*. Dvoskin shows an evident interest in how rhythmic drumming rooted in non-Western cultures from Africa to South America - and performed at Ballet Negre shows by Jamaican compatriot Prince Kari Kari and his TamTam orchestra - was fused with Western arrangements from classical as well as contemporary sources, through the orchestrations of Leonardo Salzedo, it's original composer. In his attention to the interplay of these differently inflected tempos Dvoskin reiterates his wider case for the significance of the Ballet Negres as a rare space of successful cultural integration through the agency of a unique musical and dramatic form. The film makes tribute to Pasulka's distinctive creation of scenarios which frame black experience across history, rooted as much in his background in cabaret and variety theatre as in his ballet training. A nod to the Harlem Renaissance is apparent in *Cabaret 1920's* speak easy in 1920's Harlem, for example, whilst *Aggrey* is dedicated to the Nineteenth century African philosopher James Aggrey. By presenting these different facets of black experience *The Ballet Negres* complicates the primitivist fantasy with which earlier cultural representations of 'the negro' were associated, also suggesting that the large audiences their shows generated were looking for more than an exoticism of the other, and were focused rather on what might be perceived as a post-war fantasy of inclusive British nationalism, which stressed it's role as benevolent head of the Commonwealth, rather than a coloniser.¹²[Rachel, Alison - this last point is my inkling rather than something I have read - so I don't have a particular qualifying reference - is this OK? Or is there a post war history that I should be footnoting to direct the reader?]

That *Ballet Black* celebrates a rare moment of racial accord in post-war British cultural at a time when a Conservative government under Thatcher was endorsing police violence against people of colour, is also no coincidence.¹³The film could be read as a response to prevailing racism in the British establishment, by drawing attention to how forms such as dance can encompass cultural influences believed either irreconcilable or subject to a canon of Western elitism. *The Ballet Negres*, as *Ballet Black* argues,

assimilated its different influences into a dynamic whole, which inscribed within its choreography the movements of people of colour in the history and legacies of colonialism and yet, did not diminish the pleasure of the spectacle, as its enthusiastic audiences across Europe and Britain attest.

Reflecting on the passage of time through the study of particular figures caught up in its histories is a refrain which repeats throughout Dwoskin's work. As *Ballet Black* shows, the exploration of networks of friendship and camaraderie was a central aspect of Dwoskin's work, which often gets elided by discussions of his sexual politics and unrelenting camera gaze. It is also apparent in his early engagements in London's counter cultural cinema, his book *Film Is* and later *The Other Cinema's* radical cinema, as much as it can be discerned in his depiction of the elderly members of The Ballet Negres. This impulse finds marked and elegaic expression in late works about his friendships and his family¹⁴, but is also discernible in his interest in figures such as the imagist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and the circle of writers and artists who she associated with and drew around her.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s H.D. played a pivotal role in the avant-garde circles of the day. She knew writers such as Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence on intimate terms, and was seen as a significant figure in the burgeoning of modernist poetry between the wars. But the key focus for Dwoskin was her part in an enduring creative and sexual triangle with the couple Kenneth Macpherson and Winifred Bryher, significant for their advocacy for film as an art form, through the film journal *Close Up* and a number of films as the Pool Group - notably *Borderline* (1930). Authored by Macpherson, it offers one of the first positive representations on film of homosexuality and race, and featured both H.D and Bryher, as well as the actor and singer Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda.¹⁵ As Sophie Mayer recently argued: 'it held out a possibility of a cinema that was alternative in every sense, and made a powerful connection between the potential formal disruptions of avant-garde art and the social disruptions of queerness, blackness and femininity.'¹⁶ The extent to which H.D, Macpherson and Bryher identified with the notion of the borderline as a state of being, is apparent in H.D's text on the film for *Close*

Up, speaking of the characters in the film as 'borderline social cases, not out of life, not in life.'¹⁷

The Pool group's attempt to represent and understand this condition of marginality became the basis for a film treatment in which Dwoskin draws out the psychological and geographical implications of the borderline in relation to H.D, Macpherson and Bryher. Entitled *Invisible In Daylight (In the Frontiers)* Dwoskin worked on it between 1992 and 1994, aided by the filmmaker Veronique Goël and some research and development funding from the Cultural Department of the Swiss Government. Aware that the sexual and interracial interplay of *Borderline* was an allegory for their own lives¹⁸, *Invisible In Daylight* might be seen as Dwoskin's attempt to explore marginality as creative agency, where a 'frontier' of difference was identified, occupied, and advocated as choice rather than accepted as a condition. He proposed a fictionalised biography: 'Based on the life of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) the film explores the frontiers of difference, areas which are considered socially and politically marginal -- an area known in psychoanalysis as the "borderline personality". The differences are explored through three main characters and their relationship to other characters who have moved into these borderline frontiers.'¹⁹ As an analysand of Sigmund Freud whilst in London, H.D was deeply invested in the value of psycho-analysis, and *Close Up* published some of the first applications of psychoanalytic technique to film, through the writings of her close friend Hanns Sachs.²⁰ An interest in psychoanalysis also permeates Dwoskin's work, not as a film theoretical tool but for its connection to extant forms of sexuality, visualised with the Surrealists, read through Bataille and seen in the visceral representations of the, predominantly female, body in his 1992 book of photomontages *Ha Ha: La Solution Imaginaire*, for example.

Furthermore, these psychic borderlines were concretely located in space, specifically the Swiss mountain borders where Macpherson and Bryher had constructed a modernist mansion, funded by Bryher's father's shipping fortune, and where their creative endeavours were produced and circulated. Kenwin, taken from their first names, greatly interested Dwoskin as a

manifestation of how marginality and difference might be domiciled, aligning itself, through architectural spectacle, to a modernist internationalism which eschewed national and social boundaries. As Dwoskin's proposal indicates, he saw Kenwin as the 'key space for the film', where 'the characters, both past and present, will meet and shift during the transformation of H.D.' and 'where the borderline characteristics are established and played out.'²¹ Having gained the approval of its owner, and H.D's daughter Perdita Schaffner, Dwoskin intended to site not only his production at Kenwin, but also an accompanying exhibition about the trio.²² Having advanced the project so far, the reason that it was not carried through can only be speculated in lieu of further documentation emerging. Goël's efforts to find further Swiss funding did not develop²³, and accordingly Dwoskin moved on to other projects, turning to his own history in the autobiographical collage *Trying To Catch the Moon* (1994) and a personally inflected meditation on the nature of pain and its thresholds in *Pain is* (1997).

Although it was left unmade, we can see in *Invisible In Daylight's* proposal the potential for Dwoskin to continue his investigations into artists of the past, who sought to reimagine the boundaries of cultural and social norms through art. For *The Ballet Negres*, this meant a unique assimilative dance form, which, in an inkling of the multi-cultural ideal to come, portrayed the black experience by fusing idioms from across dance culture and history. By contrast, H.D, Macpherson and Bryher chose to inhabit the borderline, and to delineate a space apart: one which expressed its hospitality to sexual and racial difference, through architecture, poetry, film and criticism. But Dwoskin does more than note significant cultural achievements or relevance in contemporary discourses of social prejudice. He goes further, by lifting these pioneers out of history into a dialogue between bodies: as the young dancers fold the memories of the old into their performance, and as, through the experimental fiction he proposed, new borderlines might have been explored in the rooms at Kenwin.