

Personal space

For over 30 years John Smith has been wryly documenting the world by dissecting it on film and video. Nick Bradshaw welcomes a first DVD release

I'm looking at a handsomely produced triptych of digipak DVD cases – coloured in the red-green-blue scheme of the RGB video colour model – hosting what I believe to be the first digital collection of John Smith's unassumingly masterful, irresistibly experimental film and video eye-openers. The DVDs are making me feel old, and a bit sad: a few years ago I'd have been thrilled to have acquired a digest (and, I suppose, a trophy) of what I consider some of the most playfully revealing explorations in the film form. Just lately, though – faced with a cellar freighted with so many boxes of DVDs it could be mistaken for a priest hole – I've embarked on one of those personal pull-back shots that strip away the promise of use-value from a given medium and consign it to the coffee coasters of antiquity. What fate lies in store for the shiny optical disc? How will it compare to the discarded, billowing audio-cassette tapes seen in *Lost Sound*, Smith's 1998-2001 archaeological film dig around East London with the sound artist Graeme Miller?

Smith's films combine that sense of wistful, nigh-on maudlin nostalgia – for matters of far more human salience than the mere fate of physical media – with a dazzlingly nonchalant ability to transcend the prosaically personal. (As he's quoted as saying in the accompanying booklet, "Basically, you're starting with your navel and then moving out from that.") It's no coincidence that this strain has grown more pronounced in his work as he has aged: his early pun films – on this set, *Associations* (1975), *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) or *Om* (1986) – foreground the invention, irony and formalist derring-do that Smith has certainly never lost. (The film-school text movie *The Girl Chewing Gum*, with its comical, seductive over-narration of documentary street footage, makes you want to watch directed bombast like *Transformers* with a DVD-commentary overlay of the wild track of Michael Bay's on-set direction.) Yet you can read the recurrent melancholia in some of his other titles: *Blight* (1994-96), *Regression* (1998-99), *Lost Sound*, *The Waste Land* (1999), *Frozen War* (2001), *Worst Case Scenario* (2001-03), *Museum Piece* (2004)... Diverse though they are in



Artisan essayist: Smith in 'Regression'



'The Black Tower'

their content, the collected films conjure a tone somewhere between the convivial banter of the pub and the lonely walk home.

The collection's first disc closes tellingly with *Regression*, an attempt to improve an earlier distillation of time – Smith's sequential daily performances of 'The 12 Days of Christmas' in 7P (1978). The later work notably sees the filmmaker appear on camera to give a lengthy disquisition on his switch to video-making and his (unlikely) hopes of being mistaken for a Young British Artist. It follows *Shepherd's Delight* (1980-84) and *The Black Tower* (1985-87), which tease with putatively autobiographical hints of drink and breakdown. ("A literal reading of all of his films' narratives," Gemma Lloyd and Gareth Bell-Jones have noted, "would lead one to presume John Smith is an alcoholic with mental health problems.")

That sense of pulling back marks the second disc. The pithy *Gargantuan* (1992, one minute, one newt) and *The Kiss* (1999, five minutes, one hothouse lily) riff on shifts of scale, perspective and comprehension.

The films have that enviable simplicity of a master and an exemplary economy of means



'Lost Sound'



'Blight'

Blight, an exquisitely edited protest musical (in collaboration with composer Jocelyn Pook) shot during the demolition of Smith's Leytonstone neighbourhood to make way for the M11, turns the received meaning of 'urban blight' on its head. *Slow Glass* (1988-91) is a dense, contemplative masterpiece that turns an erstwhile glazier's pub ruminations on the production and consumption of glass ("still a liquid... moving, trickling down, just too slow to see") into a fractured meditation on the sands of time, urban change and the act of seeing. Conversely, perhaps, *The Waste Land* pulls T.S. Eliot back to the bar for last orders and a glimpse of his anagrammed name as he exits the toile.t.s. (*Shepherd's Delight* features similar word games with the Vacant/Engaged labels on sliding door locks, while *Home Suite* (1993-94) – absent from this set – reflects at length on the bowl of his old loo. Smith elevates the art of toilet humour.)

The third disc gathers Smith's 'Hotel Diaries' (2001-07), his major project from the Bush/Blair decade. Pushing (himself) into stark, unedited, single-shot performance terrain, these are eight intimate video diaries – or as Ian Christie calls them, nocturnes – taped in sundry hotel rooms around the world. Smith's handheld camera scans his confines in search of telling images, while his monologues make strange connections between his daily circumstances and news – initially mediated – from Afghanistan, Iraq

and occupied Palestine. (The penultimate piece, 2007's *Dirty Pictures*, features both Israel's West Bank wall and a hotel ceiling that's less steadfast than you'd guess.) As ever, the films have that enviable simplicity of a master, not to mention an exemplary economy of means; they demonstrate how to surmount one's isolation, even if it leads you straight to larger geopolitical frustrations.

Last year the Royal College of Art, Smith's alma mater, mounted a rare solo retrospective of his work. Inevitably, that showcased some pieces not on these discs – those repurposed as installations, like *Blue Bathroom* (1978-79), but also early films such as *Leading Light* (1975) or *Hackney Marshes* (1977) that are involved, as Smith noted, with the materiality of film (you can read an interview I conducted with him then on the S&S website at www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/exclusive/john_smith). His website lists 44 movie works up to last year's *Flag Mountain*. You can now take nearly half of them with you, but the rest will remain fleeting graces.

Reading about Smith for this piece, I've found Adrian Danks comparing him to the great playful/artisanal film essayists such as Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Patrick Keiller and Corinne and Arthur Cantrill (not to mention his fellow dialectician Jean-Luc Godard). Michael O'Pray casts him with the cinema's "outstanding practitioners of humour" – Buster Keaton, Luis Buñuel, the Marx Brothers, Jacques Tati – "all of whom pushed or unpicked the logic of the medium itself through humour."

Thinking about Smith's attempts to address and bridge the gulf between illusionism and formalism, film's form and content, I'm reminded of the great avant-garde filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky and the observations in his monograph *Devotional Cinema* on what he calls the age-old "instinct to express the union of material and subject". And film, he notes, can be a direct metaphor for our existence as temporal, perceiving beings.

"The more we are able to relax and accept the absolute presence of our situation and then begin to recognise its formal qualities," he writes, "the greater the chance we have to transmute it. With humility, we can perform an act of alchemy and transform what might feel like leaden claustrophobia into an expression of openness and clarity."

■ The three-DVD box-set *John Smith* is available now from Lux