

Experimental Film

John Smith

Michael O'Pray

John Smith: Film and Video Works 1972-2002, eds Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon, Picture This Moving Image/Watershed Media Centre, Bristol, 2002, 138pp, col & b/w illus, £12.00, 0 953 9872 48.

John Smith has always been an awkward case in British experimental film, not least because he has been that peculiar beast – a humourist. But like his forebearers the Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton, Smith's humour is grounded in a profound understanding and playful subversion of the film medium itself. It is the relationship film has to language and sound that particularly tickles his fancy or stimulates his imagination.

Books or, for that matter, catalogues on individual British avant-garde filmmakers are rare. As such this volume of essays marking 30 years of John Smith's film and video work is very welcome. It includes contributions by fellow artists (and collaborators) Cornelia Parker, Ian Bourn and Nicky Hamlyn, the critic AL Rees, an interview by the artist and critic Catherine Elwes and a handful of Smith's film scripts.

One of the most talented filmmakers of the postwar generation, he has attracted admirers from way beyond the narrow confines of the Avant Garde. His reputation rests on a quite unique sensibility which has successfully married three traits – humour, documentary and formal ingenuity – into an indissoluble whole. His formative years were spent in the conceptualism-cum-structuralism of the 70s in which he recognised something others often overlooked or ignored and that was its wit. Smith developed this trait but always with a strong sense of subject matter, especially that of his native East London.

Rees's essay sets out Smith's relationship to the avant-garde tradition, meticulously laying out its themes and aesthetic strategies. He rightly cites George Landow as an American precursor and counterpart. But he is equally quick to point out elements that echo the more playful visual/word-games of Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton. Nearer home, he lays out some tantalising connections with Peter Greenaway's own punning proclivities, and plugs in the British landscape tradition to Smith's own documentarist tendencies. Rees's creation of a referential field for Smith only serves to highlight Smith's originality, his early forging of a sensibility, against his contemporaries. Smith has an unerring nose for art bullshit.

Rees points out that the films open 'a narrative space in which the viewer can

John Smith
Slow Glass 1988-91
film still



question the construction of the film as a manipulated spectacle'. This is also the space, he believes, in which Smith's wry and, at times, manic, obsessive 'humour' resides, most memorably in his classic *The Black Tower*, 1987. As Rees implies, Smith's humour is in many ways intellectual – punning, ironic, anagrammatic, and at times heavily reliant on cultural references as in *The Waste Land*, but it can also be more knock-about as in *Shepherd's Delight*. What Smith does not seem to share with his fellow avant-gardists is their modernist belief in the openness of meaning. His films, like all humorous work, are highly controlled and quite precise in their effect (something Hamlyn brings out in his essay). There is no room for wandering off or projecting subjective meanings. Rather, the problem is more one of getting the puns. The irony here being that Smith's subversion of film manipulation requires the very same level of manipulation on his part.

Hamlyn's essay deals mainly with Smith's use of both systems of ideas which are often verbal, and location. Smith is the East London (not East End) artist. His film oeuvre – ranging from *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, to *Lost Sounds*, 2002 – is a developing document of this still deeply unfashionable part of London, mainly Hackney and Leytonstone. Hamlyn gives an interesting account of this documentarist trait which, focusing as it does on his immediate surrounding, mingles inevitably with an autobiographical one. His readings of *The Black Tower* and *The Girl Chewing Gum*, for example, are subtle, backed up by his sensitivity to the influence of the East London locations.

Rees's essay mentions loss in relation to Smith, but it is Ian Bourn's gentle melancholic essay that centres on this mood and hence carries one of the more arresting insights in the book, one which notes something beyond the systems, the ironic humour and documenting. He suggests that 'much of John Smith's work is an exploration of how things change and the feelings of loss we sometimes experience when these things

change'. Not only and most interestingly does Bourn locate this loss in Smith's use of everyday sounds – 'the chimes of a distant ice cream van' – but also in his often meticulous photographing of objects, isolated from their surroundings. Bourn comments on three films *Leading Light*, *Blight* and *Home Suite*. Interestingly he doesn't include *Slow Glass*, perhaps because he is the voice-over in that film, and one feels that his own artistic sensibility diffuses the film.

Smith's early film *Leading Light* (a film of a room the filmmaker lived in at the time) is exemplary of this mood of loss for Bourn. But at times in *Slow Glass*, the loss is ontological, things slipping into the past so that only memory seems reliable – and glass is a metaphor for this continual flux. But Smith's oeuvre documents a larger loss, a unique moment in British history in which Smith is inextricably implicated – the collapse of the industrially-based working-class communities, here of East London, given its *coup de grâce* under Thatcher. In this way, Smith's *Slow Glass* is a blunt rejoinder to Robert Flaherty's Romantic *Industrial Britain* (as *Blight*, made with the composer Jocelyn Pook, is to Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems*), and perhaps stands as an extension of Humphrey Jennings's elegiac *Spare Time*, in which with hindsight we can detect the beginnings of the collapse of a working class – the Welsh miners helping the woman pianist off with her coat as they gently begin their rendition of Handel's *Largo*. Only in the enormously popular *Blight* does Smith perhaps give in to an uneasy aestheticisation (it is one of the most beautiful films) of his surroundings. This is an excellent introductory book on Smith even if it perhaps serves his remarkable formal imagination better than it does his equally unique humour. ■

Michael O'Pray teaches at the University of East London.