English Eccentric

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> "If, on leaving this Pavilion, the visitor from overseas concludes that he is still not much wiser about the British national character, it might console him to know that the British people are themselves still very much in the dark."
>
> Festival of Britain, South Bank Exhibition catalogue (1951)[1]

It would be easy to say that John Smith's body of moving image work speaks for itself. Indeed it does, often in the filmmaker's own voice, in laconic, droll, and occasionally mysterious ways. Few of those who see his work fail to be amused or intrigued, which contrasts with reactions of bafflement or boredom to many artists' films and installations. So Smith is simply more entertaining in his idiosyncratic narratives and treatises? Well, yes—but not just simply. As he has said, "a lot of my work is very much intended to create a sense of unease."[2] This unease, I want to argue, places him in the important English tradition of "eccentricity," which of course needs some explanation.

Calling someone "eccentric" in Britain today is unlikely to be taken as a compliment. Dubious characters suspected of bizarre or even criminal behaviour are likely to be labelled eccentric by the tabloid press, as are those with more money than sense. Perhaps the only "innocents" in this category are the scientists and artists traditionally allowed to be eccentric, as a mark of their otherworldliness. Yet a broader and richer eccentricity has long been considered a defining feature of Englishness. As Hywel Williams wrote, reviewing a recent anthology of "rogues, villains and eccentrics":

> "The English are meant to be eccentric. To be removed from the

centre, quirkily brave in opinion, individualistically creative in behaviour, is a proud English boast in both the republic of letters and in the parliamentary monarchy of daily governed reality. Nobody does eccentricity better."[3]

Reaching further back, the historian Paul Langford, in his survey of "English manners and character" as observed by visitors between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, entitled the final section of *Englishness Identified*—after "Energy," "Candour," "Decency," "Taciturnity," "Reserve"— yes, "Eccentricity."[4] Here, it seemed to many observers of the English that Langford quotes, was the kernel of English society and its values. Not a flamboyant eccentricity, but one rooted in "a fundamental misapprehension of the real world," or, preferably, a minor eccentricity, which went against "the stringent general spirit of formal conformity" that characterised England for the actress Fanny Kemble.[5]

Eccentricity, however we eventually come to define it, also has a bearing on the celebrated national anxiety about the quality and status of native art (other than, of course, Shakespeare). Among revisionist accounts of the "Englishness of English art," there has been a growing bias towards the eccentric.[6] Not only the classic eccentrics William Blake and Lawrence Sterne, but the "nonsense" maestros Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, and such disparate twentieth-century figures as Edith Sitwell, Stanley Spenser, Jeff Keen, Bruce Lacey, J. G. Ballard, David Hockney, Derek Jarman, or the widely-venerated members of the Goons and Monty Python troupes (and also such distinguished refugee figures as the artists Kurt Schwitters and Stefan Themerson). There is a perceived link between eccentric personal behaviour (practised or performed) and artistic work that stands outside the prevailing conventions of the day. Many of these have been considered "minor" or parochial or appealing only to juveniles or adolescents; and yet collectively, or selectively, they constitute what is perhaps the most distinctively English strand in the national culture.

It is not difficult to place John Smith's films in this tradition, with their appeal to the unfashionably local (1970s' Dalston in *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the eponymous *Hackney Marshes*) and to the mundane (*Home Suite*, *Hotel Diaries*). But it would be a mistake to set our sights too low, equating this English eccentrism with limited ambition. Let's try instead a different take on the eccentric. The young Russian artists who published an "Eccentric Manifesto" in 1922 took their title from a Russian tradition centred on the variety theatre and circus, cross-fertilised with the iconoclastic energy of Futurism.[7] They defined their aim as:

> "ART WITHOUT A CAPITAL LETTER, A PEDESTAL OR A FIG-LEAF
>
> Life requires art that is
>
> *Hyperbolically crude, dumbfounding, nerve-wracking, openly utilitarian, mechanically exact, momentary, rapid*."[8]

But if this eccentrism sounds knockabout and essentially performative, a later essay on the FEKS group's work cautioned against confusing it with the "eccentrism of the music hall." Instead, Vladimir Nedobrovo argued, FEKS "work on the alienation of the object ... [extracting] the things which constantly surround us from their normal context."[9] This practise of "alienation" or "defamiliarisation" is more widely associated with Bertolt Brecht, but it had its origins in Russian modernism, especially in the poetics of the critic and writer Viktor Shklovsky, who was an early supporter of the FEKS group.[10] And it was Shklovsky who traced the idea of eccentrism as a method of analysis back to Lenin, no less, in his book on the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.[11] Shklovsky quotes an anecdote from Maxim Gorky which recalled how he and Lenin had visited a London music hall—yes, this does have a London connection!—and had seen an on-stage demonstration of tree-felling by Canadian lumberjacks. This prompted Lenin to "start talking about the anarchy of production under capitalism," which led to "an interesting discussion on 'eccentrism' as a special form of theatre." According to

Gorky, Lenin defined it as "a certain satirical and sceptical attitude to the conventional, an urge to turn it inside out … in order to show the illogic of the usual."

Not Showing at the Odeon …

To show the illogic of the usual … Consider what is probably still John Smith's best-known film, *The Girl Chewing Gum*: a street scene in Dalston, distinguished only by its utter

The Girl Chewing Gum, 1976
16mm, b/w, sound, 12 min.

ordinariness, even if that ordinariness has acquired a certain period charm in the course of thirty-five years (and the Odeon cinema that appears in shot has long since been demolished). Accompanying the film's first long-held shot we hear a stentorian voice "directing" what will appear. Sooner or later, we realise that the voice is merely describing retrospectively what has randomly appeared. Several generations of viewers have been amused by this simple device, and many have certainly been prompted to reflect on the strangely authoritative quality of "voice-over."

We don't normally watch undistinguished London streets with this degree of attention for ten minutes. The primary effect could certainly be described as defamiliarising or "making strange" the familiar, with our attention held by the humour of the voice-over claiming

to "direct" the random events taking place in the street.[12] According to Smith, the genesis of the film was his seeing François Truffaut's highly self-referential *Day for Night* (*La nuit américaine*, 1973), which centres on a director, played by Truffaut, making a film at the Victorine Studios in Nice.[13] During one of the "shooting" scenes, extras are shown being directed to fill the street with apparently spontaneous actions, and Smith claims that "until then, I had assumed that extras in street scenes were real passers-by going about their business." Whether or not we take this at face value, what Smith created in *The Girl Chewing Gum* amounts to an ingenious inversion of Truffaut's scene: instead of the artificial choreography of a "street scene," we have here the "ascription of artifice" to an apparently unrehearsed street scene. We are invited to imagine that all this has been organised to convince us of its naturalness. To what purpose? Is it the filmic equivalent of Peter Handke's play *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* (*Die Stunde, da wir nichts voneinander wußten*, 1992), allegedly based on the author observing an afternoon's events in a square in Trieste—an invitation to consider what we might call "the theatre of the everyday," in which Handke suggests "every little thing became significant (without being symbolic)"?[14]

However tempting, this doesn't seem to address what the film actually does (although a later film, *Worst Case Scenario*, 2001–03, could be considered a parody of the concept). For it is the stentorian "director" creating a fantasy of control who attracts our attention. What will his increasingly elaborate instructions and assumptions lead to—when he speculates, for instance, that one passer-by is an armed robber, trying to hide the gun in his pocket? But the narrator has already "explained" his position in relation to the action: he's "shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath about fifteen miles from the building you're looking at." If this is "true," he can't be viewing, let alone "directing" the preceding action; and so we're thrown into the same kind of cognitive confusion raised by Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* (1971), in which descriptive commentary is systematically mismatched with image.[15]

Indeed the film is both more elaborate and more puzzling than descriptions of it often imply. After the narrator/director's revelation, and description of a scene we can't see, the Dalston street scene holds on a queue waiting outside the cinema, before pulling back to a wide shot of this junction. We are watching the future spectators of a film, although certainly not one like this. In 1976, it could have been Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, showing the sleazy streets of New York, and including a store robbery like the one Smith's narrator imputes to an innocent passer-by. In fact, as attentive viewers can just see from the cinema's display, it was *The Land That Time Forgot*, one of a cycle of 1970s low-budget British fantasy films, in which the survivors of a damaged World War I submarine land on a continent where cavemen and dinosaurs survive—no doubt a welcome escape from the streets of a Britain then gripped simultaneously by historic levels of inflation and drought.[16]

The scene then changes abruptly to the field already described, with pylons and grazing horses, where the camera performs a solemn 360 degree pan, bringing the

The Girl Chewing Gum, 1976
16mm, b/w, sound, 12 min.

film to an end on the same skeletal tree with which the shot began. The randomness of a city street—spectators awaiting their fix of fiction—an unexplained relocation from the city to the country. There is surely something mysterious here; something which the very mundanity of the images invites

us to speculate about. And what are we to make of its title, also studiously mundane? Is this an ironic reference to Jan Vermeer's *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*, or some other classic painting of a "girl with …"?

Trying to account for what Michael Mazière indentified as the "uncanny aspect" of this and other films by Smith, I'm irresistibly reminded of another English eccentric who could discover mystery, even nightmare and apocalypse, in the streets and suburbs of London: G. K. Chesterton. In his 1908 metaphysical thriller *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton uses the everyday topography of London as a foil for the cosmic struggle between anarchy and order, which is supposedly taking place beneath and above its streets. "Why do all the clerks and navvies in the railway trains look so sad and tired?," asks one of his characters, a poet named Gregory, who proceeds to explain:

> "Because they know that the train is going right … It is because after they have passed Sloane Square, they know that the next station must be Victoria, and nothing but Victoria. Oh, their wild rapture! Oh their eyes like stars and their souls in Eden, if the next station were unaccountably Baker Street!"[17]

Like those Edwardian commuters imagined by Chesterton, the viewers of 1976 and ever since have enjoyed the Chestertonian fantasy of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, mysteriously transporting us from Hackney to the city's outskirts, before abandoning us to our own devices.

Ten years later, *The Black Tower* (1985–87) invites more direct comparison with Chesterton's playfully paranoid fantasies. It begins prosaically with a blank screen and a man's voice recalling how one Sunday morning he'd set off for the corner shop "to buy some food for a fried breakfast." Discovering it was closed, he walked towards the High Road in search of a supermarket—at which point he first noticed the tower, actually a hospital water tower

with black cladding, which we then see in a brief shot, appearing above a row of London terrace roofs. Minimal sound effects are heard over another blank screen, before the narrator recalls a second sighting, and a third, followed by a nightmare, in which he's imprisoned in the tower and unable to move. Soon the narrator has retreated into a private world of obsession, in which he works only on "the script for this film," surviving on ice creams bought from a passing van, before he arrives in a hospital. A woman's voice then refers to the narrator's death, before reporting the reappearance of the tower and repeating some of the narrator's opening words. Visually, the screen is dark for much of the film, with only brief exterior shots of the tower seen from different angles and distances, just two shots of a clear sky and one of an interior cornice.

The Black Tower, 1985–87
16mm, colour, sound, 24 min.

The use of such blank film to frame or interrupt continuous screen imagery had become commonplace among different schools of avant-garde filmmaking in the 1960s and '70s, ranging from Gregory Markopoulos and Stan Brakhage in the United States, to contemporaries of Smith's at the London Filmmakers Co-op, and even the politically-motivated Berwick Street Collective, in their *Nightcleaners* (1976). But as with *The Girl Chewing Gum*, to focus only on formal aspects is to miss the point of *The Black Tower*. For its darkness is filled with an elliptical narrative of persecution mania, interrupted only by the

enigmatic image of the tower and its associations with the burgeoning Dark Tower tradition.[18]

If this sounds most immediately like a borrowing from Borges (as indeed was *Performance*, another metaphysical fable set in London), it may be worth recalling that Chesterton was a strong influence on the Argentinean writer. Borges described how each of Chesterton's popular Father Brown detective stories "presents a mystery, proposes explanations of a demoniacal or magical sort, and then replaces them at the end with solutions of this world." *The Black Tower* effectively reverses this process, starting in a tone of absentminded irritation before spiralling into madness and death—even if these are undercut by Smith's Pooterish humour, detailing a modest daily life interspersed with flashes of the sinister and grotesque, as when the narrator visits "a friend in Brixton prison" who has been refused parole (for what offence, we might wonder), or his confusion of the ambulance's bell with that of an ice-cream van. As well as the Chestertonian nightmare that lurks within everyday London, there is perhaps something of that other Edwardian eccentric, H. H. Munro, who published his sadistic short stories as "Saki."[19]

"Making strange" what has become unnoticed or invisible through routine can take other forms in Smith's work, and perhaps the most striking recent case is his *Hotel Diaries*, a series of films made between 2001 and 2007, in which the filmmaker muses on his surroundings in a variety of hotels around the world. Using video in long continuous takes, with apparently synchronous commentary, the form suggests something like an anecdotal version of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* descriptivity. However, in the course of these mainly nocturnal soliloquies, which begin on the night of the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 and continue through the years of the Bush-Blair "War on Terror," one issue returns with increasing insistence: Palestine. Like the Biblical poor, the Palestinians are always with us, but often crowded out of our consciousness by more immediate concerns and distractions. Smith's minute inspection of his surroundings as he travels around film festivals in six countries is increasingly disturbed by reminders of the

Hotel Diaries, 2001–07, installation view, kestnergesellschaft, Hanover
Dirty Pictures (Hotel Diaries 7), 2007, SD video, colour, sound, 14 min.

Palestinians' plight. And in 2007, he travels to Bethlehem, where he witnesses at first hand the segregation and humiliation that Israel imposes on Palestinians.

But we don't see any of this. True to his oblique method, Smith remains within Bethlehem and East Jerusalem hotel bedrooms, while we hear of his experiences in voice-over—and share his surprise at the ceiling panels that mysteriously move of their own accord in the evocatively named Bethlehem Inn. This segment of the Diaries is entitled *Dirty Pictures*, referring to dust and blemishes on the surface of Smith's camera lens, while "the surreal movement of the tiles becomes a poetic reminder of the building's haunted past" when it was occupied by Israeli forces, as Frédéric Moffet deftly put it.[20] Together, these two tropes perform precisely the "making strange" that Shklovsky practised, especially when writing about personal or politically sensitive matters. Others have shown us the conditions faced by Palestinians; and a Palestinian filmmaker such as Elia Suleiman has the right to deal directly with fellow countrymen's experience. Smith is only a visitor, who can tell us what he has seen, and can create memorable images for the sense of unreality that he feels in Bethlehem. Back again in Cork, he contemplates how the world seems to be polarised between homogenous "swanky hotel rooms" and bombsites. Confined with him in this succession of anonymous bedrooms, we have shared his sense of impotence and outrage at what happens outside, in a work that refuses any facile rhetoric or philosophising in recording the continued "atrophy of experience" that Walter Benjamin had already noted in the 1930s.[21]

Smith is unlikely to quote Benjamin, or any other such fashionable author. When T. S. Eliot makes an unexpected appearance in his oeuvre, in *The Waste Land* (1999), it is to take Eliot's most revered poem down to the local pub, "on a shaky journey from bar to bog and back again," as if to test the poet's professed enthusiasm for the music hall.[22] More typically, Smith turns often to what might be considered the "common stock" of language and music: the *Guinness Book of Records* (*Gardner*, 1977), a *Christmas*

carol (*7P*, 1977–78; also reprised in *Regression*, 1998–99), jokes (*Shepherd's Delight*, 1980–84), fragments of vox-pop interview (*Blight,* 1994–96) and discarded audiotape (*Lost Sound,* 1998–2001). Similarly, his recurrent interest in word/image play, evident in the early films such as *Words* (1973) and *Associations* (1975), could be seen as part of the wider interest in deconstructing visual and verbal syntax that was typical of the "structural" film movement, and of filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, and Paul Sharits—all influential at the time Smith was emerging as a filmmaker in the mid-'70s. But what is striking in retrospect is how little he emulated these models, turning instead towards the local (*Summer Diary*, 1976–77; *Hackney Marshes*, 1977; *Slow Glass*, 1988–91) and the intimate (*Home Suite,* 1993–94*; Regression*, 1998–99; *Hotel Diaries*, 2001–07). Granted, the structural and ontological concerns of the structuralists remain central to Smith's poetics, but a proportion of his work could also be considered parodic of structural film at its most solemn.[23]

His stance is always personal, and often wryly humorous. He appears, or speaks, "less as a character and more as himself," as two curators of a recent retrospective observe. But we should be wary of confusing this amiable self with the biographical figure "John Smith," or of underestimating his construction as a narrator. Unlike his contemporary Patrick Keiller (of whom more later), Smith has chosen to blur the distinction, especially in the diary films, where he seems most obviously to be speaking autobiographically. In *Home Suite*, he shows us round his somewhat down-at-heel East London house, shortly before he is due to be evicted ahead of demolition, as part of a new motorway development (which will in 1996 form the subject of *Blight*, seen from the outside). Rooms and objects in them evoke memories and anecdotes, which Smith narrates from behind the camera. We have no reason to think he is inventing things, or hiding the truth, but neither should we assume this is merely autobiography. It may be "to do with making work based around one's own life," as Smith admits; but like that virtuoso digressive and eccentric, the Laurence Sterne of *A Sentimental Journey*, it also embodies careful composition of a "self." After he had created the massive Chinese-box structure of *Tristram Shandy* (1759–65),

which is "about" everything except its ostensible subject, Sterne offered as his "redemption," the seemingly modest account of his *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, which became his swansong in 1768.

The "I" of the *Sentimental Journey* is surely the prototype for all digressing narrators who want to convey their sensibility as much as their experiences—and it would prove an inspiration to Viktor Shklovsky, who named the first volume of his memoirs after it in 1922.[24] Shklovsky found in Sterne a kindred spirit, wanting to fashion stories out of encounters, observations, objects; but also alert to the literary strategies of digression and other forms of "retardation" in his prose. Embarking on his journey across France at Calais, Sterne archly describes his chance encounter with a mysterious lady through their being shown a carriage together. The "remise door" closing on them becomes a device which allows the author to elaborate his views on French and English gallantry: nothing "happens," except a flurry of artful prose that hints at the narrator's sentiment. However improbably, Shklovsky will adapt this seemingly casual manner to combine reportage on his war experience, with commentary on his state of mind and on how the book's prose is being constructed. And in another flash-forward, I want to suggest that the seemingly inconsequential discussions of stair-carpet and of accumulated toothbrushes in *Home Suite* return us to the fundamental artistic technique that Shklovsky discovered in Sterne. Prevarication, focusing on details at the expense of the whole, mixing genres, referring to the work in hand—all these are grist to the writer's mill; and in Smith's hands, to the filmmaker's too. Whether or not he has ever thought of Sterne or Shklovsky, I want to salute him—along with that other deviant "structural" prankster, George Landow (also known as Owen Land)—as their worthy successor in the business of film.[25]

Landscape, Narration, and Place

But there are also illuminating comparisons closer to home. Two of Smith's near-contemporaries have made extensive, and eccentric, use of digressing narrators.

Peter Greenaway's early films, many of them fantastic pastiches of the documentaries he was making for the Central Office of Information during the 1970s, are often accompanied by authoritative yet unreliable narration. The vogue for structural film which so influenced Smith was also a stimulus for Greenaway, ten years older and the product of an earlier phase of London art school culture. Greenaway describes his *Vertical Features Remake* (1978) as "a love-hate, or more appropriately celebration-criticism, of structural method," adding peevishly that this was "unthinkingly and stupidly dominant in film circles at the time."[26] In the film, his narratorial voice-of-choice at this time, Colin Cantile, solemnly explains three attempts to remake a "missing film," navigating through "copious apocryphal diagrams, visual aids, archival exposition and subjectively-viewed manuscript text." And in another spoof documentary of the same year, *A Walk Through H* (1978), Cantile narrates the quest for Greenaway's romantic lost hero, Tulse Luper, traced across a series of Greenaway's paintings which are interpreted as maps of an imaginary land.

Patrick Keiller, closer to Smith in age, and trained as an architect before he too studied at the Royal College of Art, was also influenced by the structural paradigm in his earliest films, inflecting it towards enigmatic narratives with a Chestertonian bent through voice-over narration in *The End* (1986) and *Valtos* (1987). Subsequently, Keiller would reach a wider public with the feature-length *London* (1994), in which Paul Scofield invoked the eclectic flâneur Robinson as a guide to the city and its past visitors, and *Robinson in Space* (1997), where the narrator and Robinson discover a "new" England. But while "Robinson" evokes Daniel Defoe's most famous character, Keiller's "I" remains unidentified, and hardly the fictionalised self of Smith's films.

Landscape was also a starting point for Greenaway in his early films, despite his feeling compelled to frame it in elaborate ways. His "defence" of *Vertical Features Remake* admits

> "In the end, though, it's the
> landscape 'bits'—trees, posts, poles

> standing in snow and sunshine along the Brecon Beacons, the Wiltshire Downs and in the Suffolk marshes—that win out—the bricks of landscape that excite, please, surprise, console and delight us all."

We might hear pre-echoes of Simon Schama's epic explorations in *Landscape and Memory* in this. By contrast, Smith appears to be the stay-at-home among his near contemporaries, celebrated for documenting "his immediate surroundings, often not even moving much beyond the front door of his various abodes in a small area of East London."[27] And yet, this too may be misleading. Certainly he has focused on the local and the particular, which may often be in East London, but in a variety of ways that reveal a distinctive, inquiring sense of "place"—and one that long preceded the rise of "cultural geography." The two *Hackney Marshes* films of 1977–78, for instance, make a fascinating pair with quite different approaches to this unsung district: the one "structural" with its in-camera staccato editing; and the other a deliberate "anti-documentary" about the same area and its inhabitants, challenging the familiar conventions of the commercial television company that commissioned it, in a fine display of eccentrist "turning the conventional inside out."

Two miniatures from 1980 mimicked the formal procedures of structural film, as these were frequently applied in the British avant-garde landscape genre of the 1970s. In *Celestial Navigation,* the shadow of a bucket and spade on the beach remains upright throughout a day. And in *Spring Tree* a plane tree coming into leaf, filmed in time-lapse style of *Secrets of Nature* over four weeks, is re-ordered. In 1987, a commissioned contribution to Graeme Miller's multimedia performance piece *Dungeness: The Desert in the Garden* took Smith out of London to what has become one of the sacred sites of modern British landscape art, ever since Paul Nash began painting it in the 1920s. Derek Jarman had recently bought Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, within sight of the nuclear power station that has given this bleak landscape an apocalyptic edge.

However, it was with *Blight*, made between 1994 and 1996 in collaboration with the composer Jocelyn Pook, that Smith produced his most site-specific work, and in doing so revived the often-forgotten eccentrism that was a founding feature of the British documentary movement.[28] Many of the filmmakers that John Grierson attracted to the documentary units he headed in the 1930s were already modernist artists, such as Len Lye, Norman Maclaren, Humphrey Jennings, and William Coldstream, while Alberto Cavalcanti had been a part of the French avant-garde before joining Grierson as a supervisor of these often wayward talents. Cavalcanti's own *Pett and Pott* (1934), Coldstream's *Fairy of the Phone* (1936) and Lye's *Rainbow Dance* (1936) and *N or NW* (1937) all show traces of Russian Constructivism, Parisian Modernism and the spreading Surrealist movement. Above all, they're eccentric in the FEKS/Shklovsky sense in how they tackle their appointed tasks of promoting Post Office services.

Fifty years later, *Blight* belongs to a newly-familiar genre, community protest—in this case made during the campaign against demolition of East London housing for a new motorway link road by one of the residents affected: the filmmaker—although it's far from a conventional campaign film. Tightly-framed shots of old housing being demolished create a jagged image of the fabric of lives ripped open, occasionally revealing surreal images that were once interiors, such as a bedroom wall entirely painted as a stark *Exorcist* fresco. The film is cut to a soundtrack that combines Pook's music with natural sounds and fragments of speech, somewhat reminiscent of Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988), with repeated phrases that take on a bizarre life of their own, such as "kill the spiders," taken from an interview with a resident about how she used to be afraid of spiders in the toilet. From this microcosm of the destruction of Victorian London, Smith created what is perhaps his single most compelling work of audiovisual montage, reviving or reinventing the language of image-sound counterpoint that so fascinated avant-garde filmmakers of the 1930s and even harking back to the primal appeal of demolition as a filmic subject.[29]
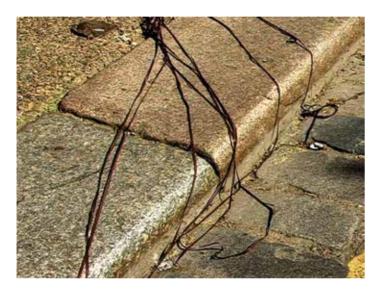

Blight, 1994–96, SD video from 16mm, colour, sound, 14 min.

Both *Slow Glass* and *Lost Sound*, made before and after *Blight*, deal with the temporality of place. In the former, details of the urban environment are shown in different lights and conditions across the three years of the film's making; while *Lost Sound,* made in collaboration with sound artist Graeme Miller*,* playfully separates signifier and signified by showing abandoned audio tapes found within a small part of East London, whose contents are then retrieved, revealing them to have once brought music from Asia and Africa to London's streets, as visitors and immigrants become

Lost Sound, 1998–2001
SD video, colour, sound, 28 min.

residents. Home, as the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott observed, "is where we start from"; and in this sense it has long been central to Smith's work ("finding subject-matter close to home has always been very important to me"). If it's literally home, his instinct is to defamiliarise, as with the fiction of *The Black Tower*. When he's abroad, typically in a hotel, there is both the traditional opportunity to reflect on home (as in the nocturnal monologues of the *Hotel Diaries*) and to look out of the window on new scenes, as in *Worst Case Scenario*, shot from a hotel window in Vienna, or the recent *Flag Mountain*. This last, showing a giant Turkish flag painted on a mountain within the breakaway Turkish republic of Northern Cyprus, filmed from the Greek side of Nicosia, the island's divided capital, extends Smith's increasingly explicit engagement with the politics of the contemporary world already signalled in *Hotel Diaries*.[30] Shot on HD, it

exists in two versions—as a linear eight minute film and as a loop for gallery display—and Smith is alert to the divergent implications of these:

> "The linear film starts with the little Greek flag blowing in the breeze, then you hear the Muezzin call to prayer, the camera homes in on the mosque, you get all the psychedelic stuff and when the camera pulls out again you hear all the church bells. It's kind of problematic for me that [the film] is a resolution—is Christianity what we're left with? I know it's not really a resolution, but it is an order: Muezzin, Turkish national anthem, church bells."[31]

Flag Mountain, 2010
HD video, colour, sound, 6 min.

He might prefer "the circularity of just moving in and out, across a landscape and between different cultures" presented in the gallery loop, but even the relatively insulated traveller can hardly remain unaware of the deep divisions entrenched by nationalism in the contemporary world, and reflected in *Flag Mountain* by the booming Turkish anthem that accompanies the image of a flag literally inscribed on the landscape, or the wall that imprisons the Palestinians seen in *Dirty Pictures*.

If Smith's career trajectory has increasingly exposed him to the world beyond East London—which of course

unusual Red cardigan, 2011, installation views, PEER Gallery, London

has long been a microcosm of that wider world—another defining characteristic is his repeated return to earlier work, as if to challenge his younger self and come to terms with the passage of time. Gallery exhibitions have created new opportunities for this form of self-examination. For example, *Regression* was a humorous restaging of his 1978 film *7P*, using digital video for the first time to record his own halting performance of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*; and in his 2010 RCA show, both this and the original 16mm film were screened side by side as *Third Attempt*. Another recent gallery installation returns quite literally to the scene of his first triumph. For the multimedia exhibition *unusual Red cardigan* (PEER Gallery, 2011), he has once again filmed the street corner in Dalston where he shot *The Girl Chewing Gum*, titling the new video *The Man Phoning Mum* and creating a digital colour overlay to the original 16mm black and white record. In this new work, figures from the past and present alternate as "ghosts" in the others' world, while the viewer is able to contemplate the process of gentrification that has replaced the Odeon cinema with new apartments.[32] Alongside this palimpsest, Smith has pursued a fantastic chain of investigation to try to discover the identity of an internet seller of a video containing the original film (together with assorted other items, including an "unusual Red cardigan"—a Shandean shaggy dog quest that also recalls Jose Saramago's 2004 novel *The Double*, whose hero fatefully sets out to track down a *doppelganger* seen in a rented video. And on a collection of computer screens, there's evidence of the original *The Girl Chewing Gum* becoming a kind of internet urban myth, with tributes and parodies continuing to proliferate.

Compared with the fictive personae created by Greenaway and Keiller, Smith's first-person voice seems closer to that of the sociable, digressive Sterne, or to the deadpan absurdism of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien. His sense of fantasy recalls the "nonsense" eccentrism of Lear and Carroll, continued into the twentieth century by such diverse filmmakers as Adrian Brunel, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Richard Massingham, Stefan Themerson, Jeff Keen, and Bruce Lacey.[33] Like these, he works mainly in

small-scale forms and with simple equipment; and he has quietly adjusted to the rapid pace of media change, refusing to agonise over the shift from photochemical film to digital imaging which has bisected his career. Having started screening in co-ops and classrooms, he now shows in galleries and museums, while also making his work democratically available in retail formats and online—apparently resisting the inflationary pressures on artists today. Like the poet Hugo Williams, he seems to weave art and life together with a nonchalance and wry humour that his audience can only admire (but should not mistake for the whole story).[34] Defining him as a descendent of the "structural" avant-garde has long seemed too narrow, when he clearly owes as much to the lingering shock of Duchamp demystifying the artwork in favour of the ludic, the gestural and the everyday. And to Lenin's "illogic of the usual"—but with a decidedly English accent...

Shepherd's Delight, 1980–84
16mm, colour, sound, 35 min.

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1   "The Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion defined a British identity through its 'realism and strength ... independence and imagination.'" Festival of Britain at the Museum of London website, http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/archive/exhibits/festival/onshow.htm.
2   "John Smith in Conversation with CCA Students," in *John Smith: Solo Show*, exh. cat. (London: Royal College of Art, 2010), 57.
3   Hywel Williams, "In Praise of English Eccentrics," *Guardian*, 11 January 2003, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jan/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview15.
4   Paul Langford, *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character, 1650–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
5   Ibid., 302–3.
6   On the impact of Nikolaus Pevsner's critique of English art, see my "What Counts as Art in England: How Pevsner's Minor Canons Became Major," in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. Peter Draper (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004). For a defence of English literary modernism which often stresses eccentricity (against "stodgy literary artisans"), see Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island: the Modern English Writers* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1988). And for an overview of British film and video artists which gives due credit to the idiosyncratic and eccentric, see David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain, 1897–2004* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).
7   Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg were the prime movers within *The Factory of the Eccentric Actor*, generally abbreviated to FEKS, launched in Petrograd in 1922 as a theatre troupe, which soon turned to film production.
8   Grigori Kozintsev, "AB: Parade of the Eccentric," trans. Richard Taylor, in *Futurism, Formalism, FEKS: "Eccentrism" and Soviet Cinema, 1918–36*, eds. Ian Christie and John Gillett (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 11.
9   Vladimir Nedobrovo, "The Eccentrism of FEKS" (1928), in ibid., 18–19.
10 On the diffusion of the concept of "ostranenie" ("making strange"), see *Ostrannenie: On "Strangeness" and the Moving Image. The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept*, ed. Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
11 Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, trans. Lily Feiler (London: Pluto Press, 1974), 116–17.
12 See various chapters in *Ostrannenie* for discussion of what Shklovsky "meant" by this concept and its influence, e.g. Yuri Tsivian, "The Gesture of Revolution, or Misquoting as Device;" Frank Kessler, "Ostrannenie, Innovation, and Media History"; and Ian Christie, "Knight's Moves: Brecht and Russian Formalism in Britain in the 1970s."
13 "John Smith Talking Film with Cate Elwes: Trespassing Beyond the Frame," in *John Smith Film and Video Works 1972–2002* (London: Picture This Moving Image / Watershed Media Centre, 2002), 65.
14 Handke's wordless 1992 play, *Die Stunde, da wir nichts voneinander wußten*, includes twenty-seven actors who create some 450 characters that appear in a town square setting, all going about their business, oblivious of each other. See 2008 National Theatre programme note, quoted at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hour_We_Knew_Nothing_Of_Each_Other.
15 In Frampton's film, apparently true autobiographical comments on a series of photographs are out of step with the actual images, so that we have to "remember" what's been shown when its description arrives; and the first-person commentary is voiced by Michael Snow. Frampton visited Britain in 1976, for an Edinburgh Film Festival symposium on avant-garde film, and an interview recorded then by the present author and Deke Dusinberre belatedly appeared in *Film Studies*, no. 4 (2004), http://www.hollisframpton.org.uk/frampton.pdf.
16 *The Land that Time Forgot* (dir. Kevin O'Connor, 1975) was scripted by the British science-fiction author Michael Moorcock, and is not to be confused with a ludicrous 2009 US remake. It may be that the film's title was illegible in 16mm screenings of the film, and is only now decipherable from pausing Internet versions of the film—a reminder of Laura Mulvey's "pensive spectator" effect, discussed in Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).
17 G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908) (London: Wordsworth, 1995), 4.
18 Robert Browning's 1855 poem "Childe Rowland to the Dark Tower Came" took its title from a line in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and the phrase/concept

has spawned many subsequent references, including Louis McNeice's 1946 radio play *The Dark Tower* and Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series of novels and stories (1978–2004). Among visual interpretations, there is an 1859 painting by Thomas Moran, and much illustration related to the many science-fiction and fantasy novels bearing the title.

19 Borges saw "something in the makeup of [Chesterton's] personality [that] leaned toward the nightmarish, something secret, and blind, and central." Jorge Luis Borges, "On Chesterton," in *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965). "Saki" was the pen name of H. H. Munro, whose macabre short stories mocked Edwardian social conventions.

20 Frédéric Moffet, "I Don't Want to Tell You Who I Am," curator's statement, booklet for a screening programme at Cinéma Parallèle, Montreal, 2008, http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf19.html.

21 Walter Benjamin, "Motifs," in *Selected Works IV*, 361; quoted in Beatrice Hanssen, "Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 55.

22 Description of the film quoted from "UK/Canadian Video Exchange," on Smith's website, http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf81.html. Eliot proclaimed his attachment to the music halls and the greatest "expressive figure of the lower classes," Marie Lloyd, in his "London Letter" of November 1922 for *The Dial*. http://world.std.com/~raparker/exploring/tseliot/works/london-letters/london-letter-1922-12.html.

23 In his interview with Royal College of Art students in 2010, Smith explains: "the Structural-Materialist trend for me was a lot more than a trend. It completely influenced the way I saw cinema and artists' film. That's still there as strong as ever, as is my fascination with narrative." *John Smith: Solo Show*, 44.

24 Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1918–1922* (1923), trans. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970).

25 George Landow (1944–2011), also known as Owen Land, made a series of deadpan, humorously subversive short films in the 1960s and '70s, which both helped define structural film and ridicule it. These include *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1966), *Institutional Quality* (1969), and *Remedial Reading Comprehension* (1970).

26 Quotes by Peter Greenaway on *Vertical Features Remake*, http://home.utah.edu/~klm6/3905/VerticalFeatureRemake.html.

27 Adrian Danks, "'On the Street Where You Live': The Films of John Smith," *Senses of Cinema* (2003), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/john_smith/.

28 Smith (mis)quotes Grierson's famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of reality" (Grierson wrote "actuality") as a label he's happy to adopt for his work, laying emphasis on the "creative" aspect. See "John Smith Talking Film with Cate Elwes," 65.

29 One of the Lumière brothers' earliest films, *Demolition of a Wall* (1896), was so popular that it was frequently repeated and shown in reverse.

30 Discussed in my article "Hotel Diaries: John Smith Makes Room for Reflection," *Vertigo* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2009), http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-4-issue-3-summer-2009/hotel-diaries-john-smith-makes-room-for-reflection/.

31 Nick Bradshaw interview, "John Smith: Of Process and Puns," *Sight and Sound* (2010), http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/exclusive/john_smith.php.

32 See feature on *unusual Red cardigan* at http://www.artlyst.com/events/john-smith-unusual-red-cardigan-peer.

33 On the "Fine Art" of nonsense (Edward Strachey referring to Edward Lear in 1888), see Wim Tigges' stimulating collection, *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1987).

34 The poet and journalist Hugo Williams writes a regular "Freelance" column in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which selectively chronicles his everyday life in Islington. See also Phil Brown in conversation with Williams, "Invisible Fireworks," *Horizon Review*, no. 3, http://www.saltpublishing.com/horizon/issues/03/text/brown_phil.htm.