

John Smith

Much has been made of British artist filmmaker John Smith's formalist approach, informed by structuralist materialist filmmaking in the 1970s. Yet when watching 20 of his works in a new retrospective DVD set – organised into three chronologically overlapping periods, 1975-99, 1992-2003 and 2001-07, with booklets containing essays by Adrian Danks, Nicky Hamlyn and Ian Christie – what is immediately striking is his dry wit and growing political anger, which culminates in his latest work, the 'Hotel Diaries' series, 2001-07. Writing on his works has mostly focused on the formal questions, yet films like *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, can also have an audience laughing out loud – a delightful surprise, given the reputation structural materialism has for being dry and earnest. Even the artist himself acknowledges that this playful approach was unprecedented when he first started to experiment with formalist work.

The Girl Chewing Gum, made while Smith was a student at the Royal College of Art, has now reached such iconic status that it is often used as a teaching staple on first year art and design BA courses. The 12-minute black and white film records the everyday events on a busy London road in Hackney. This footage is accompanied by an absurd voice-over which narrates the scene as though it is the film director who is instructing actors and the camera's movements.

Smith's intention is to use the power of the word to draw the viewer into the narrative, but at the same time to subvert this by wittily revealing its artifice. This allows him to show the illusionism of narrative, by both embracing the aims of structural filmmaking and, at the same time, exploring its potential through the use of humour. Beyond Smith's unique combination of formalism and sharp wit, this film anticipates

the force of political motivation seen in his later work. Towards the end of the film he subtly refers to the controversial 'Sus' laws of the 1970s that allowed police to hold people who looked as if they might commit a crime. He does this by drawing attention to one of the extras, suggesting he is responsible for a crime, when there is no evidence to support this.

Another highly influential film, *The Black Tower*, 1985-87, is a much darker work, as is the humour. This explores the boundaries between fiction and documentary. The film is intercut with visual puns, where disconnected images are juxtaposed to create amusing and thought-provoking connections. For example, the inclusion of found footage of a failed demolition of a council tower block is amusingly intercut into the fictional narrative where the protagonist (introduced through Smith's deadpan voice-over) is haunted and finally driven to death by his visions of a black tower. The piece concentrates on a location in Leytonstone, where Smith used to live. He transforms his everyday environment into a terrifying unfamiliar vision, touching on the alienation the contemporary subject experiences in such urban surroundings. The film indirectly comments on the increasing gentrification, urban development and loss of identity experienced in London's East End.

Dislocation of sound and image is a central preoccupation in Smith's work, and the second DVD draws attention to this formalist approach. *Lost Sound*, 1998-2001, a 28-minute collaboration with Graeme Miller, intriguingly explores how the juxtaposition of sound creates arbitrary meanings. The work here is denser, drier, more formal, and the artist's political engagement grows ever more direct. *Worst Case Scenario*, 2001-03, is an 18-minute film of black and white stills shot on a Viennese street. Disconnected images with layered sound and scratch video effect transform the everyday into a sinister scene.

Smith's most recent work, 'Hotel Diaries',

reveals the strongest political voice yet. This is a series of seven pieces. They are made on video, formally structured according to a single take staged in hotel rooms while attending film festivals. Smith plays the role of the protagonist, talking to camera and occasionally appearing on screen. He considers the dislocation between the interior spaces he inhabits and the catastrophic events of war happening outside. His voice-over shifts effortlessly from commenting on the interior décor to current events in the Middle East since 9/11, creating incongruous and at times very funny connections. In this work he is seemingly less concerned with the foregrounding of form. Christie believes that Smith would have no qualms about his recent work being regarded as propaganda. In fact Smith confirms that political anger and motivation now drive his work. While his films have always been political, he has shifted from a preoccupation with the localised to the consequences of globalisation. 'As a British person it makes an enormous amount of difference to me that my government has involved this country in wars that are obscene, morally unjustified and illegal,' he says. 'I don't feel I could make a film like *Leading Light*, 1975, again – certainly at the moment – which purely takes a pleasure in looking, because of external events that impinge on one's consciousness so much.' ■

John Smith DVD set is available from Lux. www.lux.org.uk

John Smith – unusual Red cardigan is on at PEER, London 5 October to 26 November.

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21 网络之间，连接不完了，连接了一辈子，我多希望
电脑能给我，我一下呢，人声，"任上开开
看看看看。"

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