
8 Meaning and Musicality

SOUND-IMAGE RELATIONS IN THE FILMS OF JOHN SMITH

Andy Birtwistle

ACTIVE SINCE THE early 1970s, the British film and video artist John Smith has produced a substantial body of work that demonstrates a long-standing creative and critical engagement with the role played by sound in film and video—and, in particular, with the ways in which sound creates meaning within an audiovisual context. Influenced by the Structural film practice of the 1960s and 1970s, and underpinned by a Brechtian concern with the political dimensions of representation, Smith's witty and thought-provoking approach to sound-image relations has remained a defining feature of his work for over forty years. However, despite the fact that he has become one of the best-known experimental filmmakers working in the United Kingdom today, and the subject of numerous articles, interviews, and essays, Smith's innovative and distinctive use of sound has received relatively little sustained critical attention.

The study of film sound often usefully focuses on individual elements of the soundtrack, as determined by the conventional tripartite division of speech, music and sound effects. Historically, music has attracted most attention in the critical literature on cinema sound; the corollary of this being that, until recently, sound effects and speech remained relatively neglected in film theory, including the writing on experimental cinema. While attempting to address this critical imbalance, by listening across the constituent elements of Smith's soundtracks rather than focusing on one area in

particular, my own study departs from the conventional paradigm of speech, music and effects in two important ways. First, in considering voice rather than speech, my aim is to think beyond the purely linguistic aspects of Smith's repeated use of voice-over, and to explore the ways in which qualities of voice and vocal performance contribute to his work. Second, in seeking to examine the use of ambient sound rather than sound effects more generally, my aim is to focus on an aspect of film sound that seldom attracts critical attention. Often termed 'atmos' in film production, environmental or ambient sound is usually called upon to bolster the naturalism that underpins many forms of cinematic representation—both in documentary and drama. As 'background sound', ambient sound rarely draws attention to itself; however, in Smith's work, which challenges and deconstructs naturalistic modes of cinematic representation, ambient sounds become audible, taking an active role within the film text and contributing significantly to a body of work that often seeks to examine familiar, everyday environments. In addition to voice and ambient sound, my analysis also considers Smith's use of music, precisely because it is heard so infrequently in his films. One of Smith's objections to the conventional use of music in cinema is that it is usually added to a film in post-production rather than being developed as part of an integrated soundtrack. Focusing on Smith's collaboration with composer Jocelyn Pook, the final section of this chapter considers the ways in which the soundtrack of *Blight* (1994–96) blurs the boundaries between voice, music and ambient sound, creating a soundtrack that represents a radical departure from conventional approaches to the use of music in cinema.

Smith's artisanal approach to filmmaking has enabled him to maintain almost complete creative control over the various stages of the filmmaking process and thereby to craft the soundtrack as a carefully integrated whole. Working outside the conventions and restrictions of commercial film production, Smith is able to work on projects over extended periods of time: hence his practice of not dating work with a single year of release but rather indicating the period over which the films are made. In relation to sound, the significance of this approach to film production is that it allows him to develop the soundtrack in parallel with the image, setting up a creative dialogue between the two rather than positioning sound as an accompaniment or supplement to the visual track.

Voice and Voice-Over: *The Black Tower*, *The Girl Chewing Gum*, *Hotel Diaries*

The voice has a gentle, relaxed presence. A London accent, but not particularly strong. Maybe a slight lisp, although the speaker tells us he can't hear it himself. The monologue seems to ramble, reflecting on everyday personal experience (the recent loss of a tooth, the exorbitant price of chocolate purchased from a hotel minibar), or the technical problems of filmmaking (poor focus, dust on the lens, prehardener dirt in the film emulsion). The tone is warm, humorous, self-mocking: "before you start to lose interest in this, I should preface this video by letting you know that I'm actually one of the most

famous experimental filmmakers in the world.” Anxious about filming “corny”, “romantic” sunsets at the English coastal resort of Margate, the voice explains, “I don’t want to get typecast as a sunset filmmaker”.

The use of humour, the self-reflexive focus on filmmaking and the concern with the everyday, the personal and the domestic, all identify the work as Smith’s; but it is also the voice itself, as much as the thematic and stylistic consistency of his films, that constructs Smith as auteur—a sonic presence inscribed across a body of work shot in and around spaces and places he has either inhabited or visited. Weaving its way through four decades of creative activity, this voice is heard in early films such as *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), later works including *The Black Tower* (1985–87) and the more recent *Hotel Diaries* series (2001–07), most often in the form of voice-over narration.

Though not always performed by Smith himself, voice-over has been a key element of his work since he began making his first 16 mm films in the early 1970s. It is in *Associations* (1975), produced while Smith was a student at the Royal College of Art, that voice-over first assumes a central role in his creative formulation of sound-image relations. Here the only sound used in the film is that of a narrator reading extracts from the essay “Word Associations and Linguistic Theory” (1970) by psycholinguist Herbert H. Clark.¹ The text is read by the actor Jonathan Burn, who was cast by Smith for the authority and gravitas of his voice. Burn’s polished Received Pronunciation lends the narration a scholarly tone, in keeping with the academic text that serves as the film’s script. The choice of voice and the specificity of the delivery also reference one of the dominant models of documentary film and television voice-over of the time, employing as it does the authoritative tones of a male narrator. Theorist Bill Nichols has discussed the ways in which documentarians have responded to the problematic authority of voice-over narration by developing approaches, such as that of *cinéma vérité*, in which it is simply eliminated. However, in Nichols’s view, this strategy is in itself problematic: “Such documentaries use the magical temple of verisimilitude without the story teller’s open resort to artifice. Very few seem prepared to admit through the very tissue and texture of their work that all film-making is a form of discourse fabricating its effects, impressions, and point of view.”² For Nichols, the solution to this problem is not to eradicate the voice-over, but rather to create forms of self-reflexivity that foreground the role of the filmmaker in the creation of meaning. Nichols’s position on the voice-over points clearly to the effect that Smith achieves in *Associations*, since the film not only references, but also destabilises this particular form of narration. Both the gravitas and the authority conveyed by the narrator’s voice are undermined by Smith’s choice of accompanying images, whereby words spoken by the narrator are illustrated on screen by a series of witty and sometimes outrageous visual puns. Hence the word “associations” is represented visually by four

¹ Herbert H. Clark, “Word Associations and Linguistic Theory”, in *New Horizons in Linguistics*, ed. John Lyons (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1970), 271–86.

² Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary”, *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 18.

images: an ass, a sewing machine, the ocean and a group of Asian women, producing the rebus “ass-sew-sea-Asians”. While rarely returning to this type of carefully enunciated, highly formal narration, favouring instead the rhythms and sounds of colloquial speech, many of Smith’s films nevertheless rely on tightly scripted and carefully produced voice-overs. Examples of the latter, performed by Smith himself, are found in films such as *The Girl Chewing Gum*, *The Black Tower* and the recent video *White Hole* (2014).

Where voice-over narration often seeks to constrain and anchor the meaning of an image in mainstream film and television, Smith’s use of the device works to multiply, extend and complicate meaning, prompting us to interpret an image in surprising, unexpected and sometimes troubling ways. Over one of the many “imageless” black screens that populate *The Black Tower* we hear the film’s unseen protagonist, voiced by Smith, recalling that:

I decided to take another look at the tower near my house when I got back, but by the time I got there it was dark. There was no moon and I couldn’t see it over the rooftops. That night I dreamt that I was imprisoned in the tower. My body was paralysed and only my eyes could move. At first I thought that I was in complete darkness but after a while I noticed a greyish speck which remained in the same place when I moved my eyes. I realised that I was facing a flat black wall. I got the feeling that the room was in fact brightly lit but I couldn’t be sure.

In most filmmaking practices, a black screen would be thought of as the absence of an image: an empty frame devoid of meaning. But in response to the suggestions of the voice-over, in *The Black Tower* this same black screen represents a moonless night sky, the darkness of an unlit room and the black wall of the tower that haunts the film’s protagonist. Thus Smith’s voice-over transforms the nothingness of the black screen into an image invested with meaning. Disentangling sound from image, Smith demonstrates the ease with which the narration projects meaning onto the screen, and in so doing creates a moment of potential self-awareness in which the audience may glimpse themselves plugged into the apparatus of cinema, manipulated by stimuli whose form and flow are controlled by the film’s maker.

These carefully scripted voice-overs contrast with the more personal and improvisatory tone developed by Smith in a series of works shot on video, beginning with *Home Suite* (1993–94) and continuing through *Regression* (1999), the films of the *Hotel Diaries* series, *unusual Red cardigan* (2011) and *Soft Work* (2012). Many of these pieces are shot hand-held, with Smith improvising a voice-over that falls somewhere between commentary, narration and off-screen sound. The use of hand-held camera, like the improvised voice-over, gives these films a feeling of spontaneity and immediacy, while at the same time reinforcing the personal and sometimes diaristic nature the work (Figure 8.1). Located behind the camera, at the periphery of the visual field, Smith’s physical presence is registered on the soundtrack through the sounds produced by his handling of

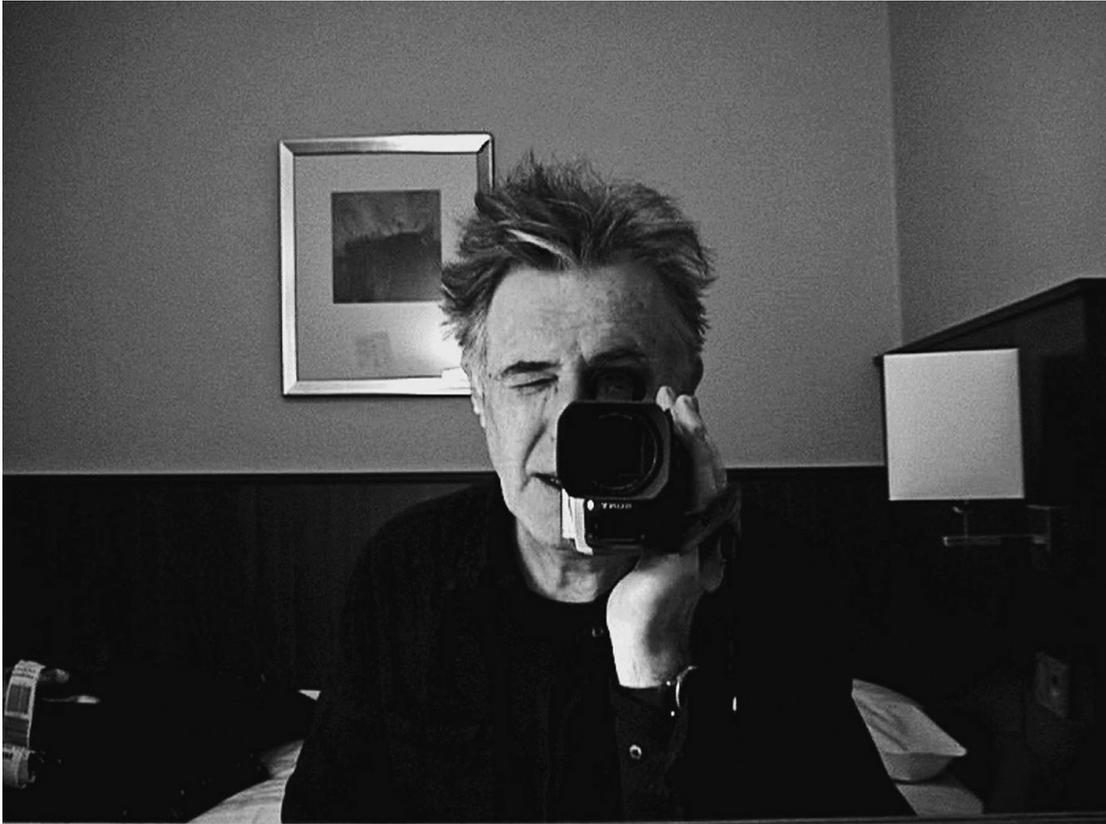


FIGURE 8.1 John Smith, *Pyramids/Skunk* [*Hotel Diaries* 5/6] (2006–07).

the video camera, the movement of his clothing and his own proximity to the microphone. In this way, to borrow Michel Chion's redolent phrase, his voice could be said to have "one foot in the image".³ Inscribed in profilmic space rather than bearing the flattened spatial signature typical of a studio recording, Smith's off-screen voice departs from the established norms of both voice-over production and performance. However, at the same time his words guide our interpretation of the image, in many ways paralleling the primary function of the voice-over commentary or narration. This is particularly apparent in the videos of the *Hotel Diaries* series, in which Smith's rambling, casual voice-over animates his immediate surroundings, infusing inanimate objects with narrative significance through the power of speech. For example, in *Dirty Pictures* (2007), Smith relates a distressing scene witnessed at a crossing point on the Separation Wall in Bethlehem. As he describes the technology of the checkpoint, his camera plays across the furniture in his hotel room in East Jerusalem. Conjured by the descriptive power of the improvised voice-over, the familiar *mise-en-scène* of his immediate surroundings begins to double and recreate the Israeli checkpoint: the door on a dressing table stands in for a turnstile, the shelf holding his suitcase becomes a conveyor belt transporting personal belongings through an X-ray machine, while his drifting handheld camerawork

³ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24.

mimics the zigzag passage of travellers through the checkpoint facility itself. There, on the previous day, Smith had witnessed a distraught, disabled Palestinian woman being refused access to the other side of the wall after repeatedly setting off the alarm on a security scanner. Following a number of unsuccessful attempts to pass through the scanner she is ordered to remove her orthopaedic shoes and hobbles through the security arch, only to be refused entry yet again. Lying innocently on the floor of his room—in the Western tourist’s privileged space of comfort and leisure—his own shoes return and transport us to the plight of the Palestinian woman as Smith explains that he had been waved through the checkpoint, his British passport given only the most cursory of inspections by the Israeli security staff. Here the everyday, unremarkable *mise-en-scène* of travel is made meaningful through the power of spoken narrative, as Smith animates and reframes the mundane surroundings of his hotel room, charging even the prosaic image of a pair of shoes with political significance.

The suggestive power of these voice-overs may appear to rest primarily on Smith’s linguistic skills, but this would be to ignore the role played by his own voice. As Chion points out, thinking about what the voice itself contributes to cinema, as distinct from language, is difficult: “we confuse it with speech. From the speech act we usually retain only the significations it bears, forgetting the medium of the voice itself. Of course the voice is there to be forgotten in its materiality; only at this cost does it fill its primary function.”⁴ That language holds a particular fascination for Smith is evidenced by films such as *Associations*, *Shepherd’s Delight* (1980–84) and *Slow Glass* (1988–91), where it serves as a key thematic element of the work. It is understandable therefore that Michael Maziere, Martin Herbert and Smith himself have all discussed the ways in which the voice-over in *The Girl Chewing Gum* foregrounds the power of language to influence interpretation of the image.⁵ However, these critical commentaries rarely consider the specific role played by the voice itself within this context. Aside from Chion, one of the few scholars to consider the importance of voice in cinema, and its relationship with speech, is Sarah Kozloff, who, reflecting on the individuality of voice, makes the point that “The voices of famous movie actors are instantly recognizable, and intimately interwoven with viewers’ conceptions of their personae.”⁶ However, it is perhaps because Smith’s voice seems so unremarkable and familiar that it tends to evade scrutiny. The ordinariness of the voice—an appropriate vocalisation of the everyman embodied in his name—means that it does not draw particular attention to itself or the work that

⁴ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 1.

⁵ Michael Maziere, “John Smith’s Films: Reading the Visible”, *Undercut* 10–11 (1983–84): 40–44; Martin Herbert, “Mediate the Immediate: On John Smith”, in *John Smith*, ed. Tanya Leighton and Kathrin Meyer (Milan: Mousse; Berlin: Sternberg, 2013), 5–16; Brian Frye, “Interview with John Smith”, *Millennium Film Journal* 39–40 (2003), accessed 11 December 2014, <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ39/JohnSmith.html>; and Tom Harrad, “Interview with John Smith”, *White Review* (March 2014), accessed 11 December 2014, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-john-smith/>.

⁶ Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 91.



FIGURE 8.2 John Smith, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976).

it undertakes on the filmmaker's behalf. Kozloff's analysis of the cinematic voice also considers the way in which actors employ pace, intonation and volume to convey emotion in a performance. These cues, while not entirely absent from Smith's voice-overs, tend to be somewhat muted, replaced instead by the rhythms and intonation of everyday speech. Unlike the actorly tone of Jonathan Burn's voice-over in *Associations*, Smith's voice appears to lack performative polish and thus, importantly, it sounds "natural".

This voice is first heard in *The Girl Chewing Gum*, where it casts Smith in the role of what appears to be a film director ordering extras around on location: "Slowly move the trailer to the left. And I want the little girl to run across, now!" Described by Ian Christie as "stentorian" and by A. L. Rees as "hectoring", the voice here differs somewhat from that heard in later works, which Rees has described, by contrast, as "intimate and personal".⁷ The slightly strained quality of the voice-over seems to locate the speaker in the space presented on screen: a busy street corner in Dalston, East London (Figure 8.2). The voice is raised, the speaker apparently exerting himself to be heard above the noise of traffic and the ringing of an alarm bell. Interpreted in this way, Smith's voice, which positions itself as off-screen rather than voice-over, refers the audio-spectator to the

⁷ Ian Christie, "English Eccentric", in *John Smith*, ed. Leighton and Meyer (Milan: Mousse; Berlin: Sternberg, 2013), 50; A. L. Rees, "Associations: John Smith and the Artists' Film in the UK", in *John Smith: Film and Video Works, 1972–2002*, ed. Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon (Bristol: Picture This Moving Image / Watershed Media Centre, 2002), 17, 26.

mechanics of film production, the soundtrack appearing to document the film's own making. However, a number of factors rapidly destabilise the impression that we are witnessing a film shoot in progress. Although the strained quality of the voice appears to locate the speaker on the noisy street corner, this interpretation is problematised later in the film when Smith announces, "I am shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles from the building you're looking at." While this seems to be a genuine possibility (and is in fact where the voice-over was recorded) the veracity of Smith's claim is potentially undermined by his declaration that "In a tree about twenty yards away I can see a large blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet."

While Smith's careful scripting occupies a central role in the film's destabilisation of documentary modes of representation, his voice also plays a key part in the film's deconstructive scrambling of sound-image relations, problematising the naturalistic (and illusionistic) relationship between sound and image that serves as the cornerstone not only of the fiction we term "drama", but also of the fiction we term "documentary". In the simple device of using performance to embed the voice in the space of the scene, and then using language to relocate that voice in space (Letchmore Heath) and time (recorded after the film was shot), Smith sets up an oscillation between conscious awareness of cinema's manipulatory power and engagement with its illusionistic lure. That is, the interplay of voice and language means that while we understand that we cannot take what we are being told at face value, the gravitational pull of the illusion is nevertheless hard to resist. As Smith explains, "Even when you know you're being lied to, it is still very easy to imagine the scenarios being described."⁸

While Smith's films are wary of cinema's power to manipulate the viewer, he nevertheless relies on this power to manoeuvre the spectator into a position where they can subsequently become aware of the constructed nature of representation. This is achieved by first drawing the spectator into the illusion, or narrative, and then pulling them out of that experience to establish a critical distance on it. Smith's voice is illusionistic, forming part of the repertory of devices that set up the dialectic between immersion and distanciation that is central to his work. Thus the slightly nasal quality one hears in Smith's voice-over for *The Girl Chewing Gum*, along with his occasional coughs, helps to stitch his narration into the naturalistic illusion of reality that the film needs in order to question the nature of that illusion.

This use of the voice is further refined in later works—in particular the *Hotel Diaries* series—in which the casual, spontaneous, improvisatory feel of the films helps Smith's voice-over manoeuvre the audio-spectator into position: guiding, nudging and leading them to the point at which they begin to make connections between the narration and the images presented on screen without feeling that they are being directed to do so. In the sequence from *Dirty Pictures* described above, Smith never overtly references or explains

⁸ Smith, quoted in Harrad, "Interview with John Smith".

the metaphorical nature of his imagery, but rather allows the viewer to situate images of the interior of the hotel room in relation to the story being narrated. Distracting us from the manipulatory power of his disembodied narration, Smith's casual tone helps to create a self-reflexive space in which the spectator has the potential to become aware of his or her own imaginative engagement with the film—aware that the scene described by Smith is conjured in their imagination rather than being represented directly on screen. Paradoxically, this type of self-awareness is most acute when Smith reveals his hand, laying bare the filmmaker's control over the audio-spectator, the manipulatory power of cinema and the mediated nature of representation. This is one reason why the punchline that draws *Museum Piece* (2004) to a close evokes such a strong response from an audience: not only because it is a good joke, but also because it jolts the audio-spectator, reminding them that, despite the film's apparently loose organisation and the engaging naturalness of Smith's delivery, there is (of course) a structure and a purpose guiding his nocturnal wandering of the hotel's corridors.

Ambient Sound: *Lost Sound*

Informing Smith's use of voice-over is a desire to reveal cinema's power to manipulate the audio-spectator, and to deconstruct the illusionistic nature of certain forms of cinematic representation. Hence, Smith has described his own work as "anti-illusionist", stating that: "All of my work, whether it does it all the time or intermittently, draws attention to its own construction, its own artifice."⁹ Liberating ambient sound from its conventional inaudibility, in part by treating it as a musical resource, Smith's work explores the creative potential of this much-neglected aspect of the soundtrack, while at the same time deconstructing its role in cinema's illusionistic representation of reality.

"Hoxton Street N1 Wednesday March 25th". The rumble of traffic. Footsteps and conversation of passing pedestrians. These familiar sounds of the urban soundscape are accompanied on screen by close-up shots of a short length of cassette tape submerged in a kerbside puddle. As a car passes out of shot, we catch a short snatch of music, muffled and indistinct. On first hearing, the soundtrack seems to consist only of ambient sound; recorded on location with the image, laminated to it. This is the unremarkable, everyday background noise of the urban environment: sounds that we hear, but rarely listen to; sounds that, under normal circumstances, barely inscribe themselves on our consciousness. The location recording helps to give the video a documentary aesthetic, bolstered by the precise details of location and date given on screen. The very mundanity of the soundtrack suggests a lack of mediation—a guarantee of the indexicality and objectivity of the recording. The music we hear could be ambient sound, issuing from a car as it passes by, but in fact has been harvested from the abandoned audiotape we see on

⁹ Smith, quoted in Frye, "Interview with John Smith"; Smith, quoted in Harrad, "Interview with John Smith".

screen. In this way, *Lost Sound* (1998–2001) documents fragments of discarded cassette tape found by Smith and his collaborator Graeme Miller in a small area of East London, combining music from the tapes with images and ambient sounds recorded in the places where the tapes were found (Figure 8.3).

In all but one of the video's twenty locations, the lengths of abandoned cassette tape are shot in situ: wrapped around clumps of grass, snagged by the peeling bark of a tree, stuck behind a satellite dish. The ambient sounds recorded in these locations present familiar and unremarkable urban soundscapes, varying in density depending on location, time of day and proximity to roads, factories, shops and flight paths. However, as the video develops, Smith begins to build formal, narrative and musical connections between the places, events, and sounds that he and Miller have recorded and the music recovered from discarded audiotape.

In the early sequences of *Lost Sound* there is little evidence of artistic intervention beyond framing and composition; however, as the piece progresses, the soundtrack increasingly announces its own construction, audibly transforming its status from documentation to interpretation. In some respects, this parallels Smith's use of voice-over narration to problematise the truth claims of documentary modes of representation. While at first the soundtrack of *The Girl Chewing Gum* seems to present itself as the simple record of a film in production, very quickly Smith's voice-over directs us to the fact that all forms of cinematic representation, whether documentary or drama, are constructions. In the same



FIGURE 8.3 John Smith, *Lost Sound* (1998–2001).

way, Smith's interventions on the soundtrack of *Lost Sound* gradually draw attention to the film's own artifice and prompt us to question the veracity of the film's documentation of the urban soundscape. The careful (re)positioning of specific sounds extracted from location recordings allows Smith to fashion micro narratives from his source materials that open out onto social and political issues. In the sequence titled "Arnold Circus E2 Sunday May 17th", we are presented with the image of cassette tape caught around iron railings. As a breeze animates the previously motionless piece of tape, Indian pop music plays on the soundtrack over the sound of children playing in the street, and both music and ambient sound signal the fact that this area of London is home to a large immigrant population. Suddenly the snarling and barking of a dog erupts on the soundtrack, whereupon the music ceases and the cassette tape becomes motionless once again. This sequence is repeated, establishing what appears to be a cause-and-effect relationship between these two sounds: the inference being that the aggressive barking of the dog silences the music. For Smith, this particular sequence has the potential to connect with a specific social issue by way of the simple narrative generated in the interplay between the music and the sounds of the dog. Smith has described how, on visiting this area of London on a previous occasion, he had witnessed far-right activists distributing leaflets, and that, for him at least, the sound of barking evokes one of the totemic symbols of British national identity: the British bulldog.¹⁰ Thus, for those members of the audience who possess the appropriate cultural knowledge, the fragment of narrative that emerges from this sequence may serve to raise issues relating to cultural diversity, immigration and nationalism.

The narrativisation that results from Smith's intervention on the soundtrack is but one of the ways in which editing problematises the veracity of the documentary aesthetic referenced by *Lost Sound*. In addition, the approach to sound-image relations developed within the project also works to destabilise the seeming objectivity of the film's documentation of abandoned audiotape. In the sequence described above, Smith sutures the playback of the music with the movement of the cassette tape as it is caught by the breeze. Here, he playfully suggests that the tape itself becomes animated by the music—or alternatively, that the movement of the tape somehow creates the sounds we hear. This simple device both emulates and deconstructs the naturalistic model of sound-image relations proposed by the vast majority of documentary and drama productions. Memorably described by Rick Altman as "sound film's fundamental lie", cinema's synchronisation of sound and image habitually works to construct, signal and foreground the apparent integrity of the profilmic event, and to efface the illusionistic foundation of naturalistic modes of audiovisual representation.¹¹ Chion terms the effect produced by the correspondence of sound and image synchresis, which he defines as "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual

¹⁰ Smith, quoted in Cate Elwes, "Trespassing beyond the Frame: John Smith Talking Film with Cate Elwes", *Filmwaves* 15 (2001): 17.

¹¹ Rick Altman, "Introduction", "Cinema/Sound", special issue, *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 6.

phenomenon when they occur at the same time.” Importantly, Chion suggests that “This join results independently of any rational logic.”¹² Thus Smith is able to fashion an event that we know cannot have taken place, yet which nevertheless appears as though it might have done; an appearance that is further underwritten by the indexicality implied by the video’s documentary style.

The creation of sound-image relations that simultaneously draw upon and deconstruct illusionistic modes of representation is a key element of *Lost Sound* and forms part of the broader play between immersion and distance that animates Smith’s body of work. This dynamic is also articulated through the musical sensibility that Smith brings to the treatment of ambient sound throughout the project. As *Lost Sound* develops, Smith’s editing gradually works to layer and orchestrate sections of ambient sound, with the result that the soundtrack begins to take the form of a subtle, sometimes almost undetectable, *musique concrète* of the environment. However, since these sounds are drawn from the video footage shot in each location, in which sound and image were recorded simultaneously, these same sounds nevertheless remain representational, and anchored in the space depicted on screen. Smith states:

Nearly all the sound that I use is there because it relates to the image. . . . So even if you don’t see a dog barking, it represents a dog barking in a scene. But when I’m working with sound, all the time I’m thinking about how that sounds in an abstract way; how it sounds as a component within a composition. And the composition is, of course, the film.¹³

What presents itself as natural, we come to realise more and more, has been selected, arranged and organised: an orchestration of individual moments sifted from many hours of videotape. By the time we reach the closing sequences of *Lost Sound*, the authorial control that was at first hidden has become wholly evident, as Smith loops increasingly brief sections of footage to create a rhythmic and progressively more abstract audiovisual *musique concrète*. In this way, Smith signals the film’s own construction while simultaneously undercutting and problematising cinema and television’s claim to the real. The presence of ambient sound in the documentary genre constructs the soundtrack as an unblinking witness to the profilmic event, in which the inclusion of the aleatory and the accidental suggest a lack of authorial manipulation and intervention. In its mundanity, ambient sound often evades conscious audition, quietly deflecting attention from the simple fact that the audiovisual text is a construction that creates the illusion of reality through particular combinations of sound and image. While the use of music and voice-over might draw the attention of those who question the objectivity of documentary,

¹² Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 63.

¹³ Smith, interview with Andy Birtwistle, 24 October 2014, private collection.

Smith drills down to the fundamental illusion that underwrites the genre's claim to the real, reminding us that, at some level, all film is fiction.

Music: *Blight*

For a filmmaker wary of cinema's power to manipulate the audio-spectator, conventional forms of film music present something of a problem. Smith's anti-illusionist aesthetic, informed in part by Brechtian ideas, seeks to involve the audio-spectator as an active producer of meaning rather than as a passive consumer. As discussed above, Smith has developed a number of strategies in his use of voice-over and ambient sound to achieve this through a self-reflexive foregrounding of the processes of filmic signification. However, these strategies, underpinned by a critical concern with illusionistic forms of cinematic representation, cannot necessarily be applied to music, whose emotional power and conventional form present Smith with a slightly different set of problems.

Music has rarely been a defining element of Smith's work and is heard only sporadically in his films. In some ways his attitude towards the use of music in cinema might be thought of as active resistance, founded in part on a mistrust of music's power to manipulate the audio-spectator, often on an unconscious level:

although my films are manipulative in a certain way . . . you know that you're being manipulated. You're aware of these tricks because the manipulation's always in the foreground. What I don't like very often about the use of music in film is it controls how we look at the images. It tells us how we should be reading a particular image, whereas without the music track then things are much more ambiguous. . . . What I really hate about the way music works in film is when it's low level, it's background. Especially with setting up suspense and things like that, where you're not really hearing it.¹⁴

The inaudibility of the conventional film score, and its function as what David Denby has termed "an enforcer of mood", clearly run counter to Smith's desire to create films that not only draw attention to their own construction but also create a space for the audience to reflect on the manipulative qualities of the medium and the means by which cinema creates meaning.¹⁵ Smith's other key objection to the use of music in cinema relates to the way in which the industrial model of film production situates music within the creative development of a film as a whole:

One of the reasons why I've never liked to use music is that I always see the development of the picture and the soundtrack as being parallel things—and of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ David Denby, *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 38.



FIGURE 8.4 John Smith, *Blight* (1994–96).

course conventionally when music is used in film it's always very late on in post-production: the composer comes in and sticks some music on the top.¹⁶

These concerns are in some ways both raised and addressed by Smith's collaboration with composer Jocelyn Pook on the film *Blight*, which focuses on the destruction of East London homes caused by the construction of the M11 link road during the 1990s (Figure 8.4). The soundtrack that resulted from this collaboration integrates the sounds of demolition and the voices of local residents with music performed by Electra Strings and pianist Helen Ottoway. If Smith has always been an ear-minded filmmaker, attuned to the sounds of the environment and the rhythms of speech, then the collaboration with Pook appears to have intensified the musicality that has always been inherent in his approach to the soundtrack:

The only distinction I would make between what I do when I play with sound and what a musician would do is that I don't usually have a rhythmic structure for those sounds. So they're not put into any kind of repetitive structure. That's the only way I'd distinguish it from conventional music.¹⁷

¹⁶ Smith, interview by Birtwistle, 24 October 2014.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Smith's sensitivity to the musical qualities of speech, effects and ambient sound, is evident from the very first moments of the film, as the Doppler swish of passing cars gives way to the creaking of wood, the crunch of falling rubble and the repeated phrase "Jordan and Kim" (a mother, perhaps, calling to her children). As the sequence gradually builds in complexity, texture and depth, it becomes increasingly evident that sounds are being chosen, placed and combined as much for their musical value as for what they might mean or represent. This integration of the various elements of the soundtrack was achieved partly because the sounds that Smith recorded for use with the image—such as those of falling bricks and splintering wood—were also employed by Pook in the music composed for the film. This produces a soundtrack that draws on both the representational and abstract musical qualities of those sounds normally termed "effects". The same is also true of some of the fragments of speech that feature in *Blight*, which are positioned and sometimes repeated as part of Pook's composition. The majority of these are extracted from recorded conversations with local people recalling memories of former homes and their subsequent demolition. Here, Pook employs the tonal qualities of the spoken word as a musical resource, generating poignant leitmotifs from fragments of recorded speech. The collaborative nature of the film's soundtrack is particularly well illustrated by this use of sound, resulting as it did from the creative interplay between the two artists. Thus Smith explains that while he selected the kinds of words that were to be used in various sections of the film, Pook chose most of the specific fragments of voice and then incorporated these into the music.¹⁸

In many respects, the film can be seen to align closely with Smith's previous work, not only because its approach to the use of ambient sound and effects is informed by a musical sensibility, but also because of the interplay between representation and abstraction that is heard in the musical use of both 'concrete' sounds and speech. However, where *Blight* departs from Smith's other films is that this interplay does not necessarily create a self-reflexive tension or movement between representation and abstraction, but rather maintains each as separate strands within the overall composition.

The complex integration of the various elements of the film's soundtrack clearly evidences a project in which the composition of the film's music has not been left until the final stages of post-production. What then of Smith's other major criticism of film music, in terms of the way in which it is employed to enforce a particular and limited reading of the image? The fact that Pook's music is sometimes designed to elicit a strong emotional response from the audio-spectator is clearly a potential problem for a filmmaker who inherits from Brecht a desire to engage the spectator in a critical manner (through textual self-reflexivity and spectatorial self-awareness) rather than on a purely emotional level. For Smith, this issue is addressed by the fact that, while Pook's music undoubtedly brings a powerful emotional dynamic to the film, it nevertheless possesses an audibility

¹⁸ Smith, personal communication with Birtwistle, 16 December 2014.

that stands in opposition to the model of the classical film score. Thus Smith comments, “The way in which I justified *Blight* to myself is the music is so in your face that you’re really aware of the manipulation.”¹⁹ While this may indeed be the case, it is also the originality of the film’s integrated soundtrack that helps to guarantee its audibility. Few films manage to achieve the complex integration of speech, music and effects that emerges from Smith and Pook’s collaboration, and in this respect *Blight* stands alongside some of the most notable experimental films of the British documentary tradition, including *Song of Ceylon* (Basil Wright and Walter Leigh, 1934) and *Night Mail* (Harry Watt, Basil Wright and Benjamin Britten, 1936).

Smith’s long-standing creative engagement with the role played by sound in film and television has been motivated in part by a desire to problematise and challenge pervasive forms of audiovisual representation:

all of my work is political in that it makes the viewers aware that they are looking at something which is an artifice, so it doesn’t attempt to make you believe in what it’s giving you, whether ideological or factual, it’s something for you to actively engage with and hopefully not just consume.²⁰

In Smith’s work we witness a form of experimental filmmaking that not only provides a much-needed alternative to the sound-image relations of commercial cinema and broadcast television, but which also offers a critique of the illusionism produced by familiar combinations of sound and image. Thus in his use of voice-over, Smith has devised a range of creative strategies to examine the ways in which language shapes perception. Shifting ambient sound from the background to the foreground of the cinematic soundscape, Smith subjects a largely ignored element of the soundtrack to critical scrutiny, and by adopting an essentially musical approach to its use indicates some of the untapped potential of this underappreciated cinesonic resource. And finally, in developing strategies to integrate music into the soundtrack, rather than treating it as a supplement or addition, Smith’s collaboration with Pook challenges the conventional tripartite division of the soundtrack into speech, music and effects. In each of these three areas, it is perhaps the self-reflexive play with the creation of meaning that identifies Smith as an original voice in experimental film and video. However, for Smith, experimentation and reflexivity are never ends in themselves, but rather part and parcel of a critical engagement with the ways in which audiovisual media influence our understanding of the world. In investigating what is at stake in the creation and transmission of meaning through sound and image, Smith brings us back to the social sphere, reminding us that the practice of art is political and has political potential.

¹⁹ Smith, interview with Birtwistle, 24 October 2014.

²⁰ Ben Rowley, “In Conversation with John Smith”, in *John Smith* [exhibition catalogue], ed. Hazel Stone (Canterbury: Sidney Cooper Gallery, 2014), 13.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altman, Rick. "Introduction". "Cinema/Sound". Special issue, *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 3–15.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Christie, Ian. "English Eccentric". In *John Smith*, edited by Tanya Leighton and Kathrin Meyer, 47–70. Milan: Mousse; Berlin: Sternberg, 2013.
- Clark, Herbert H. "Word Associations and Linguistic Theory". In *New Horizons in Linguistics*, edited by John Lyons, 271–86. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1970.
- Denby, David. *Do the Movies Have a Future?* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.
- Elwes, Cate. "Trespassing Beyond the Frame: John Smith Talking Film with Cate Elwes". *Filmwaves* 15 (2001): 12–17.
- Frye, Brian. "Interview with John Smith". *Millennium Film Journal* 39–40 (2003). Accessed 11 December 2014, <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ39/JohnSmith.html>.
- Harrad, Tom. "Interview with John Smith". *White Review* (March 2014). Accessed 11 December 2014, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-john-smith/>.
- Herbert, Martin. "Mediate the Immediate: On John Smith". In *John Smith*, edited by Tanya Leighton and Kathrin Meyer, 5–16. Milan: Mousse; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Maziere, Michael. "John Smith's Films: Reading the Visible". *Undercut* 10–11 (1983): 40–44.
- Nichols, Bill. "The Voice of Documentary". *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 17–30.
- Rees, A. L. "Associations: John Smith and the Artists' Film in the UK". In *John Smith: Film and Video Works, 1972–2002*, edited by Mark Cosgrove and Josephine Lanyon, 14–31. Bristol: Picture This Moving Image / Watershed Media Centre, 2002.
- Rowley, Ben. "In Conversation with John Smith". In *John Smith* [exhibition catalogue], edited by Hazel Stone, 11–15. Canterbury: Sidney Cooper Gallery, 2014.