

## DECO DAWSON'S DOPPELGÄNG-BANG

by Walter Forsberg

*Curatorial essay accompanying the Dream Sequences: A Deco Dawson Retrospective program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on June 6 & 7, 2008.*

Violence is afoot in Winnipeg.

But this violence is not a violence of wrecking ball-wielding city planners (see: cannibalism), or of roving West End pre-teen mini-gangs (see: boredom). Rather, it is a violence of personal struggle against one's own being—a 'Doppelgänger-Bang'—as embodied in the on-screen players and actions of Deco Dawson's oneiric and obsessive movie gems. Forged by an insatiable thirst for cinematic knowledge and an unrelenting Ukrainian work ethic, Dawson's themes of inner struggle—more broadly of good vs. bad—permeate through his characters, as well as his personal experiences in collaboration and his acute self-criticism.

This notion of an on-screen endogenous cage-match carries with it all sorts of psychoanalytic baggage and Freudian attaché cases—no manner of which most Film Groupers could engagingly discuss, or even give a shit about. Suffice it to say that it is in the moments of on-screen personal battle that Dawson's *FILMs* (and films) are catapulted from being ego-maniacal technical displays 'id-to' the realm of the psychological. Whatever narrative is present in Dawson's obtuse plot-puzzles centres principally not around time, place or wholly external forces, but within the mind and its so-called 'Dream Sequences.'

In *FILM(lode)*, one finds Dawson's dueling selves incarnated in husky twin musclemen, lathered in chocolate sauce, who sport aero-goggles and wife-beaters as they collectively dream of pick-axing each other to death. The duo's attempt to "escape their persistent and remarkably similar visions" unravels deep underground, in the interior domain where most of Dawson's ciné-stories take place—be they in *FILM(lode)*'s abandoned desert mine, or in the stand-alone tiny shacks of *FILM(emend)* and *FILM(dzama)*. In the latter, no less than a vortex of uncontrolled hallucinatory imagination opens up—impossibly—inside an artist's quaint studio hut, where he is forced to physically fend off the offspring of his creativity. Even with the astonishingly visceral *FILM(knout)*, the audience enters the interior world of a photograph to observe the knot-tying Sharon Johnson, as she is besieged by her evil-twin who ferociously whips her with all the intensity of optically-printed, Vertov-ian montage. The thematic unity

of struggle against oneself, or a disembodied double version thereof, pervades the early Dawson *FILM* cycle near as much as do intentionally poor exposures, splicing tape wrinkles and brilliantly kinetic edits.

The stark aesthetic and chronological demarcation of this retrospective's two programmes, 'Early Works' and 'Later Works,' itself evidences a history of Dawson's own personal struggles. Around 2004, with a bonanza of awards and festival successes in-hand—and a barrage of increasingly suffocating associations that film programmers and audiences had come to make between Dawson's films and those of his once mentor/collaborator Guy Maddin—Dawson largely abandoned the auto-surrealism of Vaseline-smeared black-and-white and the self-described "re-pioneering" of old film techniques that had won him such acclaim. Self-flagellatingly wiping the slate clean of the styles used in 'Early Works' like *FILM(knout)* and *Fever of the Western Nile*, Dawson delved into the task of teaching himself the more contemporary modes of independent filmmaking: colour, 16mm and, inevitably, dialogue.

In this context, *Dumb Angel*—the first of his 'Later Works'—with its uninterrupted nine-minute take, flashy fireworks, vivid colour and After Effects-rendered visual 'eruptions,' can be seen as the formal antithesis of his entire previous body of work. But from conceptual and storytelling perspectives, *Dumb Angel* holds steadfast on the notion of inner self-struggle. As its camera lens veers into a television set—so much like *FILM(knout)*'s preliminary photographic zoom—the raucous skins-bashing of Inward Eye drummer Anders Erickson reeks of liberty-lust, as does battle against the confines of his own on-screen containment.

That spectatorial impulse to decipher his works both in terms of their elaborate formal trickery, and more basically in terms of their deceptively simple, yet obtusely psychological plots, is what makes Dawson's early oeuvre so soundly and roundly accomplished. And finally, as Dawson trickily tracks out to reveal the drummer liberated from his tube-ular prison, the presence of this dual cinematic engagement—aesthetic and psychological—suggests that 'Later Works' might very well continue down the same technical and thematic paths as his earlier canon.

From a personal, extra-filmic perspective, the theme of Dawson's on-screen psychological flirtations also reflects what he has intimated as something akin to a personal mantra of self-criticism: 'Try Harder.' Dawson's persistent pre-occupation with dazzling formalism and technique is among the more obvious aesthetic characteristics of his canon. But, it's also a good interpretive telescope through which one can chart his continued self-emulation, and rigorous self-criticism, and observe a tangible personal parallel to his films' characters. It's no secret that Deco's technical knowledge of film and video, from the JK optical printer to his in-development uncompressed Hi-Definition 2K frame scanner, is near-nonpareil amongst Winnipeg independent filmmakers.

Taking a hint from Dawson's charmingly confident DVD commentaries, it's easy to appreciate 2001's award-winning *FILM (dzama)* as the accumulation to-date of his bag of tricks. With staggeringly meticulous technique—including his unvigenuple (that's 21!) in-camera multiple-exposures, his convincing re-enactment of artist Marcel Dzama's original drawings and the nerd-ily exciting cavalcade of ethereal props, sets and costumes—Dawson compounded the collective technical "re-pioneered" achievements of all his *FILMs* into nothing less than the Best Canadian Short Film at 2001's Toronto International Film Festival.

This progressive "better, faster, stronger" ideology may read like an armed forces recruitment ad, but it gets redeployed in the accomplished *FILM (dzama)*-like technical-mirror that is Dawson's WFG 30th Anniversary Film Commission, *The Last Moment*.

A 'Calling-Card-Film-To-End-All-Calling-Card-Films,' *The Last Moment* reiterates the thematic of psychological struggle found in earlier Dawson works with its beleaguered protagonist, forced to re-live variations of the same final moments of his life. Unlike the quaint and tidy seamlessness of most commercially-viable showcases-of-talent, though, *The Last Moment* presents a dizzying, complex and nearly opaque plot—one which so discretely excretes explanation amidst its almost oppressive array of visual homage that repeat viewings are required for anything approaching diegetic comprehension.

Indeed, the accomplished nature of Dawson's self-proclaimed "pitch-perfect" re-creation of cinematic styles in *The Last Moment* is so vibrant as to almost entirely endanger an appreciation of the fragmented storytelling approach. From the harsh lighting of its Film Noir sequences and Hitchcockian visual tensions, to the Tarantino-like ironic nostalgia of Connie Francis' 'I'm Gonna Be Warm This Winter' and whirligig video camerawork, *The Last Moment* is as much a testament to Dawson's moviemaking competence as it is a re-imagining of his traditional thematic territory.

Taking the body of work on display in this retrospective as evidence of where all of Dawson's self-skirmishes are ultimately leading—longer, slicker, more intricately developed and refined—one can speculate that this retrospective surely won't be his last.

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***About Walter Forsberg***

*Walter Forsberg has made films and videos and projects since the year 2000. A founding member of l'Atelier national du Manitoba (film collective responsible for the enormously controversial video Death By Popcorn: the Tragedy of the Winnipeg Jets), Walter has also worked as a programmer for the Chicago Underground Film Fest, the experimental film showcase WNDX and the Gimli Film Festival. Walter's movies have shown at festivals internationally, including at Rotterdam, Images and Chicago Underground. Walter is currently enrolled in the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation graduate program at New York University.*