

Kill the Spiders

DAVID ANDERSON

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John Smith's 1996 short film *Blight* opens with the image of a half-destroyed terraced house, its masonry crumbling away. Tree branches bob in the foreground. A passing car is heard. Birdsong too. A mother's voice calls out for her children: 'Jordan and Kim!' The camera cuts to other angles, but each shot is static, tightly framed, the field of vision split into blocks of house and not-house. As another voice says 'kill the spiders', things begin to seem unusual, stylized. A timber beam twitches on a broken wall, as if it were a length of balsa wood on a puppeteer's thread. The strings in the audio track swell, setting the expectation of a crescendo to come.

It's only after a few minutes of the house appearing to dismantle itself that a couple of labourers are revealed behind a falling wall. Hard-hatted, bare-chested figures, their ungloved hands pick apart the brickwork. Fragments of speech develop into phrases, coalescing into sense and breaking apart again: a form of narrative cut-up that aligns with the impression that this space, and the social relations it represents, is in the process of being wrecked. The musical accompaniment, by composer Jocelyn Pook, imbues the scene with an almost unbearable weight of emotion. A whole world seems to inhere in these bay windows and chimney stacks outlined against the sky: fragments of interior décor become metonyms for family, community, life. The spiders turn out to be part of a woman's memory of the outdoor toilet in her childhood home: her father would 'kill the spiders for me'. 'Sometimes you'd go in there and you'd sit on the toilet and you could see all these little legs twitching, you know, where he'd squashed those spiders. Oh it was horrible, and I still can't bear them.'

At the film's end we discover what it is we have been looking at. Tall capital letters on a corrugated-iron wall, which flash up word by word, read 'NO M11 NOT HERE' and 'HOMES NOT ROADS'. Diggers shunt huge volumes of earth back and forth. A large blue sign is shown: the Department of Transport's '£200m New Road Scheme Opening Summer 1997'. The film's score reaches a crescendo, with insistent, percussive keys and agitated strings clamouring over the combined noise of traffic and crumbling mud. The scene cuts abruptly, and the phrase 'kill the spiders' is repeated once more, its time coinciding with the depiction of a map of the road network around London: an arachnoid tangle splayed across the screen.

The houses in Smith's film were being destroyed to make way for the 'M11 Link Road', a stretch of what is now called the A12 that tears a gorge through East London from Hackney Wick to the Redbridge Roundabout, connecting the Blackwall tunnel to the motorway towards Stansted and Cambridge. Resuscitating an element of the Greater London Council's junked 'Ringways' roadbuilding plan as part of the Conservative government's 'Roads for Prosperity' agenda, the project met with fierce local resistance. This took the form of a series of actions running from 1993 to 1995, starting with the defence of an ancient Sweet Chestnut Tree at George Green, Wanstead, continuing with the establishment of a series of autonomous republics with names like Wanstonia and Greenmania, and culminating in a drawn-out standoff at Claremont Road, a small crescent of a few dozen houses off Grove Green Road in Leyton, which lay directly in the path of the proposed motorway. The protest had its own newspaper, *The Roadbreaker*, which kept readers informed of upcoming actions and carried lively reports of other successful road protests. It made the national debate too. In Parliament, the local MP Harry Cohen even sought to frame it in terms of international significance, comparing the Department of Transport's use of 'a private army to occupy the self-declared free state of Wanstonia' to 'the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait'. The Link Road, he said, would carve up communities like 'a car-roaring equivalent of the Berlin Wall'.

Such links between the local and the global would have pleased the protesters, who tended to see cars not only as 'the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement', as Roland Barthes once put it, but also as a key engine of post-war consumer capitalism. Sandy McCreery has written that, by the mid-1980s, 'some estimates suggested that as much as half of the world's measured economic activity might be concerned with making, fuelling, maintaining, and administering motor vehicles.' Road construction, it was thought, didn't respond to a need for new roads so much as prop up demand for more cars. Yet protesters could still disagree over tactics and strategy. The group behind the radical magazine *Aufheben*, for example, shared the view that 'the motor industry serves as an indicator for the whole economy' but thought that the protest should be more vigorous: the policy of non-violent 'fluffysm' was 'the worst form of liberalism', an approach born of weakness, undermined by quasi-mystical tree-worship and so preoccupied with image over substance that it amounted to little more than a 'virtual politics'.

The Link Road protest nevertheless attracted a broad church of supporters, engaging them in a project that, as the *Aufheben* group put it, aimed not just to stop 'this one road' but to create 'a climate of autonomy, disobedience and resistance'. This included not only local residents and veterans of other road protests, but also a substantial number of artists living in and around Claremont Road. Their presence contributed to a year-long 'festival'. Throughout 1994, the street was blocked to cars and turned into a public outdoor living room, just as protesters were busy burrowing underneath the houses' actual living rooms, constructing a fortress that would be difficult for police and bailiffs to dismantle (and thereby refining a technique used most recently at Lützerath, Germany, where energy company RWE is about to dig an enormous new coal mine).

The result was, according to McCreery, a space with 'no formal social organization' in which 'every moment of every day amounted to a political act'. Even if he doubts how much 'radical French theory' the protesters were actually reading, their activities 'probably amounted to the most complete expression of situationist techniques ever seen in Britain'. And at that particular moment, the idea of treating streets like beaches was especially heated. On 3 November 1994, weeks before the protest site was cleared by hundreds of police and bailiffs, royal assent was granted to Michael Howard's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. Alongside the notorious 'stop and search' legislation, this also codified specific 'powers in relation to raves' – that is, to shut them down – and even included a legal definition of music as 'sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats'.

The cinematography for *Blight* began when Smith, one of the artists living on Claremont Road, came home one day 'to discover that the house next door to me had been partially demolished, revealing a mural copied from the poster for the film *The Exorcist* on an upstairs bedroom wall.' He soon noticed a tattoo of a spider's web on the elbow of one of the workers, something that added to the 'sinister theme' established by the mural and reminded him of the road network. The woman who says 'kill the spiders' was one of the first residents he interviewed when gathering material for the soundtrack, asking them to reflect on their memories of life there. This set in motion a 'serendipitous chain of events' that Smith 'never could have anticipated when the work began'.

Made over the course of two years, the film reproduces this chain-of-association methodology. Midway through, the recurrent phrase 'I don't really remember' takes on a particular musicality, half-spoken, half-sung, circulating in new configurations. The prosaic is transfigured into poetry: 'plaster roses', 'imitation primroses', 'wood chip', 'the most hideous red wallpaper', 'pastel green and cream', 'that turkey colour'. 'You always had like a typical tiled fifties fireplace and open fire and all that'. These snatches of speech retain a sense of arising in the natural ebb and flow of conversation, and yet the intricate, cut-up, highly composed texture of the work – the mix of speech and atmospheric sound, the interplay of audio and image – flags the status of the film as artifice, troubling the relation between documentary and fiction, as well as gesturing to the idea of 'construction' as such: the relation between rearranging material things – paving slabs, tarmac, lengths of 16mm film – and creating new realities.

This accords with Smith's preferred film-making practice, which often uses spoken narration to unsettle the status of what we see. Born in Walthamstow in 1952, he studied at the Royal College of Art and was associated with the same 'Department for Environmental Media' that produced other prominent artist-filmmakers including Patrick Keiller. Works like *Associations* (1975), which projects seemingly discordant imagery based on the mishearing of words in a deadpan voiceover track, or the one-minute-long *Gargantuan* (1992), which plays with scale and framing to resolve into one central pun on 'my newt', are typical of Smith's distinctive approach: high seriousness laced with absurdist humour. The films he is perhaps best known for, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) and *The Black Tower* (1987), use minor disruptions in film-making conventions to produce dramatic changes in the way we interpret what we see and hear. In *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a camera pans across a busy Hackney intersection; the film appears to be an unstaged actuality, but a director's voiceover seems to order people around as if they were characters, a device that becomes ever more unlikely until it finally implodes. In *The Black Tower*, a mysterious matte-black building near Smith's home is shot from a range of angles that seem to make it appear in totally different locations, apparently stalking the increasingly paranoid narrator.

In a 2013 discussion with Ian Christie, Smith reflected on having only been 'vaguely' involved in the campaign against the M11 Link Road. *Blight* wasn't screened until more than two years after Claremont Road was cleared. Looking back, the sense of it as a protest film was something Smith attributed mainly to Pook's emotive audio track, which (the reason for his uneasiness about music in film) 'tells you how to read the images'. From today's vantage point, another thing that stands out is how the film documents the construction of one type of infrastructure while forming an elegy for another – the system that afforded state funding to projects like this one and, crucially, supplied a platform through which a wide audience could be reached. *Blight* was part of a series called 'Sound on Film', funded by the BBC and the Arts Council, and was screened on BBC 2 at 7:30pm. Such a slot would hardly be expected for an 'art film' today, and Smith's own most recent retrospective, or 'introspective', as he termed it, took place between the ICA and the tiny Close Up Cinema in Sclater Street.

When *Blight* was shown at Close Up late last year, it was programmed alongside *Home Suite*, a hilarious account of the bizarre 'improvements' made to Smith's Claremont Road home over the course of ten years during which eviction always seemed imminent. On the day of the screening, the news ran reports of a cyclist who had been run over by a cement mixer in Berlin. First declared dead, this was revised to 'braindead'. She later died in hospital. It was a horrifying story, but its newsworthiness was deemed not to be the death of the cyclist, nor the fact that an unknown passer-by had subsequently stabbed the driver of the cement mixer. It was the fact that the fire brigade vehicle containing the special cutting tools necessary to free the cyclist had been delayed by protesters from a climate-activist group called Letzte Generation, who had glued themselves to a nearby road. Two of its activists were later arrested specifically for the crime of holding up emergency services.

Whether Letzte Generation, Insulate Britain or Just Stop Oil, the practice and the resulting mediatized imagery of many such protests have often been the same: prone protesters, raging motorists, police armed with specialist solvents. The death of the cyclist on the Bundesallee was a crisis moment for this mode of resistance, in a context where it seemed more urgent than ever. In Britain, Liz Truss's short-lived proposals for an 'unchained' nation saw the renewed prospect of a major roadbuilding scheme for the first time in decades. In fact, the apparent absence of one hitherto was largely illusory. As Joe Moran notes in his book *On Roads* (2009), although New Labour had nominally cancelled Thatcher's plans for the 'great car economy', the Blair-Brown years saw 'a roadbuilding programme more than double the size of the Tory one that had sparked the protests of the 1990s' – it's just that this work was dissimulated through private companies and received very little press attention. The difference with Truss was that – symptomatically – her styling was decades out of date.

Smith might be unwilling to acknowledge *Blight* as a protest film, but it is nevertheless interesting to consider it as one. The critic A.L. Rees has called it 'a lament for the streets' that is also 'a warning, an alert call, for the future'. Watching it today, perhaps the most striking thing is that, simply by *not* looking at the road, the film seems to transcend it, offering up the possibility of a mode of habitation that isn't obsessed with continually getting somewhere else. At the same time, the wider context surrounding its making reveals a complex ecology of resistance in which the act of doing without need not be imagined as some kind of penitent self-abnegation, but rather a joyous embrace of different ways of thinking and being in which four wheels are not always the answer.

Read on: Julian Stallabrass, '*Irony Error*', NLR 123.

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