

## Guy Sherwin.

Guy Sherwin's films are characterised by an enduring concern with light and time as the fundamentals of film. When film is projected, light shines through the celluloid medium and is subtly refracted by the grain, which, because it is different on every frame, drifts and swirls

The electronic image, by contrast, is produced by a fixed and uniform array of colour guns which fire light at the screen. In film, each frame is presented one by one, at a rate of twenty four per second. The unique rhythmic pulse this creates differs from video, whose images are continuously decoded and then reconstituted. Sherwin is also motivated by a commitment to the photo-chemical reality of the film image: the existential connection between the real object which is filmed and its rendering as an image on light-sensitive material, a process distinct from the magnetic encoding of the digital image. The sensitivity to these characteristics of film underpins Sherwin's approach to film making.

He studied at Chelsea School of Art, where he made paintings that functioned as modifiers of shadows and light effects. The shadows they cast were as much the "work" as were the pictures themselves. This approach has fed through into film, which he began making in 1972. His early work included performances, such as *Paper Landscape* (1975-**present day**) and *Man with Mirror* (1976-**present day**) in which he interacts live with projected images of himself. Since 1975 he has also been producing the ongoing *Short Film Series*, some of which can be grouped according to content, and are discussed below. Sherwin has also made a number of medium length films such as *Messages* (1981-84), which explores the child's view of the world through questions posed by his young daughter, *Under the Freeway* (1995) shot under and around a motorway in San Francisco, and *Filter Beds* (1998), in which he pulls focus through multiple layers of foliage and passing aeroplanes reflected in the ponds of an derelict sewage works. He has also made a number of films in which the image produces the soundtrack. This is achieved by printing the

former in the area reserved for the latter. *Cycles 1* (1972-77) *Musical Stairs* (1977) *Railings* (1977) and *Night Train/Stretto* (1979) all have such “optical” -photographic-sound tracks.

In *Railings* Sherwin films along the bars of a park railing with the camera turned through ninety degrees, so that they appear on the soundtrack as closely-packed horizontal lines, which generate a buzzing sound that varies according to the movements of the camera. Even when the image is static, the individual frames continue to pass constantly over the sound replay head, so that while the image stops and starts the sound is continuous. In this way the difference between the intermittent picture reproduction and the continuousness of sound is highlighted. When screened, the projector is turned on its side so that the image appears right way up.

### Short Film Series

Since 1975 Sherwin has been working on the *Short Film Series*. This comprises films of a uniform length: three minutes, (the length of a 100 foot roll of 16mm film) which bring a given subject matter into conjunction with a particular filming procedure, such as shooting at a rate of one frame per second, or varying the exposure to emphasise particular aspects of an image. Most are single shot works, the length of the roll, and some are edited in-camera. All are silent and black and white, which stresses the agency of light and shadow and de-emphasises a potential (full-colour) documentary naturalism. In keeping with these concerns, Sherwin

usually prints the films himself in order to gain more control over the contrast, textures and light levels in each film. This also effects the spatial reading of the image. The subject matter varies enormously, from industrial and rural landscapes, to portraits and still lifes. The individual films in the series can be joined together in different combinations to bring out different aspects. This is important because it demonstrates the fact that even the simplest of films can be seen in different ways and are thus complex.

In *Eye* the camera's lens aperture is slowly opened and closed on a close-up of a young woman's face, so that as the picture grows darker the photographic lamp, which is reflected in the woman's eye, is the only visible thing remaining in the shot, a single spot of light, no longer visible as a reflection. The image is reduced to its own light source, before brightening again to reveal the whole face which glows at maximum aperture. The piece reminds us that we are looking not at a face, but at a pattern of light on a surface. It also recalls ancient theories of light in which rays were thought to emanate from the eyes. (In fact a certain amount of the light that enters the eye does bounce out again).

In *Metronome* stop-frame filming is used to arrest the to and fro movement of the arm on a clockwork metronome, whose speed relative to the intermittent camera is varied by slight repositionings of the weight on the metronome's arm. By way of contrast the linear passage of time is suggested by the time-lapsed shadows creeping through the background.

The *Short Film Series* reflect the influence of process that was prevalent in much of the art of the 1960s and 70s. In process art the way something is made is considered to be as important as the end product itself. The rigour of this approach to film also reflects Sherwin's involvement in the London Filmmakers Co-op in the 1970s, where the politics, meaning and nature of film was energetically debated. In these debates those aspects of film taken for granted by mainstream filmmakers were argued out and scrutinised. Thus the function of the lens to produce a focused

image, the role of the tripod versus hand-holding, or the nature of the projection event, were all called into question.

### Train Films

In recent years Sherwin has produced several films of more variable lengths, which are loosely grouped around common subjects, **such as trains or animals, and which explore qualities of movement inherent in these.**

The train films (some of which are also part of the *Short Film Series*) have been assembled as a separate group, formed of old and new films, in the process of which they have been renamed. All the films so far made have titles which denote specific musical forms; *Canon*, *Stretto*, or instructions; *Da Capo*, *Rallentando*. The films are structured according to these formal principles of staggered repetition, **contraction**/overlapping and slowing down, but the aim is also to draw attention to the **primacy of** the films' forms. They were partly inspired by the movements and parallax effects of objects appearing to cross each other when viewed from a moving train, as well as thinking about the parallels between film form and train journeys. In *Chimney/Canon* (1978/2001), for example, a tall chimney was filmed from a train window as it passed through the industrial landscape of the English West Midlands. Because the chimney is always framed centrally, the straight line of the train's trajectory becomes an apparently circular one: we seem to be on a giant carousel, which is rotating around the chimney.

*Night Train/Stretto* (1979/2001) was shot from a moving train at night, using time exposures of half a second per frame. The camera records passing lights as traces, so the nearer the objects to the train, the longer the trace. This results from the familiar travel experience whereby we appear to pass nearer objects faster than distant ones. This translates into a black screen with abstract horizontal white lines,

distant light sources tracing short feint lines, near ones long and bright. The judder of the train also effects the quality of the trace, imparting a zigzag which makes it look even more like an ECG scan. The train draws itself across the light sources, but because the camera is fixed relative to the train, it is the lights that appear to draw themselves across the train window and onto the celluloid, making lines in the same way that a glacier acquires striations from the rocks it passes. The soundtrack is created by extending the image into the optical sound area at the edge of the film. The continuous flow pauses once or twice when the train stops at a station and a naturalistic image abruptly forms. The striking contrast between these two kinds of image forces us to rethink our experience of night travel. We conceive of the distant lights and the railway stations as roughly the same kinds of thing, yet the visual trace of these presents us with images so distinct as to seem almost mutually exclusive beyond the common denominator of light.

### *Animal Studies*

A more recent development is the series of animal films which, by the end of 2002, number about a dozen. They came about, Sherwin writes: 'partly as a reaction to the increasing dominance of the digital moving image. I felt that because it was now so easy to 'lie' with the image, that there was no longer any certain link between image source and the image itself; and that the filmic processes of light and chemistry that register the image as a visible trace of an event having-at-one-time-been-in-the-world were now seriously undermined. In the

attempt to find a subject that was more resilient to digital manipulation, that still felt alive and untamed, I turned to animals, because of the subtlety of their movements, and because they are evidently not acting'.

In one, a cat sleeping on a corrugated plastic roof, was filmed with a camera running at about one frame per second (as opposed to the usual twenty four), so that each frame was a time exposure of about half a second. The film was shot on very high contrast film on a day of intermittent sunshine. When the sun is out the cat can be seen breathing and moving periodically, but when the sun goes in it is reduced to a black shape, and its breathing becomes thus invisible, so that it appears as if the shadow has struck it dead. At the end of the roll the cat abruptly gets up and leaves the scene, its evident vigour creating a sense of relief.

In a contrasting study of insects, several shots of gnats are superimposed, creating layers which recede into whiteness. This material is then refilmed in increasing close-up, so that we become aware of groups of gnats clumping together, forming extraordinary shapes which resemble silhouetted fragments of torn paper that hang momentarily on the picture plane. These ephemeral shapes parallel, and sometimes merge with the swirling grain which is also greatly magnified.

As well as animals, the subject of the series includes 'some of their habitats'. One example is a close-up of a small area of a lake, filmed very dark so that the water appears almost black, broken only by ripples and the reflections of overhanging branches. These branches periodically dip down towards the surface and as they do so their reflections appear to rise up out of the water to meet them. Unlike most of the other films in the series this one has been made without any image manipulation: The camera is simply pointed at its subject, with the knowledge that the spontaneous interactions occurring within the scene will produce phenomena which cast light on naturally occurring surprises in the visual field. The film is thus a testimony to the acts of acute observation that underlie all the films in the series. Sherwin sees not only what is there, but is also able to make the visible

connections between a particular scene and the various ways in which it can be transformed by film technology without denying its original and specific nature.