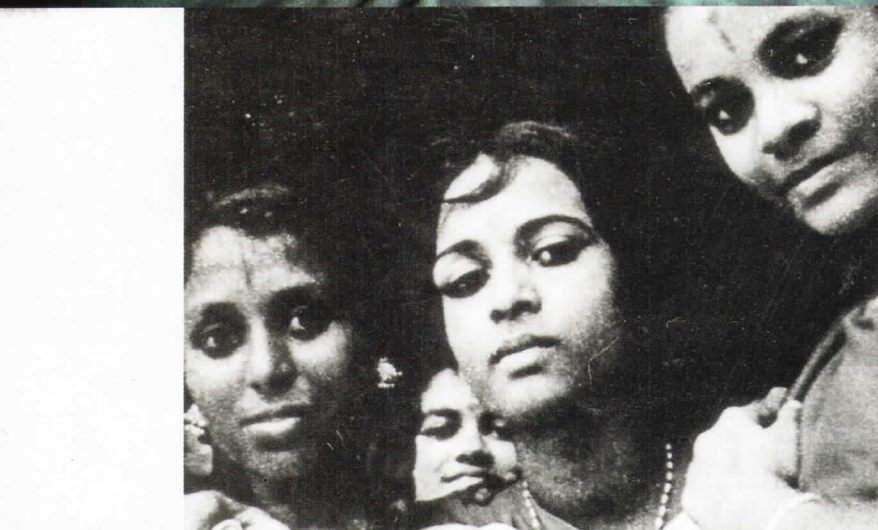
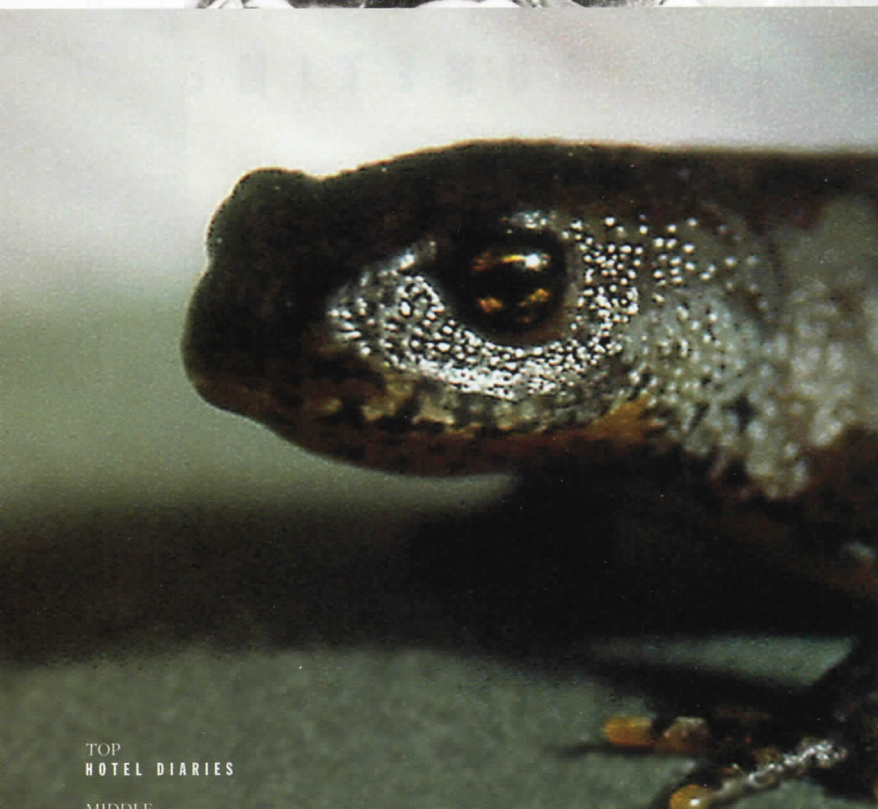


A BUDDHIST MONK chants “Om” as his head is shaved, before shrugging off his orange robes with a “Tiddly-pom” and becoming a bover-boy with a fag in his hand... A frozen image of a random man on a hotel TV screen prompts middle-of-the-night the-end-is-nigh paranoia... An inter-war suburban semi pulls itself apart, shaking off bricks like droplets of water...

This is our world, but not quite as we know it. The aptly monikered film artist John Smith – yes, it’s the name he was born with – is an ironic everyman guide to everyday realities. He can build a tragi-comic narrative around anything, from a tour of his local pub’s conveniences sparked by the realisation that ‘Toilets’ is an anagram of ‘TS Eliot’ (*The Waste Land*, 1999) to the view of a Viennese bakery from his hotel window (*Worst Case Scenario*, 2001-3). Smith is a benign master of deception; a game-player; an observer. It comes as no surprise to learn that among his many high-profile fans he counts former student Jarvis Cocker, another man who knows about making poetry from the commonplace.



OUR FIRST ENCOUNTER, seven years ago, was brief. A short film festival in Bristol: I sat captive in a black room and watched five of Smith’s shorts with a film-maker friend, who informed me Smith had serious cult status. I’d never heard of him. First up was *Associations* (1975), a brilliantly witty montage of magazine clippings edited to illustrate an arcane bit of text. By the end credits of the next piece, *Om* (1986) – a film about a haircut in which every sound, image and cliché is subverted – we were won over. Surprised, disturbed and highly amused, we went up afterwards to say hello and thank him. A shy, tall man with London vowels, an open, good-looking face, big black eyebrows and a shock of greying hair (cut by an artist friend of his for the past 20 years), Smith modestly accepted our admiration. I don’t remember anything he said. But he gave both of us his card. It said: “John Smith, Card-giver”. And I liked him even more.



JOHN SMITH was born in Walthamstow in 1952 and has never lived outside east London. Until his most recent work, *Hotel Diaries*, almost all Smith’s films have been inspired by experiences in his own neighbourhood, street or even house. He now lives with his film-maker partner Miranda in an 1850s Dalston villa with a back garden full of beautiful locust trees. “They were the reason we bought the house,” he smiles, “but the wood pigeons are absolutely mad for their blossom and sit and shit constantly for about three weeks. It’s a bugger to get off the deck.”

The narrow hall is dominated by piles of old magazines, carpet off-cuts, two bicycles and a cabinet with Smith’s collection of old toys, including a moo-making cylinder that moos no more. For three hours we sit at his kitchen table, dissecting his life’s work. He laughs and smokes Silk Cut and drinks coffee, and I laugh and eat his bananas. He wears a black sweater and jeans. His hair has whitened since 2001 and his features have coarsened slightly. Behind me, a wall of books – *Arabian Nights*, Paul Auster, Eisenstein, Buñuel, Hitchcock. Behind him, a painting of Winston Churchill and a photo of a billboard with the word ‘ARCELIK’ on it.

TOP
HOTEL DIARIES

MIDDLE
ASSOCIATIONS

BOTTOM
GARGANTUAN

LOUISE BREALEY: Are you an artist or a film-maker?

JOHN SMITH: Nowadays I would say artist, but 10 years ago I wasn't comfortable with calling myself that. When I started making films in the 70s, a lot of my peers had shifted from painting or sculpture out of a distaste for the elitism of the commercial gallery world. So the idea of being an 'artist' had a lot of political baggage. I also don't like the cultural hierarchy: the idea that you're an expert, you're different from people who *aren't* artists. It's corny but I agree with Joseph Beuys: I think everyone is an artist. [Laughs] But if people call you artist often enough you get used to it.

LB: But not a director?

JS: Never. That's someone who's telling other people what to do and I'm the kind of person who never does that. I have always been involved in the technical process of film-making – I've shot most of my work and no one has ever *touché* an edit of anything I've done.

LB: Is it safe to say there's a sort of megalomania there, even if you don't like telling people what to do?

JS: [Laughs] Yeah. Absolutely. To me, that's one of the reasons I prefer showing my work in cinemas. People get there, you shut the doors and it's hard for them to get out! And the films are very much to do with exerting power over the viewer. My excuse for it is that you're part of the game, you know you're being manipulated.

LB: Could you describe your process?

JS: My work divides into two categories: on something like *Om* I had to have the complete idea before I started the work; but most are shot over a long period of time. Very often I'll keep adding ideas to an original idea until I think it's dense enough. [Laughs] Basically all my ideas are really crap, but I just work on them until I think they're good.

LB: Why film?

JS: One of the main things I'm interested in is how meaning can be subverted or manipulated. Every piece I've made presents something that gets turned into something else. Film is really a good medium to do that: you can change how you put image and sounds together; or you can use editing or framing to give different contexts and control information.

LB: How did you originally get into film-making?

JS: Through still photography. My early films were animations of photographs. But also, when I was 16, I used to do light shows for bands with my friend whose father had a photographic shop. In the basement were all these ex-government film projectors and these sort of wacky old industrial and educational films. We would get clips and put them together. I got really interested in how you can show a couple of loops of film – whether they're superimposed upon each other or next to each other – and then randomly you'll see a relationship between them.

LB: Your films are accessible and very funny. Is that deliberate?

JS: When I first started making films most of my friends weren't from the art world – they were more likely to be an electrician

or a plumber. I was more interested in what my friends wanted to see. Most of the films are about ordinary things, things that we've all experienced, and the fact that there are a lot of ways of reading the world. I'm very glad they have a humour element that engages people, though I'm not specifically interested in making films that are *funny*: I like to explore meaning, and humour is a byproduct of that. But it's true that in most of my films there is a kind of playfulness, a game.

LB: Quite a few of your early films are about instability and change...

JS: I think a lot has to do with living somewhere that I thought was going to get demolished. I moved into a house in Leytonstone in 1982 and was told I had about two or three years until they knocked it down to build the M11, and I actually lived there for 14 years.

LB: How has your work changed over the years?

JS: These days the *subject* has become more important. *Hotel Diaries* have been about articulating ideas about things that are quite specific – for example, the Middle East and what's been going on over there. There was a certain point where I started getting frustrated about everything that's going on.

LB: Is that you becoming politicised, or is it just you getting older?

JS: I think it has to do with not worrying so much about whether or not people agree with you.

LB: How have you taken the digital revolution?

JS: I've got really mixed feelings about video. On a positive side, I actually found it really liberating when little camera-recorders came along and you could do things that you couldn't have done before. *Home Suite* (1993-4) was a 96-minute film in one take and it cost me £20. I don't have the fetishisation of film that a lot of people have. The last thing I shot on film was *Blight* (1994-6). But I really held back on editing on the computer for a long time. The idea was horrible; I liked the physical, tactile thing of editing. I finally gave in and got Final Cut Pro in about 1999 and it was actually really, really liberating. The first piece that I made like that was *Lost Sound* (1998-2001), and the technology was a big part of how the film ended up.

LB: Do you have a favourite film that you've made?

JS: *Slow Glass* (1988-91) is very close to my heart. It was made at the end of the factory era, at a time when the craft industry had more or less been wiped out. I was interested in that world, but suspicious of romanticising it. It was a kind of mid-life crisis film: as time goes on I find more and more distance between myself and the things I'm experiencing, like I'm behind glass. That film also has to do with one of my favourite feelings, which is doubt, and 'Can I trust how I feel about this?'

LB: Where do your ideas come from?

JS: It all comes down to seeing and pondering... I'm really not someone who can make a film about something that I haven't experienced myself.

FIVE EASY PIECES



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FILMS OF JOHN SMITH

GARGANTUAN (1 min, 1992)

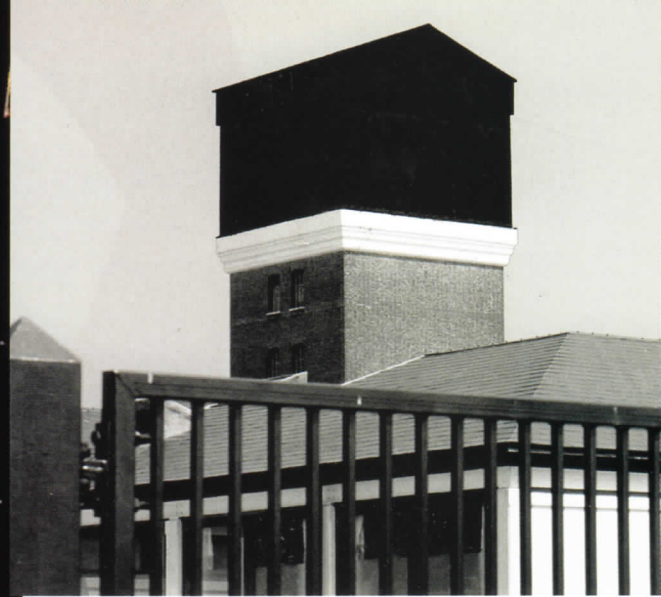
A pet newt diminishes in size over the course of a minute from a gargantuan to a miniscule amphibian...

"The film starts on this enormous close-up of a newt's face. The newt had to be very still because you have almost no depth of field. But newts are hyperactive, so I got in touch with a newt expert. This guy told me to put it in the fridge for a couple of hours before I filmed it. It's a cold-blooded animal. You won't harm it unless you freeze it. So I did that and the newt just looked dead! So I called the guy back and he said, 'Alright, try this: put a tea cup over it, leave it for about 30 seconds and take the tea cup off. It will be dazed and a bit confused.' That actually did work a few times, but I had to do so many takes that after a while the newt kind of got the game. Fortunately, I had a stunt-double newt who was an idiot."

BLIGHT (14 mins, 1994-6)

An elegy for a street and a community – Smith's own – which is demolished to make way for the M11 link road...

"When I started filming *Blight*, all the houses around me were being demolished while I still lived in mine. They looked like ruined Greek temples. I came home one night just as the sun was going down, and they had begun to knock down the house next door to me where a family had lived for 14 years. On the wall of one of the bedrooms there was this mural, this image from *The Exorcist*, of a man with a hat and a briefcase. He sort of represented the Department of Transport, the man who's going to demolish this whole community. I found it really, really sinister and I thought, 'I've got to shoot that.' I knew it would be a motif. I wanted this idea of a poltergeist in the houses, a supernatural force that demolishes everything, so you don't see any people at the beginning of the film – just close-ups of bricks and timber."



LEFT
THE GIRL CHEWING GUM

MIDDLE
BLIGHT

RIGHT
THE BLACK TOWER

THE GIRL CHEWING GUM (12 mins, 1976)

Smith's most well-known work. A megalomaniac directs all the action on a Dalston street corner: people, pigeons, time itself...

"I saw Truffaut's *Day For Night* as a postgraduate and had a revelation. Someone in the film-within-the-film directs the background action in a street scene. Stupidly, I hadn't realised that is what happens! I wanted to make a film that really draws attention to that level of direction, so I filmed this street corner for 11 minutes and later put on a voice-over which is a 'director' directing literally everything that happens in the shot. With my work on 16mm, I'm very particular about things being technically very perfect. And I only had one roll of film, and one chance to get it right, but I zoomed the wrong way on a clock-face. I was really cross at the time, but when I watched it back, I realised that in the voice-over I could *direct* it to move jerkily. So the most interesting elements turned out to be those that I didn't have control over."

THE BLACK TOWER (23mins, 1985-7)

Hilarious and menacing story of a black tower that slowly frightens a lonely man into madness...

"I could see the black tower from a house that I moved into in the early 80s. I knew that I wanted to make a film about it so I listed all the places that I could see it from – gaps between other buildings, stuff like that. And when I went back to film, somebody had built something in the way. I realised that the architectural landscape, even in a little suburb where nothing really happens, is always changing. I was also very interested in how narrative can force people to go on a journey. For about 15 minutes of *The Black Tower*, the screen is black. It's a 'control and release' sort of thing: you lead the audience somewhere, and then you force them to go on their own for a while, to create their own image. I liked the idea of everyone looking at nothing together."

HOTEL DIARIES (79 mins, 7 films, 2001-07)

A series of personal responses to international political situations from the isolation of hotel rooms...

"I'm very interested in how something can grow out of finding connections between things. Usually what happens with the hotel pieces is that I have an idea or make a connection between the room I'm experiencing and what is going on in the outside world. I work out how I can build upon that. I have this sort of puzzle in front of me. All the props are there – they all potentially have meaning. Nearly all of the rooms are booked by someone else for me to use during film festivals. It became this kind of circular process: very often I would go to a film festival to present one of these films, then end up making another one. I started to get slightly uneasy when people said, 'We put you in a very interesting hotel room, we hope you're going to make something while you're here!'"

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO WATCH CLIPS OF SMITH'S WORK GO TO LUXONLINE.ORG.UK
HOTEL DIARIES SCREENS AT LEEDS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL IN NOVEMBER. LEEDSFILM.COM