

Mediate the Immediate: On John Smith

Martin Herbert

1.

If there's a point where restraint is indivisible from showmanship, then John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) lives there. Take your 16mm camera and load it with black and white film, point it at a street corner in Dalston, East London, and don't move it much. The world that flows into your waiting frame will be, seemingly, a relentlessly humdrum one, from ambling pedestrians to amorous pigeons. You can wholly upend this, though, in postproduction, with an omnipotent voice-over that deterministically guides the self-directed acts transpiring while the camera is running—"Now I want the old man with white hair and glasses to cross the road; come on, quickly!" to name but one of many, many examples—and that, economically, opens the film onto a critique of the supposed transparency and truthfulness of documentary filmmaking and, conversely, the directive potency of language. You're not going to stop here, however.

The Girl Chewing Gum, 1976
16mm, b/w, sound, 12 min.



Your narrator—yourself—is going to become compound, wayward, dilatory, widening the angle in conceptual terms by moving from imposing himself on

events to touching, glancingly, on issues of immigrant labour in the area. With that, suddenly your street corner has broadened out, connecting itself to a spacious world of economics and transmigration and discrete local communities and inequalities. Next, marking another stage in this progressive destabilising of the scene, your narrator now reveals that his voice isn't part of the main soundtrack, with its traffic noise and its perpetually ringing burglar alarm. He's speaking, he suddenly announces, from a field "near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles away," surrounded by electricity pylons and trees. The street noise fades obligingly out (though a paranoid viewer may not, by now, take anything at face value) and the narrator, recommencing in a new mode, invents stories about the people going past in Dalston. The scene, you're declaring, is whatever you say it is.

Finally, having repeatedly cracked filmic illusion, or at least the ostensible unity of sound and image, you crack it one more time for good measure—cutting to the pylon-strewn field, a partly despoiled rural, and layering the non-diegetic sound of Dalston over it. From that London roadside, then, in a few economical bounds, you've touched progressively on some improbable and overlapping physical, conceptual and critical spaces. Also, not unimportantly, you got people to watch because you were *funny*—"Now I want everything to sink slowly down as five boys come by," you say, moving the camera steadily upwards—alloying methodologies descending from structural filmmaking with the antic wit of Monty Python or *The Goons*, as if to say: these seemingly distinct hemispheres might be connected too. Everything is, or can at least appear that way.

And later you decide you're not going to stop here either. What's missing in this (or not quite, given the *a posteriori* narration, but at least understated) is the space, if you like, of time. So, thirty-five years later, in a cultural moment now characterised by reflex nostalgia, you return to the same street corner—and the same field, or at least that's the aim—and film again and layer the new film onto the old, the girl chewing gum and her momentary compatriots

flickering through crisp video like monochrome celluloid ghosts, past and present interlaid. The fact that you're using a different recording medium now is far from all that's changed. The archetypal figure, here, signposted by the title *The Man Phoning Mum* (2011), is toting a compact technology inconceivable in the year of punk, a mobile phone. Dalston, too, has transformed in some ways; your street corner is still opening onto a vaster world—it's now

The Man Phoning Mum, 2011
HD video, colour, sound, 12 min.



part of an East End whose increasing gentrification partly devolves from artists living there and galleries opening there (a sociological footnote that could dwarf this text)—while being also as polyglot as ever. Meanwhile, "fifteen miles away," you cannot find the field. Believe that one or don't.

Yet this Heraclitean space, Smith wants to demonstrate, can be unfolded still further: keeps unfolding, indeed, of its own accord. In the 2011 London exhibition where he showed *The Man Phoning Mum* (in Hoxton, close to Dalston), Smith also pursued a logic of remaking by displaying, on a cluster of monitors, a sequence of YouTube "tributes" to *The Girl Chewing Gum*, marking its extension both into digital space and into a myriad of international urban environments. At the same time, having apparently discovered an old VHS copy of the film selling expensively on eBay, he speculated on the identity of the pseudonymous seller (and, impishly,

extending the project's Web-derived interest in identity and anonymity, the whereabouts of the original "girl chewing gum") and transacted with the same online vendor for other items. As a result, a red cardigan ended up transfigured as sculpture, the ostensibly ordinary freighted—in classic Smith style, though this move into physical objects was new for him—with diverse unexpected resonances. Smith's valorised close-at-hand, the work asserted in its hyper-connected contemporary context, now includes distant realms accessible with a single click.

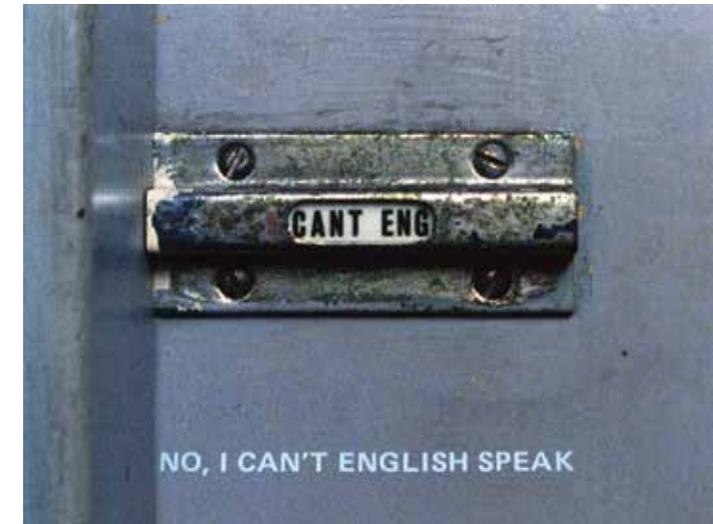
2.

For the past four decades Smith's art has organised itself, deftly and inventively, around the fascinations semaphored by *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *The Man Phoning Mum*: the local as generous world-enfolding microcosm, the power of language to direct and misdirect, how film might compress time, the ambient or hard-to-see issues that might be foregrounded as a result, and, relatedly, the questionable veracity—the dangerously trustable surface and hidden mechanisms—of Smith's chosen medium. And if there's a point where the sociocultural commentary latently present in *The Girl Chewing Gum* first becomes explicit, it's in *Shepherd's Delight* (1980–84), which seems initially to be a deconstruction of humour but reveals itself as a programmatic undercutting of easy comforts that functions as a broadside against pacifying, pleasure-promoting consumerism—and, along the way, demonstrates how Smith puts reflexive form and content in delirious sync.

Subtitled "An ananalysis [sic, stutteringly] of humour" and structured around pedagogical excursions on how specific jokes work (thereby pretty much killing them, as in E.B. White's comparison of explaining humour to dissecting a frog: you don't much want to look at the result, and the frog dies), *Shepherd's Delight* also incorporates a crazily accelerated stream of associative visual gags that leaves the viewer racing to keep up. A whistling painter paints an image of a small bird black and signs his work "Renoir": by the time you've digested the Francophone pun, Smith has moved onto a terrible joke about Shakespeare and is messing vigorously with the sliding "vacant/engaged" sign

in a toilet to create more double meanings (Renoir in the toilet, unable to speak English: CANT ENG). Energetic visual/verbal overlays abound, in an expansion of the homophonic gaming of Smith's earlier rapid-fire, pseudo-academic image-text treatise *Associations* (1975). Later he'll impishly

Shepherd's Delight, 1980–84
16mm, colour, sound, 35 min.



suggest that, prior to a redesign, the label of Teacher's scotch whisky predicted the following morning's hangover by encoding "ache" into its name. And there is, indeed, a lot of drinking in the film, a lot of escape.

At one point, a man drinking whisky rapidly intercuts with a woman pouring "Comfort" textile softener, and this tessellated, maximalist film's thematic heart is the swift micro-history midway that purports to summarise how the British public became addicted to comfortableness via the rise of a popular fabric conditioner. This is a knowingly ridiculous proposal, but Smith (as ever) has a serious point to make, concerning consumerism's softening of the social fabric via its promulgating of the false notion that buying things will make a citizen happier. *Shepherd's Delight*, whose lecturer considers how jokes themselves create "a feeling of comfort," thus and not accidentally operates against the soporifics of contentment. Its jokes move too fast or are made unfunny by over-explanation, the "serious" part—an academic lecture—is comical and the comical part is deceptively serious, and the supposed objectivity of

its documentary form is undermined, near the end, by the filmmaker appearing and confessing, in a burst of apparent honesty that can't be trusted either, to his own style of escape: a drinking problem.

Smith, then—recalling the truism that ideology works best when it goes unnoticed—here not only analyses consumption but also implicates the supposedly objective and analytical visual format he is annexing and anarchically undoing. All of which might be summed up as “Don't trust appearances”: a lesson that had manifest ramifications in the context of Britain during the years of Margaret Thatcher's administration, when the Conservative Party finessed a heritage-obsessed, cosy vision of the country while rigorously dismantling its industrial base and strategizing to undermine the working classes. Nastiness disguised as benignity is the burden of *Om* (1986)—a brilliantly allusive formal expansion of a duplicitous moment in *Shepherd's Delight* when the sight of a frying egg is coupled with the spitting sound of falling rain—which appears to feature a meditating monk clad in orange robes, with incense smoke trailing into the frame. After a certain point, though, the “om” noise he's been making merges with the electrical buzz of a barber's shaver, his “robe” is removed to expose a casual's shirt and braces, and he's revealed to be a cigarette-smoking skinhead—shorthand for the toxic nationalism that gripped the UK at the time—getting a close No 1 crop.

If this is a hyper-compressed model of change becoming apparent over time, then a work like *Slow Glass* (1988–91) articulates less visible transformations. The discursive, pub-based musings of its narrator, fellow filmmaker Ian Bourn (over Guinness, famously slow to go into the glass), touch on the history of glass-making and glazing and a lost world of patient craftsmanship begun, in England, in Roman times. But this film, one of whose script's key points is that glass is a liquid—it gets thicker when it cools but never crystallises, the sharp edge of newly cut glass blunting over time—is more broadly about flux. (Opening line: “It's not the same.”) Glassmaking, here, is a multivalent metaphor. For in terms of the subjects

that Smith's camera roams over as Bourn talks, it is about other worlds than artisanship going down—on a variety of scales: from the local (the rapacious, community-destroying speculation in the housing market in East London) to the global (the narrator, punning as he discusses instability, mentions Mikhail Gorbachev and “Glasnost”).

In its intercut flashbacks to a 1950s of tiled fireplaces and large wirelesses, and its resolutely reflexive refusal of pretences to “transparency,” meanwhile, *Slow Glass* seemingly marks its own distance from a tradition of British documentary filmmaking. Smith's film is not so much a linear argument or supposedly objective reflection as a study in contradictions, a mechanism of perpetual undercutting that the viewer must navigate and think through. Deal, for example, with the fact that if its narrator laments the loss of the past this puts him in sync with the heritage-hawking Conservatism that is Smith's *bête noire*. Deal with the fact that, as Bourn argues, it is time and change and distance that give clarity and focus to events (“it's the past that's real, and clear”), but which also implacably wash things away. The resultant tone, then, is complex: resigned to everything changing yet at the same time refusing to use this as an excuse for social injustice. It suggests too that if time is a focusing device, a lengthily gestated film that indexes alterations in the urban landscape might perform a comparable clarifying function.

Given Smith's longstanding commitment to the view from his doorstep, it's not surprising that the changing residential shape of his locality continued to exercise him. *Blight* (1994–96), set against a spatiotemporal backdrop of the construction of the M11 Link Road in East London and the homes torn down in its path, treats the inevitability of change with some irony and asperity, with its footage of homes appearing to deconstruct themselves—bowing down before the wrecking ball—and double-edged “kill the spiders” refrain (edited and repurposed, it turns out, from an entirely different context), suggestive of flushing out an unwelcome infestation. As with *Slow Glass*, what this film has to communicate, not least about the dangers in an amnesiac drive to destroy the “real” past, must

be extricated from its manipulations and tilts: from the emphatically over-determined, ominous and frequently very beautiful music onwards (composed for the film by Jocelyn Pook), which incorporates the rhythms of demolition. The artist has done most of the work; the rest is yours.

3.

Smith, though, won't be characterised solely as a filmmaker using rigorous means to politicised ends. His project, in terms of how the local can expand exponentially, is more open-ended, and also—for all the meticulous control that goes into the finished products—shaped by serendipity. *The Black Tower* (1985–87), one of Smith's finest works, is as much a demonstration of how far one can travel from a simple starting point, via linguistic and visual manipulations, as *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Its first-person narrative taking the form of an urbanised gothic horror story, it artfully presents a single, strange building from different points of view so that the edifice seems to be following the narrator—the only person who can see the tower—sending him spiralling into mental instability and living, hermit-like, on ice cream. It is at once a compelling, pacey narrative and one that undoes itself on various levels.

For *The Black Tower*, while unspooling its tale, is also explicitly materialist: a construct whose formal strategies include black intercut screens that could be nothingness or close-ups of the building; sections of the story told against seemingly abstract coloured backdrops which turn out to correspond to physical objects; backwards speech analogous to the reversed writing visible on a wet newspaper, and signposts to editing (and the passing of time) including cars travelling “into” one side of a tree and different ones emerging on the other. At stake here is balance, or rather reversibility. The film continually advertises itself as constructed: it's also an Ouroboros, a narrative that swallows its own tail, since at one point the narrator, driven indoors by fear, says “I spent most of my time working on this script ... dramatic fiction.” Yet even as it argues against itself, the narrative's conviction and tang of authentic unease carry one along; and this despite, too, the fact that its form was determined by precisely where Smith

could film the tower: he could place it in the context of a hospital, for example, into which the narrator accordingly comes to be admitted. And this place of contradiction or complexity, this conceptual roominess, Smith argues, can be reached via his signature circumscription: *The Black Tower* evidently began in the germinal event of his seeing the building, somewhere near his home, and wondering about its function.

If here that function becomes one of obsessing and pursuing all who see it, then we must see this as Smith opening up, to the widest possible degree, film's potential to at once document and persuade and falsify.



Lost Sound, 1998–2001
SD video, colour, sound, 28 min.

This many-sidedness is central to his work: see, for example, the programmatic exploration of sound that is near-paradoxically local and non-diegetic in *Lost Sound* (1998–2001, made in collaboration with Graeme Miller), which layers soundtracks from found audiotape onto footage of the places where, supposedly, they were gleaned (once again demonstrating, not least with its internationalist, chanced-upon music, what other worlds are nested in the immediate environs). It's perhaps not surprising, then, that the films which feature the artist himself—apparently playing himself, ostensibly being honest—comprise some of his method's most powerful, and richly deceptive, articulations.

In *Regression* (1999), for example, supposedly shot on Christmas Day (though who knows, really), Smith's to-camera monologue, replete with "ums" and throat clearing, is full of signifiers of confessional sincerity. Discussing his decision to remake a work from 1978, he talks of the advantages of working on video rather than reversal film stock, and the timeliness of the idea: its "combination of formal concerns and humour" speaks, he thinks, to the then-current, Young British Artist (YBA) dominated moment better than it did to the late '70s. He says, plangently, that he'd like to be successful. But he also admits to raising the camera height a little in order to "take a few years off me; a couple of years, anyway," ponders if the spot on his nose means that he's possibly getting younger and could get away with being a YBA. All of this seems casual, but it isn't. In the "remake" section that follows, Smith demonstrates film's ability to at once warp and compress time, as he (with a variety of degrees of facial hair, lighting, degrees of forgetfulness, etc.) appears to change age while singing *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Reality and artifice, human and formal self-exposure, are here not easily separated out.

Nor are they in *Hotel Diaries* (2001-07), which superbly extends Smith's instrumentalising of "candidness" on camera. In *Regression*, he'd talked up the advantages of video's ease ("it takes the stress out of making work") but handheld video footage, as in this later sequence of seven films shot in hotel rooms, is also a cipher for authenticity today, and at first blush these works appear highly veracious. As, of course, their crafty maker intends. What seems to be happening is that Smith, finding himself at a loose end while travelling, is wandering around his hotel room and free-associating. The first episode, *Frozen War* (2001), begins with the bombing of Afghanistan and Smith confronting a strangely frozen TV image on BBC News. Capable, as we know, of ramifying wildly from something right in front of him, he wonders if this represents a moment when the BBC transmitter has blown up. The abyss of certainty and the possibility of fallacious improvising about what a given image or scenario "represents," its truth quotient, is the hallmark of the ensuing series of films, which, one realises, feature far too many neat correspondences to be as unpremeditated as they appear.

In the Berlin-shot *Museum Piece* (2004), for instance, where the television marks the fact that US assaults on Falluja are going on and Tony Blair is to face questions over the legality of the Iraq War, Smith moves from talking about Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum to finding, in the corridor, an object made by Siemens, to discussing another German company's manufacture of Zyklon B, to an elevator made by the Schindler company ("Schindler's lift"). Though it moves quickly and casually and is veined with facts, it's all shadily tidy and resolved in a way that real life rarely manages. In *Pyramids / Skunk* (2006-07), shot in the Netherlands, Smith manages to get elegantly from a Toblerone on his tabletop to the pyramids (via the shape of the chocolate bar's segments) to Egypt to Hamas's winning of the general election in Palestine. Back in Rotterdam a year later, he successfully uses a supposedly found image of a deer and a skunk as a summary of Tony Blair's conversion from "Bambi" (his nickname) to something malodorous...

Pyramids / Skunk (Hotel Diaries 5/6), 2006-07
SD video, colour, sound, 17 min.



It's no accident that these films feature televisions tuned to the news. The questionable truth and dangerous power of images, particularly when they intersect with words, has been an issue in Smith's work from the start; one hardly need explain that, in the context of televisual news reporting's relentless spin and reflection of vested interests, this mendacity of the visual and verbal, of *inscription*, could be of no greater concern today. By 2007, when Smith

made *Six Years Later*, he was more explicitly unravelling the ostensible informality of the *Hotel Diaries*. He is, he says, in Antwerp—or Brussels, or Birmingham, or Bremen, or maybe Barcelona ... was he even in the places he'd claimed to be previously? The discursive issue shifts (Smith claims, finally, to be in Cork) to the anonymity of international hotels, and the pace of change. Cork didn't used to have hotels like this he says: of course, since the film was made, the Irish economy has collapsed again, so *Six Years Later* already marks several phases of economic alteration. Smith wants, we discover, to close a circle: to film the television at 1:41 a.m., exactly six years after the moment when the television froze in *Frozen War*. We wonder if he'll get something dramatic onscreen.

He doesn't, really—just the day's financial figures, though this allows him the point that the Chinese currency is up, while the West's figures are down: "Looks like it's time we went and stole some more oil ... we're just as bad as we ever were, still aspiring to be this imperial power." This, and the film's casual, scrappy end—Smith claims to be "losing it a bit here" and "getting a cold"—feel authentic, if embedded within a structure wherein, once again, we have to separate reality from duplicity. The centuries-compressing scale of the assertion about British interests and attitudes, meanwhile, is notably something one can only really see with time passing. The *Hotel Diaries*, as a whole, enable this—their seeming modesty and informality are just that, seeming—and with their ambiguity-laced joining of 2001 to 2007, they presage *The Man Phoning Mum*'s temporal overlay of 2011 onto 1976. Moreover, they emblemise Smith's longstanding, hugely prescient conception of what film might be, even when directed only at one's immediate environment: an unparalleled mechanism for ensnaring time and truth, but one to be approached with unbounded caution.

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