NEW REVIEW OF FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES
2025, VOL. 23, NO. 1, 84–100
https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2025.2461485

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Bedding down precarity: John Smith's *Hotel Diaries*

Dirk de Bruyn

Faculty of Arts and Education Burwood, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

ABSTRACT

John Smith's seven-part *Hotel Diaries* series (2001–7) documents his ruminations on Bush and Blair's 'War on Terror' post 9/11. Smith has been making experimental/avant-garde films since the 70s initially on 16 mm and here digitally. His works playfully deconstruct the filmmaking process and engagingly break down the audience's conditioned expectations of narrative. He migrates this series into international hotel rooms, extending his previous neighbourhood-based approach out of the local in relation to surveillance, global media, and information flow. The series was shot mostly after midnight in mundane hotel rooms while attending international film festivals in Europe. A preoccupation with a frozen television image encountered by chance in the first hotel room triggers the project. There is an intimate resonance in the deftly recorded, low budget camera movement around cloistered hotel spaces, with the flow and eddies of diarised impressions continuously impacted by the omnipresent television news. Each module is recorded in a single take with no editing. This analysis explores an insomniac's hypervigilance and the crossovers between tourism, televisual gazing, and the rise in surveillance technologies through Vilém Flusser's insights into the *technical image* and groundlessness. Special attention is drawn to the nimble camerawork employed to map these closeted spaces and its sustained coupling to Smith's impromptu diaristic voice, an experimental form that has metamorphosed out of the formal techniques from Structural/Materialist film, whose anti-illusionist stance focuses on form ahead of content, as this work still does. How suited and critical is this form of documenting daily life to the current situation of information overload?

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 21 December 2024; Accepted 8 January 2025

KEYWORDS Precarity; surveillance; technical image; tent; warfare

> The fact that the danger with shelters such as tents is not their falling down but their being swept all over the place by the wind. That will change. (Flusser 1999, 55).

This series of seven no-budget shorts registers George W. Bush and Tony Blair's 'War on Terror' era through Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel/

CONTACT Dirk de Bruyn dirk.debruyn@deakin.edu.au

Palestine. They were made while filmmaker John Smith toured the international film festival circuit. Historically the series sits pre-Covid and post-9/11 and resides in the industrial revolution's third phase, predicting and accommodating the fourth (Schwab 2016). Works in the series are *Frozen War* (Ireland, 2001, 11.25 mins), *Museum Piece* (Germany, 2004a, 12.31 mins), *Throwing Stones* (Switzerland, 2004b, 11.01 mins), *B & B* (England, 2005, 8.22 mins), *Pyramids/Skunk* (The Netherlands, 2006-2007, 18.54 mins), *Dirty Pictures* (Palestine, 2007a, 14.28 mins) and *Six Years Later* (Ireland, 2007b, 8.28 mins). The cloistered rooms are found film sets whose architecture and furnishings link through impromptu association and coincidence to contemporary global political events. Smith fills each room with private voice and visual reflections, both material and metaphoric. Although this series was completed more than a decade ago, its oblique narrative strategies are examined as a productive creative response to the proliferation of digital and surveillance technologies colonising our bodies.

Smith's acclaimed early film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), was considered at the Structural/Materialist film movement's margins. 'Structural/Materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist. The process of the film's making deals with devices that result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process' (Gidal 1975, 190). Whereas Structural/Materialist film's core reflexivity was material, Smith's approach interrogated cinematic conventions:

> Although I did not embrace the movement wholeheartedly its propositions were fundamental in the formation of an approach to film-making that I have pursued consistently ever since. (Smith 1997, 3–4)

> And further: Although I use narrative, the work is anti-illusionist, without a doubt. It deals with it in a different way, though. (Smith quoted in Frye 2003).

This difference is here productively framed through Vilém Flusser's *technical image*, a concept introduced into German Media Theory in the 1980s where it framed digital media's emergence in photography, and predicted shifts between the industrial revolution's third and fourth iterations. Interestingly, Flusser's German and Brazilian (Portuguese) writing became available in English during the period of this series' production. Flusser's *technical image* extends Structural/Materialist film's focus 'on the signifier rather than the signified, on form ahead of content' (Michelson 1974, 15) into digital media. For Flusser, 'To decode a technical image is not to decode what it shows but to read how it is programmed' (2011, 48). Form's primacy remains key to Flusser's *technical image*: 'Ontologically traditional images mean phenomena, while technical images mean concepts' (2000, 14). Smith affirms this emphasis: 'no images in the film are innocent' (quoted in Parker 2014).

Flusser's writing on migration (particularly its resultant groundlessness), nomadic tents, and the primacy of the recording apparatus are also deployed here. 'Groundlessness thus becomes a constant process of self-alienation, of abandoning one's "Self"' (Flusser 2017, 91). Flusser describes the rootless flower in a vase on a dinner table with its tendency to sprout roots. 'The rootless flowers' tendency is the climate of groundlessness' (Flusser 2017, 19). In the *Hotel Diaries* series, Smith becomes the rootless flower, removed from the local. Each hotel room becomes this flower's vase.

The films are readable as a case study for Flusser's proposition: 'When images supplant texts, we experience, perceive, and value the world and ourselves differently, no longer in a one-dimensional, linear, process-oriented, historical way but rather in a two-dimensional way, as surface, context, scene' (2011, 8). Each module, discussed in sequence below, is a scene, an illustrated media surface where ostensibly spontaneous contexts and their relations are laid bare.

Hotel Diaries #1

The series is triggered coincidently in *Frozen War* (Ireland, 2001), on Smith's return to his hotel room in the still of night on 8 October 2001 while attending the Cork Film Festival in Ireland where his films were showcased retrospectively in a 'Focus on John Smith'. On switching on the television to BBC News 24, his video camera roams around a frozen television image. The camera moves but the image does not. It is the image of a man's face caught in speech, a mouth moving towards one of Francis Bacon's screaming popes, but not yet there. The text beneath reads: 'A second night of strikes completed, targets in Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad hit'. The time is locked at 1.41 am (Figure 1). Smith talks as he deftly roams his camera from the screen in one continuous shot to and from a 'useless' suitcase stand in the shadowy corner of the generic room. Is the frozen face on the screen of an expert or presenter? Smith ruminates. Fear and insecurity seep through this information flow stall. Inconsequential, little things disturb. Smith contrasts the heightened street voices seeping into the room to the screams of those lives terminated in Afghanistan. His coupled voice and camera move smoothly through the hour of the wolf, whispering; what's going on? What happened in London on Monday 8th of October 2001? Speculative fragments fill an absent narrative. Has the TV studio been hit? No answer. The film finishes with the artist mulling over a useless image, useless furniture, and a waste of time while light seeps in from under the hotel room door. Is a settled middle class English voice nudging into paranoia and hypervigilance?

Flusser has theorised such a 'global image scenario' spewing from televisual screens as hallucinatory and has highlighted, as has Marshall McLuhan, the value of the fixed eyes strategy of the sailor caught in

Figure 1. Frozen image.

a maelstrom in Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'A Descent into the Maelstrom' (1841) in such overwhelming experience:

> The technical images currently all around us are in the process of magically restructuring our 'reality' and turning it into a 'global image scenario'. Essentially this is a question of 'amnesia'. Human beings forget that they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned to hallucination. (Flusser 2000, 10)

Smith's journey through his seven videos decodes and unpacks this hallucination's programming as it flips into surveillance. Flusser further suggests that 'any criticism of technical images must be aimed at an elucidation of its inner workings. As long as there is no way of engaging in such criticism of technical images, we shall remain illiterate' (2000, 16). The trajectory through Smith's films elaborates a critical audio-visual literacy required to decode the unprecedented information and surveillance torrent of the fourth phase of the industrial revolution tagged as 'Surveillance Capitalism' (Zuboff 2019) and 'Techno-feudalism' (Varoufakis 2023). Like the sampling method learnt to look out of a speeding train to decipher a blurring landscape during the industrial revolution's second phase, a new form of pattern recognition is required to resourcefully mobilise our perceptual apparatus with speed in this new situation. We have entered the industrial revolution's fourth iteration, where surveillance capitalism colonises and mines our bodies and behaviours as raw material. Smith's fluid dialogic practice – grounded in the local, gestated in hotel rooms with a considered eye – offers a method for walking and linking through this unprecedented, technologically contested

space. The hand-held amateur camera extends the artist's hand, eye, and ear, and cultivates an impromptu voice.

Hotel Diaries #2

In the series' second film, *Museum Piece* (Germany, 2004a), a single shot from the bed begins on the frosted glass on a Berlin hotel's bathroom wall. Although real, the abstracted light is reminiscent of digital morphing effects available in digital editing software that blur and stretch *technical images*. The camera scans around the room and then moves quietly outside into the corridor at 2.30 am. 'Don't want to wake anybody up', Smith murmurs, but isn't that what the series tries to do?

News texts scroll from right to left at the bottom of the screen throughout the video. Frozen in *Hotel Diaries*' previous entry, the machinery of globalised misinformation is moving again, gusting through the room: 'Five killed and sixteen injured as US air assaults on Falluja continue'; 'Iraq war illegal in international law – Blair faces new allegations'; 'Terror suspects in UK prisons mentally ill after torture doctors warn'; 'Afghan leaders accused of war crimes to be given positions of power in new government'; 'US investment firm linked to Bush envoy concealed backstairs deal on Iraq debt'.

Smith relates his tourism during the day, of visiting the Jewish Museum, its imposing aluminium architecture. But he could not enter. Something stopped him which he says is 'really stupid', disconnected and ridiculous. Do these denials unveil a lurking Palestinian empathy? Is this unspoken negation identifiable as anti-Israeli? This precarity registers as a gap for the listening audience that they must fill. These structured thoughts appear circumstantial and improvised yet pre-meditated and refined; a further ambiguity. How many rehearsals did it take?

Liminal duplicities waft through this sanitised modular hotel room and corridor. Smith walks over and considers the logo-like carpeted floral motifs. The clean, organized corridor and rooms approach the clinical dust-free architectures of contemporary 3D digital animation and architectural models.

Commentaries about *La Strada*, Schindler, Siemens, the Jewish and Holocaust Museums, and the mechanics of a hidden electric blind define the space. These objects speak to a sublimated Palestinian-Israeli tension. Smith comments on the bold design composition of a bottle of wine and glasses, water and nuts disturbed by his wallet. The camera rests on curtains that cover a 'fantastic electric blind' whose mechanics remain unseen. In the corridor, there is a museum piece encased in glass, a slick metal piston-like remnant from the Siemens war factory, on which the hotel was renovated. He mentions a familiar film playing silently on the bar wall downstairs – visual wallpaper, its voice silenced.

It was Fellini's florid *La Strada* (1954), now surviving as a mute neutered memory stroking the artist's peripheral vision, like lift music fogs auditory space. He mentions a news report about the concrete blocks painted for the Holocaust Museum with anti-graffiti paint by the same company that had once produced the gas for gas chambers that exterminated mass numbers of Jews during World War II. This is an ethical problem for the architects as no one else makes this paint. I am reminded of Matt McCormick's *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal* (2001) which, in focusing in on graffiti's removal, playfully identified minimalism as post-graffiti art.

At the end of the corridor the camera moves to a blank wall, 'a space left for your imagination'. An elegy to minimalism? My imagination conjured up the emptied painted images of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and Russian Constructivism: Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), Rothko's *Colour Fields* (1940–70), Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) and Frank Stella's *Arbeit Macht Frei* (1967), works also punned in McCormick's imagined post-graffiti art.

The video terminates in a mirrored lift, an extended field, an ambiguous reflective enclosure/expanse. The filmmaker's talking head and camera blend together into a dark shadow facing its audience. The moving mouth registers the lip-sync remnant amputated from the hotel bar's *La Strada* wallpaper stream. The compacted recording process is laid bare. The camera pans to a label that reveals the lift's maker, Schindler (Figure 2). The lift door closes, framed as the curtains covering the hotel room's mechanical blind. This surface scrolls past as one continuous stream of consciousness, unedited hand-held camera fly-through.

It's worth placing Smith's sublimated Holocaust archaeology next to Anselm Kiefer and Chantal Akerman's art. In his 1967 initiated *Occupations/Heroic Symbols*, Kiefer photographed himself performing Nazi salutes in a series of European locations, designed not to resurrect but to prompt his fellow citizens to remember. Though present, such direct critical action is more deeply embedded in *Museum Piece's* archaeology and deflected into a contemporary focus on Palestine by Smith. In Akerman's professionally funded feature *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), we follow Anna Silver (Aurore Clément) through Europe promoting her latest film. Her conversations in hotel rooms are filled with publicists, agents, family, and lovers. Akerman approaches and predicts Smith's more precarious register in the final scene where Anna lies on a bed, sinking into a silent melancholia while absorbing a promenade of commitments emanating from her answering machine.

Museum Piece won the main prize in Cork in 2005. The International Jury Statement read:

Figure 2. Schindler's lift.

> Using the smallest means to tell a great deal, Museum Piece is both a personal film and also a reflection on social and political issues, combining humour with serious commentary on past and present concerns. It brings to the foreground the difficulties of taking a position, facing the complex realities of our times. ("International Jury Statement" 2005)

These difficulties and complexities have shifted since Kiefer and Akerman's actions into acts of imposed mobility. As Smith says of his own work:

> They're wilfully simple. I've got myself into trouble at film festivals when I've won prizes for those films, particularly in Cork when I won the main prize for *Museum Piece*. I had to make a speech, and I said that it gave me particular pleasure to get a prize for this film because I'm a great believer in economy, and this film cost €7, or the price of one DV tape. And afterwards I had so many really angry young filmmakers coming up to me, saying 'I borrowed £10,000 to make my film, and yours is a load of shit!' (quoted in Bradshaw 2010)

Hotel Diaries #3

Throwing Stones (Switzerland, 2004b) starts by looking out of a barred first floor window into the Winterthur night, as the church clock strikes 4 am. As in *Frozen War*, Smith was here accompanying a retrospective of his films at the local Winterthur Short Film Festival. The camera moves from the window to scan a slightly ruffled bed as Smith closes the window to dampen the noise. The camera looks at the floor, the carpet and a discarded bag, and then moves to a desk upon which rests a brochure of the hotel façade lit up at night, some notes, a key and glasses. We see the bin under the desk as the camera moves across the rose wall past a black

television that is turned off but offers the filmmaker's shadow. We arrive at an Art Institute of Chicago poster and rest on people on the street, the Institute's façade, and a tower and its reflection.

All the while Smith talks disarmingly to his audience at their level, with a vocal delivery somewhere between the film diary and journalism. As he later noted in an interview:

> My film ideas nearly always come from things I encounter in everyday life. When Tony Blair decided we were going to join in against Afghanistan and Iraq, those ongoing conflicts became part of my everyday consciousness. It's in my head all the time. (Smith quoted in Sandhu 2022)

It is about George Bush's re-election; the recent attack on Fallujah, trapping 100,000 citizens; the burial of Arafat in Ramallah, his death in a Paris military hospital yesterday or the day before. Arafat's living in virtual house arrest in a compound captivated Smith. Coming home one night after hours, Smith's key would not work. A taxi takes him to a police station which has a key, but then another station has to be contacted. After two frustrating hours, a key finally opens the door after even more difficulties. Smith notes that his room number eerily echoes that of "Room 101", the torture chamber in George Orwell's *1984* (1949, 154), though Smith's room more closely operates like the sheltered alcove in which Orwell's Winston wrote his illegal diary:

> By sitting in the alcove, and keeping well back, Winston was able to remain outside the range of the telescreen, so far as sight went. He could be heard, of course, but so long as he stayed in his present position he could not be seen. (Orwell 1949, 7)

Smith points out that early on the taxi driver had suggested that he throw some stones at the only lit up window to ask the occupant to come down to open the door. As it turned out, however, that illuminated window was attached to Smith's own room, as he had mistakenly left the lights on. Throwing stones in Palestine obliterates your own house, which you no longer own. Throwing stones in Palestine does not open the door; those holding the key only withdraw it further. Smith's shift out of an East End local practice to a more unstable but formalised mobile nomadic trajectory around Europe underscores the shift from ownership to rental at the heart of Varoufakis' 'Techno-feudalism' (2023).

While roaming the poster, Smith reminisces about a US film tour that occurred at the same historical moment as the collapse of the World Trade Center. He had been in New York on 10 September 2001, the day before the attack. On 11 September, he was in Chicago for a screening at the Art Institute of Chicago, watching the attack live on TV. He notes those in the street looking skywards with anticipation and identifies a reflected twin

towers in the poster photograph. What was going to happen next? Smith's looking is still in some post hypervigilant mode on 13 November 2004.

Unlike the showing of *Museum Piece* in Cork, Smith did not have to wait a year to screen this film in a festival. During the prize ceremony that Sunday evening the film was shown, fresh off the press, further collapsing the official festival selection process available to other film artists. Is this an elitist or anti-elitist move?

Hotel Diaries #4

In *B & B* (England, 2005) Smith occupies a hotel in Bristol. We do not learn if he is attending a film event. This hotel is part of an American chain that embraces an England far removed from Smith's experience or understanding of it. The relentlessly roaming camera locks on two cryptic symbolic images on the bedroom and bathroom walls, and rests on a phone and toilet roll while recounting a telephone call between Bush and Blair. Bush wants to bomb Al Jazeera. There are legal blocks on a leaked transcription, draconian measures implemented to inhibit publication. The public knows, but it doesn't know. Smith ruminates on the two images as somehow communicating Britain and America's special relationship. Is this relationship somehow embedded in the amalgam of a pyramid, satyrs, goats and grapes in this first collagic image, a visual ode to an imaginary England? Its Latin title, 'Crescit in Immensum', can be translated as 'boundless growth'. The second bathroom image is also undecipherable; Smith attempts to describe it with words like 'Edwardiana', 'cabalistic imagery', and 'freemasonry', but none of it sticks. The room is plush, accentuated by gold trim and filled with decorative excess. Though this could be considered the most local space in this series, which is Smith's oeuvre, it emits the most extensive fog. We are reaching the stage where these repeating atrocities bleed into each other, the un-locatability of trauma rendering the details foggy and out of focus. Room service is twice a day yet Smith is relieved to find a bottle top and tissue under the bed. The room is clean but it is not clean. Clearly this examination is not committed to any mainstream sanitised spectacle. Smith is as committed to naming the dirt under his bed as the dirt emanating out of Bush and Blair's mouths.

In this series the artist resides alone in his rooms. The only conversational intimacy available is with his no-name viewer who is invited into the space, neutered ground compelled to be filled. You are not entering a home where the bookcase, paintings and photographs are the selected property defining the inhabitants' character and relationships.

Are we re-populating Peter Gidal's emptied *Room Film* (1973) with triggers for social and political thought? Gidal taught Smith at St. Martin's in London. *Room Film* eschews content, with erratic camera movement, low

illumination, and extreme close-ups. Gidal's anti-illusionist, materialist stance championed Structural/Materialist film's emptied signifier: 'to intervene crucially in film practice, the un-thought must be brought to knowledge, thought' (1976, 15).

Hotel Diaries #5

Pyramids/Skunk (Netherlands, 2006–2007) opens in late January 2006 at 3.30 am in a Rotterdam hotel, with Smith filming directly into a mirror, engaging with himself and his audience simultaneously. He informs the viewers wryly that he is one of the most famous experimental filmmakers in the world and shows the relevant catalogue text about a forum with Joe Gibbons and Leck Kowalski. This was an open event with an exclusive audience of 15, all friends. The text sits on his desk along with a list of films he has to watch as a short film jury member, deciding the most famous filmmakers of the future. The camera then moves to what Smith tells us is an overpriced Toblerone chocolate bar (Figure 3) from the room's mini bar. After complaining about chewing on its silver foil, he notes that Hamas has won the general election in Palestine, prompting the US to threaten to cut off all aid. The film finishes in mid-sentence, with Palestine remaining unstated. This first cut in the series announces a one-year durational pause.

One year later, Smith is back at the Rotterdam International Film Festival to show *Pyramids*. Residing in a lower quality hotel, he is no longer a jury member, merely an artist. *Skunk* focuses on a lonely broken tooth sitting on a desk's surface: the artist's tooth, dislodged at the airport having caused some discomfort and pain. The artist's open

Figure 3. Toblerone Bar.

mouth displays the missing tooth's origins. An East End working class smile? Bush did cut off aid, and the financial situation has grown in desperation daily. Smith notes that 400 individuals are still interred in Guantanamo Bay with no charge. It is also the fifth anniversary of the first use of the term 'axis of evil' by Bush. The camera pans to a wider view of the desk, showing the artist's glasses and locating damning reviews of the grimy hotel he is now in (complaining of smells, mice, and dead pigeons). Smith discounts these 'don't book here' suggestions and compares their privileged assumptions to the daily precarious grind of life in a Hamas-run Palestine. The camera pans around a TV, a gold framed mirror, a bathroom with a bidet, and an empty mini bar before settling on an array of cute animal stickers at the back of a wardrobe. These are Disney animal stickers of a skunk, hedgehog and two Bambis, triggering Smith to recall that Tony Blair's nickname was Bambi before he became a war criminal.

The discussion on deciding the most famous filmmakers of the future, the overpriced Toblerone bar, the quality difference between jury member and artist accommodations at Rotterdam and the forum's audience size all speak to the contemporary precarity of this marginal arts practice and 'class' hierarchies within it.

There has been a political shift from the term proletariat (active during Smith's practice's initiation) to the term precariat. The latter term surfaces during this series' production. In Marxist terms, the *proletariat* describes the working class selling their labor for a wage to persist. *The precariat* arises as an unstable outcome of Thatcher and Reagan's neo-liberal dismantling of the welfare state in which Smith grew up. 'The precariat consists of people who work part-time or eke out their incomes by seasonal or "gig" jobs' (Toshchenko 2018, 40). The art scene is structured onto such subsistence daily life. The shift from a neighbourhood-based practice into the unhinged nomadic hotel rooms of the film festival circuit is readable as Smith's accommodating this proletariat-precariat transmutation.

Independent film production has moved from 16mm in the 70s through Super 8, and then from various video formats into the SD, HD, and 4k formats of digital work editable on home computer screens. Portability has soared and costs have plummeted, with an explosion of boundary blurring work and genres. Smith's practice has gainfully negotiated these changes to continue exploring anti-illusionist forms.

Flusser places such technological change at social change's base. In his transition from analogue to digital forms, Smith's focus has receded from outside to inside his body.

> Every revolution is in fact a technical revolution. So is the present one. But there is one difference, so far techniques have always simulated the body, for the first time our new techniques simulate the nervous system. (Flusser 1988)

Is deciding the most famous filmmakers of the future an effective exercise, given the mass of work to be sifted through before reaching a jury? Rotterdam has brought in entry fees to service and reduce this specific data flow, adding further precarity to emerging artists making it through. Personal and professional identity, source and subject become selection markers before method and style. Smith's PC empathy for Palestinian daily life's extreme instability, which reaches fever pitch after 7 October 2023, is delivered through this subsistence art practice.

Hotel Diaries #6

> The screen wall blowing in the wind assembles experience, processes it and disseminates it and it is to be thanked for the fact that the tent is a creative nest. (Flusser 1999, 57)

Dirty Pictures (Palestine, 2007a) begins with a long roaming ceiling shot. Smith notes the ceiling tiles flipping with gusts of wind. Are we in a tent? We hear the sound before the camera eventually locates any tile movement. It is a comfortable hotel, only open for a week after renovations. It had been closed since an Israeli Army requisition during the second intifada in 2000 and completely trashed over this time. We are in the Bethlehem Inn in Bethlehem, Palestine on a high hill scrutinising the city and its surroundings, a valued military view. Smith is here as a tourist, not an arts event attendee. Rather than morphing into a couch potato drip-fed the news or a hypervigilant insomniac in an unlocatable hotel, Smith has entered his vicarious trauma's scene of the crime. Smith's voice stops as we move onto the balcony and survey the landscape, hear traffic and see posters and graffiti on the separation wall that winds from view into the distant hills. We hear shards of a mosque prayer call in the distance, a space occupied by the church bell piercing the European hotels. He talks again when we withdraw into the room – to the turned-off TV, the chair, the wall, the ceiling. This is the first hotel inspected in daylight.

A new daylight shot displays a camera bag and suitcase resting on a bed in a different hotel across the border in East Jerusalem. It is Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel. Smith has inspected yesterday's footage and is disappointed with camera lens dust. Is this a feigned preciousness, another way of communicating/avoiding the sullied corrupted space he has laid eyes on? This room tour is matched to a recall of events that occurred while travelling through a checkpoint/terminal between Israel

and Palestine. On a tour bus this is seamless, but as a pedestrian this is not.

Smith conjures up images of a cattle pen and a sheep dip. He is queued up with others inside an alienating concrete industrial maze with no guards visible. Loudspeaker announcements echo through. The queue is moving to a turnstile with alternating red and green lights siphoning the mass forward. Guards are visible behind glass and an airport type security arch with a possession conveyor belt is navigated here. A young Palestinian woman holds up the queue. Unfortunately the arch beeps every time she attempts entry. She is ordered to take off her surgical boots – revealing deformed feet, bandages, blood, and pus – but the arch still beeps. Resigned, she finally hobbles back into Bethlehem. At the end of the terminal are signs reminding those present to 'please keep the terminal clean'. The film ends. Does Smith invite us to remember the *Arbeit Mach Frei* signs at the entrance of the German concentration camps here? What line is crossed if we nudge Smith's description of livestock in a pen or sheep dip to a slaughterhouse?

Dirty Pictures shows how the flow of news and information wafts through these hotel spaces (via TV, computer screens and telephones) and swirls through Smith's body-centred deliria. At the same time, the nomadic precarity of tent culture frames the artist's rhizomatic roaming across Europe and the Middle East. Smith is not in search of watering holes but prestige and an audience for his practice's critical visibility. This art scene itself has historically moved out of the local – the open screenings and artist-curated programmes at the London Filmmakers Co-op and St. Martin's Art School classroom in the 70s, for example – and into a globalized network mapped in this journey. The tent wall has historically stored images as carpets and oil paintings, projected and networked images:

> In a tent, things are experienced; it assembles experience, and this experience is subdivided and diversified by means of the tent wall. The fact that the tent wall is woven- i.e. a network- and that experiences are processed on this network is contained within the word screen. It is a piece of cloth that is open to experiences (open to the wind, open to the spirit) and that stores this experience. (Flusser 1999, 57)

These hotel rooms are present-day tents coursing digital media. They are sites to process experience on the run, in pre-reflective mode, in preference to the accumulating possessions archived and trophied at home. Smith initiates a dialogue of associations intimately and in compacted form. Their residue lingers well after the film's completion.

Hotel Diaries #7

Six Years Later (Ireland, 2007b) only screens within the series. It is not a stand-alone work. It wraps up the journey, with repetition, and wheels within wheels. Smith admits he is back in Cork after suggesting he is in Antwerp, Brussels, Birmingham, Bremen or Barcelona. There were no hotels like this in Cork in 2001. For Smith, half the world is a swanky hotel and the other half a bomb site. Tony Blair is no longer PM but Middle East policy has not changed. Blair is now a peace envoy equating fundamentalist Islam with fascism. Iraqi detainees were mutilated by British soldiers, the news reports. The *Irish Independent* on the desk reads 'Cut in top rate ruled out by Cowan'. The camera pans up from the desk to the bottom of the television screen. The time is 1.40 – one minute before the screen froze six years earlier. Close enough. The text scroll goes through stock exchange financial figures. Smith notes it is time to get more oil with Britain reclaiming Antarctic territories to access oil and gas. His country's politicians are behaving like they always did, still aspiring to empire. Smith is losing it a bit; his mouth is dry and he goes to get some water. End. Has his spoken deliria translated into a body-centred fever?

This work's modular architecture of the seven shorts sets up reception in several forms. Each work apart from the last can be shown individually, as they have been. The series is presentable as a feature and as an installation of all the parts at once. The gallery visitor can move through its architecture employing a self-paced, self-regulated sampling method, which echoes the spontaneous method of its construction. Such modular strategies have been used extensively in experimental film historically, partly as a way of dealing with the financial imposts on the artist (particularly in 16 mm film), and time management for the individual artist.

Surveillance

This series attends to a historic flip in Structural/Materialist film from a critical practice questioning narrative and illusionism materially into a toolbox of code servicing surveillance. A discussion of Smith's early *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) and its relationship to the *Hotel Diaries* series clarifies this flip.

The film director's predictive control in Smith's early experimental documentary, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (TGCG), has migrated into artificial intelligence's programming. The film's dry humour was gleaned from François Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973) in which the director instructs his actors, even directing a dog to urinate. Smith employs this method over the whole 11-minute film to direct a public incidentally documented at an East

End intersection in a single take on 16 mm film. The voice-over, scripted after the shooting to precede the activity recorded, retrospectively choreographs the pseudo public actors. Before we see a stationary trailer inch out of frame and a girl run across the street, for example, we hear 'move the trailer to the left, and I want the little girl to run across, now' (0.20). Similarly, while a bespectacled young man in a raincoat crosses the frame, the voice-over notes that 'this young man has robbed the local post office and is attempting to appear inconspicuous' (8.56).

In the series the local public space surveyed in *TGCG* migrates into a dislocated hotel privacy. The technical migration, from the rigors of the heavy-duty tripod and 16 mm Arriflex camera to the compact hand-held video camera, enables a critical mobility. A fertile move for what happens next? The voice-over is transformed from the film director's authoritative voice to an artist's inner ruminations. Today privacy and personal freedom have receded from a street infected with surveillance cameras to a hotel room that avoids their prying eyes.

A newspaper article on a Chinese facial-recognition surveillance system that publicly shames jaywalkers underscores this technological shift (Thomson 2019). AI programming automatically places the pedestrians' images on nearby screens with their names and ID numbers. This pervasive Chinese system identifies any of its 1.4 billion citizens in three seconds. Computer processing speed and AI enable 'live' facial recognition, flipping Smith's playful conceptual intervention in *TGCG* into a live surveillance control machine. This surveillance system digitally projects the physical architecture of the checkpoint/terminal Smith describes at the Palestine/Israel border in *Dirty Pictures*.

In conclusion

The *Hotel Diaries* series offers a constructive creative response to the impact of the industrial revolution's fourth phase. In its withdrawal from *TGCG*'s surveyed local public space into the cloistered hotel room, Smith's evolving practice performs Flusser's migrant groundlessness and re-enacts Winston's alcove diary writing in *1984* to sustain a personal fragmented narrative space.

The series demonstrates Smith's technical and recording strategies' continual critical and political relevance, a decade after their completion. His use of ambiguity, punning and stream-of-consciousness coincidence maps a field of relations, a layered compacted narrative form. In addressing trauma's unlocatability, Smith's practice attenuates and occupies that pre-reflective moment where meaning emerges.

For Flusser, this is the climate of groundlessness: 'This sentence is groundless because it would be absurd to say that it is either true or false, since it is

simultaneously both and neither. This hovering sensation is the climate of groundlessness' (2017, 20).

Importantly, in this fourth phase – shaped by AI, precarity, speed, surveillance, and information overload – this compacted method addresses Flusser's identified need to remain cognisant of where our images originate. By travelling to 'the scene of the crime,' the series agitates a resolution of Flusser's identified amnesia in both form and content.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dirk de Bruyn is currently Honorary Professor of Screen at Deakin University in Melbourne. He is the Author of *The Performance of Trauma in Moving Image Art* (2014). His writing on innovative film practices has appeared in *Screening the Past, Senses of Cinema, Animation Studies Journal, Found Footage Journal and Scan*. His multi-projector film performances, documentaries, and short animations have screened at numerous film festivals worldwide over the last 40 years.

ORCID

Dirk de Bruyn http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2478-9363

References

Bradshaw, Nick. 2010. "John Smith: Of Process and Puns." *Sight and Sound*. April 9. Accessed 15 January 2024. https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/john-smith-process-puns

Flusser, Vilém. 1988. "On Writing, Complexity and the Technical Revolutions. Interview in Osnabrück, European Media Art Festival, September 1988." Accessed 15 January 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyfOcAAcoH8

Flusser, Vilém. 1999. *Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*. London: Reaktion Books.

Flusser, Vilém. 2000. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books.

Flusser, Vilém. 2011. *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Flusser, Vilém. 2017. *Groundless*. Berlin: Metaflux Publishing.

Frye, Brian. 2003. "Interview with John Smith." *Millennium Film Journal* 39/40 (Winter). Accessed 16 January 2024 https://millenniumfilmjournal.com/39-40-interview-with-john-smith-frye/

Gidal, Peter. 1975. "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film." *Studio International* 190 (978): 189–196.

Gidal, Peter. 1976. *Structural Film Anthology*. London: BFI.

"International Jury Statement." 2005. 50th Cork International Film Festival. Accessed 15 January 2024. https://watershed.co.uk/archive-sites/hotel_diaries/films.html
Michelson, Annette. 1974. *New Forms in Film*. Montreux Exhibition Catalogue. Montreux, Switzerland: Imprimerie Corbaz.
Orwell, George. 1949. *1984*. London: Secker & Warburg.
Parker, Guy. 2014. "Museum Piece." *ArtSlant*. March.
Poe, Edgar Allan. 1841. "A Descent into the Maelstrom." PoeStories.com. Accessed 15 January 2024. https://poestories.com/read/descent.
Sandhu, Sukhdev. 2022. "Toilets, Towers and Tony Blair: The Crazy World of Cult Film-maker John Smith." The Guardian. October 1. Accessed 15 January 2024 https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/sep/30/toilets-towers-and-tony-blair-the-crazy-world-of-cult-film-maker-john-smith.
Schwab, Klaus. 2016 "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond." World Economic Forum. January 14. Accessed 15 January 2024. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-meansand-how-to-respond/ .
Smith, John. 1997. "Real Fiction." PhD dissertation, University of East London. Courtesy of British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection.
Thomson, Billie. 2019. "China's Facial-Recognition Surveillance System Publicly Shames Jaywalkers by Putting Their Pictures on Big Screens to the Shock of Pedestrians." Daily Mail. November 9. Accessed 15 January 2024. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7664797/Chinas-facial-recognition-punishes-jaywalkers-putting-pictures-big-screens.html.
Toshchenko, Zhan. 2018. "A New Social Class: From Proletariat to Precariat." *Review of Nationalities* 8 (1): 39–51. doi:10.2478/pn-2018-0003.
Varoufakis, Yanis. 2023. *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*. London: Jonathan Cape.
Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Hachette: Public Affairs.

Filmography

Akerman, Chantal, dir. 1978. *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. Neuilly: Gaumont.
Fellini, Federico, dir. 1954. *La Strada*. Venice: Paramount Pictures.
Gidal, Peter, dir. 1973. *Room Film*. London: Peter Gidal.
McCormick, Matt, dir. 2001. *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*. USA: Matt McCormick.
Smith, John, dir. 1976. *The Girl Chewing Gum*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2001. *Frozen War*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2004a. *Museum Piece*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2004b. *Throwing Stones*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2005. *B & B*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2006-2007. *Pyramids/Skunk*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2007a. *Dirty Pictures*. London: John Smith.
Smith, John, dir. 2007b. *Six Years Later*. London: John Smith.
Truffaut, François, dir. 1973. *Day for Night*. Cannes: Warner-Columbia Film.