

## **Fuzziness**

### **The International Short Film Festival Oberhausen pays tribute to John Smith**

Hollywood's dominance of the world cinema market is a continuous subject of discussion, yet no one ever complains about the fact that experimental film is also, and to an equal extent, dominated by the US - and maybe even in the same way. Even the avant-garde traditions of established film countries such as France, Italy or Japan are hardly known outside of these countries. In this context, however, England represents a very special case. In other countries, the language problem might offer a possible explanation for these blind spots, these "holes in reception", so to say; a lot of experimental films lean heavily on language and its relation to the image. But, as English has now become a lingua franca, one could assume that British avant-garde cinema would take on a greater international importance. The fact that this is not the case might be an indication that language has only a partial bearing on cultural hegemonies. Maybe it has to do with the rather individual culture of satire and sensuality that has emerged in British avant-garde film. One of its most original representatives over the last three decades was the subject of a homage at the 48<sup>th</sup> International Short Film Festival Oberhausen: John Smith, the brilliant ironist and portraitist of London.

### **The omnipotence of the gaze**

The 1970s had something sobering about them, being themselves compelled to sobriety: they were thus perfectly suited to the dominant stream of avant-garde cinema, i.e. structuralist film: counting frames and finding certainties, then counting them again before everything caves in – paranoia cinema, and a kind of revenge for the Baudelairean transgressive excesses of people like Jack Smith or Ron Rice, *le cinema underground* of Yvan Lagnange, or the passionate flirt of agit-prop with pop commerce à la Adachi Masao; revenge for all the cinema that was voluptuous and intense, playing with difference and uncertainty. Smith is a child of this time: born in London in 1952, he studied at the Royal College of Art and started making films and videos in 1972 – himself a perfect example of the time, yet more than just that: Smith is its meta-satirist. He was the one to create perfect structuralist masterpieces while laughing at the general uptightness surrounding him.

Structuralist film is essentially about security and destabilization; a film is a film, a cut is a cut, a word is a word. This implies a particular sensitivity, but also a kind of severity that may at times take on despotic features. The structuralist cinema was meant to help film gain new

self-confidence: back to basics, and up to the transcendence of the material itself, which is often far removed from the very things upon whose representation the other dominant avant-garde movement of the time was concentrating: the politically committed film.

Undogmatically, Smith positioned himself between these poles; he set out to search for the relationships between things with artistic rigour. His first central work is from 1976: "The Girl Chewing Gum", a comedy about the omnipotence of the gaze and the viewer's desire to believe in what is happening on the screen at any price. We see a street corner in black and white while hearing an off-screen voice that keeps telling us what we are going to see next, making it seem as if an omnipotent guiding force, a director, is organising the course of events. Yet the instructions never include any cinematic references; when the camera pans upwards, the voice says: "Now I want everything to sink slowly down ..." Then, however, the voice starts making increasingly concrete statements about the events to follow, slowly turning simple announcements and guidance into interpretations, the next stage of which is narration. First, the narrator confesses to his fictional role, e.g. he claims to be standing on a field fifteen miles away from the building we are looking at (we are subsequently shown proof of this); then he begins to describe a man within this new scenario, who he finally claims is carrying a helicopter in his pocket. When we then again see the street corner and hear the off-screen voice, our perception of the world has changed completely – and in an extremely funny way.

This leads us to the central factor: humour. Smith's films are often very funny, playing around brilliantly with perception and prejudice, with the fuzziness that exists in the interaction between things, the space where everything becomes possible. Some simple, small examples of this are: "Om" (1986), basically a fixed single shot in which a Buddhist monk (orange shawl, a light smoke haze drifts across the picture) turns into a skinhead on a hairdresser's chair: the shawl turns out to be a towel, the smoke comes from a cigarette; or "Gargantuan" (1992), a one-minute zoom-out that starts off with a close-up of a seemingly gigantic newt, accompanied by the monotonous singing of the words "gargantuan amphibian." Then the film moves further and further away from the animal (which is sitting on a pillow on a bed), gradually providing us with a sense of scale by revealing a John Smith who, filled with amicable feelings towards the newt, is looking at its body and rhapsodizing. As the camera zooms out, Smith uses increasingly diminutive adjectives to modify the generic term "amphibian" in his ode to the animal, from "enormous", to "weenie", right down to "miniscule amphibian". Then comes "minute", followed by an intertitle displaying the word "MINUTE" accompanied by the spoken statement "I Love My Newt."

The video "The Waste Land" (1999) consists of one continuous take in Smith's local pub. Smith, mumbling to himself, goes to the loo. In the end, the toilet sign, which contains a small spelling error (toilest), tells us that everything we see is back to front (tseliot). In "Associations" (1975), things get a little more complicated. Here, an excerpt from Herbert H. Clark's text "Word Associations and Linguistic Theory" is taken apart with the help of the image: at first, with abstruse plays on words where the associations have some connection to the names of the things we see. Then there are 'fuzzy' pronunciations, where we see something whose name sounds more or less like the word we are hearing at the time (e.g. the image of an "ass" while we hear the word "as"). This then builds up to the combination of both forms, where images are assigned not only to words but to syllables (e.g. with the word "association" we see subsequent images of an "ass", a sewing machine evoking the verb "sew", the "sea" and a group of "Asians", which makes "ass-sew-sea-asians").

### **The smallest gesture counts**

Works like these tend to be underestimated, just as comedies are generally underestimated. The beauty is that they work all the same, and that their formal brilliance, their precision, never takes centre stage. Yet all of them are polished like precious jewels: even the brief moment of boredom in "The Girl Chewing Gum" which sets in when we believe we have understood it all is precisely calculated within the rhythm of the film; the smallest gesture counts. Everything says something about the nature of cinema, about its artificiality, about our willingness to believe what we see, and, implicitly, about the potential consequences of such a false perception. The fact that Smith created his own accompanying theoretical epos, "Shepherd's Delight – An Analysis of Humour" (1980-84), fits the picture. His poetic studies of London form another thread in his work and act as a counterbalance to his avant-garde satires; these include "Hackney Marshes – November 4<sup>th</sup> 1977", "Lost Sound" (1998-2001), and "Blight" (1994-96, in cooperation with Jocelyn Pook). Not to forget those works constructed as reflections on narrative, such as "The Black Tower" (1985-87) and "The Girl Chewing Gum."

Yet Smith's London is primarily located right on his doorstep; he prefers filming in his immediate vicinity, in Leytonstone. Nevertheless, the films and videos do not necessarily have a local orientation: his favourite pub, "The Northcote", figures in "Slow Glass" (1988-91), for example, without this having a special meaning for the film - he simply likes to shoot where he enjoys drinking. Consequently, his subjects and locations materialize during walks or while looking out of the window. For "Leading Light" (1975), Smith never even left the house but traced the sunlight wandering through his flat and observed how the light and the

colours transformed the room (similar to the film version of "Hackney Marshes – November 4<sup>th</sup> 1977). His paranoia-thriller "The Black Tower," on the other hand, deals with the different spaces that the (cinematographic) interaction with an object can potentially open up. A voice tells us how a black tower keeps following it around London. And, indeed, what we see is a series of different pictures of the constantly changing surroundings of the tower, until the voice is finally swallowed up by its blackness. "The Black Tower" is an attempt to understand the essential being of the camera, the power of its different lenses, and, thus the nature of obsession and imagination. Above all, however, it is an urban landscape film, connected in many ways to British landscape painting as well as British regionalism: a *Heimatfilm*, a regional film, yet by no means as locally rooted as "Blight", that 'opera of commemoration' about the demolition of a street in which Smith used to live for many years.

This "heimat-film" element is also present in "Lost Sound" (2001), but in a far less rigorous form. "Lost Sound" was shot during a number of local walks. What we see is pictures of strips of magnetic tape fluttering from lampposts, among the weeds on the pavement and from wire netting; what we hear is fragments of those tapes recovered by composer Graeme Miller. Lost songs, most of them wonderfully sentimental pop songs, seem to float through space like lost feelings – the effect is intense. Landscape films looking for a unification, an interconnection of their elements. It is the insular roundness, living with contradictions and the contradictory, the joy of it all, keeping at a distance to things, and yet longing for closeness, that make up Smith's Englishness - perhaps there is something of Edward Elgar about him.

Author of the original German text: Olaf Möller

Translated by Gaby Gehlen and Timothy Jones