

## JOHN SMITH

I first became interested in working with film through doing light shows for music events in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A friend had access to a cheap source of 16mm projectors and educational films so, in addition to the psychedelic liquid projections that were common at the time, our light show also incorporated the projection of found-footage loops from films with titles like *Your Skin* or *Your Hair and Scalp*. I used to project several loops simultaneously, either next to each other or in superimposition, and quickly became fascinated by what happened when imagery was randomly juxtaposed, realising that we can't help but find connections and meaning when we see one image set against another. I was also very excited by the basic principle of cinema, that a cut between two similar still images will produce an illusion of movement. At art school I got involved in photography before I had access to film equipment – several of my earliest films explore the animation principle by rapidly cutting between still photographs.

Peter Gidal's weekly seminar screenings at the Royal College of Art were a very important influence on me as a student, exposing me to a wide range of work and provoking much thought and discussion. The films of William Raban and Guy Sherwin were also an early inspiration. These, together with Peter's work, made me aware that the most mundane subject matter can be transformed into something quite magical and mysterious by filmic means, that what you actually film can be of secondary importance to how you control its representation and that a film's 'drama' can as easily be created by its material construction as its representational content. Ian Breakwell's film *Repertory* (1973), in which a voice describes imagined events taking place inside a theatre that we only see from outside, vividly demonstrated how words can trigger images in the mind of the viewer, inspiring the subsequent use of voice-over in my own work.

A lot of my early films were concerned primarily with formal ideas and the aesthetics of the image but as time passed I started to feel a need to address specific subjects in my work, often from a political perspective, based on the experience of living in London at a particular point in history. In the years since 9/11 this need has become more and more pressing and the work has become more overtly political, addressing issues such as Britain's involvement in the wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan (*Hotel Diaries*, 2001–07), nationalism (*Flag Mountain*, 2010), the lack of idealism in mainstream political thinking (*White Hole*, 2014; fig. 187) and Brexit (*Who Are We?*, 2016).

I have always endeavoured to be as independent as possible but for the first twenty or so years of my career, when I worked solely on 16mm film, I was completely reliant on state funding to cover the material costs of the work. All my films up to the late 1990s were funded by the Arts Council's Artists' Film and Video Committee, either independently or in collaboration with Channel 4 or BBC 2. Things have changed dramatically since I started working digitally. I have my own equipment and generally work on my



186 – John Smith, *Dad's Stick*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.  
 187 – John Smith, *Steve Hates Fish*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.  
 188 – John Smith, *White Hole*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

own, so the majority of my work costs very little to make and is self-funded. I sometimes wonder whether the fact that I am able to make low-budget films independently has made me less ambitious in practical terms – I don't often have ideas now that require resources beyond my own means. I haven't applied for funding for almost ten years, although I have undertaken a number of commissions. I like being asked to do commissions, partly because they usually have a loose brief or specific context that is likely to stimulate new ideas.

As a cottage industry film-maker with a hands-on approach to all aspects of production, my work has always been partially shaped by the possibilities of the technology available at the time. My ideas and practice are governed by what I am able to do myself, as I have always preferred not to rely on outside technical resources. My early films often explored the capabilities of the Bolex camera, including time-lapse filming, in-camera superimposition and the matching of framings through the use of a gate-focuser. Digital technology has opened up numerous other possibilities. The first works that I edited on a computer, *Lost Sound* (1998–2001) and *Worst Case Scenario* (2001–03) enabled me to manipulate speed, generate freeze frames and create complex matted superimpositions, procedures that previously would have been dependent upon the services of film laboratories and post-production companies. The advent of small camcorders with good picture and sound quality offered another important opportunity, enabling me to start making more spontaneous works like *Home Suite* (1993–94), where I could record picture and sound synchronously while continuing to work entirely alone.

When I made my early films there were very few screening opportunities for artists' film in Britain. The main venue at that time was the London Film-makers' Co-op, which was invariably where my work premiered. It was certainly the most important screening venue for me as it was also a place where a lot of influential work was shown, where the work was discussed in depth after the screenings and where I consequently developed a lot of my ideas about what

film could or should be. When I first had work screened on television, after my initial excitement about the audience numbers, I was struck by how much of an anti-climax this was compared to the experience of a public screening for twenty or thirty people at the Co-op. Nowadays my work is shown in a wide variety of venues including galleries as well as independent cinemas and festivals, but having a dialogue with audiences is still very important to me and I make a point of regularly presenting and discussing my films in person, both in Britain and abroad, where cultural differences sometimes open up new perspectives. To date I have presented and discussed more than twenty retrospectives of my work at film festivals around the world.

My work has always been political in a formal sense, in that it is anti-illusionistic and ideologically opposed to mainstream cinema, inviting audiences to actively engage with the films during screenings rather than passively consuming them. Bertolt Brecht's ideas around distancing were a very important formative influence that has not diminished over time. Having taught moving image in art schools for the whole of my working life, I have always felt it imperative to communicate to students that it is possible to make exciting work with very limited resources and that good ideas are much more important than big budgets, a philosophy that I hope is demonstrated by my own practice.

John Smith was born in Walthamstow, London, in 1952 and studied film at the Royal College of Art, during which time he became involved in the activities of the London Film-makers Co-operative. Since 1979, he has made more than fifty film, video and installation works that have been shown in independent cinemas, art galleries and on television around the world and been awarded major prizes at many international film festivals. He received a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Artists in 2011 and in 2013 he was the winner of Film London's Jarman Award.