

Rooms with a View: Watching John Smith's *Hotel Dairies*

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Watching John Smith's playfully inquisitive, profoundly interiorised and often "hushed" *Hotel Dairies* is a curious and sometimes unsettling experience. Comprised of eight episodes (though the Rotterdam entries * "Pyramids"/"Skunk" * are always screened as a double episode) shot over a six-year period in a range of European and Middle-Eastern cities (Cork, Berlin, Winterthur, Bristol, Rotterdam, Bethlehem/Jerusalem) it provides an intimate, mischievous and sometimes angry response to the political events occurring outside – and often at some distance from – the various hotel rooms that Smith occupies and blithely

comments upon. Shot intermittently but pointedly in a range of cities Smith was visiting, often to introduce screenings of his films at various festivals, it is predominantly concerned with the dislocation or disconnection between the world inside the often-unitary hotel rooms and that found or seen outside. For example, Smith opens the final episode with a quick visual survey of his nondescript hotel room playfully situating each transferable object in a different city. Like many of Smith's films *Hotel Dairies* seems carefully structured and circumstantial, premeditated and improvised. Initially conceived in Cork in October 2001, its development as a longer-form project only took shape once the various episodes – screened individually at numerous locations across this period and also as an installation of side-by-side monitors – started to suggest a "complete" work. The final episode, "Six Years Later" (shot on the 20th of October 2007), is therefore an explicit attempt to unify and further structure the work, returning to a different, more modern hotel in Cork almost six years to the day after the first, slightly panicked episode. Characteristically, it provides both something of a conclusion and a more open-ended, circumspect, faltering coda.

As some other commentators have suggested, *Hotel Dairies* is something of a departure for Smith. Most of the films he has made over the last 40 years have concerned themselves with his immediate or local environment, sometimes not moving beyond the neighbourhood streets of his East London home. In its more extreme form, such as the three shot, 96-minute video work *Home Suite* (1994), Smith can find enough fascination and points of contemplation within the interior of his own domestic environment (the well-used toilet a particular source of inspiration for this film). In this regard, *Hotel Dairies* is a continuation of these earlier works, but it also moves Smith out from the familiar terrain of home to the anonymous spaces and experiences characteristic of international tourism (there are numerous plays in the film on the comforting *and* alienating uniformity of hotel interiors). Nevertheless, although Smith views the various hotel rooms he ventures into with a wary eye, he is often quite complimentary about a particular item of décor, a specific arrangement of objects, or the comforting lived-in wear-and-tear of some of the establishments he visits. *Hotel Dairies* is also the most explicitly or straightforwardly political of all the films Smith has made. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to say that his earlier films are not also political in terms of their concern for local environments, cultures, languages and even temporalities, and the ways in which these are questioned and obliterated by modernisation and urban development. This engaged localism is a key element of such works as *Lost Sound* (2001), *Home Suite*, *Slow Glass* (1991) and *Blight* (1996). In this regard, *Hotel Dairies* continues a preoccupation with the relationship between the local and the global, the micro and the macroscopic, the world inside an anonymous hotel room and that teeming outside.

The first part of the "series" – "Frozen War" – is in many ways the most striking, immediate and questioning section of this intermittently created work. Filmed less than a month after the September 11 attacks on New York's World Trade Center, it finds a profound metaphor for the discomfort and dread provoked by those events

– and their aftermath – in the frozen image Smith finds on his television set when he returns to his room around 1:41 in the morning. It would be tempting to discuss Smith's response to this troublingly stilled image in terms that allude to Roland Barthes' key distinction between photography and cinema in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*: the deathly frozen countenance of the snapshot against the continuum of the moving image. In this regard, part of what fascinates and worries Smith is the tearing out of an image from a continuum, an arresting of temporality that speaks to the seemingly overwhelming calamity of specific global events and their localised implications. But Smith's response to this image is more circumspect and situated than it might first appear. Although he wonders what has happened to the BBC transmitter and studio in London to affect this "failure" of continuity and information, he is more concerned about what this can also tell us about the multitude of civilian deaths meted out "simultaneously" by both Britain and the United States in the bombing of Afghanistan, then in its second night of execution. As in much of Smith's work, there is a profound sense of relativity and sympathy at play here. Although the film is restricted to the filmmaker's immediate surroundings and visual perspective – and none of the eight episodes moves beyond the corridor outside the room, only seeing the filmmaker when he is reflected in a mirror or shiny surface – it uses the immediate materials of this environment to suggest a series of pointed but strangely organic connections to the world outside.

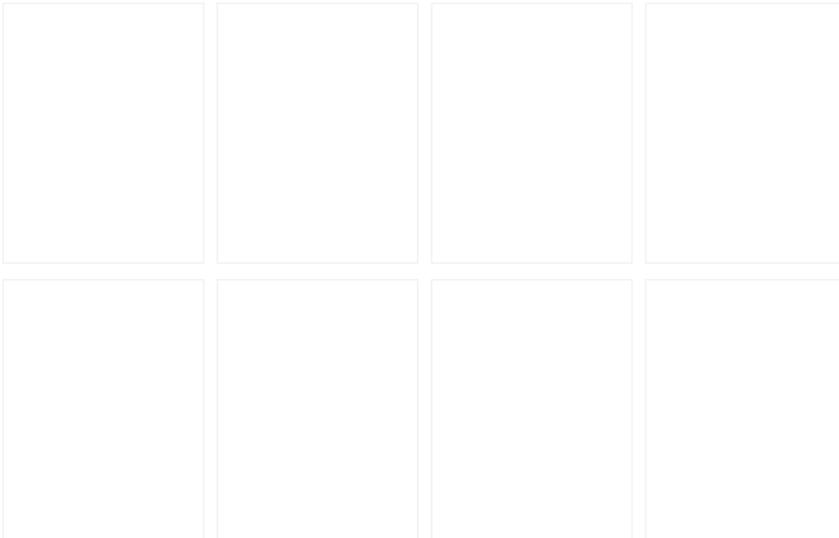
Of course, part of what worries and concerns Smith in this series of films is a sense of impotence, an anger at the mundane worlds we routinely occupy and think about while acts of aggression, prejudice and imperialism are carried out in our names. But Smith is also profoundly interested in the objects and signs he encounters, bringing an off-the-cuff inquisitiveness to his and our encounters with, for example, the lifting tiles of the roof of a hotel room in Bethlehem, a glass partition to the bathroom in Berlin, the ironically Orwellian nomenclature and implications of Room 101 in Winterthur, the snacks and mini-bars he finds in various locations. As in many of Smith's films, these encounters with the immediate physical environment are guided by the filmmaker's chatty and exploratory voiceover. (Actually, it isn't strictly a voiceover as it is seemingly produced – often in the hushed tones of early morning – at the same time as the images are captured.) It is this voiceover and Smith's palpably physical camerawork that acts to draw explicit, implicit and sometimes unexpected connections between the often-disparate elements that are drawn into the film's web or ambit. At times this approach can seem a little too calculated, such as when the second episode, "Museum Piece" – probably the most artfully constructed in the series – ends with a droll reference to *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) in the context of a story about Smith's feeling of apprehensiveness at going inside Berlin's Jewish Museum due to contemporary Israeli military actions and government policy.

My description of *Hotel Diaries* may make it sound as if it is an overly sober and humourless work – but nothing could be further from the truth. Although "Frozen War" questions the import and meaning of an image severed from the continuous chatter of information and communication that characterises the BBC's 24-hour news service, it is also concerned with the world – both immediate and somewhat more distant – around this image. Many of the other episodes of this series are more playfully occupied with the quirky and idiosyncratic details of décor that mark each distinct hotel room, but "Frozen War" finds its key point of contrast or comic/cosmic comparison in "the stool thing for putting suitcases on" that stands next to the television set. As the shot unfolds in real time – all but one of the eight episodes is made up of a single take (the exception, "Dirty Pictures", has only two) – Smith becomes distracted from his off-the-cuff discussion of the image on screen by the ubiquity and ultimate pointlessness of this particular object: "That really is such a useless fucking bit of furniture". In many respects Smith's films are preoccupied by *mise en scène*, as well as with the ability to craft stories – or fragments of stories – from the bits of information that dot our immediate environments. It is a gently essayistic, conversational cinema of connections or connectivity that can effortlessly range across such subjects as the filmmaker's supposed lisp, Berlin's Jewish Museum, Israel's appalling activities in Palestine, the wall of a bathroom, the magic of an electric blind we can't see, a silent screening of Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954) in a bar downstairs, the Holocaust, the odd fruit patterns on the hallway carpet, and a characteristic pun on the title *Schindler's List*. The wonder of Smith's cinema is that he can make such surprising connections seem completely natural, almost inevitable, and combine this with a pointed critique of foreign policy and the outrageous activities of various nation-states. There is also a wonderful, characteristically open, improvised and self-deprecating moment when, as he reaches the end of the hall and his frame is filled with the nondescript image of a blank wall, Smith states: "I'll leave that bit of space for the imagination".

Although *Hotel Diaries* returns to Cork for its final episode, both neatly summarising the concerns and circularity of the previous sections and questioning the possibility of saying something complete or conclusive about anything ("Anyway, I don't really know where I'm going with this"), it is the penultimate episode – "Dirty Pictures" – that provides the series' logical conclusion or denouement. All of the previous episodes have incorporated discussion and condemnation of Israeli and Western actions in the Middle East, providing information (in voiceover, on television screens, across the text crawl added to Smith's images on one episode) about parallel events occurring in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and the West (such as the re-election of Bush, British military atrocities, the initial bombings of Afghanistan, Blair's appointment as a Middle-Eastern envoy, etc). This incessant but subtly integrated material suggests that the key approach of *Hotel Diaries* will be to maintain a sense of explicit distance (or distanciation) between the European hotel rooms that the filmmaker is billeted in and the events occurring in far away Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. It is therefore something of a surprise when we realise that Smith is in a hotel room in Bethlehem, his camera showing the wall that separates Palestinian and Israeli territory. This is the only episode of the film that is shot during daytime and is divided into two parts, metaphorically recognising the key division between Palestine and Israel and the physical and

metaphorical spaces or places that each occupies. In the second half of this episode Smith returns to the footage he had previously shot in the Bethlehem Inn and expresses dissatisfaction with both the quality of the images and the lack of a contextualising voiceover for the material he shot through his hotel room window. This second section is dominated by his account of crossing the checkpoint between Bethlehem and East Jerusalem (occupied by Israel) and has little of the humour that structures other sections. But there is still a striking continuity between this episode and those that have preceded it. From the safety of his securely positioned hotel room Smith summons the world outside, providing a set of troubling connections and parallel stories that disable our ability to simply close the door and immerse ourselves in the bland comforts and décor of modern life.

Hotel Diaries (2001-2007 Britain 81 mins)



About the Author

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