



On the Street where You Live: The Films of John Smith

by Adrian Danks

... the films are based on the premise that pro-filmic events are secondary to filmic construction in the creation of meaning, that if you look hard enough all meanings can be found or produced close to home.
— John Smith ⁽¹⁾

John Smith is a master of withholding, his films are full implication rather than action.
— Cornelia Parker ⁽²⁾

The films of John Smith create a world from the “simple” experiences of living, breathing and being a filmmaker or artist in a particular place and time. Smith’s often humorous films produced over the last 30 years have inventively documented and probed his immediate surroundings, often not even moving much beyond the front door of his various abodes in a small area of East London (predominantly Leytonstone). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to describe Smith’s films as overly delicate, preciously insular or purely personal – assignments that the previous description might suggest – as his work sees within the minutiae of familiar surroundings a range of philosophical, aesthetic, technical and quotidian challenges and revelations that extend far beyond the realm of much other comparable cinema; bringing his work closest to such observational essay filmmakers as Patrick Keiller (with whom he shares a definitive, though in Smith’s case somewhat ramshackle, southern Englishness), Jerome Hill and Agnès Varda (in fact Varda’s 1975 film *Daguerréotypes*, a playful and personal documentary spun around the people who live in her street, is very reminiscent of Smith’s work). In film after film, Smith explores the cracks within and the tribulations of the world he confronts everyday, taking a closer look at and often transforming (verbally, associatively, just by observing from a different angle) things like a pane of glass, the discolorations of a mouldy ceiling, a hospital water-tower, the archaeology of an ancient toilet, an old shepherd’s proverb, or a work he was unhappy with some 20 odd years before. In the process, he makes us look more closely, not just at his films and the cinema generally, but our own surroundings, the everyday world that engulfs us but that we probably routinely dismiss as

a suitable subject for contemplation, art and imagination (I would add revelation to this list, but such a term seems inappropriate to describe the gentle, temporal and unpretentious pleasures of Smith’s work).

Such a description might suggest that Smith’s cinema is closest to that of such personality-based documentarians as Ross McElwee (*Sherman’s March*), Andrew Köttling (*Gallivant*) and even Nick Broomfield, but his work routinely, matter-of-factly, asks and “stages” more probing questions about film form, and what can constitute the “subject” of cinema, than any of these other filmmakers. Although he sometimes appears on camera and is often heard on the soundtrack – as character or more often “himself” – Smith’s films lack the ego-driven intensity and staged self-indulgence of McElwee and Broomfield (even more self-effacing than such closely-aligned filmmakers as Varda). Smith’s often personal cinema is much closer in scope and sensibility to a Stan Brakhage film like *The Child’s Garden and the Serious Sea*, a work through which the filmmaker discovers a world at the bottom of his garden. But Smith’s cinema is less self-consciously visionary, abstract and preoccupied with finding new modes of vision than Brakhage’s. Brakhage probed his immediate environments for revelations of vision and event, Smith just wants to look a little closer, to stay and “brew” for a while, to see new combinations and cut-price visions in the built but organic worlds that surround him. As Cornelia Parker evocatively suggests:

It’s as if by choosing as his subject the ordinary everyday things that surround us all and by scrutinising them closely, turning them over and inside out, he can find all the hidden complexity of the universe. The whole world brewing in a ‘Teasmade’. ⁽³⁾

While Brakhage attempts to transform vision through his often deliberately unfocused, haphazardly composed images (to see outside of the constraints of practiced modes of vision), Smith mainly just wants to show, record and document his world through a sometimes mobile (more so when Smith moves to video in the mid-1990s) but more often than not closed-off camera (a

conversational camera nevertheless that accompanies the words that fill many of his soundtracks). In the process, time and its critical impact on place becomes the key, gently moving leitmotif of his “economic” and prosaic cinema.

Smith’s cinema is difficult to encapsulate and describe, moving across the categories and boundaries of documentary, fictional narrative, conceptual art and the contemporary artists’ film, as well as various other forms of avant-garde cinema. Smith himself is somewhat uncomfortable (though characteristically accepting) with any attempts to pigeon-hole his work – it is perhaps best to say that along with the often artisan work of filmmakers such as Varda, Chris Marker, Corinne and Arthur Cantrill (to take an Australian example), and (sometimes) Derek Jarman and Chantal Akerman, it documents the day-to-day process or act of filmmaking, and art as a quotidian, living and incorporative process rather than as a rarefied means of heightened expression. Like all such cinema it can therefore be fitted into no single category, open to the vagaries, digressions and often-extended time-frames of filming, gathering, contemplating. Such cinema is still determined by choices, selections and exclusions and combinations made by the filmmaker (there is little that is sordid, salacious or even traumatic about their films) but is more open to “new” possibilities of content, style and representation (including the impact of changing technology). These films are also much more likely to refer to their own conditions of production – a point of almost constant awareness for Smith – as well as the spectator’s relationship to what is unfolding on the screen.

In so doing, Smith’s films often explore several of the key parameters of cinematic form but in a fashion unlike the more strident works of conceptual and structuralist cinema (a context of largely Co-op-fuelled, London-based filmmaking from which Smith emerged in the early to mid-1970s). As A.L. Rees has suggested, two of his earliest films – *Associations* (1975) and *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), both made while Smith was still a Masters student at the Royal College of Art – establish the key formal questions and experiments that propel pretty much all his subsequent work⁽⁴⁾. Though similar in many respects, these two films contrast, respectively, droll explorations of cinematic montage and the sequence shot. Nevertheless, I think it would be incorrect to suggest that there is anything particularly schematic about Smith’s exploration of these two key parameters of avant-garde cinema – his films are too playful and idiosyncratic to allow this – but such forms do create a structure upon which he hangs multiple digressions, associations, observations and jokes (creating a potent contrast to the often painfully playful work of Peter Greenaway in this mode – Smith’s films are often genuinely funny).

The principles of montage and the long take are also extended to the soundtrack of his films. Often filled with puns, associations, long digressions, personal testimonies, linguistic explorations and poetic reveries

of thought and language (just listen to the enjoyment at the sound words and their combinations the glazier-narrator appears to experience at points in *Slow Glass* [1988–91]), Smith’s soundtracks alternate between a variety of connections and disconnections between sound and image, long, extended stories (for example, the Poe-like narration of *The Black Tower* [1985–7]) and collections of alliterative and even “found” words (and music in *Lost Sound* [1998–2001]). Smith is also fascinated with the associative relationships thrown up by the dialectical contrast between sound and image (a semiotic obsession he shares with Godard), often running words and sounds over a collection of images in a manner that makes us question their connection and thus the “fidelity” of either component.



Still from *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976)

Such an approach produces its most hilarious and profound effects in *The Girl Chewing Gum*. The film consists of only two shots showing, in turn, a bustling streetscape in East London and a pylon-blighted country landscape that the narrator claims is “15-miles” away. These two shots are matched to a combination of ambient sound and matter-of-fact but somewhat urgent voiceover narration. On the soundtrack, the narrator appears to be directing all of the elements of the scene we are watching, moving even the fixed, concrete elements of the world – buildings, sky, etc. – to agree with his vision. The film does indeed look like a documentary – and, of course, in a Griersonian sense, in many ways it still is. At first, the spectator is carried along by the central conceit of the film’s formal structure, taken in by the familiarity of its sound and image combinations. It soon becomes apparent – as the relation between image and sound starts to lag, flocks of birds are instructed to fly through the frame, an outdoor wall clock is instructed to move its hands – that the voiceover is actually recorded after the fact, and that the film is predominantly an examination of the interpretative pre-eminence of sound, and particularly word, over image (*Associations* explores similar territory by presenting a stream of variously associative images

culled from Sunday supplement colour spreads that “respond” to the soundtrack). *The Girl Chewing Gum* could easily have become a throwaway parody of conventional documentary form – as is true of most contemporary mockumentaries which use the revelation of their fictionalised “reality” as both punch-line and central point – but instead it powerfully explores the links between image and sound, constantly making us aware – through a variety of subtle methods – of the multiple ways in which such films tend to guide our reading of the image, while taking on, at times, an almost surreal dimension. A key to Smith’s achievement in this film lies in extending this conceit to almost breaking point, reconfiguring the relationship we commonly allow to be created between sound and image. But, as Nicky Hamlyn suggests, this is fuelled by both a questioning and celebratory attitude towards such techniques: “He delights in the power of narration at the same time as he questions it”⁽⁶⁾.

Throughout most of the first, extended shot of *The Girl Chewing Gum* an alarm is heard on the soundtrack. It is not until towards the end of this shot that the narrator draws attention to this element (in a way he hasn’t addressed the soundtrack before) and relates it to an action unfolding on the screen – a young man in a coat walking into frame is said to have just robbed the local post-office, the narrator describing his sweaty hand on the gun in his pocket. Despite all that has come before, for a short time we wonder whether this is indeed true, if in fact it is a conceivable interpretation of the combination of the alarm on the soundtrack and the way the man walks through the frame. This quizzical moment pinpoints a key dimension of Smith’s cinema. Unlike many of his counterparts in the British avant-garde, Smith is mostly interested in the juxtaposition of verbal, cinematic and gestural language with forms of narrative storytelling. In some ways he uses his immediate surroundings and day-to-day experiences to discover the raw materials and new possibilities for this storytelling. In the first long take of *Home Suite* ([1993–4] his first long-form video work) these stories and legends are wound around a soon to be replaced, ancient-looking toilet, spinning out in the third and final shot of the film (its three shots are 96-minutes long altogether) to incorporate the destruction of the whole neighbourhood around Smith’s home to make way for the M11 Link Road, a project which completely ignores and obliterates anything of local topographical and cultural significance. Smith’s most inventive use of the “bricolage” of reframed or “found” images and voiceover narration is found in *The Black Tower*. Smith utilises the variously reframed, “ominous” image of a hospital’s water-tower – a built form that can actually be seen from the back of his house, across a graveyard – to weave a disturbing, symbolic tale of urban transformation and dread. Over the last 20 years, Smith’s films have become understandably preoccupied and concerned with changes in the topography of East London. The title of one of Smith’s most celebrated films, *Blight* (1994–6), indicating a shift of perspective, a somewhat bleaker

and more direct vision of urban decay and supposed renewal. It is quite revealing that this film also includes Smith’s most composed soundtrack, a combination of residents’ testimonies and specially recorded, emotive music orchestrated by Jocelyn Pook.

As suggested earlier in this article, the key concerns of Smith’s cinema are time and place. Two of the filmmaker’s most profound examinations of these pockmarked terrains are *Slow Glass* and *Lost Sound*. *Slow Glass* is an extended work structured around the combination of a digressive, at times annoying but ultimately quite moving voiceover of an old-fashioned glazier (voiced by sometime collaborator Ian Bourn) and a series of images largely “containing” glass forms and objects. In many ways it is an emblematic Smith film. Shot and compiled over a period of three years, it is testament to the painstaking, temporally defined approach that the filmmaker often takes to his work, documenting small and more dramatic changes in architecture, light and topography (it often shows the “same” place with the same framing at two or more different points in time). The film takes glass as its central metaphor, highlighting its definition as a liquid rather than a solid form (and thus, in the process, questioning the solidity of things that are seen through it). It is a film that dwells on both drastic and gradual change, but that is ultimately about a more general impermanence of things (buildings, professions, objects and even modes of expression). In a manner typical of Smith’s work, it makes us contemplate the apparatus of lenses, viewfinders, mirrors and screens through which we watch cinema, *Slow Glass* included.



Still from *Lost Sound* (1998–2001)

One of Smith’s most recent films, *Lost Sound* is equally responsive to the peculiarities and temporality of place. It is also a somewhat melancholy examination of both discarded sounds (shown in the “physical” form of strands of audio-tape) and a blighted urban landscape. It is in many ways a conceptual or process work – Smith and his collaborator Graeme Miller scouted a limited

area of East London over an extended period of time to find strands of discarded audio-tape; these “discoveries” were then filmed in situ, ambient location sound recorded, the tape itself “recovered”, digitised and then played over the recorded images and sounds. Typically, the subsequent combination of image and sound registers as both documentation and as a controlling and manipulating aesthetic technique (for example, it is sometimes reversed or played backwards, matching similar visual experimentation). *Lost Sound* emerges as a strangely moving film that indirectly documents the changing topography and impermanent occupation of the East London landscape – surprisingly the majority of found music on this tape is of East Asian or African origin or derivation. Like *Slow Glass*, *Lost Sound* lets us hear, taste and see the impermanence of things, the ephemeral details of sound, image, light, macro and microscopic events that make up a community. Although Smith's films are wonderfully non-systematic in their portrait of a specific community structured upon its environment, they are also profound, humorous and small-scale manifestations of a much more universal human experience.

When watching much of Smith's work I am also reminded of an episode of the classic British comedy *Hancock's Half Hour*. In this particular instalment Hancock spends the entire duration of the show just wandering about his home, spending time interacting with the small details of the bed-sit world that surrounds him. The drama of this episode is not conventionally dramatic, its solipsism not necessarily problematic, and its philosophical bent not particularly existential, and yet its insights into the way people relate to their environment are gently profound. It is from similar small moments and observations that John Smith creates such an equally captivating, garden-variety universe. He moves hesitantly from the micro to the macrocosmic, and from the world inside a bathroom, a toilet or bedroom to the street outside. As Smith himself self-deprecatingly states: “If I'm planning a film I'll start with one shot, and there won't be a second unless there's a reason for it. Basically, you're starting with your navel and then moving out from that”⁽⁶⁾.

ENDNOTES

1. Smith cited in “John Smith talking with Cate Elwes”, *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971–2002*, Picture This Moving Image and Watershed Media Centre, Bristol, 2002, p. 70
2. Cornelia Parker, “John Smith's Body”, *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971–2002*, p. 12
3. Parker, p. 12
4. A. L. Rees, “Associations”, *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971–2002*, pp. 16–7.
5. Nicky Hamlyn, “John Smith's Local Locations”, *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971–2002*, p. 44
6. Hamlyn, p. 57

Adrian Danks is Senior Lecturer and Head of Cinema Studies in the School of Media and Communication, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (University). He is also co-curator of the Melbourne Cinémathèque, and editor of Australian Content and *Cteq: Annotations on Film in Senses of Cinema*.

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