

GUY SHERWIN'S SHORT FILM SERIES 1975-2014

The whole history of film began with a series: on 28 December 1895, at a cafe in Paris, the Lumières showed ten short films, each 17 metres along which, when handcranked through a projector, ran approximately 40 to 50 seconds, the length of the film dictating its structure. To make each film, all the Lumières had to do was point the camera. Since distribution methods militated against the idea being taken further, it wasn't until the mid-sixties that the idea of the series was taken up again. Stan Brakhage made his thirty-one *Songs* on standard 8mm in the mid-60s, a format forced on him by the theft of his 16mm camera. Again distribution played a role here, as he envisaged selling prints of the films for intimate viewing at home rather than public viewing in a cinema. However, these films are all of different lengths nor subject to a strict format. Almost at the same time, and much more relevantly to what Guy Sherwin embarked on ten years later, Andy Warhol started his series of film portraits, filming celebrity faces for the length of a 100' roll of film which when screened at 16 instead of 24 f.p.s. added a slow motion quality to them, more piercing and much more arresting. What is more, they are silent.

The arrival of Sherwin's *Short Film Series* on DVD makes a proper advance of the idea: the DVD format allows quality reproduction of black and white film and proper showing of the films on television or computer. When he started making them however – the first is dated 1975 – this was an act of faith. He could screen the completed works at the London Filmmakers' Co-op and they would be available for hire, but the DVD format, which had not yet been invented, is significantly better: you can choose the order to play the films in, you can watch one at a time, you can dictate when to watch them. This is much closer to a version of consumption such as you get with reading poetry or listening to a CD.

There are thirty-four of these arresting films, again all silent, made between 1975 and 2013. There is a gap however between 1980 and 2010, broken only in 1997/8 when five get made. This prompts the question as to whether the ones on the DVD are a selection and whether there are more, maybe quite a number more, left off it. Despite these gaps, there is a strong sense of the autobiographical to the set. You can quickly work out Sherwin's favourite subjects: children, women's eyes, nature (leaves, trees, clouds, wind on water, birds on water and so on), cats. You also see youth and age: the set is book-ended by an attractive portrait of his parents, with a young Guy readily visible in an oval mirror between them, handcranking away while Kenneth and Lillian wonder where to look and what to do with their hands; the last in the set is a self-portrait with the face of his young son, Kai Foo, adjacent to his own, now much more elderly face, not done in a mirror this time, since the camera is operated by his partner, Lynn Loo. So, a family affair – just as the first one was.

These are both films of affection, but not of sentiment, and on the whole feeling is rigorously excluded, perhaps only creeping in with *Cat on TV*, which gives the tiniest hint of sentiment. Much more austere, and more striking, are the five 'eye' films of which the 2013 film with his son is one. The other three are *Blink* (1977), *Eye* (1978), *Maya* (1978) and *Yi Wei* (2011), made with three different women and one daughter (Maya), and therefore four quite different sets of eyes. All five adopt a different strategy in the way the 100' of film is shot.

The largest group are the nature films: *Treeline*, *Barn*, *Light Leaves*, *Wind and Water*, *Gnats*, *Tree Reflection*, *Coots*, *Tree and Cloud*. Each one of the thirty-four films remind us what a luminous medium black and white film is, but none more so than this group: Sherwin favours exploring the grey tones with which natural colour is rendered in black and white – just as landscape in black and white was a favoured subject for the artist draughtsmen of the past. These films may be short but each gives a sense of having been noticed with the eye first, planned in the mind, and watched on the screen of the mind, before the camera is set to observe and run. Nature needs to behave too: *Tree and Cloud* starts a little overexposed, the leaves light in the sun in the bottom third of the frame, a blue patch (showing grey of course) edged by cloud in the top third. The film's narrative is then of how filters are used in the processing to turn the leaves pitch black and darken the blue sky, combining that with the cloud drifting down the screen. The film has a haiku-esque quality, of each element being 'just so' and not something else.

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So these films can be approached as documentaries, with an autobiographical quality. But there is another level of appreciation that is important, signalled by the minimal information printed on the DVD case: "An ongoing series of silent films, each lasting about 3 minutes, the length of 100' roll of 16mm film. There is no fixed order or duration." To interpret them autobiographically requires watching them in order but Sherwin is encouraging us to watch them in a random one. When that is done a different sensation is opened up, since they become what one might call – in the favoured language of the 1970s – 'camera events', in other words their structure and construction become the subject of the viewer's attention. The second film in the series, *Hand/Shutter* (1976), puts us on to this immediately. Sherwin is visible in the oval mirror again but we do not watch him but the way he uses his hand to mimic the shutter of the camera, as it moves from shielding his eyes so he is blinded, but we are not, down to shield the lens, at which point we are blinded, while in the mirror Sherwin is not but watches what he is doing. (The film is a version of blinking which links it with *Blink* mentioned above.) He then adds a further rhythm by approaching and stepping back from the mirror. For this film he uses a motor to drive the camera, his hands being fully occupied with other things, but in a number of other films he uses handcranking, a conscious echo of the Lumière method. In the portrait of his parents he can be seen cranking away, and the title of one of the films is *Handcrank Clock*, while the fluttering, handheld quality of some of the films points to the use of cranking.

The films are also editing events. A few seem to run their hundred feet without alteration, but editing (whether within the camera or afterwards on an editing table or at the processing stage) is used in treating the films as well. *Treeline* (1976) is an example: "a line of trees in Suffolk farmland. Each tree was recorded in morning and evening light, from east and west, to give four distinct images" [from Sherwin's note for the film]. The impression is of a film composed on the editing table, but it may be that the trees were shot in fixed lengths and in the sequence they appear in the film. On the other hand a more complex process seems to be taking place, because the surface grain is very noticeable and freeze frames keep occurring. The notes explain why, that the film was made with an optical printer "which allows one to freeze individual frames of film or change the speed of the original footage". The end result is therefore technically intriguing but also points to the much larger ontological question of how the still image relates to the moving one, so that the film becomes a mini-essay on the birth of the still image and the birth of the moving one.

How important is it to understand what is happening with these films technically? It is a moot point. They can be accepted as fragments of a life if you like and enjoyed as such, but there is a quality in a number of them which is best captured by the word 'brain-tickler' or even 'brain-teaser'. What determines the editing of the shots of a chimney seen from a train (*Chimney*)? How did the second set of wires get there and how was it superimposed in the processing (*Clouds and Wires*)? Did you spot the way the tree and its reflection, sky in the top half, water down below, is turned upside down halfway through, so the watery reflection comes to occupy, quite unexpectedly, the top half (*Tree Reflection*)? And what are the coots on the pond in Amsterdam doing, swimming and then disappearing, then swimming backwards (*Coots*)? (This film is a forerunner of the clips used on BBC4 to fill between programs – and Sherwin got there first, without using digital means.) Then there is a super-clever group in which a clock is used in the image to ground us in time. Best of all is *Metronome* (1978). In this we watch a ticking metronome in shadow, filmed it seemed to me at first by a handcranked camera, but then the background brightens as the sunshine moves across. So it must be recorded with timelapse, not in real time, so the camera can't be cranked, and then the metronome quivers at the end of its beat, single framing again (I presume). And to fox the viewer further, the encroaching sunlight reveals a picture pinned to the wall, which turns out to be Vermeer's 'Lady seated at a virginal' looking blankly at the painter and - in the film - at us as if we had asked her, "How is this done?" and she had answered, "Don't ask me. Even if I knew I would not be inclined to tell you." The film starts as still life and ends as mystery.

These films are best watched singly rather than as a sequence, since there is a risk of them becoming indigestible, and the injunction to 'read, mark, inwardly digest' is very relevant to the way they should be appreciated. They may be monochrome but they are polytonal; they may be short, but they linger on the retina; they may look little, but they are in fact large, a lesson that digital film-makers letting the camera run and run could usefully learn. And they have this quality of mystery, maybe Zen mystery. *Tap* is not of a tap, but of water in a bowl, the surface of which is rhythmically ruffled by a drip from a tap. So far so simple and so restful. Then the lens changes focus so at different points in the film, the edge of the bowl is in focus, then the surface of the water, then the background. This is much more complex and against the grain of our passive gaze. But there is a story too, because the camera during the course of the film moves to reveal the cross frame of a casement window on its surface, turning our sensation of depth into perception of a single-plane abstract image. This is marvellously subtle film-making.

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Sherwin's notes on this DVD (very useful for technical information) is at:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/231256179/Film-Notes-for-Guy-Sherwin-Short-Film-Series-1975-2014-LUX-DVD-Release#download>

For more on Sherwin's other two DVDs, see my essay at: <http://www.timcawkwel.co.uk/guy-sherwin>.

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