

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 other founders of the London Film-Makers' Co-op, and his book *Film Is ...*, with its international scope and at times partisan views, describes the networks of underground cinema that extended across Britain and Europe. His films serve not only as documents of the landscapes and attitudes of this countercultural milieu, seen in the dim interiors and naked protagonists of early works such as *Chinese Checkers* (1964) or *Girl* (1975), but, across his long career, have reflected what A. L. Rees refers to as a 'psychodrama or inner life seen at the extreme'.¹

Behindert/Hindered (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 Willemen to draw psychoanalytic readings from his films.² Dwoskin, however, regularly expressed frustration about how Britain, where he had made his home when a Fulbright scholarship for design brought him from New York in the early 1960s, gave his work less acknowledgement than it received in France and Germany. The reason for this lack of interest, 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 modernist film during the 1970s.

As well as being drawn to depict the psychodrama of intimate relations in his own work, Dwoskin was also interested in attempts by other artists to grapple 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 that the photographer shot towards the end of his life. Dwoskin's intimate documentary of Brandt delineates an area of the filmmaker's 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 delineated by Willemen than a gaze of historical resonance, directed at individuals who represent bodies of difference from prevailing norms. Indeed, the marginalization that Dwoskin experienced as a result of his own disability impelled him to insist that marginalized bodies should be perceived beyond the physical conditions that others presumed limiting, and be understood instead as having emotional and physical worlds as complex as any other body. As he stressed in an interview with Raymond Durnat, in relation to his films *Behindert* and *Outside In*: I didn'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 at women – characteristic of Dwoskin's films and the gaze

¹ A. L. Rees, 'Stephen Dwoskin profile', Luxonline, <[http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/stephen_dwoskin/essay\(2\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/stephen_dwoskin/essay(2).html)> accessed 17 December 2015.

² Paul Willemen argues for Dwoskin's films perpetrating a fourth gaze, beyond the three identified by Laura Mulvey in her psychoanalytical reading of the look in Hollywood cinema. As Willemen puts it, in 'Voyeurism, the look and Dwoskin', *Afterimage*, no. 6 (1976), p. 47, 'the viewer now has to confront the considerable sadistic components present in his/her act of looking'.

³ Raymond Durnat, 'Raymond Durnat interviews Steve Dwoskin', *Films*, vol. 4, no. 5 (1984), p. 11, <<http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/08/directing-the-avant-garde-raymond-durnat-interviews-stephen-dwoskin-1984/>> accessed 17 December 2015.

which he endured for his own disability, writing that, 'To 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 stared 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 towards subjects such as Brandt and others, as Dwoskin focuses in on 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 racial, physical and sexual prejudice. This is most clearly demonstrated in Dwoskin's film *Ballet Black*, a documentary of the Ballet Nègres, Britain's first black dance company.

Ballet Black was released in 1986, and continued the nonfiction focus of *Shadows From Light* of three years before. Indeed, in correspondence Dwoskin refers to *Ballet Black* as a 'documentary film',⁵ 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 at that time for documentaries on the arts.⁶ But this is not to suggest a traditional conception of the documentary, by any means. While *Ballet Black* utilizes the conventions of interview, narration and archival photography, it equally exchanges the narrative of chronological history for a dynamic and dialogical expression of temporality, primarily embodied in the movements and form of dance itself.

Ballet Black might thus be seen to fulfil two purposes for Dwoskin. Firstly it proposes a history of the Ballet Nègres, using a documentary collage of images and voiceover to rehabilitate its significant contribution to dance culture as popular entertainment in post-war Britain. Dwoskin was made aware of this ignored history by his close friend the actor Astley Harvey, one of the original company and a consultant on the film. As Dwoskin put it in his funding proposal: Even though the Ballet Nègres 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 Dwoskin's impassioned use of capital letters emphasis indicates his appreciation of Ballet Nègres as the embodiment not only of cultural convergence in dance, but also, as I shall go on to discuss, as a pioneering proposal for how racial relations between Britain and its former empire in the early post-war period might be redrawn. Once the Arts Council had agreed to fund Dwoskin's proposal for the film, an intense period of research commenced, in which, aided by Harvey, original members were contacted in Britain and Jamaica in order to piece together the history and choreography of the company. 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

⁴ A. L. Rees, 'Stephen Dwoskin', BFI Education leaflet (1984), p. 2.

⁵ See, for example, early production correspondence with Loftus Burton, 18 January 1985, Box 17, University of Reading University, Special Collections.

⁶ For a full list of the arts documentaries made through Arts Council support between 1958 and 1998, see the University of Westminster's exhaustive Arts on Film Archive, <<http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk/index.html>> accessed 17 December 2015. It is also notable that Dwoskin's executive producer was Rodney Wilson, responsible for this aspect of artist film funding at the Arts Council.

⁷ Stephen Dwoskin, 'The Ballet Nègres/a proposal for a film. "Ballet Black" by Stephen Dwoskin', University of Reading, Special Collections, Box 13.

success that it achieved 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 [sic] own'.⁸

But Dwoskin conceived *Ballet Black* as more than an advocacy project. For his film goes further to lift The Ballet Nègres out of its historical coordinates and into the contemporary context of the 1980s, replacing archive time with the temporal dynamic of the present through the movement of new bodies reprising past choreographic patterns. Dwoskin and Harvey went to great lengths to reconceive some of the Ballet Nègres' most well-known works,⁹ bringing together a new generation of dancers to perform the archive by reinterpreting key dances from the company's original repertoire. As Dwoskin explains in his proposal, 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 [sic] 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 an unfolding duration, reflected in the intense and cumulative process of learning which the dancers undertake at rehearsal.

But it is not simply a temporal connection that Dwoskin renders, linking past and present, but also a dialogic one between different generations. For example, he invited one of Ballet Nègres' original performers, Richie Riley, to work with the young dancers and help them restage 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 thus documents a process of archival inscription where memory is enunciated through movement and gesture rather than image and word, as it is transferred from one living body to another. The movements of the performers are further echoed back 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 organized 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 Nègres dancers¹¹ are liberated from the gravity of history, as their bodies share a dance of mutual recognition for their contribution to its legacy.

Here the film reflects a sensitivity to the potent relationship between corporeal motion and the moving image that marks all of Dwoskin's films. Conditions of movement receive great scrutiny in his work, be they the intense immobilization of protagonists caught within claustrophobic interiors in early works such as *Trixie* (1969) or *Kleiner Vogel* (1976), or the slowed down and magnified use of film in *Jesus Blood* (1972), *Some Friends (Apart)* (2002). Certainly, the 'purely cinematic coherence

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Production files testify to his correspondence, and that of his producer Trish Thomas, with the performers' union Equity to find suitable dancers of colour for the purposes of this restaging, and also detail the conception, rehearsals and final performances of the ballet.

¹⁰ Dwoskin, 'The Ballet Nègres/a proposal for a film'.

¹¹ The original cast, who also participated in the making of *Ballet Black* as consultants and through interviews, and who featured at the reunion supper, were: Patricia Clover (Salzedo), Astley Harvey, Ben Johnson, Pamela Johnson, Pearl Johnson, Tony Johnson, Elroy Josephs, Johnny Kwango, Richie Riley and Leonard Salzedo.

and integrity'¹² that Maya Deren wrote of, where once on screen, bodies are unbounded to a different temporal and spatial logic, held resonance for a filmmaker constrained in his own bodily movement and keen to assert how film might reimagine those bodies considered flawed, through disability, race or gender. However, in *Ballet Black* Dwoskin was more interested in how the less perceptible movements of history might be translated to the moving image. He was to explore this in a more material form through his fluid use of archive and home-movie footage in autobiographical works such as *Trying to Kiss the Moon* (1994) and *Dad* (2002). But, rather than the photographic record, in *Ballet Black* it is the dancing body, old and young, which functions as a bridge in time, reactivating what has slipped into memory in order to present it for a contemporary scrutiny from which new resonances and readings may be drawn.

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 Nègres. Dwoskin shows an evident interest in how rhythmic drumming rooted in non-western cultures from Africa to South America – and performed at Ballet Nègres shows by Jamaican compatriot Prince Kari-Kari and his Tam-Tam orchestra – was fused with western arrangements from classical as well as contemporary sources, through the orchestrations of Leonardo Salzedo, its original composer. In his attention to the interplay of these differently inflected tempos, Dwoskin reiterates his wider case for the significance of the Ballet Nègres as a rare space of successful cultural integration through the agency of a unique musical and dramatic form. The film makes tribute to Pasuka'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 1920s* speakeasy in 1920s Harlem, for example, whilst *Aggrey* is dedicated to the nineteenth-century African philosopher James Aggrey. The film ends with a contemporary 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 stylized dance and attire of Christian priest and African shaman present contrasting versions of spirituality.

By presenting these different facets of black experience, the Ballet Nègres complicates the primitivist fantasy with which earlier colonially inflected cultural representations of people of colour were associated. The popular acclaim their shows generated also suggests that audiences were looking for more than an exoticism of the other, and were focused on what might be perceived as a post-war fantasy of inclusive British nationalism, which stressed its role as benevolent head of the Commonwealth rather than as colonizer. As Lee Grieveson has articulated, anticipating the breakup of British colonial hegemony in the immediate post-war period, 'alternative fictions were pressed into service', where what might be considered a 'rhetoric of unity was urgently supplemented with ideas of "development" and "Commonwealth"' to emphasize instead a 'benevolent trusteeship'.¹³ A consideration of whether the large and enthusiastic audiences for Ballet Nègres performances, both in Britain and Europe, reflected this shift from colonial to Commonwealth, encouraged by British cultural policy, remains an ongoing question beyond the scope of this short essay. For whilst it could

¹² Maya Deren, 'Magic is new', in Bruce R. McPherson (ed.), *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2005), p. 205.

¹³ Lee Grieveson, 'Introduction', in Lee Grieveson and Colin McCabe (eds), *Film and the End of Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2011), p. 6.

be argued that the history of colonial abuses that Pasuka and his company overtly address, through dances such *They Came*, suggest a rare agency and open dialogue about past oppressions, at the same time, the extent of the abuses perpetrated could equally be seen as neutralized by Ballet Nègres' cultural context, choreographed away as historical event becomes entertainment, as the government's newly benevolent regime may have hoped. However, amongst the extensive research for *Ballet Black*, generated by Dwoskin, Harvey and the film's producer Trish Thomas, there is no trace of official financial support for Ballet Nègres performances, which were hosted by existing networks of regional variety theatres rather than the emerging state-sponsored organs of culture.

Whilst further research into these questions is required in the disciplines of history and dance as well as film, the contemporaneous context for Dwoskin's film was undoubtedly highly resonant. *Ballet Black* overtly celebrates a rare moment of multicultural accord in post-war British history at a time when the 1980s Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher was endorsing police violence against people of colour.¹⁴ The film could thus be read as a response to prevailing racism in the British establishment, 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 Nègres, 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, to which its enthusiastic audiences across Europe and Britain attest.

Ballet Black also highlights a political engagement in Dwoskin's work that is often elided by discussions of sexual politics and the unrelenting gaze of his camera. Although it may not have demonstrated overt party political allegiances, Dwoskin's work shows an enduring commitment to a politically engaged cinema, instilled from his countercultural roots; it is perhaps instructive that he chose the radically inclined The Other Cinema, with its commitment to the promotion of a postcolonial cinema, as his distributor rather than the London Film-Makers Co-op. Made at a time when the discourse of post-colonialism was becoming well established in the UK through voices such as those of Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, and the films of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective, it could be argued that, like *Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah, 1986), for example, Dwoskin's film employs archive material and interviews to make a cogent narrative of the black experience in post-war Britain. However, unlike the former, the film remains little known within the canon of politically engaged artists' documentaries of the 1980s, despite being favourably received upon its first transmission on Channel 4. The reasons for this may lie with the differing emphasis of Dwoskin's pluralist film practice, which was less concerned with contemporaneous postcolonial discourse and more exercised by an enquiry into artists of the past who sought to reimagine the boundaries of cultural and social norms. For the Ballet Nègres, this meant a unique assimilative dance form, which, in an inkling of the multicultural ideal to come, portrayed the black experience by fusing idioms from across dance culture and history. But *Ballet Black* does more than document the Ballet Nègres' significant cultural achievements and relevance to contemporary discourses and experiences of racial prejudice. It can also be read as an artist's singular meditation on passing time and corporeal

¹⁴ I can find no specific reference in production files or correspondence for Dwoskin making the film in response to the pronounced racial prejudice of the period, but the film could be seen as part of a wave of cultural protests against police violence. It was only two years later that the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* was to address the riots and police brutality in Birmingham, and Isaac Julien with Sankofa was to address the incitement of violence at the Notting Hill Carnival in works such as *Territories* (1984).

embodiment, as the young dancers fold the memories of the old into their dance, and lift these pioneers out of history into a present day dialogue between bodies. By asking the viewer to bear witness to the writing of these past choreographies onto new bodies, by tracing them from the rigours of rehearsal to final performance, *Ballet Black* is emphatic that the Ballet Nègres be understood as legacy rather than history: which will continue to offer new resonances in the ongoing struggle for parity by black communities in contemporary culture.