
Programme notes by Ian Christie

Lost London

John Smith's films have been described in many ways – as 'structuralist', droll, ironic, eccentric, playful, etc – but less often as London-centric. And yet, a glance at his bio-filmography confirms not only that he was born in and wholly shaped by the city, but also that a significant proportion of his films have taken London as their subject, ostensibly or ambiently. By ostensibly, I mean those that identify some area or feature of the cityscape as their locus; while ambiently, many of the other films have been made in unidentified London locations. And even when Smith has travelled more widely, as in the *Hotel Diaries* series (2001-07) or *Flag Mountain* (2010), his persona remains unmistakably that of a Londoner abroad.

I recently compared Smith to the original master of the shaggy-dog digression Lawrence Sterne, and William Hogarth would be another relevant 18th century avatar of London-centrism. So too would T. S. Eliot, whose great poem *The Waste Land* is rooted in the city where he had made his home, and also lends its title to one of Smith's films (a Sternean parody set in a London pub). We may not think of Hogarth or Eliot primarily in terms of London – any more than the audiences of Smith's films around the world need to be specifically aware of Leytonstone, Dalston or Hackney – but all of these artists share a deep, formative sense of 'being in the city' which pervades their work.

What Smith reveals in his London films – all located far from the historic tourist zones – is that paradoxical sense of the local that is many Londoners' sense of their city. The junction in Dalston seen in *The Girl Chewing Gum* may have been chosen originally for its nondescript quality, but it is also typical of London's default Victorian/Edwardian fabric, constantly modified by later additions,

such as the modernist Odeon cinema that suddenly appeared there in 1939 (and subsequently disappeared in 1984). This corner becomes a living theatre of London street-life through the film's narration; and through its longevity, it has also become a time-capsule – a status acknowledged by Smith's return to the same place in *The Man Phoning Mum* (2012), overlaying the original film in a ghostly re-visitation. Blight is also theatrical, although in a different register, using vividly disjunctive audiovisual montage to expose the inner micro-dramas of East London terrace houses, as laid bare in the death-throes of their demolition: a true city-symphony in miniature, focused on a microcosmic district that, once again, has since disappeared. There's also an elegiac sense of the disappearing city present in many the films.

Hackney Marshes, *The Black Tower* and *Lost Sound* illustrate another strand of Smith's engagement with London – his passion for creating formal and narrative patterns out of found material. In these films, he discovers enigmatic and sometimes disturbing patterns amid the repetitive banality of London's terraced streets, corner communities and recreation areas. He doesn't need to be swamped by cultural comparisons, but it may be worth invoking the Parisian Surrealists and later Situationists, with their love of urban serendipity; or the Chestertonian fables of Borges, or even Robbe-Grillet's sinister topographies. These may or may not have influenced Smith in the early stages of his career, when they became popular among the emerging young intelligentsia of the 1960s, but they can still help us see beyond his deceptively modest persona as an 'English eccentric'.

Many writers have tried to capture the varied textures of London everydayness in their own different styles: think of the span from Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, with much between and since. Smith joins this endless cavalcade in a wholly distinctive way: anecdotal, whimsical, determinedly focused on the local and the personal. His terrain is the (often decaying) London terraces and parades that lie between the grand inner boroughs and

the bland outer suburbs, and the lives of their shifting communities, pressured by migration and gentrification. Future generations will no doubt treasure his work as a unique distillation of the *fin de siècle* London zeitgeist.

John Smith is an award winning avant-garde filmmaker noted for his use of humour in exploring various themes that often play upon the film spectator's conditioned assumptions of the medium. He studied film at the Royal College of Art and since 1972 he has made over fifty film, video and installation works that have been shown in independent cinemas and art galleries around the world.

Ian Christie is a celebrated film historian, curator, and Anniversary Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck, University of London. Ian recently contributed a key text to a 2013 monograph on the work of John Smith, and has long been engaged in ongoing research on the history of London on screen.

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Programmed in association with the Barbican Film series Urban Wandering:
Film and the London Landscape (19 September - 2 October)