



IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN SMITH

Interview by Ben Rowley

Ben Rowley: I'd like to begin by asking you about the impact of changing technology upon your work. What was the first film camera you shot with?

John Smith: That was a clockwork Bolex, I had a very old one to begin with. The old ones have a very small viewfinder on them so you're looking at this tiny image. Most of the films I've made were shot using a Bolex camera, though mainly with a later model where I could see what I was filming (laughs).

BR: So were you using the Bolex through the 80s?

JS: Nineties too, yeah. *Blight*, the last piece that I shot on film, was shot on a Bolex. With that camera you can wind the film back and film a second exposure, so when I was making *The Black Tower*, for example, I could mask half the frame and rewind the film to make cars disappear behind trees and so on.

BR: That's all 'in camera' stuff?

JS: Yes, I didn't like leaving that kind of thing to the labs, you wouldn't know if it was going to work until it was too late.

BR: I'm interested in your transition from using 16mm film to using video.

JS: When I first started working with film there

wasn't really any choice between working with film and video if you were interested in the aesthetics of the image, at the time I thought the video image just looked like rubbish. What was available to artists in the early 70s was basically a low resolution camera connected to a black and white reel-to-reel 'portapak' recorder. You had to edit using a stop-watch and if you got really good at it you could make an edit that was maybe accurate to around a second, so you couldn't do anything that was at all precise. Although I have to say in retrospect I really like the look of some of the work that was shot at that time using video. There's a kind of mystery about the indistinctness of the image, particularly now we've entered the realm of HD, which at times can be kind of sickeningly clear in a way, although I love all that detail as well. So I shot only on film until the mid 90s, when Hi-8 came along and you could suddenly get a reasonable quality image with a very small camera and record sound at the same time. At that point I started making much more spontaneous video works alongside the film things. It was a bit of a release, having been used to spending up to four years making a film, that I could make a video in a day. So with *Home Suite*, which consists of three long half-hour takes, I'm travelling round the house I lived in when I made *Blight* while telling stories about what had happened there, triggered by



what the camera is looking at. By then the house was basically a complete slum - it was eventually demolished so they could build the M11 Link Road. I was watching the house fall down around me. At the time they had just started making these home improvement programmes on TV like *Changing Rooms* and I thought it would be interesting to make a video where I was very proud of my disgustingly squalid house (laughs).

BR: Was that the first time you had done a walking/talking piece?

JS: Yeah, it was the model for the *Hotel Diaries*, which were made in a very similar way, planned and mainly choreographed but also improvised. So that was a big shift for me that was driven by technology.

BR: Did you feel liberated by video?

JS: Absolutely, it was really liberating, but I saw film and video as sort of two different areas of my practice at first. For a while I only used video for the rough and ready hand-held stuff and continued with film for the more formally composed static camera work. I guess the next development was when Final Cut Pro appeared and all of a sudden it was possible to edit video on your own computer, where previously you would have to take your tapes to an editing

facility and pay loads of money to use an Avid suite and sit there with an editor who was operating it. That was not my idea of film making at all, because for me editing is usually the most interesting and creative part of the process and I certainly don't want someone else doing that for me. The first piece I edited using Final Cut Pro was *Lost Sound*, and I was able to flip the image over, reverse the sound and image at high speed, basically make many analogies to the mechanism of tape in the video. I'd never have done that on film as I would have had to go to a lab to flip the image and so on, so the possibilities afforded by the technology fed into the work.

The shift to HD has had a big impact on my work too. I find myself shooting much wider shots than I ever did on 16mm or SD video because you can see detail that would previously have been lost. I would never have made a video like *Flag Mountain*, with its panoramic landscape shots, on SD. The enforced change in aspect ratio in HD to 16:9 is taking a bit of getting used to though - having composed images within a 4:3 rectangle all my life it's strange having all that extra space on the sides to contend with. I hope no one comes up with the bright idea of changing the aspect ratio again - the problem

for me with technology is that it's changing so fast it's hard to keep up with it.

BR: When the tool you have been using is suddenly replaced by something 'better'.

JS: Yeah, the thought now of a camera, like the Arriflex SR, being the professional camera of choice for over twenty years is... I mean who would believe that now?

BR: Your use of sound is very striking and playful, I wondered whether some of your creativity with sound was born out of your experience with non-synchronous film cameras where the sound is always created and applied separately?

JS: Absolutely, I've always much preferred that sort of freedom, combining independently recorded sound and image in whatever way you want. I've usually steered away from having lip-sync, because treating sound and image as separate entities affords so many more possibilities. It also means you can use sound in an abstract way as well as in a representational way. For me the whole dynamic of film is to do with that interplay between sound and image, how the sound will be leading the image at one point and then the image will lead at another... the dialogue between the two is fundamental for me.

BR: Have you ever felt like you were part of a British tradition of documentary film making following on from the G.P.O. films and people like Humphrey Jennings?

JS: Well yeah, the work from that period is really fascinating to me, and John Grierson's definition of documentary was 'the creative treatment of actuality'. Well, I'm definitely involved in the creative treatment of actuality (laughs) and a lot of what we call documentary now isn't, so yes I'm very interested in that.

BR: Do you think of yourself as a political film maker?

JS: Yes, definitely, but by that I mean political in different ways. When I was starting to make films Bertolt Brecht's ideas around theatre and distanciation were very important to many independent filmmakers, both artists and political activists, and they were very influential on me too. In a formal sense all of my work is political in that it makes viewers aware that they are looking at something which is an artifice, so it doesn't attempt to make you believe in what it's giving you, whether ideological or factual, it's something for you to actively engage with and hopefully not just consume. This ambition to expose the construction of the work was there from very early on - *The Girl Chewing Gum* directly addressed the artifice of cinema and the ways in which words can determine how we interpret documentary images.

When I started making my *Hotel Diaries* videos they were much more overtly political but... they were sort of cathartic for me because I was so angry about what was going on at the time, first of all in Afghanistan and Israel/Palestine,

then later Iraq as well. Even though I was saying things that anybody might say I just wanted to say them... however banal they were, it was important to me to try to have that kind of empathy with other people through screening the work and discussing it with audiences in different countries. I'd like to see more work in the world that feels like someone addressing something important to them, whatever that might be.

BR: *Soft Work* continues your process of shooting while directly addressing or confiding in the viewer, is it something you have become comfortable doing?

JS: I think I couldn't have done that kind of work when I was younger, you know as you get older you don't care so much what people think about you (laughs)... and I'm very much playing on kind of 'being boring' in the work. It can still feel uncomfortable, but for some reason I feel this compulsion to make work that is in some way confessional, where I'm taking the mickey out of myself to some degree.

BR: *Soft Work* allows the viewer into the process of you making *Horizon* (*Five Pounds a Belgian*).

JS: Yes, it came about spontaneously while I was hanging around on the seashore waiting for people to pass by the camera. The camera was set up looking out to sea and the microphone was plugged in, so I just started talking about what came into my head at the time. Over the

course of the day the structure for a new piece of work emerged. I'm excited about showing the two together simultaneously at the Sidney Cooper Gallery, *Horizon* in the bigger space and *Soft Work* in the smaller room so you can move from one to the other. I like the way that the two pieces frame the sea in exactly the same way while their impact on the viewer is entirely different.

BR: *Horizon* was a commissioned work from The Turner Contemporary in Margate, can you talk a little bit about this transition from cinema to gallery?

JS: Well there are advantages and disadvantages to showing work in a gallery, something I never really did until the 90s. Previously all of my work was made within the context of cinema screenings where you watch the film from start to finish. Making work that might loop continuously in a gallery presented a new challenge, so by the time I made *Lost Sound* I wanted to make something that would work if someone were to come into the piece half way through, something that would be a lot less problematic than coming in half way through *The Black Tower* or *Slow Glass* for example. So *Lost Sound* does develop over time but not in such an important way. Most of my work is still made ideally to be seen from beginning to end so the way I get around it in a gallery, especially with longer pieces, is to let viewers know the time when each cycle of the loop begins. Then at least people have the opportunity, if they want to,

to watch it from start to end. But some recent pieces are made specifically to be seen as a loop - *Horizon* doesn't have a beginning or an end, so I wouldn't show it in any other screening situation. I think a video like *The Kiss* really benefits from this type of repeated cycle, the four minute image of the flower being crushed becomes like a production line, you get this sense of a factory crushing flowers one after the other.

BR: You have also been commissioned to make films for TV throughout your career. It seems strange that with the proliferation of TV channels such a scenario is becoming increasingly rare.

JS: Well the television environment has changed so completely, not just the commissioning but the screening of work... it is hard to imagine now that *The Black Tower* for example was shown on Channel 4. I don't think that that would happen now, it would be too... disorientating. The broadcasters would be too scared of viewers switching channels. *Slow Glass*, a forty minute film, was commissioned by Channel 4 and the Arts Council, and *Blight* was commissioned by BBC2 and the Arts Council for a series called *Sound on Film*. What TV opportunities for artists' film do we have now? *Random Acts*... three minute interventions on Channel 4, and at the moment that's it.

BR: In terms of subject matter you seem to have been very inspired by the view outside your window and the street where you live. Is that still something that inspires you today?

JS: Yeah, absolutely. I'm happiest, partly because I work alone, in places that are familiar to me. It's also very important to me that my work comes out of personal experience. Even though I've started making pieces in other countries in recent years, like *Hotel Diaries* and *Flag Mountain*, they are still actually to do with my immediate environment. It's just that it might be an environment I'm only in for a short period of time. People sometimes ask me why I chose to film the giant flag on the mountainside in Nicosia. Although I'm very interested in issues of nationalism the answer is simple - this happened to be the view from the balcony of a flat I stayed in when I visited Nicosia for another reason. Almost all of my work is triggered by things that I come across by chance. The *Hotel Diaries* videos are all improvisations that make connections between world events and personal experiences that occurred while I was travelling, and they all use the hotel rooms that I happened to be staying in as found film sets. I still believe very strongly that you can find all the material you need to work with without going very far at all. You just need to look at things closely and if you're patient and look hard enough things often fall into your lap... it's just a question of waiting around.