

[ONLINE ONLY]

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SMITH

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IN 1976, WHILST STILL A STUDENT AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART IN LONDON, JOHN SMITH MADE A SHORT FILM CALLED *THE GIRL CHEWING GUM*. TO THIS DAY THIS FILM – IN WHICH SMITH APPEARS TO DIRECT THE INCIDENTAL COMINGS AND GOINGS ON A BUSY DALSTON SIDE STREET, REMAINS HIS BEST-KNOWN PIECE OF WORK; AN ART-SCHOOL CLASSIC, PRESENTED TO WIDE-EYED FIRST YEARS IN COLLEGES UP AND DOWN THE COUNTRY. SINCE THIS EARLY SUCCESS, SMITH HAS GONE ON TO BECOME AN UNPREDICTABLE, UNSELFCONSCIOUS ARTIST, A FILMMAKER WHO CAPTURES THE HUMOUR, COMPLEXITY AND MUNDANITY OF LIFE IN THE UK. EVEN HIS NAME SUGGESTS A TRIUMPHANT, BRITISH ORDINARINESS.

Often associated with the structural materialist movement that emerged from the London Film Maker's Co-Op (now LUX) in the late 1970s, his work combines peculiar narratives in films like *THE GIRL CHEWING GUM* (1976), and *THE BLACK TOWER* (1985) with anarchic, intuitive editing processes. *LEADING LIGHT* (1975) and *HACKNEY MARSHES* (1977) are cut in-camera, and cast buildings, furniture and unsuspecting passers-by as malleable figures, animated by Smith's stop-frame techniques.

Much of Smith's work is rooted in East London, where he has lived and worked for almost all his life. Films such as *BLIGHT* (1997), which documents the regeneration of the area, and *LOST SOUND* (2001), a film celebrating the ethnic diversity of the capital through found fragments of magnetic audiotape, reflect a city changing around an artist.

John Smith's recent commissions have included *HORIZON (FIVE POUNDS A BELGIAN)* (2012) for Turner Contemporary. Last year Smith won Film London's Jarman Award in recognition of both his status as one of the leading artist filmmakers of his generation, and his more recent body of work which includes the film *Dad's Stick* (2012). However, at a recent screening evening in central London it is still his 38-year-old student film that people are eager to see. *THE GIRL CHEWING GUM* is a film that even Smith himself has returned to, collecting homages to it posted by fans

Q^{THE WHITE REVIEW} — To what extent do you consider yourself to be a structuralist filmmaker?

A^{JOHN SMITH} — I went to the RCA in the 1970s and at that time most of the artists talking articulately were generally the filmmakers. Whether you want to call it structuralism, or structural materialism or whatever, many artists at that time were making work that was generally to do with drawing attention to the illusion of cinema. Personally I don't like those labels very much, and in fact most people didn't really think in terms of labels, but there's no doubt that there were certain kinds of ideas that were current.

For me, these ideas were certainly very influential, and so at a very formative time in my life, I strongly believed that it was really important to draw attention to construction. And that is something that has stayed with me. All of my work, whether it does it all the time or intermittently, draws attention to its own construction, its own artifice. So I am kind of a child of my time. But there was also a dryness to a lot of the work that was being made around that time, and I found that problematic – so I started telling stories, or at least using words in some way to actually shape the work – in an illusionistic way. So my work was a bit hybrid.

Q^{THE WHITE REVIEW} — You've mentioned that when you begin to make new work, 'things radiate out from serendipity'. An idea forms around an unplanned incident, and you utilise the unpredictable nature of filmmaking in your work. Is that key to a film like *THE*

A^{JOHN SMITH} — The first ten minute shot is a street in Hackney in 1976, and I simply set up a camera and filmed what was going on in the street over that period of time. I just filmed one take, so what I actually recorded was completely serendipitous. Then, afterwards, I

GIRL CHEWING GUM?

recorded directions for the actions that appear in the street.

The intention is that when you start watching the film for a little while you believe that the actions are actually being directed but it rapidly transpires that they aren't. I direct the hands of a clock in the street to move – one hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour, and the other to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours – which I think is a pretty obvious giveaway that I'm not actually controlling anything.

What I was interested in when making the film is that even once you know that these things aren't being directed, such is the power of language that there is still a kind of magical quality to the word. Even when you know you're being lied to, it is still very easy to imagine the scenarios being described.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — So as well as being an exposé of the mechanics of filmmaking, or the tricks that filmmakers use to manipulate viewers, it's also a romantic attempt to exercise control over the uncontrollable?

AJOHN SMITH — You can look at that film in lots of different ways. When I made it, I wasn't thinking about any narrative or character for the director, i.e. me. I hadn't thought who the director was, or how one would relate to that voice. I was more interested in drawing attention to the power of the word and how it operates in voiceovers, documentaries, and captions in newspaper photographs. So I was interested in how documentary images are controlled, and how perceptions of such images are shaped by media and language. So although it's deliberately a humorous film it also has a serious subject matter.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — What are your responsibilities as a filmmaker? I assume you weren't chasing the people who feature in *THE GIRL CHEWING GUM* for release forms...

AJOHN SMITH — I've never had any qualms about that at all, but I have to say that when I first made the film, on more than one occasion when I showed it someone in the audience would get very upset about it. A few people who came from Northern Ireland expressed concerns, where there was an awful lot of British surveillance of people's daily lives going on at that time.

But I think the viewer is very aware that anything that is said about the people in the film or the way in which they are being shown is a construct. Because I am so obviously fictionalising what is going on in the film, I have no moral qualms about it. I think it's much more problematic when films purport to be documentaries, where we are told what somebody did or what somebody thinks, but it is still not a very accurate representation of that person's thoughts or actions. In a way *THE GIRL CHEWING GUM* is more honest in its manipulation.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — You seem to be interested in sudden dips or shifts in your narratives. Is wrong-footing the audience something you enjoy doing?

AJOHN SMITH — Oh absolutely, it's there in almost everything, in fact in nearly all of my work I tend to set up expectations which are not fulfilled, leading people

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — You are often ‘present’ in your films, either visually or through the techniques you use. To what extent are you happy to reveal yourself in your work?

down the garden path a bit. It’s very deliberate and I like that playfulness, not being sure where something is going, but also not being sure quite what it is you are actually looking at. I try and make work that isn’t immediately classifiable within a particular genre.

AJOHN SMITH — It comes back to revealing the means of production. I like making things slightly suspicious. I want people to think: ‘Is that actually true?’ ‘Am I looking at a naturalistic image?’ And although I do lots of things which are not naturalistic, I also try to make things which are factual and straightforward in documentary format, and try to make them as improbable as possible, so you still can’t trust what you see. For example, the *HOTEL DIARIES* videos – all of those are essentially just responding to what was in a place. I go into hotel rooms and treat those spaces as found film sets and construct narratives around the elements which are in the room, and tie them together with things that are going on outside – politically in the Middle East and Afghanistan and in relation to the conflicts that were going on at the time. If you look hard enough you can make connections between everything and sometimes when you do that successfully it becomes very suspect, because people think: ‘That can’t really be like that... he must have put that picture there, or arranged certain things like that.’

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Does it concern you the way in which people access your work?

AJOHN SMITH — I was quite amused really, because I never put anything online, I haven’t myself made anything publicly available, apart from a few clips on my website. Generally if you go to Vimeo and YouTube and type in John Smith you won’t find that much, apart from things that have been pirated. I was very amused by a version of *THE GIRL CHEWING GUM* on YouTube that had been on television in France and somebody had filmed it off the screen, onto VHS tape, in terrible quality, with French subtitles, the tape kept breaking up and it ends early, you don’t see the second shot because the tape runs out. And I like that, because it kind of gives a taste of the work, but isn’t purporting to be the work itself, and for a very long time I really didn’t like the idea of showing things online, certainly as any kind of substitute, because the quality was so bad. Now of course things are very different.

For me, the cinema, or at least a communal viewing experience is something that makes looking at films exciting. I think it’s true for most people, that part of the experience of cinema is actually going and sitting in a dark room with people you don’t know, and there is an atmosphere. If a film is successful it creates this – I don’t want to get mystical about it but I think there is a kind of feeling in the space that you get which is entirely different from looking at something on your own.

And in terms of my own work it's very important to me to actually be there sometimes, and sense how people are receiving it, and reassuring myself that I worked things out right, and that things seem to be being perceived in the kind of way that I hope. But then, people perceive things in different ways. There's the story of André Breton and the Surrealists – him and his mates used to go to the cinema and they would leave at the point at which they would start to realise what was going on in the narrative. What they wanted was that disorientating experience, and a lot of people do like that. They're not interested in what happens in the end, it's boring.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Your film *HORIZON*, from 2012, feels as though it references some of your earlier work, at least more so than your other recent films. Was this intentional?

A JOHN SMITH — That piece was actually the first piece that was commissioned specifically to be shown in a gallery. So right from the beginning I wanted to make a cyclical piece of work, something with a seamless loop structure. Making work with that kind of premise affects it dramatically. With some earlier pieces of mine the linear development over time is less important, because it's always been in my head that people might not see it in linear circumstances.

HORIZON, in a way does have things which are to do with breaking down the expectations. There are surprises. The film is just shots of sea and sky, and there's a feeling that you're looking straight out to sea, you could almost be on a boat, there is no sense of land. But then at certain point in the piece, somebody walks very close to the camera, and it looks as though they're walking on water, because what the camera hasn't shown is that the quayside pavement is just a few inches out of shot at the bottom of the frame. There are different elements in that piece where the intention is to confuse the viewer.

There is a lot of correspondence between *HORIZON* and other pieces, in that I'm trying to take completely naturalistic, representational images but then abstract them, through cutting and repositioning, so that they look less naturalistic. I want to draw attention to the improbability of the natural world.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think it's the changing light that gives that effect?

A JOHN SMITH — Yes, and in older films such as *THE BLACK TOWER*, one of the reasons for making the film was to do with what the tower looked like in certain lighting conditions. The tower in question is, or was, actually a large, metal water tank that looked a bit like a garden shed on the top of a brick column, this strange, enormous structure. The garden shed bit was painted in completely non-reflective black paint so, especially in a sunny day, you really couldn't see any detail in the black, or where the black roof joined the black walls, or where the walls joined each other.

So often the top, black part of the tower just looked like a hole cut out of the sky, an absence. It's like the empty plinth in Trafalgar square. I was fascinated by this column supporting this black polyhedron, and when you looked at it from different angles the configuration of the sides changed, but it remained looking like a flat, black hole, of different, multi-faceted shapes – so that was the initial reason for doing it, because I was curious about the way something looked. That's very often the impetus for making films. Other ideas come in later, but it starts with noticing something unusual.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The ideas that you extrapolate from this building seem to me to resonate with science fiction. How do you approach the writing process?

A JOHN SMITH — The narrative of *THE BLACK TOWER* is a good example. Given that I'm interested in the power of language in relation to images, and that film is exploiting the power of language, to suggest that the same building photographed from different angles might be in different places. But I was surprised when I first showed the film how much people got drawn in to the narrative aspect of it, because for me the story wasn't the important part of it, it was simply written around the places where I could see the tower. To me the details of the story weren't important. What was important was that the story was a pastiche of a horror, or mystery or science fiction, which to some degree is kind of immersive. I wanted to draw the viewer in, to get them involved in the psychology, but it was very light hearted and tongue-in-cheek and playful, so it's funny sometimes when people assume that the film carries some sort of serious message to do with mental health.

The film is shown in different countries, where English isn't the first language. If you can understand the voiceover there are of course little clues that undermine the story, and quite a few jokes in there too, but for example when I showed it in Japan, people were coming up to me afterwards and telling me that *THE BLACK TOWER* was one of the most frightening films they'd ever seen, because the humour was lost in translation.

I like writing. I spend a lot of time writing very little. I get obsessed with it.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Could you explain your project *UNUSUAL RED CARDIGAN*?

A JOHN SMITH — The *UNUSUAL RED CARDIGAN* was an exhibition based around the discovery I had made of somebody trying to sell a second hand VHS tape of my films on eBay. I'd discovered though ego surfing, googling myself. The tape was going for £100, which seemed like a lot to me for a clapped out videotape! This was pretty recently, so it was already long obsolete. So I became curious about the seller, and I'd never bought anything on eBay before, but I wanted to investigate and find out as much as I could about the character of this person.

I could see their name, and the town in which they lived, but their name was an online alias – ‘Serenporfor’. I wondered if it might be an anagram, for someone called Rose Pronfer, or Senor F Roper, and I started making up these characters. But the main revelation was that I realised that if someone was selling other things, then you could check out what their other items were. I found that Serenporfor was selling a diverse range of other things; cheerleader pom-poms, a green rabbit fur handbag, an unusual red cardigan, after which the show was named, a Resident Evil videogame.

The other items gave me no clue, other than perhaps to the gender, of who this person might be. I kept logging in to see if anybody had bid for my tape over the next few days, and nobody did. But I saw that all these other items Serenporfor was selling were really cheap, so I decided to buy as many of them as I could. So the exhibition featured prints from the eBay listings pages and photos of the packages sent in the post, as well as the objects themselves.

I think it comes back to ideas around improbability. I was quite surprised that quite a few people saw the show and thought that I’d invented the whole thing, that I’d bought these clothes and handbags for an exhibition.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — People look for tricks in your work now perhaps?

AJOHN SMITH — There are tricks in how you tell things. It’s in the telling that things appear to be improbable or incredible, again – a theme that arises often in my work.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Have you had any further dealings with Serenporfor?

AJOHN SMITH — I certainly didn’t want to know who the person was, because the show was about imagining that person. Through the things they were selling I took them to be a young woman, and it made me think about *The Girl Chewing Gum* – which is mentioned in the description of the tape – and the girl herself, who walks through the frame of that film very briefly and ends up having a film named after her. I know nothing about her but I see her all the time; I live back in Hackney now, I’ve probably passed her in the street, I don’t know. She was a young girl then, she’s probably a grandmother now.

The show was to do with confusing these two imaginary identities: the girl chewing gum, and the seller of the unusual red cardigan. I thought about contacting her, but I couldn’t decide whether or not to do it. I wondered if there was an ethical thing there, but when I produced the prints for the show, and the photos of the packages – many of which were odd-looking things wrapped in binbags, and looked as though they might contain body parts – I took a photo of the parcels before I opened them.

The photos show my name and address on the package, and so I thought I shouldn’t have any qualms about

depicting this person, because I am just showing her in a way she publicly presented herself on eBay. I'm sure she would be a bit surprised, but it's all just speculation, and if I'm making anybody vulnerable it's myself. So I decided not to contact her.

The interesting thing is that if you type Serenporfor into Google, lots of stuff to do with me and my work comes up. And of course, she must know my work as she was selling the videotape. I didn't hide my identity on eBay, so she was selling all this stuff to John Smith. Now there are tens of thousands of John Smiths, so when I bought the package I was half expecting to find a note inside it, or some other sign that the seller perhaps suspected that it was John Smith the filmmaker who was buying her things. And I was buying a diverse range of things, I mean I'm sure it's not normal for one person to just buy up everything a person is selling, so I think she must have suspected.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Would you agree that there's a radical simplicity in what you do?

AJOHN SMITH — I like to call it an economy. Economy is very, very important to me. If I'm making a film I'll start off thinking, 'OK I have one shot in this film, and if there's going to be a second shot then I need to kind of have a reason for it'. Paring things down to essentials. I try not to have superfluous elements in my work.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Are you a purist do you think?

AJOHN SMITH — I don't know, though when I first went to college it was graphic design that I studied, and I think I have retained a design sensibility. But I was also part of the structural film scene of the 1970s, and there was an interest in semiology – how one creates signification is fundamental to the work. I don't want any red herrings, apart from deliberate ones. Some of my films need a nonsense element, but I think the nonsense works better when there's logic behind it.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — So the simplicity is masking something more complicated?

AJOHN SMITH — Yes, but I think it's about language too – filmic language. For me, the films that are most interesting are the ones that in some way invent their own language. If you are inventing a language in a film people need to be able to learn to understand it. So the film actually has to teach people a language, and you can only do that if what you do is economical, and avoids misleading elements. It is similar to the way in which children learn, for example, through mistakes and repetition.