

Volker Pantenburg: Language/Record

Brief Remarks Concerning John Smith's Films

Common sense (as well as the curricula of Film Studies departments) traditionally tends to distinguish three major realms of filmmaking: fiction film, documentary, and experimental film. This is, as we all know, an entirely insufficient and schematic set of distinctions, but implicitly or explicitly, it still prevails as an underlying structure in film festivals, academia, film funding etc. *Experimental film* – the poorest of the three sisters in this family, is in itself quite an unfortunate term, sometimes competing with old fashioned words like *avant-garde*. John Smith's films advocate a different way to see things: What if we thought of experimental film making not as a field apart, a somewhat messy drawer next to the other two drawers? Instead, his films strongly advise us, we could (and maybe should) regard experimental film making as precisely that mode of practice which continuously troubles and subverts the categories of documentary and fiction, tries out combinations, deals with their inextricable connections. Watching John Smith's films, we either realize or get the confirmation that experimental film is neither a genre nor a set of modes and aesthetic practices, but a means of investigating the conditions and properties of film, or moving image art in general.

When he started to make films in the mid-1970s, John Smith was firmly linked to the activities of the London Film-Maker's Coop. His all-time-classic *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) has been called an "improbable treatise on representation." (Ian Christie) It is one of those films that make you wonder: How strange that no one had had this idea before... I don't want to spoil the experience by explaining the concept, but I assure the reader that the film is based on a relatively simple idea – the kind of simplicity that, once and for all, changes your perception of the medium.

In many Coop films of the time in Great Britain – I oversimplify – the vector of investigation tended to be directed inwards, towards the apparatus in all its facets: The material of the film strip, the sprocket holes, the camera and its lenses, the projector and the cinematic event. It appears as if, first and foremost, the preconditions of filming had to be thoroughly studied. Although there is, we could say, a strong documentary impulse, the subject of documentation is not primarily the external world, but the apparatus itself.

In Smith's work, this is different. Not that his films take the apparatus for granted or don't worry about the intricacies of the recording process – far from it. However, their vector is rather directed towards the outside, into the world before the camera, and, as I would like to emphasize: the world before the microphone, since the acoustic – be it in the guise of Smith's very pleasant voice, be it in the guise of a very sophisticated sound scape – is a crucial element of their strategies of transforming what's there before the camera lens.

This voice is an integral element of confusing and playing with the ideas of "the real," "the authentic," "representation," etc. In the *Hotel Diaries* series, but also in *Dad's Stick* and *The Black Tower*, the voice delineates a recognizable subject, it marks the vantage point from which the images are impregnated and infused with meaning and

signification. To think about these films as *witnesses* of some kind of reality (political, psychological, autobiographical), we need to trust in, or at least follow the words that accompany the images you make. In *Hotel Diary #3*, for instance, the authenticity, the factuality of what Smith is saying about Yassir Arafat, George W. Bush, or 9/11, depends on our confidence in this particular voice, a very pleasant voice at that. The film could have been shot in a hotel anywhere, the story of Smith's 9/11 experience in Chicago on 9/11 could be completely made up, but I don't think the film gives us any reason for this kind of mistrust.

On a more general level, this brings up the question of responsibility and ethics. A word that keeps crossing my mind when thinking about the films, is "faith." This is not a very scholarly term, and I have not yet come to a conclusion what my mind wants to tell me with this association. In fact, it makes me feel more comfortable to rephrase it slightly and speak of "trust." It seems to me that John Smith's films rely on a contract that implies a basic assumption: We do take the images of *The Black Tower* as actual images of actual locations in London at an actual point in time in the 1980s. If we had reasons to question the image on this level and to think of it as fabricated, non-representational, "fictional," the film would be quite pointless.

The British editor and theoretician Dai Vaughan whose collection of essays *For Documentary* I keep returning to, offers a simple opposition. In each and every film, he claims, we deal with the dichotomy of "film-as-record" on the one hand and "film-as-language" on the other. What Vaughan refers to as "the twin aspects of the medium" – the capacities of registering and of signifying – always appear hand in hand, albeit in different mixes: "If documentary were merely record, then editors would not be needed to order it," he says, "since to grant significance to the order in which records are presented is to impute to it a linguistic nature; yet if documentary were language pure and simple, editors would not be needed to manipulate it, since there would be no meanings generated other than those commonly available – to film crew and viewers alike." Vaughan, Dai: "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity" in *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*, Berkeley 1999, p. 79.

Only if we acknowledge the recorded image of *The Black Tower*, as a somewhat reliable visual testimony of a certain reality in London, its signification (via montage, voice, sound) can take off to turn into the increasingly psychotic, unreliable first person narration. In other words: A strong sense of "film-as-record" is the presupposition that "film-as-language" with all the sophisticated methods Smith employs can work.