Blight

Country
UK

Year
1996

Duration
14:19

Director
John Smith
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.' 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. 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 unspecific 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,
Smith was able to spend months working with composer Joce-
lyn Pook. Together they turned Blight into an intricate montage
of sounds and images. The soundtrack became a mix of instru-
mental 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 apoc-
alyptic 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 with-
out 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
come longer, the viewer becomes increasingly curious to discov-
er their source, and fantasizes about the missing context. Can
you imagine any better incentive for the imagination?