

DECEPTIVE REFLECTIONS: ON THE FIRST TEN MINUTES OF *SLOW GLASS*

NICKY HAMLYN

The first ten minutes of John Smith's longest 16mm film, *Slow Glass* (1988-91), embody all of the distinct characteristics of his oeuvre in particularly resolved and concise form.¹ In keeping with the interrogative intent of its many extreme close up shots, I have chosen to undertake a detailed analysis of this portion of the film, rather than an overview of all the films included in this volume. This is because I hope to show that only such an analysis can adequately yield the density and complexity proper to most of Smith's films, but especially those, like this one, with a long gestation and production period.

Slow Glass is a seemingly paradoxical work; documentary and fictional, abstract/experimental and representational, cryptic yet concrete. The materials and processes of film are figured in and on the screen. The distorting and transforming effects of the medium undercut the film's reality effect, yet reinforce reality at a material level. It has a strong documentary ethos and surface, yet that surface is consistently disturbed, the ethos both criticised and reflexively expanded. *Slow Glass* argues against itself relentlessly, if subtly, so that we cannot but be reminded that films are utterly constructed to the point where we wonder what they can tell us about the world at all, at least any putative world outside the film. It is a very condensed and multi-faceted work, yet also long, and so bears multiple

repeated viewings, generating, on each occasion, new ideas and connections, which reflect the degree of meticulous care and attention to detail that is evident in all of Smith's work.

In the first scene, composed of a single shot, a football flies through a blue sky with rooftops and fluffy clouds, framed by an Edwardian bay window and reflected in its distorting glass. Here one of Smith's key strategies is established from the outset: a disturbed pictorialism, with an image seen at one remove, since it is in a space that is in-frame, but whose pro-filmic is behind the camera, elsewhere. Eventually when, as we know it must, the ball hits the window that bears its image, the picture goes black, and in so doing becomes explicitly the picture plane, or rather the screen surface that it has been all along. The illusionary surface on which an image sequence plays out is destroyed, both by the ball, which crosses from the reflected views to the actual pro-filmic space framed by the camera, and by the editor's decision to cut to black, an operation unique to film. Over the black we hear the sound of tinkling glass, but we don't see the window break. Can we assume that the tinkling was caused by the ball's hitting the window? Not necessarily. Thus the film sets out its sceptical terms in order to get us to question the causal assumptions on which a movie's coherence depends. The screw is tightened when the black screen, after a decent passage of time, turns out to be an extreme close up of a pint of Guinness.

"No, it is not the same, people are different," intones the unseen, Guinness drinking, (assumed) narrator in the second scene, where the kind of mundane but earnest

disquisition one might hear in a pub is juxtaposed with a wholly abstract image that shifts incrementally into a representational one as the Guinness disappears from the glass, sip by sip. Along the way, he makes a plea for the tactile and olfactory, which we cannot but be prompted to consider in comparison to film, the most visual of experiences. An out of focus pub interior is gradually revealed beyond the glass, and the two contrasted strands of sound and image move into alignment to form a naturalistic scenario, albeit one shot in extreme close up and shallow depth of field.² Yet this process, too, only serves to remind us that such sound-image conjunctions are always a function of a framing: in reality the relationship between sound and vision is fluid, constantly changing and often incongruous in a way that narrative cinema cannot accommodate without jeopardising its own terms and conditions. Smith seeks to preserve such incongruities, establishing a deeper, more problematic, level of realism by eschewing conventions around the unity of sound and image.

When the drinker lifts his glass, he reveals another, out of focus, drinker in the background, also with a pint of Guinness, who drinks from his pint in synchronisation with our presumed narrator. Was this rehearsed or fortuitous? The final image of the Guinness glass is composed of two thirds quietly moving translucent froth in the top of the frame, with one-third static, opaque, beer at the bottom. This framing gives us two contrasting images in one: an example of in-frame dialectical montage. The image of light and dark reminds us that film works by light shining through a medium, and where

it can't shine through, black is the result, but that this is also a question of degree: when Guinness is thin enough it becomes a translucent film, permitting the transmission of itself as image, like a microscope slide. It is a film on a surface (glass) whose image is born on another surface/medium, composed of silver nitrate crystals embedded in a gelatine layer bonded to a celluloid base. As such it also figures, or corresponds to, the structure of celluloid: Guinness: emulsion, glass: celluloid. Celluloid is flexible, and glass, as the narrator vociferously insists, is a liquid. The gradual reduction of Guinness in the glass also measures the passage of time, time consumed, idled away, passed in pubs, in conversation. One is reminded of the line "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" spoken by the narrator in T S Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* (1917), partly, perhaps, because of Smith's use of extracts from Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) in his 1999 film of the same name, which similarly is set in a pub, and is also included in this volume.

Already we have encountered two quite distinct contexts for "glass", and will now encounter a third one that unites the material of both through its being worked upon, a manner deployed extensively by Dziga Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), in which we are reminded of the otherwise hidden productive labour behind the object we hold in our hand or which fills our window. (Smith also echoes Vertov in the way he juxtaposes images of work and leisure, production and consumption).

The third scene is announced by another cut to black, punningly synchronised to the sound of a piece of glass

being snapped in two after having been scored with a cutting tool. This scoring sound will recur through the film as a punctuation device, as well as being a way of drawing time with sound, given that the duration of a piece of glass being scored is limited by the physical dimensions of the worker's arm-length, thus a human measurement, but a temporal one, as opposed to the old Roman spatial measures based on feet, spans and paces (yards). In the new scene the image-sound relationship has been reversed in a certain way. Whereas in the first shot the sound that followed the picture cut belonged to the scene just finishing, here it belongs to the scene we are about to see, yet both happen around the visual incident that gives rise to them, so that a causal nexus oscillates between that occurring naturally in the pro-filmic event, and its fabrication as a sound-image conjunction. As per the first scene, the image is both mediated and reflected by a screen, in this case a piece of glass that is slid onto a cutting table, so that the medium is literally interposed between us and the initial object of our gaze. In the middle distance we see a clock whose face has no numbers, only markings, such that we cannot immediately tell if we are seeing it directly or in reflection, bearing in mind the theme of reflection that runs through the film. One could also say that the clock, as much as it constitutes a moment of ambiguity or uncertainty, symbolises the practice of streamlining of information in many areas of life, and that this reduction depends on (and implicitly signals) prior knowledge or assumptions: we can tell the time from a clock face that has no numbers on it, but only because we know where the numbers are supposed to go. Film's efficacy turns

on a massive compression, reduction and fragmentation of information relative to that which it purports to portray. Its concomitant dependence on the knowledge of codes and conventions that the spectator brings to bear renders it susceptible to sabotage by filmmakers, though few have successfully done this. I mention all this partly because Smith's early background in graphic design, and his exposure to semiology whilst an MA student at the Royal College of Art Film School, sharpened his awareness of the economies of communication, of how to maximise the efficacy of mass media and minimise noise in the system. Like all good artists, he learnt the rules the better to break them later: the reason why his films are so technically immaculate is so that he can subvert the medium's mimetic power on its own ground.

The new scene is intercut with the previous one, so we return to the pub to hear the narrator insist that glass is a liquid. At the end of this section, on the words "it is still a liquid" we cut back to the glass-cutter in time to hear that "liquid" snap along the line he has scored with the cutting tool. Thus paradox is located in the very material of the film's subject matter (*sic*). The image of the clock, which by now we understand to be a reflection, breaks in half as the piece of glass is snapped in two, and the left hand part of the clock disappears. Then the piece of glass with the remaining half of the clock is removed, taking the reflection with it. Of course we know it's only an image, but the surprising disappearance of the clock reminds us how quickly, how unavoidably, we see it as real, entering the mimetic world of which it is a part. This moment demonstrates the disturbing power of film,

which has motivated so much of the distrust that found vehement expression in the attack on narrative illusionism in British experimental film that began in the late 1960s. Perhaps a measure of cinema's powerfully seductive structures can be seen in their recrudescence in so much contemporary artists' film and video, which has been enthralled by narrative forms and conventions, by what has lazily been called, in the context of moving image in the gallery, 'the cinematic'.³

As the narrator runs on energetically through his monologue, he develops his theme by quoting Mikhail Gorbachev quoting the "ancient Greek" maxim of "everything flows, everything changes". While speaking these words a barman clears away empty glasses and crisp packets, so that the point about change is made forcefully, didactically even, though in its bathos, and self-conscious heavy-handedness, it is a comic comment on didacticism as much as it is an exercise in the correspondences between text and image, a preoccupation that recurs in Smith's films, from *Associations* (1975) onwards. This didacticism is also a feature of the work, yet insofar as it is invariably leavened by striking visual images, one doesn't feel one is being lectured to. Clearly though, Smith is testing out the limits and possibilities of a kind of instructive tone, and instruction, after all, is a technique in the field of communications, with which so many of the films are concerned. In another, *Shepherd's Delight* (1980-4), the didactic is embodied in the figure of a cultural studies lecturer who delivers a laboured talk on the meaning of the weather-lore rhyme: "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight".

The attribution of the ancient Greek quotation to Gorbachev, reformist figure at the end of the Soviet era, coincides with the end of the scene in the pub – another text-image correspondence – and allows Smith to smuggle in a clunky pun on “Glasnost” (transparency) – at which point the scene is saved by the bell for ‘last orders’. This is followed by a brief, identically framed shot of the cleaned and empty tables, perhaps a cryptic reference to the now mostly abandoned custom of ten minutes ‘drinking-up time’? In any case, it permits a shot of the bare tables as themselves, as light reflectors, whose character was previously concealed during opening hours beneath the crowd of refractive containers. The absence of this clutter radically changes our perception of space within the frame, impressing on us that Smith’s films are not just jokey-conceptual, but also work with formal-visual ideas that are often thought of as belonging to a different register of filmmaking, but which in Smith’s films have always been co-present: the critique of realism in film necessarily takes place in a visualised, mimetic world that also must be interrogated spatially as well as semantically, indeed, space and meaning are seen to be interdependent.

The recurring device whereby objects abruptly change their appearance is established more explicitly in the final shot of the scene, with a cut to an exterior view of a (the?) pub, The Copper, painted a drab brown. A bus passes, concealing a cut, but functioning like a wipe, so as to reveal the same building, identically framed, but now painted a pale greenish blue. The use of passing vehicles as vertical wipes also occurs in other

films, notably *Blight* (1994-6). Like the cut on the pub tables described above, these wipes fulfil a formal function, which is to emphasise the crucial role of framing both in the control of meaning and in the moulding of medium-specific visual events: a wipe requires a spatio-temporal frame in order to function as such. The frame abstracts the wipe effect from its surroundings, and creates an abstract image-process from one that is at the same time representational. The gap between this last shot and the first shot of the next scene is punctuated by a return to the glazier, who scores another line on a sheet of glass.

We then cut to a mystifying scene, apparently from another film entirely, of a 1950s-style sitting room, with coal fire burning in the grate, wooden radiogram and voluminous red armchair, shot from floor level. This will turn out to form another strand in the complex theme of “everything changes”, and we will subsequently see the room in its contemporary incarnation. However, the abrupt interposing of this shot evidences again Smith’s interest in controlling and challenging the cognitive processes of the audience: we are bound to ask, “What’s that doing there?” and Smith knows that we will be puzzling over how this shot fits into the film as a whole. In *Shepherd’s Delight* there is a similar, more self-contained such sequence that tests to destruction our ability to make sense of and integrate disparate material into the film’s thematic threads.

The next scene takes us a step or two further back in the passage from glass’s raw materials to its use as drinking vessels and windowpanes. At the Pilkington

factory in St. Helens we see a long, tracking, top-shot of a plate glass production line. This sequence allows Smith to explore wholeheartedly some formal-visual ideas, relatively free from narrative incorporation or inflection. As the endless ribbon of glass passes under the camera, reflecting light from the ceiling windows' patterns of glazing bars, film's form as a strip of images separated by frame lines is delineated. These lines bend and splay, animated by the quivering glass as it slides past. For an extended period we are immersed in this complex moving image – a true light-play – in which the exact positions in space of the shop floor, machinery, glass and ceiling are intriguingly difficult to locate in relation to each other. After three and a half minutes we finally see a factory worker, and things fall partially into place, but much of the indecipherability of the image remains.

Before this, however, after exactly two minutes, a single arcane word, "cullet" ("cu' it", "cut it"?), is uttered by the narrator: a word, which in its obscurity, occurs at first as pure sound, an auditory counterpart to the scene whose visual spell it nevertheless breaks. The film is peppered with other such words, which are enunciated repeatedly in streams that flow poetically throughout. Cullet is used glass that has been crushed before it is melted down to make new vessels, and so takes us another step back in the production process, and one closer to its raw materials. These latter (soda, lime, silica) will be enunciated in the next scene, which returns us to the narrator at the bar (is he still on Guinness or has he switched to bitter?). Smith now brings the materials of glass production into direct conjunction with the uses

to which the end products will be put, in a spectacular shot of the shelves behind the bar, which are packed with bottles whose images are doubled by a large mirror behind them, and which fill most of the frame.

In these first dense minutes of *Slow Glass*, Smith establishes contrary-motion patterns for the whole film. As it moves forwards he traces, in reverse, the glass-manufacturing process. We also go back in time to Smith's childhood home, beginning with the establishing shot of the 1950s sitting room, with its boy's-eye point of view. The backwards look is later directly figured in a sequence featuring the view in a car's rear-view mirror. Thus Smith intertwines the personal and the local with larger patterns of industrial production and consumption, and with the changing face of the urban landscape, a landscape in which so many of his films are rooted (as opposed to merely located).

Slow Glass anticipates the more explicitly political character of two subsequent films, *Home Suite* (1993-4) and *Blight*, which deal more directly with urban blight and popular resistance to its causes and consequences. Indeed, all the other works in this volume could be said to develop from ideas present in *Slow Glass*. *Lost Sound* (1998-2001), made with Graeme Miller, introduces elements of chance and formal procedures derived from the topography of its subject, whilst grounding the film in the cultural detritus of the inhabitants of its locations in and around Shoreditch, East London, so that it functions as a kind of anthropological investigation into a community and its choices of music, as well as coming to serve as a wistful record of the era of the

compact audio-tape cassette, once the most ubiquitous music storage medium in the world. *Worst Case Scenario* (2001-3) narrows the location to a highly complex road junction, viewed from a singular point of view, and in which scale also plays a key function. *The Waste Land* is set wholly in a pub, and although no glasses feature this time, other kinds of liquid are involved. In *The Kiss* (1999), made with Ian Bourn, glass makes a surprise return, in a film that remains enigmatic until the very end, indeed beyond. It is a quasi-allegorical, single shot work, (like *Gargantuan* (1992)), that turns on the contrasting relationship between vulnerable subject and predatory camera, literally closing the necessary gap between the two and reminding us that no point of view is innocent or neutral.

Nicky Hamlyn is a filmmaker and writer. He teaches film, video and visual theory at University for the Creative Arts, Maidstone, Kent.

1. *Home Suite*, at 96 minutes, his longest work, was shot on Hi-8 videotape.
2. "There are many ways in which my films don't give you things ... I use a lot of close-ups. The close-up denies you the full picture. You rarely see people in my films; the action is usually described or suggested rather than depicted. So you are forced to imagine." John Smith, interviewed by Cate Elwes in: *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1972-2002*, Picture This / Watershed Media Centre Publications, Bristol, 2002, p.67.
3. I am grateful to Simon Payne for this critique of the sloppy use of 'cinematic' in the context of gallery video, as opposed to cinema, where it has some meaning.