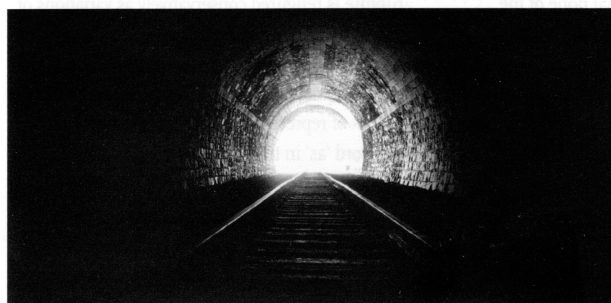


# FILM

## John Smith: White Hole

We begin in the dark, and we end there too. John Smith's six-minute film *White Hole*, 2014, starts with a visual and interpretative void, as a black screen is accompanied by backwards speech. The visual aspect clarifies first: a white dot appears at the centre, gradually growing until we see a roughly hemispherical form and fit the sight to a mental template – a train tunnel, the film is leading us towards the brightness at its end. As we slide closer, though – and as the garbled speech stumbles along, like a deeply foreign language – it becomes apparent that this isn't quite a 'film'; or rather, it is and it isn't. The camera is filming, but slowly zooming in on a black-and-white photograph of the end of a tunnel. As we reach the mouth, the screen fills with whiteness: daylight, at last. The 'foreign language' reverses into comprehensible English – relief! – but the camera keeps moving forward and a black dot appears on the horizon. We're heading into another tunnel, or rather another photograph of a tunnel, not an exit but an entrance. And, as so often in the films Smith has made over the past 40 years, illusions are being pointedly punctured.

As we progress into the black hole – and as we watch the film, surely not coincidentally, in the recent aftermath of the celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall – Smith starts talking about the only time he ever visited a communist country: Poland in 1980, just after Margaret Thatcher's government took power back home. He liked it. He couldn't speak the language at all and was delightedly bemused by the shops, which offered a double barrier: not only couldn't he read their signs, but what was displayed in the window didn't correspond to what was inside. Which wasn't much, and Smith loved the fact that, as opposed to capitalist Britain, there were 'no decadent luxuries, and there was very little choice'.



John Smith  
*White Hole* 2014  
video

The Poles he spoke to, though, 'did not agree ... they seemed to be obsessed by western democracy' and, the Solidarity movement aside, sang the praises of Thatcher. They wanted the light at the other end of the tunnel, on the other side of the Iron Curtain. It seemed far away. Smith now starts talking about visiting Leipzig in 1997, just after Tony Blair's government had taken power – a moment, of course, of temporary optimism for the left. The East German city, eight years after communism began toppling, was, he said, beginning to look like the West. Yet unemployment was rising, the divide between rich and poor expanding, and a new East German aphorism was going around: people were saying they could see 'a tunnel at the end of the light'. The light is snuffed, the film starts again, and this time we know what's coming.

The work of Smith's that *White Hole* recalls most, for me, is *Om*, 1986, a similarly compressed, self-unveiling reflection on the violent nationalism beneath Thatcherism's bucolic, heritage-clad facade, in which what appears to be a Buddhist monk sitting amid rising fumes of incense turns out to be a thuggish, cigarette-smoking skinhead in a barbershop, getting a haircut. The distance from barbers to Poles is not a great one, and the link is a wilful, hopeful misreading. The Britain that elected Thatcher, *Om* suggests, couldn't see neoliberalism's retracted claws. Eastern Europe unsurprisingly wanted what it saw, distantly, in

the West, while leftists like Smith wanted the less that they had. Each side, we now know, was looking into a faulty mirror of its hopes. The train in *White Hole* has crashed through the looking glass.

And then there is the loop, which might suggest an even more pessimistic message: that as a species we are easily seduced, doomed to misinterpret and to rush towards an illusory light, to grip hold of what seems better than what we have, though we barely understand it. The 'light at the end' might read as the light seen, legendarily, by the dying. Under these auspices, the job of art, Smith's cogent work suggests, is cognitive enlightenment so that we don't get fooled again. But his light turns dark, and his film goes round in circles; it is nearly two decades since *Om* and here is Smith, making a closely related point. What might console, in a limited way, is the deep formal and inferential gratification of *White Hole*, a film of such impeccable economy – a few minutes, a mirroring structure, two photographs, a bit of chat, decades of geopolitical change mordantly trapped between – that you can't believe it didn't already exist; that it wasn't always out there, waiting to arrive. ■

John Smith's *White Hole* is installed at Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle to 11 January.

MARTIN HERBERT is a writer based in Tunbridge Wells and Berlin.