

Blight

Country
UK

Director
John Smith

Year
1996

Duration
14:19



Chirping birds, passing cars, a half-demolished house against a clear blue sky, and a female voice searchingly calling: 'Jordan and Ki-im ... Jordan and Ki-im....' Just half a minute is all it takes to assemble all the building blocks of *Blight*, a film title with a 'slightly apocalyptic, biblical significance, but also a place which is going to be demolished, which has no future'.¹ The deep hum of string instruments swells, a succession of static shots of houses in ruins appear, then the sounds of falling bricks and another female voice that seems to recall a scene: 'Kill the spiders....' The two voices alternate with each other and compete with the string instruments for priority on the soundtrack: 'Come on Kim, come on.... Pull them down.... Jordan and Ki-im.... Legs twitching.... Kill the spiders.... Come on Kim, come on.... Kill the spiders for me....' Images of wallpaper evoke bygone times, while thick beams appear to come loose of their own accord. Wood creaks as a male voice joins the chorus of women: 'Kick them out....' After a few minutes, the first wall collapses and, as a huge cloud of dust rises up, two workers light their cigarettes. Plastered on another wall is a life-sized painting of *The Exorcist*.

Londoner John Smith draws most of the inspiration for his films from random events around him.² He filmed *Blight* in his own neighbourhood, where numerous homes were demolished in the 1990s to make space for a motorway. In the first scene he creates uncertainty as to the film genre; this could just as easily be a documentary or a thriller:

'This really sinister mural of the poster for *The Exorcist* seemed very poignant to me: the silhouette of a man in an overcoat and trilby hat, carrying a briefcase. For me he represented the kind of faceless official from the Department of Transport who decided to destroy the houses. But also, because of this reference, I filmed the opening scene with things falling from the building without showing any human presence, like there being a poltergeist in the house.'

Blight is often considered a political manifesto, even though that was not Smith's primary aim: 'I am always surprised that people see it as being quite an agitprop film.' If that had been his intention, he would not have left the time and place unspecified for so long, nor would he have saved signs of protest, such as the graffiti slogans 'No', 'M11 not here' and 'Homes, not roads', until the end. It is only in the credits that we read: 'Filmed in East London on the route of the M11 Link Road.' But if Smith wasn't aiming to make 'political propaganda', what then? For him, the film is 'much more about general ideas to do with notions of memory and loss'.

Smith was right beside the demolition work with his camera, and through his window he could film remarkable close-ups of workers as they manually ripped loose the neighbour's gutter in the semidetached house where he was still living. Grippers or wrecking balls are nowhere to be seen; the workers simply hack bricks off with pickaxes. Smith still has to laugh at the absurdity of some scenes: 'Imagine looking at the film silently, and you see this macho road-building-man running away from little pieces of sand and stones falling. It looks very comic!' Except, you cannot turn off the sound in *Blight* with impunity, since that would destroy at least half the film. Thanks to a generous Sound on Film subsidy from BBC2 and the Arts Council,

¹ Interview with John Smith on 24 April 2018.

² His most important films between 1975 and 2007 were released in 2011 by Lux in London as a three-set DVD box under the title *John Smith*. Among others, it contains *The Black Tower* (UK 1987, John Smith, 24:00), an architecture film with a remarkable narrative quality.





Smith was able to spend months working with composer Jocelyn Pook. Together they turned *Blight* into an intricate montage of sounds and images. The soundtrack became a mix of instrumental music with endlessly repeated, initially minuscule but gradually lengthening interview fragments. They were sampled from fifteen extensive conversations with neighbours, from children to the very elderly, all residents of the demolished buildings or of nearby homes left standing. They returned in their thoughts to a place that was once home. The woman with the 'kill the spiders' fragments, for example, had a toilet in her garden when she was a child. She told Smith about the plague of spiders that her father always had to tackle before she could use it. Smith saw in it an echo of the spider's web tattoo on the elbow of a worker, which also made him think of the map of the London motorway network.

When Smith started to work with Pook, he had already shot more than half of the footage, but without any definite plan. He was very wary of using music. 'Usually I stay clear of using music because it can be so emotionally manipulative.' Even so, he let it happen in *Blight*: 'Because of the kind of apocalyptic nature of the music in places, some people tend to get a simpler message from the film than my actual intention.' But that was preferable to flying in a composer at the very last moment 'to set the tone'. That's something Smith very much dislikes, because it often manipulates the viewer subliminally, so that he no longer even realizes he's listening to music. Not so in *Blight*: 'The music is so foregrounded and overpowering, that perhaps it is manipulative, but at least the viewer knows that he is being manipulated.' And besides, the soundtrack includes music as well as natural sounds (such as a wooden stick as it rattles along a metal fence, footsteps, splintering wood) and especially 'bits of text' which acquire not only a 'literal quality' but also a 'musical quality'.

Blight embodies the transition from analogue to digital in the 1990s. Smith was still filming on 16mm and edited the footage on an old-fashioned Steenbeck, but the music track was so complicated that it could never have materialized without the computer. He combined the edited analogue audio material in a film dubbing studio with digital material prepared in a music studio. Apart from the fact that *Blight* is a technical achievement for its time, its contents also make it a complete work of art that masterfully weaves together a variety of sounds. Smith and Pook shared an interest in 'the fragmentary nature of language, the way in which you can use words to suggest things'. The snippets of text are perhaps the biggest find of the whole film. Because they are initially very short and gradually get longer, the viewer becomes increasingly curious to discover their source, and fantasizes about the missing context. Can you imagine any better incentive for the imagination?

