

AL Rees

Associations: John Smith and the artists' film in the UK

John Smith's wit and his observant eye were clear from his very first films, made when he was in his early twenties. This was the mid 1970's, when he graduated from North East

London Polytechnic and was an MA student at the Royal College of Art. At that time, radical filmmakers were in two main camps, one centred on political film groups such as Cinema Action, the Film Work Group or Four Corners, and the other on avant-garde 'structural film' at the London Film Makers' Co-operative, known as 'the Co-op'. Both trends were to be found, arguing mightily, at the RCA Film and TV School. But there were also many links across the barricades, and the joint product of the two groups – the Independent Film-Makers' Association (IFA) – brought together theorists with practitioners, successfully campaigned for a fourth 'cultural' TV channel, and agitated for production grants from the British Film Institute and the Arts Council.

All these events hum in the background of Smith's early films, and beyond, because they set the agenda for independent film over at least a decade. Like many film radicals before them, the UK political and avant-garde independents of the 1970's rejected film as pure entertainment and sought new relationships to audiences. They looked to expand film language, whether by the Godard-Straub example of theory-and-politics 'essayistic' cinema or following the artistic model of formal experiment pioneered by the Co-op. Despite all of their differences, both camps were also unquestionably modernist. For the political groups, this meant Brecht: for many artists it meant Brecht too, but also Warhol.

These are old battles, but they were in the air when John Smith (b. 1952) made his first work. Since the late 1970's he has continued to screen and distribute his films through the Co-op (and more recently its successor, the Lux). The colleges in which he teaches, the University of East London and Central St Martins, have long been associated with artists' and experimental film and video, and hence broadly with the Co-op orbit. His films are often shown in a Co-op-type context, alongside Guy Sherwin, William Raban, Lis Rhodes, Nicky Hamlyn, Jayne Parker, Alia Syed, Karen Mirza & Brad Butler, Emily Richardson and many other artist-filmmakers.

At the same time, John Smith's films do not at first sight look



Cold Jazz
Jayne Parker, 1993

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Associations (1975)

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typical of the Co-op, in the various ways in which that look has manifested itself since the 1970's. No hand-held camera and oblique image (Peter Gidal), no dragging the film through the printer (Malcolm Le Grice, Annabel Nicolson) or drawing on film (Rhodes, Ian Kerr), no found footage (Le Grice, Fred Drummond), no expanded live action performance (Film Aktion), no multiscreen (Welsby, Raban), no traces of the raw film roll (Sherwin) or single-frame critique of apparent motion (John Du Cane, Nicky Hamlyn).

Yet Co-op films they are, in ways all their own, sharing a general ethic and aesthetic of film making which the Co-op represents. First, they are artists' films, reflexive, self-motivated and self-defining, resisting their own transparency to reading, narrative and closure (the very forces they invoke). Secondly, they are as artisanal as films can be in the industrial and collectivised nature of the medium, with many of their stunning visual effects achieved 'in camera' by craft skill, with the maker controlling every stage of the film's production. Thirdly, and as a joint product of the aesthetics and the techniques which they embody, the films assert a personal vision which is never finalised or fixed, and open a narrative space in which the viewer can question the construction of the film as a manipulated spectacle.

The two major distinctive markers of John Smith's films are their humour and their iconic imaging. The wit is often linguistic, and plays the ambiguity of words against the seemingly realist image. In most films which use voiceover commentary, for example, the purpose is to seal and smooth the narrative gap between word and picture. Paradoxically, and to thicken the plot, the voiceover is one of Smith's main devices in opening that gap. Two early films show this in different ways, one based on single-shot montage and the other on the continuous shot. Each has a spoken narration which, in the end, is defeated by the iconic code.

In *Associations* (1975), a grave and scholarly voice reads a linguistic text over a series of visual puns, most of them very rapid and funny. The phrase 'i.e.' is imaged by a Tarzan-like figure swinging from a tree ('aiyeel!'), the word 'players' by a shot of a cigarette packet with the same name. The child's rebus, in which pictures substitute for letters to spell out a hidden message, is the basis for the film, but not its only secret code. The film also offers a critical glance at



Flight
Guy Sherwin, 1998

structuralism and linguistics as models of meaning. The authority of the voice and of the word is gently deflated by the fluidity of the images, which will be registered quite differently by each viewer because of their sheer speed. In a further comment on 'secondary sources', all the images are visibly cut from the pages of colour supplement glossies, creating a semiotic circle – there is nothing outside of this text, at any rate.

The Girl Chewing Gum (1976) adopts the reverse strategy. In contrast to the many hundreds of single frame cuts in *Associations*, this film has only two shots although it is almost twice as long. The first and major shot is in an east London street, a busy intersection near a cinema. The camera explores this space in dour monochrome, while a hectoring director-like voice purports to control the action. Pigeons, cars, pedestrians and clocks all appear to follow his instructions, revealing a fantasy of cinematic power in a single-line joke. This moves from documentary to fiction ("the young man with the gun") as the shot moves to the right and approaches a queue outside the cinema, here the 'house of fiction' itself. A concluding shot of a field is covered by the director in voiceover, who now claims to be miles away from the urban scene he has just described. What he then describes, in this second 'field of vision', cannot be seen by the viewer. The film ends in the improbability and doubt which it has set out to evoke.

Both films, although light and direct in tone, are rich in implications. Between them they divide up the two basic codes of cinema – montage editing in *Associations*, the continuity shot in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. In the mainstream this is Hitchcock versus Ford, in the avant-garde it is Brakhage against Warhol. The two films also parody the dominant modes of voiceover in the teacherly voice of the one film, and the documentary style of the other. In the end, they insist that words are inadequate to represent their respective visual objects: the animated still shots in *Associations*, the fluidly panned street in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. In each, language is shown to contain a lack (or a 'lag') in time, and ultimately the visual world escapes full coverage by the abstract word. This principle extends to the titles of each film. The first puns on the syllables of the word 'Associations', while in the second a glimpsed pedestrian – a girl chewing gum – is memorialized as the name of a film about transience. At the same

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time, the visual field is neither glorified nor dramatised. The US underground from Deren to Brakhage expressed its scepticism about language in the visual sublime of the silent image. Here, the subject matter is demotic and popular, its images culled from pop culture journalism in the one film, and a long shot in a busy but shabby street in the other. In these ways, the social world seeps deeply into the films through the pores of these images. The means to do so are objective: rostrum camera, tripod camera. The voice in **The Girl Chewing Gum** is the filmmaker's, but here he is acting, so that the play of fiction and reality is maintained.

These fully achieved early films retain their power today, but also look ahead to much more elaborate work to come, which will continue to explore language, narrative, the iconic image, subjectivity, and the powerfully manipulative and therefore dangerous power of the cinema. These later films also explore the area of east London which has been John Smith's almost sole subject matter for thirty years (an exception, shot in Vienna, is forthcoming). At the same time, the social aspiration of the Independent Cinema, in both its avant-garde and its more political manifestations, never quite cease to lose their hold. The formidable technical skills in the earlier films were to be enhanced and heightened, all the more impressive because John Smith is still essentially a single person author who shoots and edits his own work throughout (with full credit to his regular collaborators like Ian Bourn and cameraman Patrick Duval).

By the mid-seventies, a number of younger filmmakers, Smith among them, had begun to rebel against the structural and formal film, and there were calls from some for a 'new narrative' or more personal cinema. Penny Webb and Tim Bruce were among this number, and others such as Michael Maziere, Lucy Panteli and Steve Farrer took to a more lyric and subjective approach signalled in a revival of 8mm filmmaking. The 'new narrative' movement itself didn't get very far and a number of talented filmmakers fell by its wayside. Among older mentors, Malcolm Le Grice, took a narrative turn in such films as **Blackbird Descending** (1977), while Lis Rhodes – who appears in that film – produced the masterly **Light Reading** (1979), with its complex and punning voiceover narration 'in a woman's voice'. Only Rhodes, a fellow student of Smith at North East London



Light Reading
Lis Rhodes, 1979

Polytechnic (NELP), used speech in this way at that time, and in a highly coded, disruptive way, seemingly culled from James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. Smith was unique in that he connected film narrative to linguistics. This play of signs – visual and textual – was a cornerstone of his thinking in this direction.

Silence or fragmentary speech and sound in their films were characteristics of the English avant-garde filmmakers and were direct outcrops of their background in the visual arts. The art schools from which they emerged were themselves often suspicious of language at that time, even while the studios were beginning to incorporate – or resist – the new cultural theory and philosophy of 'general studies' stemming from the reforms of the late 1960's. NELP's own Communication Design course, which Smith, Kerr, Bruce, Rhodes and their young tutor Guy Sherwin made into their pathway to film making, was run by feisty dissidents of the battles and occupations of 1968-70, notably at Hornsey College of Art. But in the main, the UK avant-garde identified with a pictorial tradition of modernist art practice, in which Cézanne was a precursor as much as Lumière, Léger and the US Underground. Even those filmmakers most concerned with film and language, such as Peter Gidal, were allusive and cryptic – deliberately so – in their use of words and text on screen or soundtrack. The watchword of this tendency was indeed 'Anti-Narrative', the title of a much-cited 1979 Screen article by Gidal himself.

By contrast, Smith began to include language more and more as a constituent element in his films. In a way, his predecessors were North American rather than British. They include Michael Snow's art of visual puns and language, as well as the strict form of **Wavelength** (1967) and other films. In **Zorns Lemma** (1970), the formidably polymathic Hollis Frampton had made his own rebus-film, in a highly abstracted form, by substituting images for words. Shots of gestures and actions, measured by the mathematical structure alluded to in the title of the film, gradually replace alphabetical signs culled from the street signs of Manhattan. Predating Rhodes' intervention by almost a decade, the voice-overs which sandwich this long and silent central section are read by a woman alone or in chorus. The overarching linguistic metaphor for Frampton is the language of the Bible – the word made flesh and authority. This critical dialogue with WASP tradition



Wavelength
Michael Snow, 1967

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continued in the States with the text-image films of George Landow, later 'born again' as Owen Land, whose films are avowedly if obliquely concerned with religion and revelation. Landow has often been compared to Smith for his wit and humour, expressed in puns and jokes (as in *On The Marriage Broker Joke As Cited by Sigmund Freud In Wit And Its Relation To The Unconscious Or Can The Avant-Garde Artist Be Wholed*, 1977).

Like Paul Sharits, Landow had begun as a Fluxus group filmmaker in the early 1960's. Fluxus films often included text, numbers and letters in an anarchic melt-down of found footage and anti-art gestures. An early Sharits film cuts up a Sears Roebuck catalogue, like the magazine pictures in *Associations*, but punning the montage splice with the physical cuts or 'sears' of a razor. In other films, Sharits uses letters as indexical markers of duration, as in the letters of *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968) which intermittently spell out the title of the film as it moves gradually to a conclusion. The extraordinary *Word Movie* (1966) is perhaps the closest in spirit to John Smith. Rapid-fire letters spell out a grid of interlocked words, too fast for the eye to take in, while a male and female voice alternately read two texts, one of which is – as in *Associations* – about language itself.

US conceptualism had a strong transcendental streak – as in the Biblical allusions of Frampton and Landow, or the Buddhist references of Sharits – but its UK variant in the 70's was more down to earth. Pop art icons were mixed with game-playing, charts and puns and the intersection of perceptual puzzles with the daily urban scene. Prior to John Smith, Ian Breakwell had turned his camera on the London scene – *Repertory* (1973) is a camera trip round the walls of a closed theatre – and later turned to laconic diaries (read in voiceover for their TV versions in the 1980's), which were however directly autobiographical, unlike John Smith's fictionalised stories. Breakwell had also used extensive narration over such long films as *The Journey* (1975), opening a psychological, rather than perceptual, space between image and word. Further from the Co-op scene, and often in sarcastic opposition to it, is Peter Greenaway, yet another art school graduate, coincidentally from John Smith's own first college, Walthamstow School of Art, but a decade earlier. Greenaway created his own form of anti-narrative from fragments of signs, words,



Repertory
Ian Breakwell, 1973

drawings and maps. Of these, *Dear Phone* (1976) is an intriguing precursor. Shot around the Thames, a series of red phone boxes relay frantic messages, ostensibly about the plot of the film which is being shown, and depicted in a much-crossed out film script, shots which alternate with the phones in their different locations. Greenaway's world is both more literary and conventional than Smith's, more polemical and grotesque, but the strict structure and word-image dialectic also echo Smith's own project.

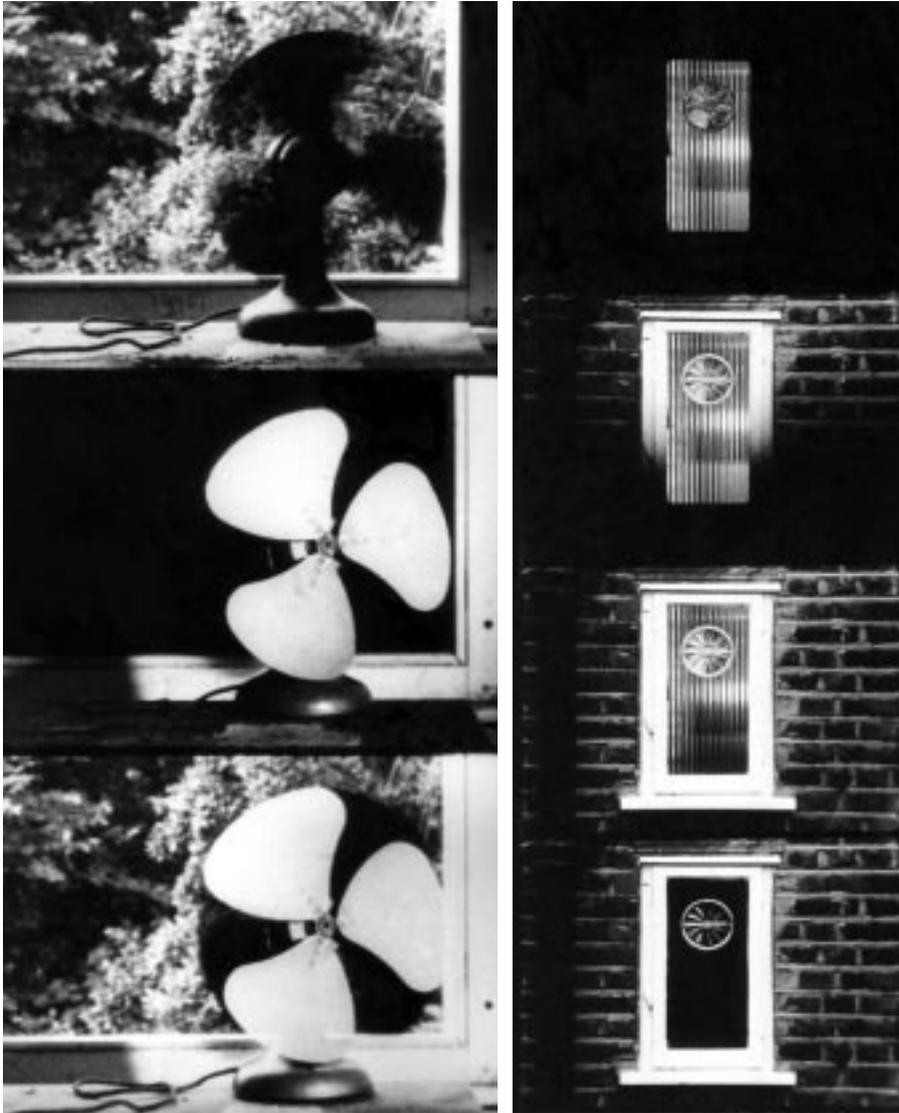
Different as they are, Greenaway's impulse to language and documentary also characterised some parts of the London Co-op. Chris Welsby had renewed the film-as-document in a series of time-lapse and long-take films, with mainly in-camera editing. Shaped by the events which they depict (sea, clouds, rain), these landscape films were directly printed from the negative with minimal intervention. Welsby's films restored film's optic nerve, its lucid ability to depict a framed world, to counterbalance the attack on the representational image with which the UK and European avant-gardes were mainly concerned. Smith also explored this iconic mode in his delicate room-films *Leading Light* (1975) and *Blue Bathroom* (1979), while subtly humanised landscape appears in *Hackney Marshes* (1977/8) and in *Celestial Navigation* (1980), his study of light and time-lapse.

In the early 1970's, Welsby collaborated with William Raban, who had also discovered the landscape genre. Raban too developed an explicitly documentary cinema, focused again on the Thames, with a minimal use of language or text for the most part but with an expanding interest in sound (working with musicians such as Paul Burwell and David Cunningham). Most crucially, as he engaged with the urban context, Raban increasingly included social and even historical references in his fusion of art and document .

During the 1980s, these filmmakers all developed their new options in distinct ways. The most visible and spectacular of them, Greenaway embarked on a very public career as a dystopian moralist, making formalised dramas as well as ambitious art installations in which lists and catalogues bulk large. Welsby and Raban led the landscape film into gallery art and into new kinds of art as documentation. Another Co-op regular, Patrick Keiller, also built a formidable body of work, strongly iconic, explicitly neo-documentary,



Seven Days
Chris Welsby, 1974



Blue Bathroom (1978-9)



Blue Bathroom (1978-9)
Celestial Navigation (1980)

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and with extensive voice-overs usually (as with Derek Jarman) delivered by professional actors. In the cool social observation of the essay-film **London** (1994), emblematic shots of the city evoke city and suburban space, while the public world of monuments and statues is mixed with the private 'non-spaces' of memory and association. The spirit of British documentary, and of English landscape art, moves in different ways through all these films

John Smith too incorporates the British documentary tradition, in the radical form laid down by Humphrey Jennings, Alberto Cavalcanti and Edgar Anstey in the 1930s. Experimental sound tracks, a melee of voices and optical, iconic camerawork are hallmarks of their films, just as they are in the Co-op landscape and cityscape genres. Among the elements Smith shares with Raban, Keiller and Welsby are direct frontal shots (to indicate the objective viewpoint), flat and planar colour swatches (including colour-fields which flatten the screen to abstraction), an authentic inscription of the passing scene (from which nonetheless the viewer is distanced by camera plane or placement) and an explicit social or even political intent.

To these common features, John Smith adds new and unexpected twists. He reads his own voiceovers, for the most part, a personal touch akin to his evident familiarity with the streets and scenes which he shoots. Unlike most 'London' city-poem filmmakers, with the exception of Ian Bourn, he is a native son of the districts he records, and his own voice and accent are part of the grain of such films as **The Black Tower** (1987) and **Home Suite** (1994). This personal aspect is neither strictly autobiographical – even when, as in **Shepherd's Delight** (1984), he appears to confess all to the camera – nor simply empathetic. On the contrary, the viewers are increasingly made aware of the differences between the descriptive voice, the shots on the screen and their own placement as spectators in the constructed flow of the film.

Narrative voice-over is the mainspring of these films, most elaborately in **Shepherd's Delight**, **Home Suite**, **The Black Tower** and **Slow Glass** (1991). Finely written and wonderfully timed in the reading, John Smith's scripts both renovate and complicate one of cinema's most stock devices. Rescued from its usual role – often as a cover for missing shots or inadequate story-telling! – the voiceover is also raised up from its tarnished role in straight documentary, where it is no longer



London
Patrick Keiller, 1994



Shepherds Delight (1980-4)

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seen or heard as the 'voice of truth'. The clichéd aspects of voiceover, or those aspects of it which are now regarded with suspicion, are redeemed by John Smith, but at the same time made even more paradoxical. Sometimes the voice in the films is intimate and personal (as in *The Black Tower's* narrative of obsession and downfall), in other films it is a collage or patchwork of texts and diversions. The collage films – *Shepherd's Delight* and *Slow Glass* – tend to use actors on screen and a variety of spoken voices, rather than that of John Smith himself, but in either case the certainty of address is slowly undermined by structures of vision or speech or fantasy.

Slow Glass is a sort of history lesson, but also a prolonged 'reflection' on its subject, the making and meaning of glass itself. Form meets content head on in this film, which is of course the product of a 'lens-based' medium, and therefore at one with what it describes. Only gradually is it revealed that we are listening to an 'unreliable narrator', that not all his stories can be trusted. Similarly, the naturalistic scenes shot by the lens – in pubs, at a glassblower's foundry – are in fact acted. They are in this sense as much 'constructed' as the non-realist, shifting and impossible scenes recorded (by matte shots) in the rear view mirror of a car, or the subtle recording of the passage of time in the frontage of an east end corner shop which changes hands, names, decor and functions over the months, here spliced together. The same kind of visionary cinema is seen in the montage of seasonal change in *The Black Tower*, which mattes different times in the same space as seen through a window.

Another debt to the documentary tradition is paid by *Blight* (1996), which in effect reworks Anstey's (and Ruby Grierson's) innovative *Housing Problems* (1935), the first such film in which the participants – slum dwellers in Bethnal Green – speak straight to the camera. *Blight* has the urgency of a campaign film, set to Jocelyn Pook's neo-minimalist and rhythmic sound score, but is also a lament for the streets (including Smith's own) demolished to make way for new motorways. This battle was lost, so that socially the film is a warning, an alert call, for the future. The lament is vocalized in a montage of stories and memories by the local residents (who are not seen), in a variety of voices, old and young mixed in a collage of sound. The film is as strictly metricated as a poem, with complex and oblique

correspondences and off-rhymes between sound and picture. The link might be a sound, a colour, an object, a description of wallpaper. Sometimes sound contradicts picture: this leafy tree is about to be cut down by the buzzsaw which sounded like an innocent scooter, the spiders in the toilet are also the tattooed web on the arm of a demolition worker and the criss-crossing roads he is helping to build. Unlike most of his films, which are constructed illusions, *Blight* is the product of material shot over two years and crafted by exemplary montage-editing into a precise fourteen minutes.

Scattered among his prodigious output are a number of very short films, lyric-length counterparts to the longer works, to pun on scale (*Gargantuan*, 1992), sound and meaning (*Om*, 1986) or visuality (*The Kiss*, 1999, with Ian Bourn). One among these gives a hint of Smith's literary resources: *The Waste Land* (1999). The film opens with T.S. Eliot's own reading of the pub scene in the poem, his plausibly cultivated English, scoured of his original American accent, only creaking when he takes on the cockneyfied voices of Lil and her pals. An extended point of view shot, made with a handheld video camera, takes us into a pub lavatory. John Smith's own voice now recites the 'city waste' section of the poem in the urinal, with casual and swaying references to each line ("or other testimony of summer nights" is keyed to a shot of the condom machine). A one-liner in real time, like the first part of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the film ends with a door sign that switches the expected word 'TOILETS' to its literalized anagram 'TSELIOT'. Emblematic for English readers of his generation, Smith is not mocking the poem (nor perhaps Eliot's beguiling struggle to read it in the east end voices he had hesitantly imagined). It is also a homage to 'The Waste Land' as the founding moment of London's modernist imaging, a collage poem akin to montage cinema, translatable across time and medium, not quite taken back to its sordid roots from its high cultural ground, but close enough. The effect is to rehumanise the poem, to 'make it new' as Ezra Pound claimed.

The literary clue in *The Waste Land* is preceded by his most writerly film to date, *The Black Tower*. The 'dark tower' as a theme in English poetry is explored by the critic Harold Bloom (as in 'The Ringers in the Tower', 1979). He finds this brooding and threatening image from the Renaissance to Shelley and the Romantics, ending with Browning's



The Waste Land (1999)

‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ and Yeats’ ‘The Tower’.

This dark tower is a metaphor of isolation and death, as it is – in a less heightened way – in Smith’s film. As a visual icon, Smith’s tower is both type and token, only made possible by cinematic illusion. For the deranged narrator who encounters it everywhere, in town and country, it is a token of an imagined and fantasised original. In fact the tower is a type: there is only one, it is the original, it has simply (or not so simply) been shot from many different angles to suggest many towers in many places. Just as the viewer is prepared for these confusions by the breakfast sequence – in which colour patches turn to sounds and then real objects – and by a later section which transforms the narrator’s running footsteps into the abstract edge patterns of the flat screen, so too the film ends in a long shot which contains much of the real space fictionalised by the film itself. Over this discreet self-revelation, a mourning woman implies that the whole process of searching and delusion will start over again, which more optimistically may also mean that a film can and should be seen more than once.

In his most recent film, **Lost Sound** (2001), made with sound artist Graeme Miller, Smith’s narrative coil is shuffled off almost completely. In style and manner it is more like concept art than anything else, sharing its roots with the stark literalism of the 1970’s from which Smith’s generation emerged, but hooked up as well to the direct, frontal mode of address which characterises gallery-based art today. Like the title which opens Godard’s **Weekend** – ‘A Film Found on a Dump’ – the film is based on overlooked found objects, namely discarded audiotape cassettes. Carefully recorded and duly dated, like a documentary, the fugitive tapes are barely visible at first, dwarfed by the urban space around them. As new ones appear, their lost sound is restored and played back into the location noise around them. Gradually, as the film progresses, the shots are restructured in non-documentary and counterfactual rhythms: real events in time and space (a weathervane, a traffic roundabout, a truck door) are flipped back and over to create film time and space, in this case with the aid of digital editing.

The films of John Smith are among the most widely seen and appreciated of the UK avant-garde. Rigorous in structure and highly crafted in making, they extend the logic of language to question the

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authority of the image and the word. Sound and picture are the core of film narrative, which Smith has always embedded in his work. The succession of images leads to the production of meaning. How this is done, and how the viewer is compelled to read those signs, are central to the films. Along with these concerns there runs a personal, observational streak, in which time and change – rather than duration – are key. These induce two deeper aspects of the films, namely imitation and loss. Film is here a belated medium, presenting the past as a continuous present, so that what it records with apparent objectivity is a memorial rather than a fact. The role of memory in watching a film is itself invoked by the process of the medium. Among the complex features of these films is perhaps an attempt to sidestep, in a knight's move, Brecht's critique of cinema, his "fundamental reproach" that a film is "the result of a production that took place in the absence of the audience". In John Smith's films, the spectator is a producer as well as a consumer of meaning, bound in to the process but simultaneously distanced from the 'naturalness' of the film dream. This feature alone marks off John Smith's films from the lure of cinema (to which his richly visual images nonetheless allude) and locates him firmly as an artist-filmmaker, who turns the codes of the film medium into a continual questioning of film truth.

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Leading Light (1975)