

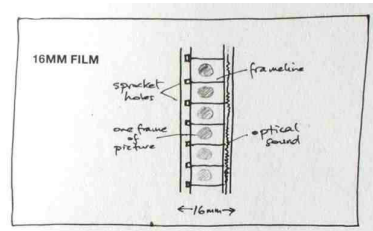
# GUY SHERWIN

## PART ONE

There is something exhilarating about observing an artistic star that shines at the edge of the cosmos, and steadfastly refuses to move to the centre, that even seems to vanish beyond the periphery as time and fashion move on, only for it to become visible again, still at the periphery but as an even brighter star.

Such is the nature of the career of Guy Sherwin whose optical sound films are now available in an austere but enticing DVD package from LUX, funded by them along with Middlesex University and the University of Wolverhampton. I don't suppose many copies have been sold, but Sherwin (and LUX) can take comfort from the fact that the films will be watched 100 years from now. The first thing to say is that they exemplify perfectly the spirit of artistic experimentation in the 1960s and 1970s, an understanding of which is essential to any social and cultural history of the period. There was a feeling that new languages were waiting to be discovered, especially in music, painting and film, that there were no limits. Although there were limits, as we found out, since the unfettered, uncompromised pursuit of artistic freedom led to cultural elephantiasis - Philip Glass's minimalist piece, *I + I* (1968), ends up as the bleeding chunks of his three-hour opera *Satyagraha* (1980) - what is so striking about Sherwin's endeavour is that he has preserved his soul: the DVD tells us that it is still possible to experiment forty years on, that there are still exciting things to communicate.

His particular area of study is the strip of celluloid film, like this:



(Sherwin's drawing)

It looks simple enough, so how do you make a career out of it? What is an optical sound film anyway? What Sherwin does is uncover a micro-universe that arises from the question: how does the image track relate to the optical sound track (occupying the non-sprocketed edge of the celluloid strip), a world not just of images but of sounds. Although Sherwin experiments with the image in interesting ways that other film-makers of the time were doing, his particular forte has been to use the optical soundtrack to impart the same experimental rigour to this (hidden) part of the celluloid strip as the image track. In this he is driven, I think, by a peculiarity of the 16mm film projector. Since he explains it so well in the booklet accompanying the DVD, let me quote what he says:

“Steady film projection requires an intermittent motion. The film stops and starts 24 times a second as it passes through the projector light. However, good optical sound reproduction requires a continuous smooth motion to minimise ‘wow and flutter’. Therefore, the sound-reproducing head in a 16mm projector is positioned separately from the picture gate, 26 frames further down the film path. This is a sufficient distance for the flywheel to smooth out the intermittent motion produced at the gate. Consequently, if you were to cut through a projection print of a film, you would be cutting the picture and sound in different places. You would see the splice first and hear it approximately one second later.”

Early on Sherwin had started to use 16mm film without a camera, working on the filmstrip or re-working 'found footage'. He quickly gravitated to the London Film Makers' Co-operative, where he gained access to the printing and processing machines there, and where he learnt about techniques such as contact printing, optical printing, developing and processing, an apprenticeship reinforced by the fact that he was employed by the Co-op to help run the workshop between 1975 and 1977.

The engagement with film was not therefore with imperatives such as the invention of fictions to which the public can respond – nor with the concept, say, of 'representing' the world in beautiful images, stirring editing and stirring performance, nor with such theoretical concepts as the auteur theory, semiology, postmodernism, and other critical constructions of that kind – but with the sheer fascination of handling the physical side: the film strip, the printer and the projector. For Sherwin film practice is a matter of the practical and the empirical. Indeed, watching the films reminded me of nothing so much as the school of postwar British language philosophy, especially as practised at Oxford University. Its primary text was Ayer's 'Language Truth and Logic' (published before the war in 1937) but the school developed and superseded that book, as any good philosophical practice should do, and ensured its empiricism spread wider than epistemology into ethics, theology and metaphysics. The latter two areas of philosophical enquiry were viewed with particular mistrust: how we know objects exist, and how statements have meaning were the only two things worth wrestling with, philosophically speaking. Similarly, Sherwin might be saying: forget fiction, which is the equivalent of metaphysics. What is the status of the primary elements, image and sound?

There is something peculiarly English about these films. At a time when the American avant-garde had burst into colour, led by Brakhage, but followed by Warhol, Snow, Frampton, Kubelka, Sharits and others, Sherwin stayed with black-and-white, perhaps for reasons of cost and perhaps because the Co-op printers could only process black-and-white. However he has stuck with black and white as if its uncomplicated polarity properly complemented the experiments with the two basic elements of image track and optical soundtrack. One notes also an exemplary taste for brevity. Although the film performances documented on this DVD are longer, of the films in this package none is longer than nine minutes, and the average is about four. Again this is in marked contrast to the big films coming out of America: *Dog Star Man*, *Central Region*, *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* and so on, he operates in the same way that the British abstractionists of the 1950s, for example the St Ives School (Frost, Lanyon etc.), did not seek to emulate the blockbuster, all-enveloping canvases of American Abstract Expressionism. Paucity of resources may also have had something to do with it: the sky was the limit for the newly-emerged superpower, while for Britain in economic decline, the 1940s age of austerity dogged the subsequent decades. Yet it is more than this. Sherwin's brevity seems to recognize not just the limits of resources available but the virtues of scepticism. The films are modest, but not too modest to make their presence felt, and in keeping with a disdain for metaphysical vastness.

Harping on about philosophy, however, only gets us so far. Artistic endeavour is not the same as the philosophical kind. You do not read PF Strawson's article of 1950 'On referring' and finish satisfied with the aesthetic experience, although you might marvel at the intricacy of its reasoning and the elegance of its exposition. What is more the essay might only be said to succeed if it has prompted a critique, a 'counter-text' in the reader's own mind. It is a means to an end, whereas a Sherwin film is an end in itself. There is the challenge of fathoming the technical idea he is exploring in a particular

film, and admiring the intricacy of the idea, but of more importance is the sensation it arouses. The films may be short, but they are intense, for they assault the viewer's optic nerve and the sound created by the optical soundtrack is taut, crackly, arid and percussive without the pure and seductive quality that a musical instrument brings to melody and sound. For all their technicality, their seeming dryness, the viewer reacts strongly: it may be a reaction of disgust, it may be of excitement, but it could not be of boredom. Their shortness helps here: even as you acclimatize yourself to the visual/aural world of each film, it comes to an end.

Sherwin subdivides his optical sound films into five groups:

- Hand-made abstraction
- Found films
- Films with a soundtrack made with a camera
- Films that rework variable-area optical soundtracks
- Hand-made abstraction 2, in which image and sound are made by a single action.

The description 'hand-made' suggests a link to free spirits such as Len Lye whose *Free Radicals* (1957) exploits the beauty of scratched calligraphic lines on black leader, or of Harry Smith, whose *Early Abstractions* (1940s and 50s) were made by working directly on the film with dots, cut-out shapes and sprayed colour. Their simplicity and their frenetic, pulsating optics foreshadow Sherwin's work, but his ideas are much more mathematical, and 'tactical' in the sense of seeking to complete a particular task he has set himself, e.g. 'What if I used filmed images on the optical soundtrack?'

Least effective, in my view, is a film such as *Newsprint* (1972) in which he glued newspaper onto clear film and, where it was stuck over the soundtrack, that section was re-aligned by printing it in 'projection sync' (remember that the sound head is 26 frames behind the gate through which the image is projected) so "this means that we hear the same image that we're seeing". The result is inchoate, the conjunction of image and sound impossible to grasp. But another found film, *At the Academy* (1974), well illustrates Sherwin's virtues. 'Academy leader' is the "countdown leader, with its accompanying optical sound 'beep', which is used by projectionists to cue the start of a film". The film creates overall visual effects by the device of combining negative film with positive to create a striking bas-relief effect, and the multiple layering plays with the way we perceive the numbers and the shapes. This 'harmonic exposition' is underpinned by a rhythmical 'ground bass' provided by the repeating of the leader: as you watch you become familiar with the basic strip and learn to anticipate the 'beep' (which accompanies the figure 4 in the strip). It begins as a clear two-note beep, but with each repeat it changes incrementally so that by the end it is a thin, blurry, disappearing sound.

The musical analogies are appropriate. In fact for *Sound Shapes* (1972), Sherwin specifically uses a 'bar structure' of one second in length (i.e. 24 frames) divided into 2, 3, 4 or 6 aural and visual beats. For *Musical Stairs* (1977, in the group of films with soundtracks created by images filmed in a camera), Sherwin filmed an iron staircase for both image and soundtrack. In the latter case, the tilting of the camera up and down enabled him to make an approximate musical scale in eleven tones. There seems to be a link too to minimalist music: in Glass's *1 + 1*, "repetition is the rule, but the relation of one modular figure to the next is an additive one" (to use Michael Nyman's description in his book 'Experimental Music' [London: Studio Vista 1974]). This tactic of changing repeats in tiny increments is also a vital one in Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970) and it is an interesting point whether or not

Sherwin had seen it before he made *Phase Loop* in 1971 [I saw *Zorns Lemma* in London in May 1972, but I am unclear whether this was the first showing in the UK.] This film uses a loop of film to focus both eye and ear on incremental changes each time the loop runs through the gate and past the sound head.

The ‘visual music’ of these films springs from the device of making the simple complex, complex in visual rhythm, and complex in the relationship of the way we see the images and the way we hear the sounds. The fact of projecting the films is then turned into performance by using two projectors (or more even: *Sound Cuts* of 2007 uses three to six 16mm projectors) either to screen two images side by side, the one echoing, contrasting, colliding with the other, or to overlap the films, projecting one over the other. *Mobius Loops* (2007) uses three or five 16mm projectors in vertical format, with each projector lying on its side.

“It was very simple to make, but is perceptually (to the eye and to the ear) surprisingly complex,” is his disarming comment on *Phase Loop* of 1971, his first film, and from simplicity to complexity has been his mantra. *Phase Loop* uses holes punched in black leader. The raw circle of light on a black frame, or the raw blackness in a white frame, is then reworked in *Cycles* (1972/77). This pulsating five-minute barrage of light is given structure by the ‘bloops’ in the soundtrack, starting slow, then getting faster in phases, then slowing down to a point where you think the film is coming to an end, only for the aural storm to restart with the sounds speeding up to a blur, then decelerating again so that the bloops separate out and come to a halt.

In 2003 *Cycles # 3* was then created as a performance piece of *Cycles* for two projectors and two loudspeakers with an amber filter, the presence of an audience turning it into a screen dance in which you sense a strong interaction between the two. Even on DVD you can feel this happening, and when it ends, the spectators erupt – and you feel like joining in – in whoops of joy and clapping. You can even hear a triumphal shout of ‘F\*\*\* video!’ So, there may be a metaphysical element after all, for while it can be sterile to read large ideas into abstract images, the sight of this circle of fire, this black hole from which the light has been sucked, does prompt a feeling of some galactic event taking place, an eclipse of starlight that burns itself into the retina and makes its own magical corona, thus allowing an illicit metaphysical dimension to seep back in.

In view of Sherwin’s resolute and admirable persistence with 16mm film technology, should someone have shouted as well ‘Screw digital too’? Well, possibly not. After all, it is digital technology that has made this important body of films available in images that are true to the original 16mm technology. One final point: through the 1980s and 90s, Sherwin made films for a single screen, “more personal and lyrical in character”. Having had one’s appetite whetted by these optical sound films, it is to be hoped that these can be made available on DVD as well.

## PART TWO

And so they are. A second DVD entitled ‘Messages’ has now been produced, again courtesy of Lux and again with funding from Middlesex University and the University of Wolverhampton, who can be proud of this act of patronage.

This second DVD contains five films, of which one is 34 minutes long – we’ll come to that – and another was originally shot on super 8 – we’ll come to that too. That leaves what is for me the core of the DVD, namely *Flight* (1994/8), *Prelude* (1980/96) and *Filter Beds* (1990/98), all three in 16mm black-and-white with optical sound.

The first thing to note about them is that they are in black and white because by the 1980s, let alone the 1990s, this seems to have been a matter of aesthetic choice for Sherwin rather than necessity, at the root of which must be the fact that with black and white he retained the capacity to operate a print machine himself rather than go through a laboratory in order to experiment with getting the results he wanted. Like the optical sound films, the works capitalise on using film's basic elements to realize its ability to impact on the retina as percussive, flickering image, although this time the images constitute much less an assault, more a stroking of the retina.

The purity of this strategy is then allied to figurative image-making (unlike the optical sound films described in part one) to explore the screen plane, presenting the images and then 'disrupting' them with jump cuts and shifts. For example, the position of a shadow will alter suddenly (*Prelude*), while *Filter Beds* uses the in-out focusing of a telephoto lens to play tricks with depth of vision and how our brain has to interpret what it sees. *Prelude* and *Flight* are time-based, more simply in the latter film, where the pigeon in the trees is still then not still, frozen in flight then unfrozen. The eye sees things quickly, but the lens makes us pause, decelerates us a little. If a 3.5-minute film may be said to have a climax, it is in the sight of a second pigeon launching itself from the tree where we thought there was one bird only. Counterpointing this blurry image, and creating a conscious space is the soundtrack, signposting not showing, capitalising on the way the ear interprets sense-impressions more imaginatively than the eye does. So, we hear the noisy flapping of wings as the bird launches itself, we hear the call of the lapwing, we hear the single bark of a dog. Sherwin notes of the film that the "wind in the trees brings life to the image", which it does but so do other sounds.

The image of the yard in *Prelude* he poetically, and accurately, describes as "a frame through which pass sunlight and childhood", and cleverly explains that the shadow from the sun sweeping round the yard is a rudimentary sundial. The strong shadows are also intercut with the yard on dull or rainy occasions to tell of the passage of days, the scene enlivened and a narrative suggested by the shadow of a little girl on a swing, her pouring water from a watering-can, a ball bouncing. This infuses this film about time passing not with regret but with tenderness, heightened by the use of Bach's *Prelude No. 1 in C major* from the 'Forty-eight' on the soundtrack near the end. Sherwin is not making a comparison between the two works so much as an aesthetic analogy: as the piano rejoices in working through the *Prelude*, so the edited film celebrates the way it works through moments in time.

Time is a central element in *Messages*, but in relation to much of Sherwin's work it is of a quite different order in being over half an hour long. Size brings ambition, but I hesitate to conclude that the ambition is matched by achievement. There is a compulsion in the images. The best shows water running over pebbles and a hand reaching down to pick one from the bottom and bring it from the water into the air. As it breaks the surface, the shape of the round black pebble gleams in the light: it is a novel reworking of the Sherwinesque tactic of shifting focus to show something is there that didn't seem to be there, as in *Filter Beds* (see below). The pebble is barely discernible in the water but by bringing it nearer the lens it is revealed in all its quintessential stoniness.

But the film is really about something else, namely how humans name the world about them, and it uses drawings and writing by his daughter Maya, various texts including from Piaget's 'The Child's Conception of the World' and ancient scripts to pose the philosophical question: why did humans choose a word like 'tree' to name a tree? This is new territory for his aesthetic thinking, and while that is laudable in itself, it requires a different mode of viewing from the others on this DVD, not

only because it is a long film, but also because the pace of the images feels so much slower: you (or at least I) become impatient. In relation to the other films I had a sensation like watching the third part of Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*: after the eyeball-shaking quality of the central section, we have to watch two people take an age to walk across a field of snow.

I am much more comfortable with a modest enterprise like *Views from Home*, shot on super 8 in 1987-89 and finally given form on a computer in 2005. The ambition is almost nugatory: to use time-lapse photography to recall the passage of sunlight both in the courtyard view out the window and in the interiors of his flat, for the pleasure of the patterns of sunlight and shadow that suddenly illuminate familiar scenes, fragments and corners, so that the unobserved becomes observed, the ignored becomes loved. That is not all because Sherwin adds a soundtrack of a jazz saxophonist improvising, mixed with fragments of ambient music ('music from the street' as he calls it), including zither music, rap, Joan Baez (I think), and snatches of Bach harpsichord music. The feel of this is nothing so much as one of exile, but not in terms of regret at the fact but in celebration of the new possibilities exile can give. The state of homelessness provides its own roots.

The best of Sherwin's work has an ascetic quality, which brings us to *Filter Beds*, made, like *Prelude* and *Flight*, as a result of his acquiring a Steenbeck sound edit table, because "sound editing became for me a lengthy process of trial and error and it was essential that I have easy access to the equipment". Within a nine-minute time length, Sherwin distils a world of nature (reeds, grasses, trees, birds) and human presence (overhead cables, planes in the sky). These epiphanies are matched by glimpses afforded by sounds again natural (wind, birdsong, raindrops) and man-made (moped, chainsaw, aeroplanes). The whole is bound together seamlessly by the edit because the images are as much juxtaposed by racking the focus from near to far, or far to near, as by dissolves in the film. The overall effect is of stillness, of noisy pressing reality merging with a state of timeless zen-like repose. The reeds in the still water, with their mirroring reflections, have the quality of calligraphy, a song of the earth merging into eternity. There is even perhaps a metaphysical union of opposites going on: the images were taken at the "site of the disused and overgrown Middlesex filter beds in east London", and the whole film makes of this wasteland a vision of paradise, all in nine minutes too: hyperbolic filmmakers, take note.

Finally, the film also poses the fundamental question of structure, which is sketched in rather than rigorously imposed. The branches, the reeds in the water and the overhead cables are constant anchors, a 'net' in which Sherwin captures his images of planes overhead, crossing the screen horizontally, diagonally and vertically. And just as one tires of this, the track of the plane is shown as a vapour trail tracing across the sky then fading, and the final image holds on an overhead cable and a vapour trail in the process of dissolving while the graininess of the film emerges into consciousness, a metaphor for Sherwin's whole aesthetic as it climaxes with a reminder to the spectator of pre-digital film's quintessential elements.