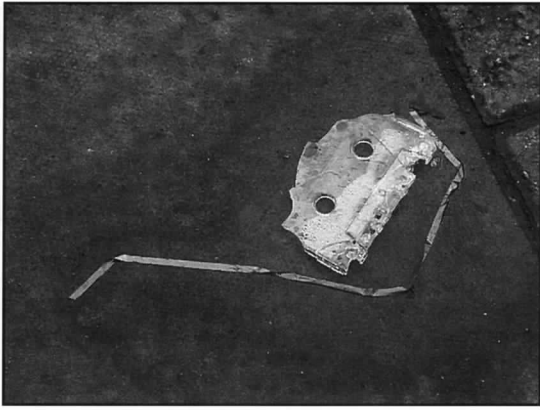


# FLASHBACKS



## Trespassing beyond the frame

John Smith talking film with Cate Elwes



*Lost Sound*  
(Collaboration with Graeme Miller 1998-2001) 28 mins. Video. *Lost Sound* documents fragments of discarded audio tape found by the artists within a small area of East London, combining the sound retrieved from each piece of tape with images of the place where it was found. The work explores the potential of chance, creating portraits of particular places by building formal, narrative and musical connections between images and sounds linked by the random discovery of the tape samples. Opposite: *Worst case Scenario* (work in progress)

**Catherine Elwes:** I wanted to ask you about *Lost Sound* (1998-2001) in relation to documentary. In what way is a film like *Lost Sound* different from documentary, particularly documentary as we currently experience it on television.

**John Smith:** If I'm forced to put a label on my films, I'm happy to call many of them documentaries, especially if you go back to Grierson's definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of reality". A number of my films are entirely documentary in their source material but they always construct stories from these sources. Something that is fundamental to me in any film I make is that the information it presents should be made suspect and its construction should be made evident. Television documentary in its worst form compels us to believe everything it is telling us. I'm interested in work that invites us to question what we are told. It's to do with engagement rather than consumption. Hopefully *Lost Sound*, made in collaboration with Graeme Miller, asks us questions, about itself as well as the world. What starts out as scientific documentation evolves into formal manipulation, questioning its documentary authenticity and stressing its construction. All film is fiction in that it is literally 'made up' – from controlled representations of chosen phenomena which are ordered selectively to construct meanings. All film is factual in that, as well as existing physically, it presents ideas born out of experience – a fictional narrative can sometimes say more about the 'real' world than a documentary. So I feel that the

accepted genre distinction between documentary and fiction is given too much importance. I'm interested in work that bridges this divide, that asks questions about real events without claiming to accurately represent them.

**CE:** In spite of the fact that you are often very specific in your use of humour, verbal humour, puns and visual jokes, you have written that you deliberately keep your images 'open', leaving us space to breathe, to exercise our imaginations. You refer to the research into radio and television that was done when children's television first started in which children were reported as saying that radio has the best pictures. Presumably, they said this because radio allows them the space to create the visual images suggested by the audio elements. In your films, there are many moments in which the screen goes blank or becomes highly abstract to the extent that you aren't too sure what you are looking at. Either the voice takes over, or it creates a space for the text to resonate. Perhaps you have discovered a much more effective way of telling a story, a very clever and an even more devious way of manipulating the audience. You have discovered, as radio has always known, that less is more.

**JS:** I think you're right. The films do control the framework within which the imagination can operate. As you say, they are extremely devious and lead you up the garden path all the time. But in order to do that effectively, you have to create a space for the viewers, so that the viewers start to take their own directions.

*The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)  
12 mins. 16mm film.

"In *The Girl Chewing Gum* a commanding voice over appears to direct the action in a busy London street. As the instructions become more absurd and fantasised, we realise that the supposed director (not the shot) is fictional; he only describes - not prescribes - the events that take place before him. Smith embraced the 'spectre of narrative' (suppressed by structural film), to play word against picture and chance against order. Sharp and direct, the film anticipates the more elaborate scenarios to come; witty, many-layered, punning, but also seriously and poetically haunted by drama's ineradicable ghost."

A.L. Rees "A Directory of British Film & Video Artists"  
Arts Council of England, 1995



*The Black Tower* (1985-7) 24 mins. 16mm film.

"In *The Black Tower* we enter the world of a man haunted by a tower which, he believes, is following him around London. While the character of the central protagonist is indicated only by a narrative voice-over which takes us from unease to breakdown to mysterious death, the images, meticulously controlled and articulated, deliver a series of colour coded puzzles, jokes and puns which pull the viewer into a mind-teasing engagement. In *The Black Tower* we have an example of a film which plays with the emotions as well as the language of film."  
Nik Houghton, *Independent Media* magazine 1987.

"Something that is fundamental to me in any film I make is that the information it presents should be made suspect and its construction should be made evident. Television documentary in its worst form compels us to believe everything it is telling us. I'm interested in work that invites us to question what we are told. It's to do with engagement rather than consumption"

“There are many ways in which my films don’t give you things. The point about the fixed frame is that you wonder what is going on outside of it. A travelling camera takes you there, and it’s usually an anti-climax”

**CE:** Straight into your trap, John.

**JS:** Yes, it’s very cat and mouse. The wicked thing is to let on that you knew what it was that they were going to think anyway.

**CE:** In your writings you describe time as a fixed system and film as a flexible system. I understood this to mean that you can use film to take control of a march of time over which, in reality, you have no control. In *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), you reveal the ways in which a film director manipulates actors and events to create a reality that has no bearing on what we experience in our daily lives. It is a terrific joke, but to me, the real joke, and a very poignant joke is that the voice-over ‘director’ actually has no power whatsoever to direct the chain of events unfolding in front of the camera. And that is what you know we know.

**JS:** In *The Girl Chewing Gum* I wasn’t really thinking about the director, I was thinking about the audience. The director is an impotent character and in some ways incidental. I made the film after seeing Truffaut’s *Day for Night*. There is a winter scene in the film within the film in which the main protagonists meet against a background of extras doing things on the street. Believe it or not, I was really surprised to discover that the people in the background were being directed in their actions. Even the dog was instructed to piss up a lamp-post. Until then, I had assumed that extras in street scenes were real passers-by going about their business. I was already a filmmaker and thought to myself how naïve I had been about the ‘realism’ of fiction films. *The Girl Chewing Gum* came out of the shock I felt at the power of the illusion of cinema. I made it for myself – just to make sure I understood that all these things were being controlled.

**CE:** I think your word impotence is right. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, the voice over ‘director’ made me think about King Canute facing the waves and telling wave number three that he could come in now.

**JS:** What I was really trying to express is how everything in a film, documentary as well as fiction, is always directed. It is chosen. The maker of the film can always take it out. So, if a person crosses the street in a film, that action has in effect been directed, because the filmmaker has chosen to include it.

**CE:** I suppose what I respond to is the extra dimension that emerges in retrospect, the poignancy of the fact that your voice-over could do nothing to direct those people’s actions. This brings me onto *The Black Tower* (1985-7). When I first saw it, I thought that it was a study of madness, a descent into chaos, madness and death. I thought it was a very dark film. Maybe that was just the aspect that I responded to.

**JS:** I said earlier that I manipulate my audience and anticipate their reactions, but I was quite shocked when I started showing *The Black Tower*. People asked me if I’d ever had a nervous breakdown or whether I had any experience of working with mental patients. Stories must come from somewhere, but the story I consciously tell in the film was constructed purely around the places where I could see the tower. I decided to write a narrative that was basically a pastiche of a familiar form of storytelling like a ghost story or a short story of the type I used to love reading as a child. But I never expected people to take the story in *The Black Tower* so seriously. The tower was actually in the grounds of a hospital, and you could see it across a cemetery. So, I thought, I’ve got the hospital, I’ve got the cemetery and, as we know, sickness and death are very common themes in narrative. I’ve got an ending for my pastiche! I was responding to chance, cued by the places where I could see the tower. From one position I could see it behind a high wall, so I thought of a prison. Seeing it behind a couple of trees meant that the protagonist could go to the countryside. I collected a series of images and then wrote a story around them. My intention was that the story should have a certain atmosphere. I wanted the film to play with the edge between immersion in a psychological narrative and seeing the film for what it is – a material construction, an assemblage of assorted parts. So there are gradual movements between totally abstract manipulations of images and very straightforward narrative. I wanted the film to be poised on that edge, but people fall into the narrative abyss more than I expected they would.

**CE:** But you have written about the power of the voice-over, and its ability to override images, to fix their meaning. Is this a good example of that?

**JS:** Very much so, but in *The Black Tower* I was playing with that power, controlling and releasing. It’s a question of balance. The scales tip a bit further in the narrative direction than I expected.

**CE:** I felt that your use of the static frame in *The Black Tower* increased the feeling of claustrophobia. Although you use static frames throughout your work, in this case it considerably enhanced the drama and its dark humour.

**JS:** There are many ways in which my films don’t give you things. The point about the fixed frame is that you wonder what is going on outside of it. A travelling camera takes you there, and it’s usually an anti-climax. The movement tells you that you’re going somewhere important. Static framings have equal importance, you have to make your own value judgements. I use a lot of close-ups. A close-up denies you the full picture. You rarely see people in my films, the action is usually described or suggested rather than depicted. So you are forced to imagine. The monster in the horror film is always less frightening when you see it.

*Slow Glass* (1988-91)

40 mins. 16mm film.

“The film begins with a shout in the street and a smashed pane, and ends with a bricked-up window. Between these literal images of opening and closing, *Slow Glass* spins immaculately shot puns and paradoxes that play on reflection and speculation – words that refer both to acts of seeing and of mind. Glass is the key, as a narrator’s running commentary sketches the glassmaker’s art, splicing a history lesson with a quasi-autobiography. The authority of word, voice and picture is questioned through the film’s gradual revelation of its own (highly pleasurable) artifice.”

A.L. Rees, London Film-Makers’ Co-op distribution catalogue 1993.



**CE:** In *Slow Glass* (1988-91) you do show people, but they are strangely disembodied. You see a hand and a glass, and the act of lifting the glass. Then you use jump cuts so that at times, the hand disappears. You pan across people who look familiar, but then their behaviour seems odd. How do you do that?

**JS:** I think you are referring to the scene at the end of *Slow Glass* where the camera pans across a lot of people who are standing in a bar. It is to do with the sound. It starts with synch-sound and then cuts out to silence. You continue to observe them in silence and a distance is created. The high frequency tone created by running a finger around the edge of a wine glass is then faded in, producing an even greater separation between sound and image. The camera finally comes to rest on a close-up of the wine glass and moving finger and the synchronisation is restored. I wanted to express an alienated perception of the world, of the protagonist being in a crowded place but observing it as an outsider. *Slow Glass* is the only film that I have made in which I have concentrated on creating a specific character. The glazier is one of those people you might meet in a pub who comes out with a lot of interesting information, but who you very soon can’t wait get away from. It emerges that his real agenda is quite different from what he is talking about. He appears to be discussing the history of glassmaking, but what really underlies his monologue is his own alienation from the present-day.

**CE:** His narrative is very powerful in the film. You would have to severely tamper with the language to make it function in other ways. You would almost need to reinvent poetry or introduce gibberish.

**JS:** The language does break down in places. I do introduce gibberish, which I find quite poetic. There are lots of obscure words associated with glass making, for example marver, cullet, lehr, pontil and punty-wad. These occur at several points in the film without explanation. Towards the end of the film Ian Bourn (the unseen protagonist) improvises around these words, creating non-sense which is nevertheless full of meaning.

**CE:** I feel that the humour in your films has a much darker side that takes me off into other realms of thought and emotion. And I often come away feeling sad. In *Lost Sound* you used the device that the soundtrack is made up of fragments of tape you found caught in the gutter, in the cracks and crevices of the street and which make up the images you show us on screen. These fragments of ‘lost’ musical entertainment also represented people’s lives and I got a sense of migration, of people in transition through the area. Then they drift away. I found it very poignant, not just lost sounds, but lost peoples, ghosts.

**JS:** *Lost Sound* is certainly concerned with loss in a broader sense - we deliberately called it *Lost Sound* rather than *Found Sound*, although for us the soundtrack was indeed found. The pathos of the title is intentional, suggesting unknown histories about which we can only speculate. It shouldn’t have been a revelation, but it was surprising that we found so little western music, less than a quarter of the total. We shot the film in Hackney and the contents of the tapes reflect the diversity of the population. It was pertinent to be editing the film when asylum seekers were very much in the news. You constantly heard the simplistic myth on the radio that people come here for our wonderful way of life. When we filmed, of course, we didn’t know what sound was on the tape we were shooting. It was only afterwards when we rescued the sound that we found its association with a particular image. For me, one of the most poignant images is of a clump of tape on the kerb in Kingsland Road. It is a miserable wet, grey afternoon and the sound on the tape is of really joyous West African music. The sunniest music you could wish for against a horrible bleak, polluted, grey road. So the film does express a sense of loss, of displacement, of attempts to survive in alien environments. It develops quite slowly at first as it needs time to create particular atmospheres, to develop a sense of place – of marginal places, microcosmic places.

**CE:** I recently showed Patrick Keiller’s film *London* to a group of Canadian students and they didn’t react as favourably as a similar group did at Camberwell. But

when you showed *Lost Sound* at the Lux in London, I could hear all the locals grunting in recognition of their own streets. It had a real significance for them. I wonder how easily our sense of place can be transposed to another country. Do you think the films have an ideal audience?

**JS:** For a film like *Lost Sound*, the experience is bound to be different for someone who is familiar with the place where it was shot. There were editing decisions that were made based on privileged knowledge of the area. Often these were poignant, for instance in the case of racial tensions that exist here. When we were filming at the end of Brick Lane we couldn't help remembering that a couple of years ago, members of the British National Party were handing out their leaflets on the same corner. At one point in the film there is a close-up of a bit of tape that starts moving in time to a piece of Indian music. The music is suddenly cut off by the barking of a vicious dog. It starts again and is stopped by the same bark, the censorious bark of the British Bulldog.

**CE:** I see the films as locating your identity in the subtle changes you observe in these streets over a period of time. People always ask, where do you come from? For you it is easy, you just show them your films, and say, this is where I come from. And you can also say, this is who I am. You have become an observer of an environment that defines you. I rather envy that feeling of belonging. These days, our lives are increasingly transient and nomadic but you have succeeded in creating a sense of belonging to a specific place through the films that you have made here in the last twenty years.

**JS:** Concerning the documentary aspect of the work, I am very wary of making films on themes that are outside of my experience. That is a big reason for rooting things at home. But there is also a very practical consideration

involved here. I nearly always work on my own. I don't like filming on my own in a place that is unfamiliar. Many of my films were shot inside, or out of the windows of, the house where I was living at the time. Sometimes I might go down the road a bit. But on the whole, I have always worked in environments that I know well. I don't have to worry if I am looking through a camera and can hear someone standing behind me. I usually know them. But having said that, I have just shot my new film, *Worst Case Scenario*, in Vienna.

**CE:** That must have been traumatic.

**JS:** Well, actually I shot it from my hotel window! The films I have made in London have often come out of the experience of looking at places over long periods of time and seeing different things in them at different times – like seeing successive pictures in the patterns of your bedroom wallpaper. I came up with the idea for the film that I shot in Vienna when I was showing my films in the evenings and had several days free to contemplate a particular place. So the sense of sustained observation is the same in both places. Like *The Girl Chewing Gum*, *Worst Case Scenario* is a view of a street corner from a fixed vantage point, which will transform real events into imaginary ones. I'll find out what happened there when I start editing!

#### Catherine Elwes

*John Smith's films are distributed by the Lux Centre, 2-4 Hoxton Square, London N1 6NU. Worst Case Scenario will be completed in spring 2002 to coincide with the launch of a major tour of John Smith's work supported by the Arts Council of England's National Touring Programme.*



*Worst Case Scenario (work in progress)*