

Genre Bending and Experimental Comedy: the work of John Smith

ÉMILIE BUJÈS I would like to start with your first films and the framework you were partaking in, on one side of course the London Filmmakers Co-op¹ and your relation to it, on the other hand perhaps there were some other influences as well, from the US in particular?

JOHN SMITH I never saw much work at all until I did my postgraduate course at the Royal College of Art which I started in 1974, where I made *Associations* and *The Girl Chewing Gum*. I was definitely impressed by the American as much as by the British filmmakers. As you probably know, much of the work that was being produced in Britain at that time was very dry and formal, and although I really liked that work, I was also really interested in language, narrative and the power of words. I saw some films from North America, in particular Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, and I really liked its mixing of genres and its shifts between abstraction and representational, narrative interruptions. Later, I saw quite a few other American films that I empathized with, like Robert Nelson's *Bleu Shut* and Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*), which a lot of people connect with my work and *The Girl Chewing Gum* in particular.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS So you were consciously willing to go beyond structuralist film, highjacking some of their rules in order to push your interest forward.

JOHN SMITH I certainly needed to; most of my friends at that time weren't artists or filmmakers and I wanted to make work which people who weren't familiar with experimental film would be able to get something from. They might not necessarily read all the layers but I wanted things to be

more accessible. Funnily enough, after making films like *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *Associations*, I made some very dry formal work. But I then had a very strange experience: there was a big international experimental film festival in London in 1979 and because I had a film there I had a free ticket to go and see everything. About half way through the festival I started to get really pissed off. I was thinking: "God, not another fucking structural film which goes on for hours and hours and is based on just one single formal idea". On the last day of the festival my own film *Blue Bathroom* was shown and I was surprised to find that my latest work irritated me as much as all the other films I had been getting annoyed with. It was a revelation that caused a shift in my work—with *Shepherd's Delight*—to making more complex films, with a greater variety of elements, which were still oppositional to mainstream film but at the same time used a lot of mainstream film conventions.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS You often start your films with something that is close to you—quite literally—and could be considered a documentary element, to then bring it somewhere else. Could you explain how the writing process takes place?

JOHN SMITH It is usually a very gradual process. The films that have a big writing component in them, like *The Black Tower*, *Slow Glass* and *Shepherd's Delight*, usually grow very organically and are made over a quite

1. The founding members of the London Filmmakers' Co-operative, formed in 1966, included figures such as Bob Cobbing, Jeff Keen, Simon Hartog and Stephen Dwoskin. It aimed to support the production, distribution and promotion of British experimental film practices, and was based on the Filmmakers' Cooperative founded by Jonas Mekas in New York.

long period of time, often several years. The writing usually starts to evolve after the filming has started. With *The Black Tower* I moved house in the early 1980s and could see the tower across the garden from the house. My initial interest in it was purely aesthetic and visual, because the strangely non-reflective black top of the tower looked like a hole cut out of the sky, and the shape of the hole changed when you saw it from different angles. But then I asked my next door neighbour, who I didn't know before and who ended up being quite an eccentric character, if he knew what that building was. And he said: "Yes. It is the psychiatric ward of the old people's hospital", which of course was a complete lie. But it was quite interesting that he had read it in a sinister way, as I had done myself, and I thought that I would like to write something that explored that sinister feeling.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS So the documentary is fictionalized, sometimes even becoming abstract, through verbal language and filmic language—with such tools as framing which plays here an essential role...

JOHN SMITH Yes, absolutely. I am interested in making hybrid work, which includes lots of different elements that, if edited successfully, brings completely unrelated things together. With *The Black Tower*, I was experimenting with the power of narrative to create some psychological immersion on the part of the viewer, and at the same time exploring a completely abstract and constructed dimension as well, as I do in quite a lot of my films. So the framing is very important, and what I was interested in is the fact is that the close-up images require other images or sounds to contextualize them, for example these flat color fields that are later revealed as objects. But the ultimate abstraction of course is the black screen: it could be the night time sky with no stars or it could be looking at the tower on a sunny day; both those

things would look exactly the same, and in fact in the film sometimes I am filming the tower, sometimes not.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS Until the beginning of the 1990's you have been filming on film stock, to then move on to video; how did this change affect your practice (also in regard to the technical specificities of film that you had been regularly using as narrative devices), and why did you make this decision at that moment?

JOHN SMITH The reason I first started working with film is that there wasn't really a choice in the 1970s if you wanted to make aesthetically pleasing colored images. Video was an absolutely different medium and what was available to artists when I first started making film was basically a heavy camera and separate tape recorder that produced very poor quality black and white images. But by the early 1990's video technology was starting to improve dramatically and it became possible to produce quite good quality images with cheap, lightweight equipment. Also, when I made *Home Suite*, my first video in 1993–94, which is one hour and half long, each part took me a day to make, whereas my films were taking longer and longer to produce... So I was interested in the immediacy, and in the fact that you could record images and spoken sound at the same time and be quite spontaneous, which is impossible to do on your own with film and which I came back to in the *Hotel Diaries*. Also, film was starting to require quite big budgets and I didn't want to be applying for funding all the time. As a teacher, it was important to me as well to make it clear to students that you don't need a fortune to make a film, the most important thing being to have a good idea.

When digital video came along, and especially "Final Cut Pro", I got interested in what that technology offered—a lot of the ideas in my work have been technology driven—and in the fact that I could do everything

myself at home. The first video piece where I exploited the technology was *Lost Sound*, in which I am for example speeding up the action, reversing the action or flipping the image over. They were all things that were difficult to do with film and you would normally have to go to the laboratory.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS Does your new work *White Hole* relate to that new technological empowerment in some way?

JOHN SMITH Yes, it is another example of something that is very easy to do using a computer. It is the first piece I have made where I zoom in on a still image on a computer, a library image that I found on the internet.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS There is an ethnographic aspect in several of your films, strongly accentuated by the fact that your neighbourhood is a recurring setting or subject. Has this interest of yours evolved over time—alongside the metamorphosis of this very neighbourhood—becoming more political and perhaps to some extent leading to recent works like the *Hotel Diaries*?

JOHN SMITH Most of my work is triggered by personal experience. I consider all of my work to be political in a formal sense, but it has certainly become more overtly political in recent years, as political events have impacted more directly on my own life, firstly in relation to the demolition of my house in order to make way for a new motorway, as recorded in *Blight* and *Home Suite*. On a larger scale, the *Hotel Diaries* videos were a direct response to the US/British invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, actions with which I fundamentally disagree. Since 9/11, events in the Middle East and Afghanistan have strongly affected attitudes and events at home too, so international politics are a bigger part of my everyday experience than they ever were in the 20th century.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS The recurring personal dimension of your work is interestingly tightly related to yet another crucial

element which is humor, to the extent that one might think of fake first-person films or a fictionalized self figure. Humor is also what allows you to undermine the very authoritarian structure you are building...

JOHN SMITH I hope that the films aren't didactic and I guess particularly with the *Hotel Diaries* I don't want to be lecturing anybody because I have nothing special to say. My political opinions become pretty predictable after about three minutes. Somebody said to me a while ago: "Who is the person in your film?" It is me really, but I do try to undermine my authority, often through humour.

In *Shepherd's Delight* for example I am questioning the author's status as well as the authenticity of what one is being told. So I deliberately tell true stories in ways that make them harder to believe. The problem is that sometimes people end up thinking that I made them up, for example with *unusual Red cardigan*, which is actually completely factual.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS In your exhibition at La Galerie—entitled "The Kiss"—objects, which have been represented for many years in your films, are not only playing once again a very essential role but also physically present in the exhibition space...

JOHN SMITH I guess that the objects in the recent works are more intimate, more loaded with a sense of personal history. At La Galerie I thought it would be an interesting experience for the viewer to see some of the objects that feature in the films displayed in a vitrine. If the viewer hasn't already seen the films the immediate reaction will be: "What the hell are these things?" The objects are given importance by the way they are displayed. I am very interested in language: how we put letters together to make words, how we put words together to make sentences, how we put shots together to make "sentences" in film, but also when we put objects together in a row, they become like words in a sentence,

implying some kind of collective meaning. When you arrange things neatly in a kind of scientific way, it somehow implies that there is a connection, a logic.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS *The Girl Chewing Gum* is seminal work of yours and has been abundantly presented; are you getting bored of it or how do you relate to it today, and how did its reception reshape over time?

JOHN SMITH I still think it is of considerable interest, but sometimes I get a bit irritated when I meet somebody who says: “You made the *Girl Chewing Gum*, didn’t you; do you still make films?” because I have made about fifty more films since then. But it’s my own fault that the film is so well-known, because when I first made it nobody was very interested in it. But I thought it was pretty good so I kept on showing it. And if I am doing a lecture screening to introduce people to my work, I still often show it in order to talk about cinematic illusion, and most importantly about how the power of the language can determine how we read images—which of course is something that recurred in probably half of my films since that point. When I made the film, it had nothing to do with time passing. I just wanted to film an ordinary street in the present day and I wasn’t thinking at all about that being any kind of historical record. And of course later on, I realized that maybe this is the longest shot of people walking in the street in East London that was made in the 1970s. Without the sound track it has quite a lot of ethnographic interest, which at the time wasn’t meant at all. I never imagined that this film would still be shown regularly nearly 40 years later.

ÉMILIE BUJÈS With your recent *Dad’s Stick* you are rather remote from your eminent humorous tone and on the contrary using different strategies to express an obviously painful moment; would you like to explain a little how you worked in that case?

JOHN SMITH In *Dad’s Stick*, coming back to the question of language, one of the things that is very important to me is the use of captions rather than my usual voice over. I am really interested in the fact that in the caption you can say something that maybe is quite emotive, but actually doesn’t have any expression to it. There are things in it I would never have done in a voice over, because it would just be too overwhelming emotionally. I was very interested for example in the part saying: “Dad used to beat me with a short piece of plastic washing line that he kept behind the television. It didn’t happen often. He hated having to do it”. To me that line “He hated having to do it” could be either factual or ironic, even humorous—there is no vocal expression to suggest how it should be interpreted. I was interested in playing with the fact that the film is psychologically very loaded but also creates a sort of cool distance through the use of captions. At the same time, it hopefully has an immediacy and an intimacy through the singing on the sound track that humanizes it in a sense. So there is this tension between formal manipulation and the human element, an interaction that is present in a lot of my work.

Freelance exhibition curator Émilie Bujès is also a programmer for the “Visions du Réel” International Film Festival in Nyon, Switzerland and La Roche-sur-Yon International Film Festival, France. From 2010 to 2014 she was exhibition curator at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Geneva.