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# *The Girl Chewing Gum*: The time that cinema forgot

**ABSTRACT**

*John Smith's* Girl Chewing Gum *was made in Hackney, East London and shown at the London Film-Makers' Co-op in 1976. Through its wit and imagination this film extended the forms of British avant-garde experimentation that were pervasive at that moment and mobilized a critique of narrative cinema.*

**KEYWORDS**

experimental film
structural materialism
London Film-Makers' Co-op
'Control is an illusion' – apocryphal feminist maxim

It would have been 10 March in the spring of 1976, and I would have been wearing a badly fitting navy blue duffel coat when I went to the regular London Co-op Wednesday evening screening at Prince of Wales Crescent, Camden. I was a film student at the Slade School of Art and went to the Co-op quite often as it was a dynamic centre of experimental film. The programme included the first showing of a new film by John Smith, *The Girl Chewing Gum*. His short film stood out in the screening, it immediately struck me as remarkable – a witty play with the parameters of cinema achieved with an elegant and notable simplicity of concept and means.

It is interesting to determine the point in the film at which first time viewers realize that the directorial voice is not in control of the image; after a few minutes they work out that this illusion is achieved by a shift between the image and the sound tracks that allows description to become anticipation. Maybe by 'I want the clock to move jerkily towards me … stop. Now I want the long hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour, and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours' certainly by

'Now two pigeons fly across' (Figure 6b). The role of chance is brought into the foreground of the film by the voice's assertion of control over relatively autonomous elements. As Boethius, writing *The Consolation of Philosophy* in 524 ad, made clear – chance events may be unforeseen, but that does not mean that they are completely random or outside causality.

Exaggerated auteurial control is manifested through the attempted orchestration of the aleatoric or chance elements involved in filming in a city street or other location shooting. These unforeseen factors are also revealed through a director controlling the pro-filmic event in the opening street scene (filmed in the Studios de la Victorine in Nice) in Francois Truffaut's *Day For Night/ La Nuit Américaine* (1973); made a few years earlier and apparently a starting point for John Smith.

This renegotiation of verisimilitude and the spectator's relation with the space of the film involves several disorienting reversals – the comment 'two pigeons fly past from right to left, and two boys run past from left to right' (Figure 10) refers to the viewer's perspective and not, as one might expect, that of the boys; the phrase 'everything else ... goes away a bit' (Figure 11) pre-emptively describes a zoom out literally from the spectator's point of view. The implicit codes of the filmic process are destabilized as representation is treated as reality. The idea of the commanding author is further undercut as the voice on the soundtrack becomes increasingly less plausible in terms of veracity or credibility in an inventive 'fictional' construction that soon breaks diegetic space by addressing the viewer directly: 'I am shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Letchmore Heath, about fifteen miles from the building you are looking at' (Figure 18a).

There is play with on-screen sound – an alarm bell rings in the background but there is a silence on the sound track when we are told 'The burglar alarm is still ringing' (Figure 19c) and it returns for the 360° pan of the countryside. After the eponymous heroine of the film appears there are further shifts with sound/image track disjunction when the voice-over adds extraneous detail not available to the viewer; speaking from the unseen landscape the voice moves into a non-credible realm invoking the unfeasible scale of 'a large blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet' (Figure 18b), and then suggesting (libellously) that the young man crossing the road '... has just robbed the local post office and is attempting to appear inconspicuous ... he grips the butt of the revolver in his raincoat pocket even harder' (Figures 19a and 19b).

The London Film-Makers' Co-op at this time was more than an access workshop with a vague milieu – it defined a critical context where, for a brief period, a group of film-makers worked in convergence and shared preoccupations and debates. It was a constellation that drew focus towards individual artists' work while placing it in the context of a small-scale movement, a cluster of activity generating its own discourses locally and connecting with experimental film internationally; John Smith encountered these arguments in courses by Peter Gidal and Jorge Dana at the Royal College of Art. 'Structural materialist' film, as it was called, proposed that films should decipher both their own material construction and operation. It was also referred to as 'structural minimalism', as questioning cinematic process sometimes extended to inhibiting and repressing the representational image itself; an approach to signification described as purist and reductive in Peter Wollen's 'The two avant-gardes'. It should be understood that, in the wider frame of film culture, this was the 'moment of *Screen*' when French structural theory – semiotics, Marxism and psychoanalysis – was having a direct impact on anglophone film culture.

These specific politicized debates about signifying practice placed even formal film in a radical framework. In their differences from the industrialized modes of representation, experimental films were seen to question naturalized codes: their attention to structure and signification threw the codes of normative film-making into focus. In its unique way *The Girl Chewing Gum* both challenged the set formulae of structural film and pointed towards the presence of mainstream cinema exemplified by *The Land that Time Forgot* (Connor 1975) at the Dalston Odeon.

Experimental film in Britain was carried to direct interaction with audiences as film-makers became used to presenting and discussing their films with audiences at screenings; John Smith took his films around Britain with support from the Arts Council's 'Film-makers on Tour' scheme. This ethos of discussion was a relevant starting point for an encounter with a wider audience through television. There was an early screening of 'Associations' on BBC2's *First Picture Show* in 1976, and after the launch of Channel 4 in 1983 there was a more consistent engagement with experiment by British television, *Black Tower* was transmitted in 1988 and *Slow Glass* in 1993 (Stoneman 1996). *The Girl Chewing Gum* was eventually shown by the Franco-German arts channel Arte in 1999 and 3sat in 2001.

In relation to contemporary short film-making *The Girl Chewing Gum* is exemplary in that it is an artisanal film made with ideas and imagination rather than budget. I remembered that it had a tiny budget from discussion at the time of its screening and John Smith recently confirmed:

> The budget was miniscule – the cost of one 400 ft roll and one 100ft. roll of 16mm B/W neg, dev and rush print and mag. striped show print. It was conceptually important (and economically vital) that the film was shot in one take, that whatever happened when I switched on the camera became the action within the film. I shot it and my fellow student (now Director of Photography) Patrick Duval recorded the sync sound for the Dalston shot. After writing the text for the voice-over I drove my motor bike to a field in Herdfordshire and shouted my directions (edited later on the Steenbeck of course) into a crappy microphone.
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> (E-mail to author 10 October 2011)

The budget was provided by Smith's ex-tutor Ken Campbell (book artist and poet) at north-east London Poly and his wife Ruth who generously gave him £500 to make new work while he was at the RCA. He made both *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *Leading Light* with this money 'so the total budget was probably about £250', which covered the cost of making the film (shot at a ratio of 1: 1) editing and working with the separate magnetic sound track.

Although digital shooting and editing is now cheaply and easily available it tends to be accompanied by a pervasive aspiration to use ever more sophisticated and elaborate equipment and software – a kind of techno-fetishism. John Smith's film stands as exemplary in an epoch where somehow budget is an index of production value, which then equates with cultural worth. As the German experimentalist Klaus Wyborny suggested in *Pictures of the Lost Word* (1970–1974): 'There is often an inverse relationship between budget and quality'.

As the queue of people at the Dalston Odeon suggests, the film moves beyond the introversions of experimental modernism and faces the wider domain of industrial cinema. Alexander Kluge talked of the 'homeopathic

effect' of the avant garde – the smaller the dose the greater the effect and this short film can be understood to be a part of a critique of conventional narrative cinema that is not an academic question. The forms of film that emanate from the bottom left hand corner of the United States constitute a global monoculture, which in 2011, as in 1976, continues to pervade our screens; as Robert Olson noted in *Hollywood Planet*, it is a world where the global audience is 100 times more likely to view a Hollywood product than a European film. An epoch or two after it was made, the subversive wit of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, its attention to the calibration of meaning making and play with spectator's understandings, are even more necessary as we face the forces of industrial culture.

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