

Can The Girl Chewing Gum Save the World?

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In 2018, the film magazine [Little White Lies](#) asked a variety of its contributors whether movies can save the world and, if so, which one. ALT/KINO founder Ben Nicholson proposed John Smith's avant-garde classic *The Girl Chewing Gum*.

by [Ben Nicholson](#)



The Girl Chewing Gum (John Smith, 1976)

Dear friend,

We contact you on the occasion of the 75th issue of [Little White Lies](#).

We are working on a project and we'd love to have you involved. We are looking at the subject of whether movies can save the world.

Context: the world is fucked.

If you had the most politically influential people in the world - politicians, CEOs, philanthropists, etc - as a captive audience in a cinema, what movie would you screen to them and why? All we would like is the name of the movie and your justification. Please interpret the question as you like. The aim of this feature is to produce an alternative canon of films, each hand-selected by a diverse array of collaborators.

Thanks

David Jenkins
Editor, [LWLies](#)

How better to inspire epiphany in an audience assured in its worldview(s) than screening a film that offers continual revelations and constantly challenges preconceptions? For me, that film is John Smith's monochrome avant-garde short, *The Girl Chewing Gum*.

The film opens with a shot of a busy intersection in Dalston, over which a traditionally omniscient voice-of-God narration (from Smith himself) directs the action seen on screen; "...and I want the little girl to run across... now." The world as prescribed by its creator/controller. What quickly becomes apparent, however, is that the voice is not directing the scene at all. The visual is documentary observation of the junction in East London, the soundtrack descriptions are an intentional assertion of authorial control on a disorderly reality.

As the unbroken shot continues for the length of a single reel of film, the voiceover becomes increasingly fantastical in its demands and detail. The voice commands both space and time to move on its whim, seeing things invisible to the camera's eye and gleaning information about people's internal lives. The film may primarily lampoon cinematic conventions - the ego of the auteur, the 'reality' of documentary imagery - but it readily applies to similar social, cultural and political norms of the modern world.

The Girl Chewing Gum can be plugged directly into contemporary concerns about the wielding of power, fake news, exploitable audiences and constructed narratives designed to cement a sense of dominion, or to lubricate acquiescence or unthinking consumption. That Smith achieves this in a remarkably funny and enjoyable 11 minutes makes it a perfect inoculation against a number of maladies afflicting today's industrial and political leaders.

Ben Nicholson is a writer and curator specialising in non-fiction, experimental film, and artists' moving image. He is the founder and editor/curator of [ALT/KINO](#).

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