

Life in Film: John Smith

In an ongoing series, *frieze* asks artists and filmmakers to list the movies that have influenced their practice



John Smith is a British film and video artist known for his playful subversion of documentary imagery. Drawing upon the raw material of everyday life his films, in his words, 'rework and transform reality, exploring and exposing the language and manipulative power of cinema'. This year two of his films were included in the 6th Berlin Biennale; he also had solo shows at The Royal College of Art Galleries, London, and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin. Smith's solo exhibition 'Accident' runs at Kunstbunker, Nuremberg, Germany until 31 October. He lives and works in London.

The earliest event I can remember occurred when I was about six months old. It was a sunny afternoon and I was lying in my pram in the garden. The man who lived in the flat upstairs was relaxing a few feet away in his deckchair. I dropped my teddy bear from the pram and the man reluctantly got up and gave it back to me. After he returned to his seat I deliberately dropped it again

and he, irritated, got up and handed it back to me for a second time. I continued the game, dropping my teddy again and again, which became more and more amusing as the man became increasingly disgruntled.

This is obviously an unreliable or possibly constructed memory but what fascinates me about it is that I remember it shot-by-shot. First, a wide establishing shot: pram and man in garden. Then, a medium close-up: baby drops teddy from pram. A medium shot (baby's point of view) follows: man gets up from deckchair and approaches baby/camera. Unless I was born with an innate knowledge of filmic conventions, my memory, if accurate, has been reconfigured within a filmic structure. Dreams, of course, are often remembered in the same way. It is a testament to the terrifying power of illusionistic cinema that it can reshape memory into a filmic form.

David Hand **Bambi**

1942
My strongest residual memory is of colour breaking through the darkness - the muted dark pastels of Bambi (1942) and Snow White (1937), the intense Technicolor of the parted Red Sea in The Ten Commandments (1956) and the copious blood on the operating table after the brutal chariot race in Ben Hur (1959).

My earliest memories of watching an actual film are both hazy and strong. Although this might seem like a contradiction it is precisely the vagueness of the recollection that gives it its potency. I was about five and - as my parents had no television until I was a couple of years older - it may well have been my first significant encounter with the moving image. The venue would have been the Walthamstow Granada or the Regal in Highams Park but what I remember about my first visit to the cinema is not the location but its apparent absence, the dislocation of the projected images from any familiar or even comprehensible space - pictures floating in the darkness. Strangely, the images I remember were not uniformly rectangular in shape but soft-edged vignettes of different sizes located in various places within the slightly frightening void that confronted me, adding to the disorientation of the viewing experience.

I have only a dim recollection of any narrative but I do remember a number of live-action images, in particular one involving a carpet of traditional Middle Eastern design incorporating a stylized tree motif, the kind where the branches stick up at right angles to the horizontal boughs. The film must have used special effects as the carpet gradually came to life, revealing a microcosmic world inhabited by children, animals and birds. A confusion about scale plays a big part in this memory – the tree was depicted on a small area of the carpet, seemingly only a few inches wide, but on the screen it was very big, the size of a real tree. And although the children varied in size from one appearance to the next they were usually enormous, sometimes 20 feet tall. How could a stitch in a carpet be as thick as my arm and how could children be so gigantic? These mixed feelings of utter bewilderment, fascination and horror made a deep impression on me, so much so that the world inside the carpet still pops up in my dreams occasionally. I wish I knew the title of the film.

I'm not sure whether it was due to economic necessity or a lack of interest but my parents rarely took me to the cinema and they never went there on their own. I can't remember asking to see particular films, but every now and

From top:
Sergio Leone
Once Upon a Time in the West
1968

In the 1990s I took my dad to see Sergio Leone's Once Upon a Time in the West. It was his first visit to the cinema in over 30 years and his evident enthusiasm for the experience reminded me of my own excitement about the cinema as a child.

Terence Young
From Russia With Love
1963

Watching the film in the presence of my mother was almost unbearable and our mutual silent discomfort became palpable. Things became even more upsetting the next day when my friends joked that my mum looked like Rosa Klebb, the evil and sadistic SMERSH agent played in the film by Lotte Lenya.

Cecil B. DeMille
The Ten Commandments
1956/57



then – not more than once or twice a year – I would find myself in front of one that my parents deemed to be suitable viewing. At first these were mainly Disney cartoons but when I was a bit older I was taken to see biblical Hollywood epics, which always seemed to star Charlton Heston. I don't know if my parents enjoyed these infrequent outings but for me they were always exciting and highly sensual experiences. My strongest residual memory is of colour breaking through the darkness – the muted dark pastels of *Bambi* (1942) and *Snow White* (1937), the intense Technicolor of the parted Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and the copious blood on the operating table after the brutal chariot race in *Ben Hur* (1959).

My last parentally-supervised cinema visit was in 1964 when, after some cajoling, my mother agreed to take me and my 12-year-old friends to see the recently released James Bond film *From Russia With Love* (1963). For reasons that became more than obvious during the screening, the certification required that minors should be accompanied by an adult. I had been expecting violence but, to my surprise and horror, there was also something that I assumed to be sex. Watching the film in the presence of my mother was almost unbearable and our mutual silent discomfort became palpable. Things became even more upsetting

the next day when my friends joked that my mum looked like Rosa Klebb, the evil and sadistic SMERSH agent played in the film by Lotte Lenya. I was reassured many years later to find out about Lenya's creative collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, whose ideas about identification, distancing and the necessity of revealing artifice were hugely influential on the development of my own filmmaking practice.

After my mother died my relationship with my father gradually changed and I started to take on something of a parental role myself. In the 1990s I took my dad to see Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). It was his first visit to the cinema in over 30 years and his evident enthusiasm for the experience reminded me of my own excitement about the cinema as a child. Before the film started he was like a hyperactive boy who couldn't stop talking, commenting on the enormous size of the auditorium, its architectural details and the number of seats; but when the lights went down he became instantly transfixed. Towards the end of the film, during one of its many extreme close-up shots, he came out of his trance briefly and nudged my arm. With a look of happy amazement on his 70-year-old face he whispered: 'Look at the size of that eye – it must be 25 feet wide!'

