

# I am John Smith (You also are John Smith, we are John Smith, here's how to be John Smith)

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## 1. Talk about violence

It's 25 July 2014 and "Operation Protective Edge", launched on 8 July, is continuing. It all began with the murder of three Israelis and the subsequent reprisals; a very young Palestinian was killed as well. The Israelis are out to destroy the infiltration tunnels dug by Hamas—and to destroy Hamas at the same time. Dozens of men, women and children are being killed every day on the Gaza Strip, after being given two or three minutes warning to get out of their houses. Israel has just accepted a twelve-hour ceasefire. Twelve hours. There have also been two-hour ceasefires to give people time to flee. Two-hour ceasefires.

I'm reading this news on a tiny beach in a town I go to in summer. A small, declining fishing port, a small, declining working-class town with a declining climate. The tourist industry isn't declining because it never really got off the ground: not much in the way of hotels, restaurants, facilities, entertainment. My mother lives here. My reading oscillates between the local and national press and transcripts of John Smith's voice-overs for his *Hotel Diaries* (2001–07), those videos he turns out, let's say, fairly irregularly. About one a year, shot in the hotel rooms he lives in when he's invited to show his films or sit on the jury at festivals in Cork, Berlin, Rotterdam, Bethlehem, Winterthur. Rooms he films and comments on as, in the same unbroken flow, he speaks of his loathing of war and his country's imperialist involvement in conflicts in the Middle East; of his weariness and incredulity,

and the disgust violence inspires in him.

Smith's voice—dragging, melancholic, sometimes almost crepuscular—reminds me, for example, that the Second Intifada lasted several years, from 2000 to 2004;<sup>1</sup> that I was in Jerusalem in January 2001 when I learnt of the death of my pro-Palestinian father, who more than anything else hated travelling; that Yasser Arafat died in Paris in 2004;<sup>2</sup> that Hamas was democratically elected in 2006;<sup>3</sup> that Tony Blair was appointed the official envoy of the Quartet in the Middle East in 2007, immediately after his resignation as prime minister.<sup>4</sup> The Quartet is an "informal body" comprising the European Union, Russia, the United States and the United Nations. What might such an "informal body" actually be, I find myself wondering, especially with Tony Blair as its spokesperson? And what purpose might a fabrication like this serve?

1. *Museum Piece (Hotel Diaries 2)*, 2004

2. *Throwing Stones (Hotel Diaries 3)*, 2004

3. *Pyramids/Skunk (Hotel Diaries 5/6)*, 2006–07

4. *Six Years Later (Hotel Diaries 8)*, 2007

## 2. Google yourself

As I write I find myself slipping into an awkward imitation of the dragging, melancholic, sometimes almost crepuscular voice of John Smith talking about Yasser Arafat encircled by the Israeli forces in the Muquata'a, his headquarters in Ramallah: "So over the last few days... I suppose one identifies with people... I've been thinking about what it must be like to be trapped in a place."<sup>5</sup>

We identify with people from the vantage point of our beach, our hotel room, our experimental film festival, our computer or our small, declining town as we strive to understand war, issues of dominance and class, violence, machismo, gentrification, technological mutations, post-structuralism, experimental cinema, and a neighbourhood and its residents. Along with John Smith and his humour, his logic, his eccentricity. Maybe there are days when Smith, who admits to receiving Google alerts and googling his own name (refining the search with the title of one of his own works, so as not end up with millions of results)<sup>6</sup>, also tries to identify with himself. He has done this, to take one example, by trying to home in on Serenporfor, an eBay alias for someone—probably female—whose offerings included a VHS cassette of a number of his films. The cassette was up for auction as *The Girl Chewing Gum*, with this title ousting not only all the others, but also, almost, the name "John Smith", which is the actual title of the cassette. Exploring Serenporfor's eBay account in minute detail, Smith literally zooms in on her and thus on his best known film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), seen as emblematic of him and his work, of John Smith and his fifty or more films.

The first time I saw *The Girl Chewing Gum*—after starting with *Hotel Diaries*, then other films by him: proof that they haven't necessarily been eclipsed by his "most famous" one—was when one of my students,

Quentin Lannes, showed it, or rather used it, in one of his works. I did not know at the time that Quentin had substituted a youthful female voice, with a very commanding, "movie business" American accent, for the voice of John Smith as he pretended to direct the movements of passers-by at the intersection in Dalston where he had set up his camera in 1976. I was intrigued by the idea that Smith's most acclaimed film should be the one in which you don't hear the nonchalant, casual, sometimes almost detached voice that is so omnipresent in most of his other films. Thinking that I was watching the original version of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, I tried to work out what lay behind the use of this voice: maybe, I thought, it was a joke based on the contrast between mainstream commercial movies, represented by a get-up-and-go American woman, and an experimental, post-structuralist cinema represented by the long static shot of the intersection and the residents of Dalston. This was a rewarding misinterpretation, because when I saw the film (again) later—this time in the John Smith version—instead of the dragging, melancholic, sometimes almost crepuscular Smith voice, I heard a parody of movie directing, of cinema's just-in-time economy, of directorial authority: John Smith playing a part, John Smith hamming it up.

5. *Throwing Stones (Hotel Diaries 3)*, 2004

6. *unusual Red cardigan*, 2011

### 3. Disappear, blend into the crowd, look like everybody else

Quentin actually went to England, to Dalston, to film *The Girl Chewing Gum* intersection, and this was why he replaced Smith's voice with a new one: the voice had to direct the passers-by of today's Dalston. The owner of the scooter store now on the corner told him that lots of people came to film the intersection, and admitted he'd never seen *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Quentin found it funny that Smith, when he came back 35 years later to film *The Man Phoning Mum* (2011), would probably have looked utterly anonymous to the scooter store man, blending into the crowd of his own admirers come to repeat the seminal act over and over again.

"Maybe before you start to lose interest in this, I should preface this video by letting you know that I'm actually one of the most famous experimental filmmakers in the world. I can prove this actually... I'll just show you if you'll bear with me. Here we go... that's me, that's all about me, John Smith"<sup>7</sup>. And yet—my excuses in advance, John—when I go looking on Wikipedia France I find the following interesting comment: "John Smith is a frequently used pseudonym in English-speaking countries; it is also the real name of a number of well-known personalities." English film director John Smith, born in 1952, is right there on the list of personalities, but all you get when you click on it is (in French), "The article on John Smith (British film director) does not exist yet. Please help us to create it."

For John Smith anonymity is a *modus operandi*, a stance that lets him record images wherever he happens to be—lost in the crowd just like everybody else, or looking out his window, one window among thousands or millions; then to reassemble those images with no preconceptions about their character, origin or target audience; and then to comment on—or accompany—them as he moves from utter objectivity to total

empathy. Producing images that look like "home" videos,<sup>8</sup> producing images that look like post-structuralist cinema, producing images that look like ethnographic documentation,<sup>9</sup> producing images that look like a reality TV show.<sup>10</sup> At bottom these resemblances are almost fortuitous; at least they make no "effort" to adhere to a model, existing rather in their pure and simple "anonymity": unspecific, unidentified, unattributed. Images free of any assumptions. Sometimes Smith even uses pre-existing images, images picked up on the internet, as in the generic tunnel of *White Hole* (2013). And sometimes a black screen becomes an image in its own right, as in *The Black Tower* (1985–1987). Another way of disappearing.

7. *Pyramids/Skunk* (*Hotel Diaries* 5/6), 2006–07

8. As in the "Christmas" film untitled 7P, 1977–78

9. In the interview with Émilie Bujès in this journal, Smith comments that the static shot of the intersection at Dalston is probably one of the longest in existence focusing on the residents of a UK neighbourhood in the 1970s and as such has documentary value.

10. Smith has compared his video *Home Suite* to the British life-style series *Changing Rooms*, in which the participants swap houses in order to redecorate them. A subjective camera documents their perception of their respective houses and the improvements they undertake. See Cornelia Parker, "John Smith's Body", *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971–2002* (Bristol: Picture This Moving Image/Watershed Media Centre, 2002). <http://johnsmithfilms.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/John-Smiths-Body.-Cornelia-Parker.pdf>

#### 4. Talk about your life

This disappearance determined by use of a black screen is the subject of *The Black Tower*, together with disorientation, loss of bearings and above all the isolation that is the fate of someone who sees something others do not see. But this disappearance of an image and its replacement by the black screen (which, as if by some minimal sleight of hand, in turn becomes an image) only renders more omnipresent—more visible, perhaps—Smith's deep, poignant and sometimes ultimately stagey voice, the embodiment of the tragic wanderings of his protagonists in their quest for the black tower.

This same voice permeates the house on the brink of destruction in *Home Suite* (1993–1994). Entire swathes of memories are swallowed up by the image, drained away by the description of each nook and cranny of this house likewise doomed to disappearance. As in the rooms of *Hotel Diaries*, the place of privacy is dealt with as the iconic political place, the place where class conflicts and global power issues are played out. “The personal is the political”: true, but given the poignant, moving and sometimes ultimately stagey voice of John Smith, maybe the message is also that emotion is political.

This is radical emotion. Not attention-getting, but stripped down, vulnerable, stark. With cinema and filmed images it shares a capacity to survive the disappearance of the houses, as well as of the people of a neighbourhood, the leaders of a movement, and video cassette machines.

Translation: John Tittensor