

Nicky Hamlyn

John Smith's Local Locations

Two distinct but intertwined strands can be seen to run through John Smith's oeuvre. Firstly, there is the use of a system or an idea, often verbal, and frequently involving puns. A number of films exhibit this aspect of the work, including **Associations**, which plays on word/image relationships; **Blue Bathroom**, in which day and night shots were superimposed to create a composite image and **Celestial Navigation**, which uses a bucket and spade on a beach to create a sundial. **Shepherd's Delight** and **Gargantuan** are more semiotic in concept, using word and image play to trick the viewer or explore ideas about humour, framing, scale and off-screen space.

The second strand in the films is the use of particular locations, or objects and events in the familiar landscape, and it is this aspect of the works which I will be discussing. Earliest among such films is **The Hut** (1973) made while Smith was a student at North East London Polytechnic. This was inspired by the wooden rental office for a boating lake in Epping Forest. Smith saw it in winter, when it was closed up, and decided to make the film, which is a minutely detailed, rhythmically precise examination of the structure, full of focus pulls and fast cutting. The work is bracketed by a voice-over introduction which narrativises what would otherwise be a purely visual piece. Like the falling chimney which brackets Jean Cocteau's film **Blood of a Poet** (1930) the two halves of the narrator's sentence bookend **The Hut**: "I was walking through the forest one day, when suddenly I saw it ... I was amazed!". The introduction of a narrational voice into a work which is part documentary, part exploration of filmic form, establishes a strong template for all of Smith's subsequent films. He delights in the power of narration at the same time as he questions it. The sense of place in the work is very strong, yet always mediated by equally strong formal concerns and processes. In other words, the films are hybrids of documentary, abstraction, psychodrama and narrative.

Another early example is a Super 8 film: **Out the Back** (1974). It was made soon after **The Hut** and is composed of views of suburban rooftops and back gardens visible from Smith's bedroom window. The film's structure is reminiscent of **Forty Eight Heads from the Zondi Test** (1960) by the Austrian filmmaker Kurt Kren, which uses a strict frame by frame filming system to create pseudo-movement between the very

short shots of faces. This kind of method re-emerges in Smith's film **Hackney Marshes** (1977) in which the juxtaposition of similar-looking blocks of flats creates pseudo-movements, and in his most recent work **Worst Case Scenario** (2002), discussed below. In **Out the Back** the profiles of the roof tops suggested the structure, in which diagonal lines cross from corner to corner of the frame, rhythmically switching direction, and sometimes alternating with rectilinear shapes. These formal passages are interspersed with moments of human activity; washing being hung out and people leaning out of windows or fiddling about in their back gardens.

In 1974 Smith graduated from NELP and went on to study for an MA at the Royal College of Art, where he was taught by the filmmaker Peter Gidal, whose key 'Structural Materialist' work **Room Film 1973** was an important influence on a whole generation of students. Smith was also taught by Jorge Dana, whose lectures on semiology imparted a sense of the importance of economy of means in the production of meaning, reinforcing Smith's commitment to rigorously controlled forms in his work. At the RCA Smith made several films, including **Associations** (1975), **Leading Light** (1975), which is a study of light movement and intensities in an attic room, and **The Girl Chewing Gum** (1976), the first more ambitious project of his to combine an East London location with a powerful narrative voice over. The film was inspired by Francois Truffaut's 1973 movie **Day for Night** whose title refers to the practice of shooting night scenes in daylight. The artifice of movie making signalled in the title also informs the film's story which is about the making of a movie. Smith was struck by a snow scene in which the director organises not only the principle characters, but also all the extras, right down to the smallest details within the scene. The director emerges as a megalomaniacal deity, striving to create a plausible artificial world in as much detail as possible, so that ideally it is indistinguishable from the natural one.

In **The Girl Chewing Gum**, Smith mocks this aspiration and turns it on its head, by approaching the project from the opposite direction. He starts with a part of the real world of East London and then 'directs' it, in voice-over, so that it becomes a created world that really is indistinguishable from the real. The film was shot at Dalston Junction, a busy crossroads where genteel Islington gives way to

Nicky Hamlyn

Hackney – ‘England’s poorest borough’ – in a haze of heavy lorry fumes. It is one of the notable thresholds of the mythic ‘East End’, and as such was a symbolic starting point for Patrick Wright in his book on Hackney: *A Journey through Ruins*¹. Smith wanted a busy location, and here he finds it, training his camera on the offices of a glass company, then a queue of people waiting to get in to the Odeon cinema to see *The Land that Time Forgot*. The film is a testimonial to the power of narrative, because although we soon realise that the director is retrospectively voicing-over a real-life scene to sound as if he were directing it, we go along with this conceit, which Smith strains to breaking point, by, for example, directing pigeons to cross the frame, or telling the clock above the glass company building to rotate its long hand once an hour. There is also a fascination with language here, in the way that a description of a scene can be changed into a series of commands to the things in that scene by adding certain words to a descriptive sentence. The temporal shift that is required is also achieved by literally moving the words in time, slipping them back so that they occur before, rather than after, the events on the image track they describe. For much of the time the actions being directed are obviously spontaneous, and the commands obviously not commands, but every now and then a person moves into frame and appears to respond in a deliberate manner to directions. At these points the viewer slips involuntarily into credulous mode.

In keeping with the theme of the omnipotence of the director, camera directions such as tilts and pans are expressed as orders to the world itself to move in accordance with the director’s desires. Thus a tilt up is requested in the form: “I want everything to move down”. Later in the film, the voice-over moves into an interpretative mode, weaving stories around the figures in the scene. We are told that a man in a mac moving across the space has just robbed a post-office, whose alarm bell has been ringing throughout the film. His hands are sweating as he fingers the revolver in his pocket. This account opens up a whole problematic about descriptions, and about the criteria we use to interpret actions. For any single action, there are a potentially infinite number of interpretations of what is intended by that action, and therefore what it means. Cinema avoids these difficulties of interpretation by excluding from the narrative any

¹ ‘A Journey through Ruins (The End of London)’, *Paladin*, 1991. See also Paul Harrison: ‘Inside the Inner City’, *Pelican*, 1981, which starts its lurid trawl through the borough at Ridley Road market, a bare two minutes walk from Dalston Junction.



The Girl Chewing Gum (1976)

Nicky Hamlyn

actions which do not directly affect the story's development, but reality is contrastingly complex². Towards the end of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a further layer is added when the speaker of the voice-over reveals himself to be located at Letchmore Heath, fifteen miles away. Hitherto one has linked the voice to the action, and thus thought of it as being 'there', 'with' the action, somewhere behind the camera. Yet this new information forces us to think about why we felt that: it is a feeling too, not a thought, for we know that voice-overs are added in the studio, and we know that this is a voice-over, yet we associate the voice with the action because they are together in the space of the film. This final point reinforces the knowledge that we willingly and all too easily suspend our disbelief when at the movies.

We are again invited to stretch our credulity in *The Black Tower* (1987) where we cannot but be aware that what the framing and cutting of the film implies could barely obtain in reality, yet remains plausible, at least within the terms of narrative film construction. If we choose, however, to go along with the film's story, we become as vicariously paranoid as the character whose story the film tells, partly also through the agency of that other linchpin of narrative cinema – identification. In *The Black Tower* a number of diverse filmic forms; documentary, abstraction, psychodrama and surrealist reverie are stitched together by the narrator's retelling of his descent into madness. Indeed, in its ability both to contain these various forms, and to create a plausible mimetic world, the film is another eloquent statement on the persuasive power of narrative. It differs from most narrative movies, however, in a crucial respect. In movies the shot reverse shot system creates an illusory unity of time and place. In *The Black Tower* the opposite is the case: we are persuaded that what, in reality, is the same place is, in the film's story, several distinct locations. The film's hero/narrator becomes convinced that he is being followed by a black tower. At first he sees it behind some houses, noting only that he had not noticed it before. So far so good. Gradually, however, he sees it more often than seems natural. He ventures further afield, to Brixton prison, where he sees what he assumes to be a similar tower behind the prison wall. On returning home, however, he is disconcerted by the absence of his 'local' tower. This is a turning point in his state of mind, because it now begins to

2 _ For an introduction to the philosophical issues surrounding the interpretation of behaviour see John Searle: 'The Structure of Action' in 'Minds, Brains and Science', the 1984 Reith Lectures, BBC publishing, 1984, pages 57-70.



The Black Tower (1985-7)

Nicky Hamlyn

seem as if there might only be one tower, which is following him around. As the narrator slips into his paranoid state, the viewer comes increasingly to realise that the film's meanings have been constructed through carefully selective framing. The utter simplicity and transparency of this strategy forces the viewer to confront his own gullibility, but equally to take pleasure in noticing the details which give the game away, and to understand how easy it is for him/her to be deceived. A funny and telling moment comes late in the film, just before the tower is spotted over the trees in Shropshire. The scene is established with a few shots of tranquil willows and greenery, but there is something about the tightness of the framing of the landscape – one expects a wide shot in these circumstances – and the decrepit state of the foliage – too much moth-eaten bindweed – which hints at the actual location.

A more profound revelation comes soon after this, however, as the narrator approaches the tower. It is shown to be enormous: much bigger than the many previous views of it lead one to believe. The narrator points out the repairs to the brickwork and numerous other details hitherto unnoticed. Thus, just as the transparent techniques of the narrative declare themselves, a more fundamental problematic is broached, on the inability of film to adequately represent, in a purely documentary manner, even quite simple objects. Where Bernd and Hiller Becher developed this theme through their rigorously restricted and uniform approach to the photographic documentation of industrial buildings, Smith explores it by introducing a completely new way of describing and thinking about the tower. Up to this point it has been a flattish, distant black shape, a hole in the sky, and a symptom of the narrator's paranoia. Now at the end of the film, it is seen to be complex, three dimensional, precisely located and full of history.

The view across the railway line and cemetery to the tower that occurs towards the end of the film is the view that faced Smith from the back window of a house he moved into in Colville Road, Leytonstone, in the 1980s. Smith was struck by the matt-painted, geometric shape, which altered in unpredictable ways as he walked around it, and which seemed to absorb light like a black hole. An eccentric neighbour told Smith that the tower was part of the psychiatric wing of a geriatric hospital. Although it was in fact an innocent water tower, the

neighbour's account reinforced Smith's first, sinister, impressions of it. The film was a deliberate exercise in hybridity, in which a number of existing ideas for different kinds of films are brought together, but the tower and its role clearly influenced the story's direction, and acted as a catalyst and unifying element for the whole work.

Slow Glass (1988-91) can be seen as the antithesis to cinema in terms of its approach to the use of location. In cinema, locations, like so many movies, are generic. A location scout will find a location that will substitute or stand for a certain kind of setting appropriate to the film: The Philippines substitute for Vietnam in **Apocalypse Now**, Gubbio for Verona in Zeffirelli's **Romeo and Juliet**, and so on. Anywhere that satisfies the demands of the film's theme or style will do, whereas in Smith's films the peculiarities of his locations become increasingly important, particularly in his more recent films like **Blight** and **Home Suite**, where topical issues affecting the local community feature in the subject matter.

The locations in **Slow Glass** had to be observed and researched over a period of several months in order for Smith to record the changes to the urban landscape that are a feature of the film. Smith would take note of 'For Sale' sign boards on properties, then make before and after shots of the buildings with the signboards framed-out. He rang breweries to find out which pubs in the area were due for a makeover and so on. In this sense the film is like an enormously extended time-lapse film which speeds-up imperceptibly slow changes to the landscape. We are accustomed to parts of London like the Isle of Dogs being in a state of constant flux, but we do not expect this of semi-dormitory suburbs, composed of large tracts of terraced housing. In fact, as the film dramatically reveals, the landscape of East London is undergoing constant and sometimes dramatic change. In **The Black Tower** this is seen in the spectacular, botched demolition by explosion of the first of an estate of tower blocks on the edge of Hackney Marsh. In **Slow Glass**, even bigger developments are touched on. The bricking-up of windows towards the end of the film, in preparation for the compulsory purchasing and demolition of houses to make way for the M11 Link Road, is poignantly recorded. The shutting out of the light, the replacement of glass by its antithesis, symbolises the benighting of whole

Nicky Hamlyn

communities for the sake of the convenience of car drivers for whom the area is merely an inconvenience.

The central themes of **Slow Glass** are transience and metamorphosis, symbolised by the material which is fragile and self effacing, yet omnipresent. In its often less than perfect form it is a gift for the filmmaker. Glass complicates, expands, distorts and reflects the urban landscape. It interacts with the sky, lights and puddles to produce glittering effects which are largely absent from the rural landscape. **Slow Glass** touches on the history of glass making, from the production of float glass at the Pilkington factory to laboriously hand-blown wine glasses. The arcane vocabulary of glass making is enunciated as a poetic list, and its ubiquity stressed in the pub scenes with drinking glasses, shelves, mirrors, bottles and mock-tudor window panes. Liquidity is stressed, beer being one kind of a liquid contained by another. The notion that much of the physical world with which we interact is a liquid recalls Thales of Miletus' assertion that the world is made of water.

In two of his more recent works; **Blight** (1994-6) and **Home Suite** (1993-4) Smith's use of local locations is more explicitly conjoined with personal circumstances. **Blight**, again, combines a strong formal approach with word/image play, but the documentary element gains urgency from the political issue driving the film: the building of the contentious M11 motorway link road through East London, which required the demolition of large areas of housing, including Smith's own, and provoked a prolonged treetop protest. In visual terms the film painstakingly records the demolition of a number of Victorian terraced houses in Leytonstone. Like **Slow Glass**, it was shot over a long period of time – two years. The care and deliberation with which one of the houses is demolished is due to the fact that it was attached to the house in which Smith was living at the time! Nevertheless, the film begins as a highly dispassionate record of that process. The music, composed by Jocelyn Pook, is contrastingly emotive and dense, and combines a string ensemble with sampled words and sentences from one neighbour calling her children and another talking about her fear of spiders.

Although the work becomes quite busy and packed at times, the disparity between the cool images and the emotive music and speech



Slow Glass (1988-91)

Nicky Hamlyn

has a great poignancy. By making the emotive role of the music explicit, the film avoids the subliminal, and hence manipulative, functioning of most movie music. **Blight** is another hybrid film, but here Smith combines politics with documentary and quasi-autobiography in more explicit fashion, as well as the familiar passages of formal abstraction. These latter come in a sequence where passing vehicles function as vertical 'wipes' which effect shot changes between a series of close-ups of graffitied corrugated iron.

Home Suite is the most explicitly autobiographical of all Smith's works. Overall, it tells the story of Smith's enforced move from his old house to his new flat nearby, via the streets in which the M11 protest occupations were held in 1993-4. It was shot on Hi-8 tape, in three continuous half-hour sections. The first part, which was made some time before the second two, is shot in the toilet of the old house, and describes, in extensive detail, the history of the cracked pan, the motorised toilet-roll holder, the shoddy paint work and other minute details of the smallest room. The space gradually fills with its history: complex, eccentric, funny, until it has become a kind of monumental environment, about which epic stories could be told for ever more. The work serves to remind us about the complexities of the history of even simple spaces and objects, a complexity to which most films do not even begin to do justice. In part two, Smith continues with a similar survey of his bathroom, which features a hilarious study of the gloopy, freeform Artex applied to the walls to hide an accumulation of cooking grease left by the house's previous occupants. In part three, as if to emphasise, by contrast, the foregoing, Smith sits the camcorder on his shoulder and takes us for a walk through the streets to his new flat, greeting neighbours and stopping at the M11 street protests on the way. Much of the history recounted in the first hour of the work now gains both a retrospective poignancy and an outer, political context, to do with the impact the road development will have on individuals' lives and circumstances. This is the closest Smith comes to straight documentary, but unlike most TV documentaries, the camera operator, director and narrator are all the same person, making a work about very immediate local issues. Thus the camera is not disinterested, but personalised, and the work becomes invested with an urgency and significance that is absent from daily TV news.

Smith's virtuoso commentary, improvised simultaneously with the shooting, reinforces this quality.

Lost Sound, made in 2001, marks a return to less explicitly autobiographical forms. Like **Blight** this is another collaboration with a sound artist, Graeme Miller, and was shot in several locations all within an area of less than one square mile, in Shoreditch, East London. Smith and Miller noticed discarded strands of audio cassette tape in the streets: in piles in the gutter, amongst rubbish and hanging from trees, wires and fences. The video tape is composed of a series of scenes, in each of which we see the audio tape in situ, and hear the music from that tape, which is mixed with the location sound. Each scene is prefaced by a title card giving the date and place of the scene.

In **Lost Sound** the balance between documentary and formal operations is schematised. The early shots are straightforward views of the streets with the tape visible. As the work progresses the formal interventions become more pronounced and explicit. In one scene the sun coming out from behind clouds activates the sound. In another the chevrons of a road sign prompt the rewinding of the tape. In other scenes we hear the other side of the tape, while the image is correspondingly flipped over. **Lost Sound** is one of Smith's most subtle works. On one level it explores the fortuitous coincidences between the audio tape and its location, so that within each scene there is a chance element. However, the film also has an ethnographic dimension, in that the tape fragments, which are frequently of African and Indian music, tell us something about the nature and probable inhabitants of the locale. The film is both concrete, in that its locations are formally identified, and abstract, both in terms of the increasing formal operations, and in terms of the sound-image relationships. It offers a quite different kind of documentary in which conventionally insignificant aspects of the environment feature, and do in fact reveal, interesting truths about that environment that in mainstream documentary would either be overlooked or overkilled.

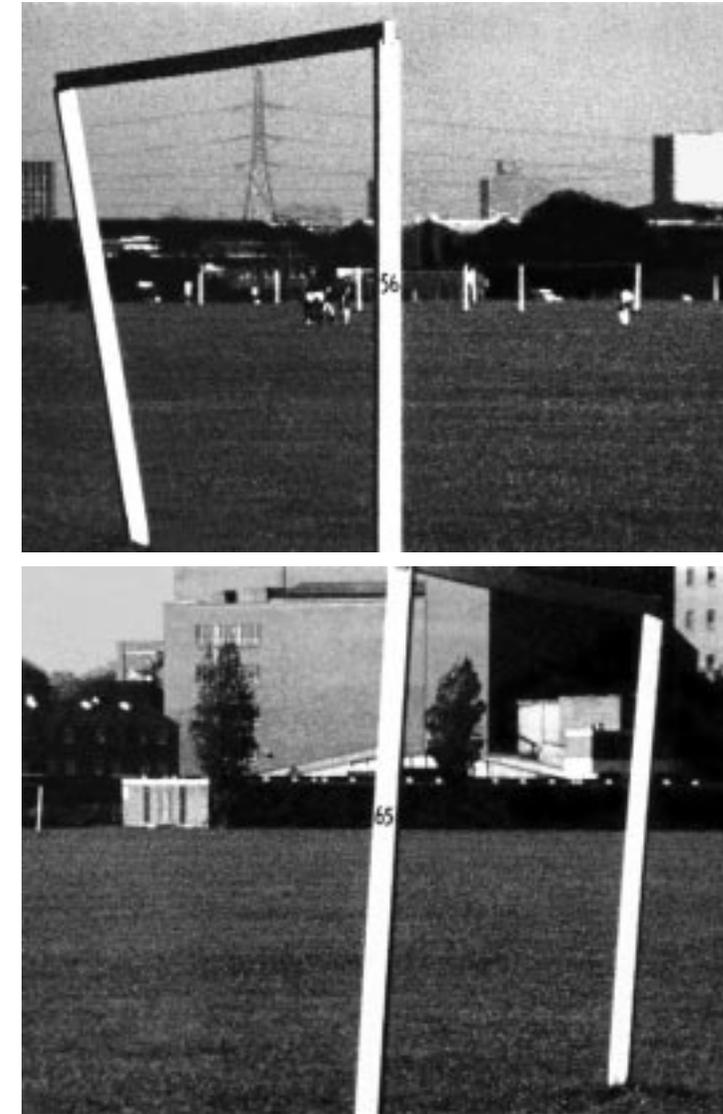
Smith's latest work in progress is **Worst Case Scenario**, which, like his other recent productions; **Lost Sound**, **Home Suite**, **The Waste Land** (1999) and **Regression** (1999) was made on video. Although this piece, unusually, was made away from home, it is still a domestic work of a sort, in that it was shot from a hotel where Smith stayed for

Nicky Hamlyn

several days when he was showing a series of programmes of his films in Vienna. The title, a “terrible” pun in Smith’s words, derives from the signs on the shop opposite: ‘Wurst’ and ‘Kase’, and the ‘scenario’ is the complex and chaotic scene visible on the street below. The images were shot with a motor-driven 35 mm stills camera and later transferred to video. The whole piece is composed of ‘top shots’, where the camera looks down onto the subject. This, combined with the use of a telephoto lens, produces very flattened images. This flattening, and the near stasis of most of the images, renders the relationships and movements between objects, vehicles and people highly ambiguous. The impression is compounded by a process of electronically matting together different events that took place within the same frame at different times. Smith conceived of God looking down on the scene and imagining a worst case scenario in which total chaos reigned; cars colliding with each other and with trams, people run over etc. All this was initially suggested by the apparently chaotic disposition of trams and tram lines, pedestrian crossings, cars, animals and people in the scene.

John Smith’s films and videos are untypical of much of the experimental work produced by artists. Where many filmmakers have striven to foreground the medium by, for example, scratching the emulsion, or filming the act of filming, Smith has always insisted on technically immaculate, seemingly straightforward images. But these images are so created precisely in order to challenge mainstream cinema and TV on their own ground. The high quality pictures are put in the service of thoroughly subversive structures, which question their own veracity as much as they challenge the mainstream. Smith’s oeuvre is characterised by an insistence on an economy of means which is most manifestly visible in the rigour of his forms and in his use of local locations: “If I’m planning a film I’ll start with one shot, and there won’t be a second one unless there’s a reason for it. Basically, you’re starting with your navel and then moving out from that”.

Nicky Hamlyn is a filmmaker and writer. His films include *Silver Street* (1975), *That Has Been* (1984), *White Light* (1996) and *Penumbra* (2002). He teaches Time Based Media and Visual Theory at Kent Institute of Art and Design, Maidstone. His book *Film Art Phenomena* will be published by the British Film Institute in 2003.



Hackney Marshes – November 4th 1977 (1977)