

Les États généraux du film documentaire > 2016 > Fragment of a filmmaker's work: John Smith

Fragment of a filmmaker's work: John Smith

Let's start with Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality". Would you call your work "documentary"?

The majority of my films certainly fit Grierson's definition. Many of them are constructed entirely from images of real places and events but I use various filmic and narrative strategies to create new meanings and metaphors from the material. But I think the distinction between documentary and fiction is overrated – a fiction film can say just as much about the world we inhabit as a documentary, while documentaries frequently distort reality. I have always been interested in making work that doesn't clearly read as belonging to any particular genre, where the viewer is uncertain as to whether s/he is experiencing fact or fiction. My film *Blight*, for example, starts out looking a bit like a horror film, it's only later that it becomes apparent that it is constructed entirely from documentary material relating to a specific real situation. Even in my most straightforwardly documentary works I deliberately make the information that I am presenting appear suspect – it's very important to me that the viewer never fully trusts the filmmaker.

When you began your career in the seventies, the British experimental cinema and film theory were obsessed by the heritage of Brecht and his ideas about distanciation as a political and aesthetical tool. Do you feel that this has influenced your vision of reality as a construction?

In my time as an MA student at the Royal College of Art I was enormously influenced by Brecht's ideas. These formed a firm foundation to my practice that has stayed with me ever since – it is still vital for me that any film that I make draws attention to its artifice and foregrounds its construction, so that the viewer can actively engage with the work rather than passively consuming it. I was introduced to Brecht's ideas, together with semiology, which was equally influential, at a very formative time in my life. I'm fascinated by how much our lives are shaped by chance – I suspect that I would probably be making entirely different films now if my art and film education had taken place a few years earlier or later.

Most of your works engage and ask us to question our vision, our thoughts, our feelings: the frame and camera angle are used to transform objects visually and dramatically. Would you describe this reshaping and rewriting of the visible as political cinema?

Yes, I see these transformative strategies as fundamentally political. Philosophically the films are concerned with the fact that we all see things differently and that nothing in the world has a single, "correct" reading. I take pleasure in pushing meaning to its limits in a playful way, often through using the manipulative power of words to ascribe invented, sometimes fantastical, meanings to mundane records of reality. On a social level, the films encourage viewers not to take things at face value and appreciate that there may be legitimate ways of seeing the world that differ from our own individual and cultural perspectives. At a time when there is so much conflict and misunderstanding in the world this seems to me to be a particularly important ambition. We really need to imagine ourselves "in each other's shoes" – so many of our current crises are rooted in entrenched assumptions and myopic vision.

Your inventive taste for English language, your pleasure in making puns and playing with words, are mirrored by your love for disorienting images, mining the usual codes of meaning and montage. How do you work with images and words?

Having been introduced to semiology as a student, I have always been fascinated by the production and interpretation of meaning. I'm particularly interested in ambiguity and in how meaning is determined by context. Film is of course an ideal medium for exploring ambiguity because images and sounds can be juxtaposed and framed in different ways to suggest many different meanings. Even though I record most of my material with a specific purpose in mind I always look for alternative uses when it comes to editing, which for me is the most exciting and creative part of the filmmaking process. I like to distance myself from my material when I start editing, treating it like found footage and searching for all the possible meanings it might hold.

When children try to make sense of the world they come up with all kinds of interpretations because they lack the experience that provides clues to understanding. But this lack of knowledge can also produce the most wonderful, playful and amusing flights of imagination. In adulthood most of us come to feel that playing is no longer appropriate. As someone who has continued to play throughout his life I would like to encourage other adults to join me. I am interested in play for its own sake and see my films as "games" with the viewer. They frequently set up expectations that are later subverted, so that viewers realise that they have been deliberately misled. I hope that these twists and turns of meaning and the shifts between disorientation and understanding enable viewers to have an active and pleasurable engagement with the work.

The metropolis and its daily life (even the most banal) are the main inspiration for your work. The ordinary becomes an astonishing object of fiction and the routine becomes a mirror to analyse society and politics. Is your neighborhood your "Monument Valley"? Why do you choose to work almost only where you live?

I am not at all interested in dramatic spectacle and prefer to record the most ordinary environments and events, hopefully turning the ordinary into the extraordinary by filmic means – it's the formal structure that creates the drama. I hope that using the everyday and familiar as my subject matter creates situations that viewers can relate to their own experiences in a productive and meaningful way. I believe that filmic meaning comes more from construction than from subject matter and that most meanings can be produced without travelling far from one's own front door. But it is also important to me that my work comes from personal experience. I don't go looking for subject matter, I usually wait for it to come to me. I'm a great believer in chance and coincidence.

First person cinema and humour seem to be in constant dialectics in your work: the astonishing result is no narcissism. Would you describe your presence in your films as a "character"? In which sense are your works autobiographical?

Even my most fictional works are rooted in personal experience, so they are all autobiographical to some degree, often responding to the environment where I live. *The Black Tower*, for example, was a building that I could see from the window of a house that I lived in in the eighties. The fantasy of the film's narrative, together with its formal basis, came about through the contemplation of a real and familiar piece of architecture – I was only able to make this film because I saw the tower every day and this prolonged exposure generated a variety of ideas. Many of my films come about in this way, where my imagination is triggered by the sustained observation of a particular location.

Whether my films' narratives are fictional or directly autobiographical, as in *Home Suite* or the *Hotel Diaries* series, I always want my own presence to have as little character as possible. It's the words that are important, not the person behind them. That is one reason why I nearly always use my own voice – because to my own ears it is so familiar that it has no character at all. I want to keep the protagonist's identity as vague as possible – that's one of the reasons why I nearly always use voice-over, so that there's no visual representation to limit the viewer's imagination. It's very important to me that the voice is not didactic, that my character is equal in status to the viewer. I like to think of my voice as that of an "everyman" who can put speculative propositions to the viewer in a conversational way, so that the viewer feels as if s/he is engaged in a kind of dialogue. I guess that the character I present is basically my own, but the kind of "me" that I present when I meet people for the first time, when I want to impress them. In real life I want people to like me. In my films I want to relate to as many people as possible, to sound like an agreeable and modest person that viewers can enjoy spending some time with.

Interview with John Smith by Federico Rossin.

Debates led by Federico Rossin.

In the presence of John Smith.

The complete programme

Monday 22 August - 10:00 am - Salle Cinéma

The Black Tower (24')

Slow Glass (40')

Hackney Marshes (30')

Blight (14')

Lost Sound (28')

Monday 22 August - 2:30 pm - Salle Cinéma

Home Suite (96')

The Waste Land (5')

Throwing Stones (11')

Dirty Pictures (14')

Monday 22 August - 9:00 pm - Salle Cinéma

The Girl Chewing Gum (12')

Associations (7')

Om (4')

Gargantuan (1')

The Kiss (5')

Dad's Stick (5')

Worst Case Scenario (18')

Flag Mountain (8')

The Man Phoning Mum (12')