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Michael O'Pray

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JOHN SMITH

John Smith began making films in the early 1970s.

He graduated from the Royal College of Art in 1977 as one of a younger generation of avant-garde filmmakers and became strongly associated with the London Film-makers' Co-op, which had emerged in the 1960s and had become the centre for artists' filmmaking in England. He had made eight films before making *Associations* (1975), a witty visual rendition of psychological word-play. In the same year he made *Leading Light*, a film recording light changes in his room over a day and revealing the 'irregular beauty of a familiar space'.

These two early films express two different impulses which run throughout his work. On the one hand, *Associations* is a highly structured, hermetic work in which an academic voice reads an excerpt from a book on linguistic theory, discussing how people associate words with other words. Smith sets up his own humorous parallel associations, using images to stand in for words, and sometimes the syllables of words, uttered by the speaker. The images are banal ones, taken from colour supplements and popular magazines. The film comprises black leader with bursts of images appearing in clusters. For example, the utterance 'associations' is represented by images of an ASS, a SEWing machine, the SEA and a group of ASIANS. More obliquely, the image of a judge accompanies the utterance 'sentences'. It is a film of semantic wit, word-play and visual punning.

On the other hand, *Leading Light* is a 'document' of Smith's immediate world, sieved through the structuring devices of location, time and light. It is a study of light as it moves through a lived-in attic room over the course of a day. At a certain point a folk-song is heard on the soundtrack, apparently coming from the record player we see in the room. In its time, it was a film that fitted in with some of the experiments of such contemporary filmmakers as William Raban (*Angles of Incidence*) and Peter Gidal (*Hall*) who often used domestic space as a subject matter for exploring film-structuring devices. However in Smith's film there is also a sense of reverie, of a personality who

occupies the room and of an attempt to capture some fleeting quality. Viewed nearly thirty years after, it has a sense of loss and of sadness. While *Associations* and *Leading Light* are fairly pure examples of respectively semantic wit and of documentary, his other films often combine both qualities.



Still from *Leading Light* by John Smith, 1975

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Humour has been used and explored by Smith throughout his career.

While much of his work centres on the fluid relationship between image and language, it takes different forms. For example, in *Associations*, *Shepherd's Delight* (1980-4) and *The Waste Land* (1999), spoken and written words are directly counterpointed with images for paradoxical or punning effect. Much of this borders on the absurd and has the manic glee associated with a long literary tradition encompassing Lewis Carroll (whose intellectualism Smith shares), Hilaire Belloc and the Dada inspired Marcel Duchamp whose optical-text film has the anagrammatic title *Anemic Cinema* (1924). But in *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), *The Black Tower* (1985-7) and *Slow Glass* (1988-91), Smith explores forms of film narrative, juxtaposing a voice-over with a visual 'narrative'. In his 1986 film *Om*, he brilliantly uses sounds to confuse the visual track (or is it the other way around?).

Humour is rarely addressed in film theory even though its outstanding practitioners have been some of the cinema's great innovators - Buster Keaton, Luis Bunuel, the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati - all of whom pushed or unpicked the logic of the medium itself through humour. Smith stands fully in this tradition. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the voice-over (assumed to be that of the director) seems to be guiding every action and mini-event in what is fairly obviously documentary footage. As the voice-over barks out 'instructions' to innocent passers-by and even directs events like pigeons landing on a roof, Smith pays testament to the overconstruction of mainstream narrative films (extras standing in for real crowds etc). The result is sublimely funny for its confusion of directorial omnipotence with our own run-of-the-mill need to control (which Freud believed was at the centre of art itself).



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Still from *Girl Chewing Gum* by John Smith, 1976

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Smith's films are often characterised by his use of authentic East London locations.

He also incorporates characters sometimes played by himself - the self-confessed alcoholic film-maker at the end of *Shepherds' Delight*, the documenter of domestic minutiae in *Home Suite*. All of these are fictional figures even if ambiguous at times - is this the real John Smith confessing or John Smith playing himself confessing in *Shepherds Delight*? In *Lost Sound* (1998-2001) made in collaboration with Graeme Miller, found sound tapes are played over images of the sites of their discovery. In *The Waste Land* (1999), he sets the pub scene from Eliot's poem in an emptying pub and then cuts to a shot of a pub toilet in which a tipsy Smith recites other verses from the poem as he urinates. The film ends with the half-drunk Smith leaving the toilet and a lingering shot of the nameplate which should read TOILETS anagrammed to TSELIOT. It's a deceptively simple piece with the autobiographical feel of an imaginary self-portrait, but a portrait nevertheless.

In the perennial audience favourite, *The Black Tower*, Smith uses a local landmark as the focus for a character's mental breakdown (once again only known through voice-over). It is a story of rising paranoia in the suburbs of London. Smith's powerful and authentic voice-over plays with the audience's tendency to understand the first-person in documentary as a real person. According to Smith viewers have sometimes assumed that he is depicting his own breakdown. This is not to argue that Smith is his characters, but rather that he expresses particular moods, feelings and emotions in his films. It is maybe useful to view his work as primarily self-expression disguised as games, rather than the reverse.



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Still from *The Black Tower* by John Smith, 1985-7

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JOHN SMITH

Smith's world is a fag-end one, of dislocated characters who uneasily straddle the past and the present.

There is a troubled bohemianism that melancholically attempts to recover an Arcadia which has been lost, knowing that this is futile. *Slow Glass* is a key film in this interpretation. '...When I look at the world now, it seems a long way away. I mean it never used to', utters the protagonist in his fine-tuned monologue on glass, DIY, his neighbours and life in general. He opines 'It's not the same, people are different, everything's different. I mean, nowadays, I don't think people know what the smell of linseed oil is like, what it's like to roll a bit of putty in you fingers'. This is a discourse of nostalgia, in the same way that the drunk in *The Waste Land* reciting Eliot in a pub toilet at the end of a long night is re-enacting Eliot's own sense of cultural loss, a nostalgia of longing. Smith ironically uses Eliot employing the vernacular ('Goodnight Bill'), while his drunk recites the high-art rhetoric of 'nymphs'. This is also a loss associated with the pastoral in which 'simple' characters (here Smith's drunk) are the purveyors of complex ideas (the drunk's recital of Shakespeare).



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Still from *Slow Glass* by John Smith, 1988-91

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In many ways Smith's subject-matter is one he seems only comfortable approaching through humour.

It is not a novel device. There is a rich tradition of British social commentary and feelings of displacement played through humour (in literature the two Amis's and Larkin for instance) or grotesque melodrama (Dickens). Slow Glass's melancholic drift is even supported by a dramatic sequence of a young boy dressed in 50s clothes, waiting at the window of a suburban house: a veritable post-war image of loss.

Blight, made with the composer Jocelyn Pook, documents the demolition of an East London street to make way for the new M11 Link Road. It is an exquisitely beautiful film of surfaces, textures, movement and colour as Smith's camera records the dereliction, the detritus of urban demolition. Pook's textural sound-track incorporates voices ('Come on Kim, come on') reminiscent of Eliot's pub dialogues in Smith's *The Waste Land*. A sublimely droll Smithian moment is the gigantic poster of 'The Exorcist' revealed on a wall as a building is destroyed, with all its connotations flowing into the film's own subject-matter. Unlike the complex levels of *Slow Glass*, *Blight* has the static lyrical quality of the earlier British documentary film movement of the 1930s.

Blight has to be compared with *Home Suite* as they both cover the same subject-matter. In the latter film, Smith's new video camera takes a long look at the house he must leave to make way for the M11 development. This is an up-close document of the minutiae of his house, beginning characteristically in the toilet. The filmmaker provides his own wry desultory commentary and in his longest film, often grappling with the technical glitches of his video camera (it is thus, at the same time, a film about the artist coming to grips with a new medium), he offers a personal reaction to the loss of his home. On viewing *Home Suite*, *Blight* can be seen as the public face of what was at heart a private affair. Made back to back (*Home Suite* made first), the two films reveal a tension between the pristine heavily modulated work he had made up to that date and a more relaxed, freer way of working that video afforded.

In his essay on John Smith, Ian Bourn compares *Home Suite* with Smith's earlier film of his home, *Leading Light*. They are both about change, with the difference that the earlier film is structured by the movement of light in a room, while *Home Suite* is recorded by a jiggling hand-held camera whose movement is determined by the film-maker's response to the



Still from *Lost Sound* by John Smith, 1998-2001

topography of his home, which we are finally told by him is about to be demolished - 'it's the end of an era', he comments. So Smith is a protagonist in his own story. The collapse of the traditional working class, the loss of an industrial base, of skills and crafts, of community is a powerful theme in his work and to this extent Smith himself is bound up in the inexorable social and historical movement he captures in his films. It is fascinating to observe the maturing of his work in terms of emotional resonance, from the cool logic of *Associations* and conceptually filtered *Leading Light* to the complexity of *The Black Tower*, *Slow Glass* and *Lost Sound*.

In *Lost Sound*, the sensibility and issues of social perception, humour and formal rigour which have flowed through his work since *A Girl Chewing Gum* have found a further means of expression, again using the interplay of sound and image. Over some years Smith and Graeme Miller gathered discarded audio tapes from East London. They found them wrapped around trees, in mangled knots in gutters, hanging from old railings and so on. Smith filmed the tape where it was found and Miller took it away to rescue its sounds, often damaged by weather and urban wear. The result is a montage of East London tape-locations with their accompanying fragmentary sounds which range from pub songs to Asian pop. As in many of his other films people are represented by sound - not voice-overs this time, but the sounds they use for their pleasure, now lost or discarded. *Lost Sound* is another imaginative picture of London and of a new society of fragmented yet interlocking communities (perhaps this was always the case). Characteristically, its pathos is gently shot through with humour.

Born and bred in East London, Smith has produced a body of work which is both an 'objective' and a personal response to urban change. He achieves this without collapsing into a facile political posturing, or an omnipotent 'mirroring' or understanding of it. Smith's world is seen through a prism of humour, absurdity and easy-going but formally rich structures. His keen artistic intelligence never allows self-indulgence to offer cheap balms. Rather, it is through Smith's fundamental humanism pervaded by sadness that art comes to offer its restorative power, whilst always remaining grounded in the world as we experience it.

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