



top left and right:  
JOHN SMITH and  
GRAEME MILLER, *Lost  
Sound*, 2001, video  
stills. Courtesy: John Smith

below left:  
JOHN SMITH, *Beside  
the A-Side*, 2002,  
installation view. Courtesy:  
the artist and Pearl  
Gallery, London

below right:  
JOHN SMITH, *The  
Girl Chewing Gum*,  
1976, black-and-white  
film with sound. Courtesy:  
the artist

# SLEIGHTS OF HAND

IAN STEWART CELEBRATES TWO FILMMAKERS WHOSE INSTALLATIONS AIM TO REVEAL THE TRICKS OF THE TRADE

THE gallery space should be a liberating place for filmmakers to get introspective, yet when Abbas Kiarostami, Chantal Akerman and Atom Egoyan were invited to present installations at the 2001 Venice Biennale, the results were pure video art, failing to contribute to any wider understanding of cinema. Two recent installations in London have proved more illuminating.

John Smith's installation *Beside the A-Side* (recently at Pearl Gallery in London's East End) pursues themes from his films, careful and rewarding constructions full of clever humour. Though always multi-layered, his films have consistently succeeded in exposing the manipulative and deceptive devices of mainstream cinema, and could serve as a useful self-defence course for any film-goer.

In one sequence in Smith's *The Black Tower* (1987) there is a shot of a skyline dominated by an apartment tower. Then, suddenly, the tower is gone, although nothing else has changed, like a Méliès film

or David Copperfield's *Statue of Liberty* act. But unlike these magicians, Smith then gives away the trick by showing footage of the intervening demolition of the building, demonstrating how easily editing can produce false chronologies. In films like *Slow Glass* (1991), Smith uses Tati-like sonic substitutions to undermine the perceived simultaneity of sound and image. The narrative voice-over is another frequent target. The opening of *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) depicts an ordinary east London street scene. An off-screen director shouts detailed instructions which are then acted out by people passing in front of the camera. Things get suspicious when pigeons start responding to instructions. Later, the director reveals that he has been 'standing in a field, shouting into a microphone' miles away, and we realise the 'direction' was all done after the filming. What is fascinating and instructive about Smith's 'unreliable narrators' is how hard we try to achieve the



ATOM EGOYAN, *Steenbeckett*, 2002, installation views. Courtesy: Artangel, London

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impossible reconciliation of narration with image even when we know it's bald deception.

The video *Lost Sound* (2001), made with sound artist Graeme Miller, documents strands of audiotape discarded around London's East End, each image accompanied by sound recovered from the tape. The relationship between sound and image gradually becomes artificial: arrows on a street sign trigger a fast forward, wind rustling the tape sets off playback, and so on. While also suggesting the interplay between technological norms and aesthetic forms, the work illustrates how soundtrack music constructs our reading of the filmed image. Despite being chosen entirely haphazardly, the music defines each scene, African music showering light on a rainy street, a children's sing-along making ominous an image of tape tied around barbed wire.

Smith's installation *Beside the A-Side* follows on from *Lost Sound*. A screen is hung along one diagonal of a room. Projected on both sides of the screen is a street scene shot just outside Pearl, foregrounding a strand of audiotape tied to a red barricade. Because the image is mirror-inverted on one side, objects abut themselves across the screen, producing a peculiar 3-D effect if one stands at the screen's edge. Distorted bhangra recovered from the tape is heard on one side of the screen, ambient street sound on the other. Then image and sound move across the room like flipping sides of a cassette, and, as in *Lost Sound*, the form of the work is derived from analog tape conventions. The concerns are appropriate for a filmmaker in contemplative mode: the confrontation between image and viewer, the tangible medium of tape itself, and the conventions and language of film.

Given how important these ideas are to understanding cinema, it is perhaps not surprising that Egoyan, despite being a very different filmmaker from Smith, works with parallel themes in his installation *Steenbeckett* [an Artangel commission recently shown at London's former Museum of Mankind, see April reviews]. Like Smith, Egoyan begins with one of his own films of Samuel Beckett's monologue *Krapp's Last Tape*. Much like the structure of *Lost*

*Sound*, Egoyan takes inspiration from his technological forms: his camera zooms out when Krapp rewinds a tape.

*Steenbeckett* is a lamentation for analog orchestrated over a series of rooms filled with analog film artifacts – instructions for a Steenbeck operating table, film cans, a projection booth – and objects from Beckett's script. The installation explores the implications of recording *Krapp's Last Tape*, itself fundamentally about recording – Krapp at 69 remembers his life through a tape he made 30 years earlier. Through Krapp, for whom authentic memory is elusive (he puzzles over his 30-year-old diary notes: 'Memorable... what?... Memorable equinox?'), Beckett suggests that recording, with its selections, defects and deceptions, may have more control over our memory than we do. *Steenbeckett* enriches this theme by proposing that technological forms have their own idiosyncratic effects. In one room, a loop of thousands of feet of film is draped through ceiling hooks and along the walls, continuously spooling through a Steenbeck projecting *Krapp's Last Tape* onto a distant screen as it gradually deteriorates during the month-long installation. The adjacent room displays an immaculate digital projection of the same film, the contrast leaving us to imagine how Krapp might be reinvented in the digital age.

JOHN SMITH's touring retrospective begins at the ICA, London, in early 2003. [jo.lanyon@picturethis.demon.co.uk](mailto:jo.lanyon@picturethis.demon.co.uk)

SHOOT SHOOT SHOOT, a retrospective of the London Filmmakers' Co-operative, which includes early Smith films, is touring world cinematheques in 2002-03. [www.lfmc.org](http://www.lfmc.org)

ATOM EGOYAN's *Hors d'Usage*, a new installation, is at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, 29 August – 20 October 2002. [www.macm.org](http://www.macm.org)

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