

Ian Bourn
The Sound of Loss

I remember the time in childhood when I discovered I could close my eyes and just listen to the world. How I learned that this shutting down of vision actually increased the intensity of my listening.

It seemed of great significance to me that the world could describe itself through sound alone. I got the notion of life as a narrative. There was a reassurance in knowing that the narrative continued even though I couldn't see it.

My first recollections of these experiences come from times spent on holiday at the seaside. Maybe they occurred there because of the brightness of sun in my eyes? Exhausted after an extended period of kicking balls about, I would lie on the sand and just listen to the sea. In the blackness (not really black, but the red-black made by the skin of my eyelids) I could hear space in perspective. Everything from distant voices at the water's edge to close-by towellings of skin. The high flapping of a kite. The fade-in-fade-out of someone trudging across the beach quite near to my head.

There was a pleasure which came from the feeling of passivity, of letting the world wash over me. Also a feeling of detachment. In this surrendered state I learned to control and select sensory input and put it to use, adapting reality into a narrative of my own.

Seeing John Smith's films now reminds me of those early experiences. So often in his work he uses the device of making us close our eyes. He snatches imagery away from us and we have to wait in the darkness. Then there is a sound. Followed by an image. An image that is sometimes a surprisingly different explanation of what we expected the sound to be. What we took to be rainfall turns out to be an egg frying. When we do see something, it is in isolation, in close-up or only a selective portion of the whole. Then the screen is black again. We are not sure if this black represents the closed eyes of the film's narrator or is an open-eyed view of a night sky. In the case of Smith's

The Black Tower (1987), it is a summer's day and it turns out that we are looking, close-up, at the black walls of the tower itself.

When the screen is white, we could either be looking at the blank page of a diary or the central portion of a cloud in the sky.

We are given views that are a strict cornering of our vision. He feeds us tightly compounded nuggets of word, sound and image. Yet in this audio visual straitjacket we imagine more. Vistas wider than the film frame.

On the beach, which was crowded with holidaymakers, I rolled over onto my stomach and covered my eyes with my hands. Parting the fingers a little, I could isolate the distant lighthouse from the surrounding landscape.

Sitting in the dark I am passively letting a film wash over me.

Silence and the image of a window frame, filmed from within a room. It is the window of an attic flat with a view facing the back gardens and rear windows of houses opposite.

Moving clockwise, a slanting rectangle of sunlight drapes the sill and enters the room. There is a chess board and pieces laid out on a low table. A game is in progress. Temporarily suspended. The sunlight makes steady progress, throwing into stark contrast whatever it touches. The chess pieces. The table edge. An old armchair. Its wooden arm.

The ache of moments as, bit by bit, the sun penetrates this interior. The square of illumination, having made its way across the carpet, reaches a record turntable, on the floor by the skirting. The muffled fragments of a song...

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This is a sequence of shots. Like moving snapshots. Each one complete unto itself, with occasional over-exposed flashes dividing them. The shots in **Leading Light** (1975) have the accumulative effect of those panoramas made by aligning the horizontal lines and details of separate overlapped photographs.

The exposure of the shots is uneven. Adjusted at each stage. But they are a set. They remind me of photographs I have taken when I wanted to capture the passing of something, like the methodical record I made, room by room, of my old house before it was pulled down.

Leading Light is put together according to a system. Which I try to work out. I know it has something to do with the shots being in chronological order with, at each stage, the camera moving to the furthest extent of the slowly moving square of sunlight. But I lose interest at about the time the record player appears and the snatches of music start. Something happens. Memories start coming. Fragments of a poem.

In their serious corner, the players
move gradual pieces. The board
detains them until dawn in its hard
compass...

... The player, too, is captive of caprice
(the sentence is Omar's) on another ground
crisscrossed with black nights and white days.¹

The music from the record is a soft sonorous voice accompanied by guitar. Musical fragments not strictly fitting the image. Not necessarily recorded at the same time. Maybe a memory of a time when the record was played? On that record deck. In this room. On days like these. Softly. As if not in the room at all. As if coming through the walls. The memory of someone who used to live next door? Who used

to play that record, whose lyrics one could never really grasp? Or maybe not. Just that it was a folk song. And on sunny days like this it could be heard. In this room.

Folk songs are often about recording the past. About commemorating events.

Maybe on Sundays, the window let in smells of other peoples' cabbage and roast dinners. The record plays and the odour of that time returns.

The room is John Smith's room. Where he lived at the time of filming. It's a document, in the same way that my set of photographs were documentation of a house that no longer exists. But this one is also a record of the sun's movements, on that day in 1975. From its morning through to its night. Until the sunlight ceased and the light bulb hanging from the ceiling became the only source of illumination. Given the limited lifespan of light bulbs, we know that this one, in 1975, has long since passed away.

In the darkness of evening, having gone full circle, the film finishes by returning to the view through the window frame. Distant tower blocks define themselves in the night sky by their arrangements of illuminated windows. The lights going off and on in the different living spaces. The literal dimensions of other peoples lives, each one reduced now to what is reached by their artificial sources of light.

Much of John Smith's work is an exploration of how things change and the feelings of loss we sometimes experience when these changes occur. He usually does this by focussing on the small details of everyday life, on things that happen gradually and by introducing

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occasional jump-cuts between past and present. He explores subtle relationships inherent in the names of places and things, between words and the images they are associated with. There is hidden humour in the particular placement of a street sign. A sadness in the chimes of a distant ice cream van.

Even in the film **Blight** (1996), with its account of the ruthless destruction of a community by a road-building scheme, Smith deals with big issues by focussing on intimate details.

In the scenes of empty houses and demolition debris, which form the landscape of **Blight**, distant voices are heard of those who used to live in this now abandoned neighbourhood. As if carrying on as normal, invisible mothers call to out to their children to stop their games and come in for dinner. Daily routines continued in ghost format. Lingering in the dust and rubble.

Sounds evoke the past and absences of sound even more so. The record player turntable appears again, silent amongst the broken bricks and piles of earth, too brutalised and messed up to generate a gentle folk song. We hear the sizzle of stir-fried bean shoots, but the battered wok we see is rusty and dry.

The use of a specially composed music score, which differentiates **Blight** from all Smith's other work, is an interesting experiment and highly effective in orchestrating an emotional response from the viewer. But for me it pushes a little too hard. This reaction could be just a personal thing, due to the fact that, like Smith, I had witnessed first hand the events depicted in the film. I lost my home to the M11 motorway extension. I also burst into tears at the slightest provocation.

I've noticed on subsequent viewings that my urge to weep always begins at the same point. It's when bright green sunlit leaves fill the screen after a prolonged period of rubble and corrugated iron. The violins strike up a 'glimmer of hope' note. A woman's voice on the soundtrack is repeating "I don't really remember, I don't really remember...". It makes me aware of the uselessness of an anger

in retrospect (I campaigned against the road and failed to stop it being built). That and the fact that I will inevitably end up forgetting.

Started two years before, **Home Suite** (1994) slightly overlaps the period when **Blight** went into production. It deals with similar concerns and is set against the same sequence of events. But **Home Suite** is overtly autobiographical and employs a completely different narrative method.

The big difference is that **Home Suite** is a videotape. A medium that integrates sound and image at source.

It is also shot on a domestic camcorder, where lens and microphone are only a tiny distance apart. So for the first time there is a sense of Smith's physical presence and proximity to the body of the camera. We hear the fingering of the rocker switch that controls the zoom mechanism and the little clicks and rustlings of clothing that occur as he moves through space. We are literally in the director's hands.

The linear narrative of **Home Suite** is even more of a visual straitjacket than the work Smith made by cutting measured lengths of film and sound tape. It replaces montage with a flow of carefully choreographed camera movement. It uses video's unique advantage over celluloid to make a ninety-six minute composition comprised of only three almost continuous shots.

Home Suite begins in extreme close-up (macro view) and creates a 'landscape' from the textures of a crumbling wall. Inch by inch this is slowly revealed to be the dilapidated interior of a domestic toilet. The approach recalls those archeological documentaries that explore underground caverns, scanning the walls for marks left by early inhabitants. This journey through a terrain of peeling paint and plaster becomes a trip back in time, as John Smith relates to us the hidden past of this private place.

He explains that the toilet leaks badly and that very soon this is all about to change. He pulls the chain and steps back slightly as water pours out all over the floor.

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We get closer (and I mean much closer) to the grimy cracked bowl of the toilet itself. Hidden wires are teased out from the darkness by the fingers of Smith's hand as he simultaneously struggles to focus the camera. He points out micro-switches and mechanisms located around the wooden toilet seat. Then our view is slowly guided up the down-pipe to the overhead cistern, where we find a clock radio, ultra violet disco lighting and an automatic bog-roll dispenser looming in the darkness of the ceiling. Smith, still holding the wires, explains that all this paraphernalia was designed to be activated by the toilet seat which, when lowered, caused the hidden switches to be triggered.

"It was great for a while," he says, "but then it all got to be a bit too much."

"Pull the other one," we think.

Suddenly, as Smith's fingers roll the damp wires together, the whole toilet swings into disco mode. We are plunged into darkness. The radio comes on. Music plays. Lights flash. And in this sudden disorientation of the senses we also hear the rattle of a tube train passing by outside. We are temporarily immersed in a new reality. A miraculous toilet. Reliving its former glory.

Then, just as quickly, the wires crackle as they fail to keep contact and the present is restored. We realise that the point of this guided tour of an eccentric toilet has been to preserve its memory. We have been shown a place we will never be able to return to.

"It's the end of an era," Smith says.

Then the camera backtracks out of the closet into an adjoining room. On the floor is a new white toilet and cistern, waiting to replace of the old one.

The second prowl with the camcorder appears to be the start of an expedition to explore the whole house. Moving from the newly installed toilet and along a passageway, we are guided to a position at the foot of the stairs.

John Smith tells us how he feels his luck with stair carpets (this one having been worn to shreds in only 5 years) is somehow directly related to similar wear and tear to the knees of his trousers. He explains that the two disintegrations are forever connected in his mind by the memory of his kneeling on the stairs and begging a former girlfriend not to leave him.

"She never liked the bathroom and I got it into my head that if I decorated the bathroom perhaps she might come back to me..."

Given the attention to detail lavished on the toilet earlier, we begin to get anxious about where this is all leading and exactly how far Smith is prepared to go. By the time the bathroom is reached, we are seeing things on the periphery of vision that the camera is passing over unexplained.

The lens holds close to its chosen targets, refusing to give us the wider picture.

As the camera dwells on particular fixtures and fittings, patches of mildew and rust, and as Smith relates the history of the house and those who have passed through it, there is an overwhelming sense of how complex and interrelated this world is. How every screw and nail, every stain and scratch means something.

The house is full of former innovations that have fallen into disrepair. Old jokes that don't work anymore. But Smith seems completely content at this state of decay. Like in the toilet, we get the feeling that everything is about to change.

In the last section of **Home Suite** the camera moves from the vermin-besieged kitchen back to the hallway once more, where we notice a half-finished job of ripping up the ornate floor tiles. Smith informs us that the entire house is about to be demolished. That, in a matter of hours, the bulldozers will be moving in and he will have to vacate the premises for good.

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The fireplaces in the front rooms have been pulled away from their chimney breasts and await removal. Attempts are being made to save anything of value or use. We realise that the video we are watching is also an effort to salvage the past.

Smith explains that he is going to take us on a walk to his new flat and warns that what we will see along the way is not the usual state of affairs. After a brief examination of the water squirting device that used to be operated by the front door bell, the door is opened and we enter the wider landscape.

The street outside is lined with coaches and police vehicles. Many of the houses in the street have already gone and are replaced by corrugated iron fences. Smith is nervous and we sense this. It's just us, him and the camera. Everything else is unpredictable.

Midway along the route, at the junction to another street, Smith pauses to look at people who are watching the activities of demolition men and police. Down the street, caterpillar trucks with raised hydraulic arms appear to dance in the distance in a 'play area' defined and protected by a wall of policemen in shirtsleeves. The police are standing two or three deep, shoulder to shoulder, to completely seal off the road. They appear to be guarding an unseen demolition worker who is chopping down a sixty year old tree. We assume this from the ladder resting against its trunk and the sound of a chainsaw coming from inside the foliage.

The scene is strangely undramatic. There are no signs of conflict. What we are seeing is a dull, laborious process. The gradual snuffing out of a community. The role of the police appears to be an anaesthetic one; to deaden any flaring up of pain. Like Magritte's multiplications of bowler-hatted men, they stare straight at us with uniformly blank expressions.

We continue walking. Smith shepherds us away from the 'frontline', to streets where the sounds of demolition cannot reach. The camera shakes less. The houses now are without scars. Their facades seem to say 'mind your own business' in a typically English way. We approach what will be John Smith's new home. His fingers slot the key into the door. Sound and image fade.

We are left with a sense of having reached another shore.

Home Suite's wandering camera is its positive force, seeming to represent the ability of our imagination to sidestep or subvert whatever we are told is an 'official story' or 'the way it is'. It shows us that we have the power to construct our narratives exactly how we want to. That those damp patches on the ceiling really are the map of an unknown country.

Ian Bourn is a film/video artist and writer. His video works include *Lenny's Documentary* (1978), *The End Of The World* (1982), *Sick As A Dog* (1989), *Monolog* (1998) and *Alfred Hitchcock* (2000). In 1985 he founded the *Housewatch* group of artists, whose environmental film/performance installations toured the UK and Japan. He performed the narration in John Smith's *Slow Glass* (1991) and collaborated with Smith to produce *The Kiss*, shown as a video installation in Tokyo in 1999.