

Tanya Leighton



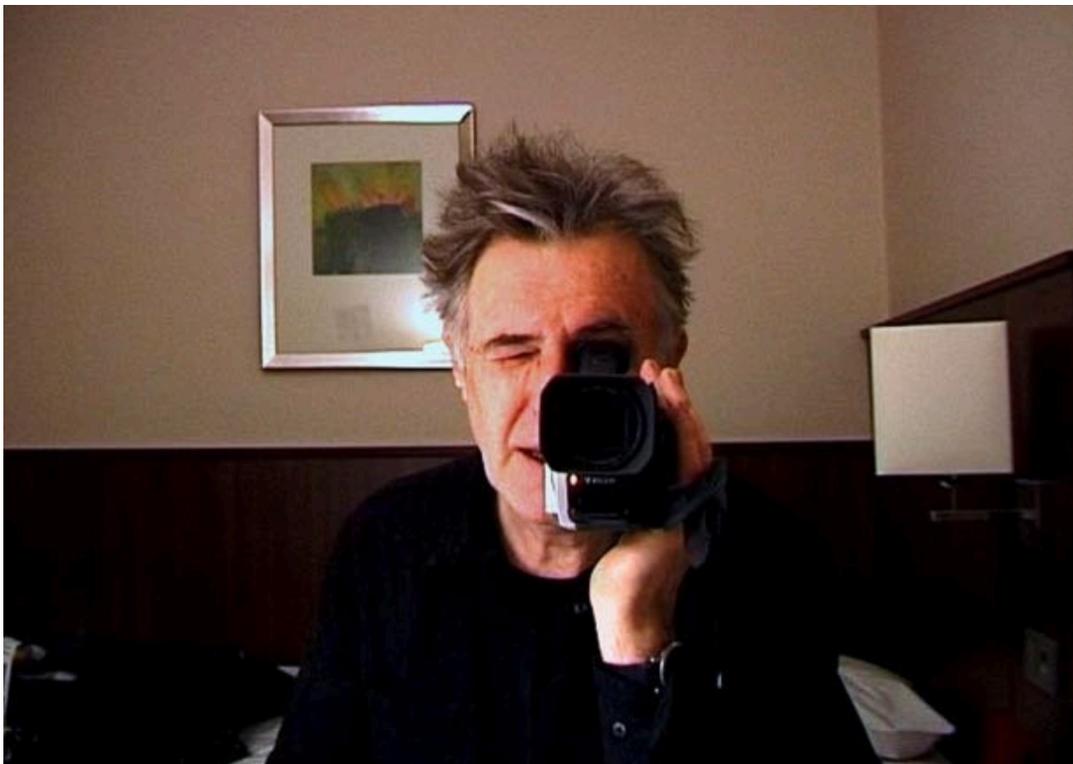
Notebook Interview

"I Don't Want to Make Films for Elites": An Interview with John Smith

On the occasion of two career-spanning retrospectives, the British filmmaker discusses his playfully anti-authoritarian art films.

Sophia Satchell-Baeza • 05 OCT 2022

Playing with Cinema, a retrospective of John Smith's work, is currently screening on MUBI. On October 1, 2022, a ten-week survey of Smith's films, "*John Smith: Introspective (1972-2022)*," launched at London's ICA, with further events at Close-Up Cinema. Screening 50 films to celebrate his 50 years of filmmaking, it is the most extensive look at his work to date.



Hotel Diaries (2001-2007).

MUBI, October 2022

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In the films of John Smith, nothing is quite as it seems. Even if you already come to them with preconceived notions about the destabilizing powers of the avant-garde, Smith's work still defies expectations. Its distinct marriage of formal dexterity and a clever, questioning, wily wit has been integral to the British filmmaker's art world-transcending appeal and ongoing success in the field of moving images over the last 50 years.

There are plenty of ways into Smith's expansive body of work, from prescient debates on the manipulation of reality in documentary film and the immersive powers of storytelling to the slipperiness of language and sound-image relationships. Refreshingly though, his films don't rely on having prior knowledge of avant-garde forms or artistic reference points to be appreciated and understood. Subverting the audience's assumptions of experimental cinema as dry or academically stuffy, these are not films that do away with narrative completely but that draw our attention to their construction through teasing suggestions and playful, considered trickery. They bring us into their immersive fold through humor or intrigue only to pull us back out again, making us aware of the deceptive red herrings and unsteady signifiers that lie in their wake. Lindsay Bosch rightly describes Smith's cinema as a "video art gateway drug," initiating new audiences into the pleasures and puzzle boxes of artists' moving image.

The Girl Chewing Gum (1976) is a quintessential example of this egalitarian vision for a self-reflexive, economical, and intellectually critical avant-garde film. Made up of only two camera shots, its ingenious economy of means is a great reminder, in the days of increasingly bloated budgets for artists' moving image, of how much can be done with so little. Now a staple of art school courses, it's famed as much for its technical ingenuity in undermining our assumptions about authorial control as it is for its refreshing sense of humor. And like so many of Smith's films, it is firmly rooted in the specifics of a place; here, the uninterrupted stream of life on a busy street corner in the then working-class East London neighborhood of Dalston. (Smith was born in East London, where he continues to live and make films, many of which don't roam too far beyond the peripheries of home.)

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Many have described Smith's comic sensibility as uniquely British, conjuring a world of perky puns and pints down the pub, and sending an anti-authoritarian two-fingers-up to those in power. From recording the changes to inner-city living under Thatcher to the more direct lambasting of Boris Johnson's nonsensical word salad in the recent *Covid Messages* series, Smith's films marshal humor as a sharpened weapon of attack. Their references may be British, but their quick wit and narrative-breadcrumb trails have more in common with the work of American structural filmmakers like Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, and George Landow than they do their British counterparts, so-called structural or materialist filmmakers like Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal. At the Royal College of Art (RCA), Smith studied under Gidal, who co-founded the London Filmmakers' Co-operative (LFMC), an artist-run organization for the production and distribution of artists' moving image. After graduating from the RCA, Smith became closely associated with the LFMC and was inspired by the vital discourses that were taking place there regarding the politics and aesthetics of artists' moving image. A lot of the work coming out of the LFMC at that time was doggedly anti-narrative and anti-illusionist, concerned instead with identifying the medium-specific qualities of film and the process of its construction, and in some cases hoping to decimate narrative entirely. As Erika Balsom notes, with *The Girl Chewing Gum*:

Smith took up the task of making a film that rejected the creation of a seamless diegetic reality in favour of emphasising filmic construction, reflexivity and the shifting dynamics between spectator and text. But in maintaining a keen interest, however critical, in the codes that governed the production of meaning within narrative cinema (be it fiction or documentary), Smith was positioning himself outside the orthodoxy of structural/materialist film.¹

I interviewed John Smith via Zoom on the day that Liz Truss was appointed the UK's Prime Minister, ousting Johnson, a recurring charlatan puppet in Smith's recent films, from the "top job." It's a cliché to say that an artist's work feels more relevant now than ever. But writing this days later as the exclusively fawning coverage of the Queen's death rolls on in the mainstream media, Smith's cinema is a potent reminder to always be critical of the narratives they feed us, no matter the historic occasion.

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The Girl Chewing Gum (John Smith, 1976).

NOTEBOOK: How did you start making films?

SMITH: I first became interested in film through doing light shows for bands when I was very young. The light shows started when I was 17 and carried on for about four years while I was at art school. They involved all the usual psychedelic stuff—liquid slides, boiling liquids, and graphic slide projections. A friend of mine's dad owned a photographic shop in Hackney, which sold government surplus equipment from the Ministry of Defense. So we had a supply of 16mm projectors that we could buy very cheaply. The shop also sold educational films on 16mm that would have been projected to soldiers or in school classrooms. Very often you had no idea what these films were about. Sometimes you had hints from the titles, things like "Your Skin" or "Your Hair and Scalp." Our projectors couldn't play the soundtracks, so the silent images often appeared very enigmatic and mysterious. I got very interested in making loops from these materials.

We often had several projectors playing at the same time, so I could show these

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loops next to each other or superimpose one on top of another. I rapidly got interested in how we always try to make sense of what we are looking at. If you have two film loops which have nothing to do with each other but you're watching them at the same time, they often seem to be connected. If you've grown up with mainstream narrative cinema, you can't help but make up stories from things, however unconnected they might be.

In the early days of the light shows, whilst still at school, I was making psychedelic paintings and decided I wanted to go to art college. My paintings were really awful so it was probably fortunate that my parents said they weren't going to support me to do a fine art course, but they would help with what they called a commercial art course, which was graphic design. I was lucky enough to do this course called Communication Design, which was a new thing in 1971. As well as graphic design, the course combined audio, film, photography, video, and creative writing. That's when I started making films of my own. It was a very broad and liberating course, run mainly by lecturers who had been thrown out of Hornsey Art School after the 1968 sit-in. So half of them were Marxists. It was great.

NOTEBOOK: How did *The Girl Chewing Gum* come about?

SMITH: *The Girl Chewing Gum* came about after seeing François Truffaut's *Day for Night*, a film within a film in which you see the setting up of a street scene which turns out to be in a studio. Everything in it is faked. Machines create fake snow on the streets and pedestrians are directed to go by. I was shocked when I saw that film. Even though I'd been making my own films for several years, I still thought that the extras in the background of mainstream films were real people going about their business. I didn't realize that everything was directed. I wasn't making narrative films but nevertheless, how could I have been so naive to think that they were actual passers-by in the street?!

NOTEBOOK: There is a strong sense in your films of a distrust against authority, whether it's the authority of the written or spoken word or that of politicians. Would you describe yourself as anti-authoritarian? Where does it come from?

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SMITH: I've never really thought about it, it's just the way I am. I've always taken it as a given that we should question authority. I grew up at a particular time, in the late 1960s, believing we would be part of a new, alternative society and thinking that the older generation's world was corrupt and stupid. I was very naive, like a lot of other people my age, in believing that a more egalitarian society was more or less inevitable. I really thought my generation was going to change the world. I'm a lot more realistic now, but the world is still corrupt and stupid and I'd still like to change it! I hope that my films question and undermine the status quo in their own small ways, and suggest that there are different ways in which we can interpret the world around us.



Twice (John Smith, 2020).

NOTEBOOK: The *Covid Messages* series of films is based around Boris Johnson's press conferences. What was it about the Prime Minister and his delivery that fascinated you so much?

SMITH: Like a lot of my films, it's something that grew bit by bit, first by noticing something, then having the germ of an idea based on that, and allowing it to grow over time. I was never intending to make a series. The first section, *Twice*, where I'm washing my hands and singing "Happy Birthday," was originally a stand-alone

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film. That came about because of finding the scenario we were in [during the pandemic] so bizarre. It was such a serious situation and yet there was Boris Johnson telling us to wash our hands for as long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice. Why “Happy Birthday”? Why not something a little bit more appropriate? Which is why I sing it to the tune of Chopin’s death march. But also, why sing it twice; if it’s all about duration, why can’t he pick something we only need to sing once? It just doesn’t make sense. It’s strange, it’s like a spell, an incantation.



Covid Messages (John Smith, 2020).

A while later I was watching this other press conference he did where he fluffs his lines. He says this nonsensical group of words. He’s supposed to talk about “contact testing” but he says “contract tasting.” It was just coming out at this time that the Conservative government was awarding dodgy COVID-related contracts to its friends, so this really felt like a Freudian slip. The nonsensical words sounded like another spell so I decided to work with this material and develop a supernatural theme around the press conferences. Fortunately one of them took place on Halloween, which was very helpful for the narrative! I found the whole situation surreal, with the ridiculous room where they would traipse in and stand in front of their shoddy lecterns with the naff cardboard signs that kept changing

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with the different slogans. You could almost see the gaffer tape holding everything together. It was such a bizarre scene. I knew I had to work with that.

I'm really angry, of course, nowadays! [Laughs.] Films like *Covid Messages* and *Citadel* are cathartic. I want to scream but my way of doing it is to make films. If humor can arise out of these situations, it can be an effective vehicle to address serious questions. Finding new ways to present and critique information is important, as we can easily become inured to conventional reporting of the horrors that continually unfold.



Worst Case Scenario (John Smith, 2003), shot through a window in Vienna.

NOTEBOOK: You've said before that limitations are really important to your way of working. What is it about constraints that makes them so generative to you?

SMITH: Limitations set a particular framework to work within. The thing about a medium like film is that the possibilities are limitless. I suppose I'm a bit overwhelmed by all of the possibilities that one might explore through film. If a

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framework is not imposed on me by someone else, I try to impose one on myself. I really believe in economy. I won't have more than one shot in a film unless there's a reason for it. I won't move the camera unless there's a reason for it. It gives one a framework to think within. Giving yourself strong limitations pushes you to think more deeply about what the possibilities are within those limits and come up with ideas that you would otherwise never have thought of.

NOTEBOOK: I was thinking of the window as a constraint in your films, as a framing device.

SMITH: Absolutely. I initially got interested in windows because of witnessing the phenomenon of day and night when looking out through a window frame. Visually one appears as a negative of another. If you film a shot of a window with the lights on at night, the inside of the room is light and it's dark outside. If you film the same shot in the daytime without the lights on and expose the film for the outside, it's dark inside and the outside is light. If you alternate rapidly between the two images it creates a strobe-like assault on the eyeballs. I do this in my film *Blue Bathroom*, alternating images of an electric fan in front of a window by day and by night.

It's also to do with withholding. If you are looking through a window you don't actually know what's going on outside of the framed area. I think of the film frame as a window frame. Many of my films encourage the viewer to think about what is going on outside of the frame without actually showing it. To me it's more exciting not to see things than to see them because it triggers your imagination. The horror films that are exciting are the ones where you don't see the monster. In my films, you never see the monster. And you very rarely see any drama. I very deliberately don't show dramatic action but hopefully there's a drama that comes about through filmic construction.

NOTEBOOK: Though you were associated with the LFMC, which at that time had a strong undercurrent of anti-narrative rhetoric, your films have narratives, and humor, which is not often associated with these types of films. Did you consider yourself a structural filmmaker?

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SMITH: I wanted to be a part of that group and bought into those ideas very strongly. When I did my MA at the Royal College of Art there was a lot of crossover between those kinds of ideas associated with structural film and Bertolt Brecht's ideas about alienation and distancing in the theater. It went without saying that we were making work that was concerned with revealing the illusion of cinema, and not allowing the viewer to slip into identification.

I was at an impressionable age and I took it a bit like a religion. Of course you should reveal the means of production! Of course you should draw attention to filmic construction! That stuck with me, and I still feel the same. My problem was that I was also fascinated by the immersive power and universal appeal of narrative. Most of my friends didn't go to art school, didn't go into higher education, and I wanted to make work that they would appreciate, for people outside of my group at college. It became very important to me to think about how one could make work that you could connect with even if you weren't a member of the Co-op! I tried to find a way to create a bridge between those two worlds. Sometimes my formal or conceptual experiments, especially those which explored ambiguity, ended up being humorous. I've said before that I never set out to make a funny film, but I'm very happy if humor arises in the process because it makes the work more accessible.

The American avant-garde was influential, and a lot less dry than most British work at that time, so seeing those films made me feel less out on a limb. Quite a few American structural filmmakers were making work which had an element of humor and narrative to it, people like Hollis Frampton and George Landow (later Owen Land). Even Michael Snow. Especially Michael Snow. People go on about *Wavelength* being a formally severe film, but it has significant narrative and humorous elements.

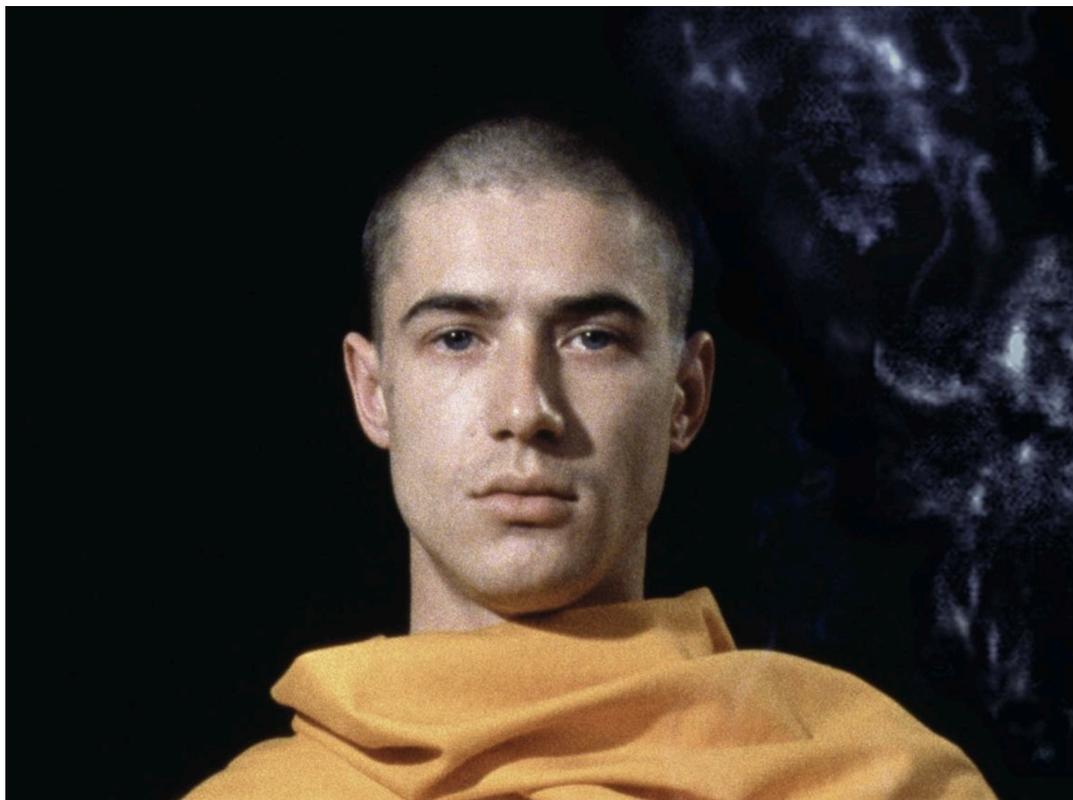
NOTEBOOK: MUBI is going to be showing your work as part of a global artist focus retrospective. How do you feel about your work circulating online? Has this opinion changed over the years?

SMITH: This goes back even further to when video started to become a more

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common medium. Back in the early 1980s the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts] in London set up a videotheque where you could watch artists' films on VHS. A person from the ICA was trying to sell this to the Co-op filmmakers when most of us only worked on 16mm film. None of us were keen; in fact most of us, including myself, were quite hostile to the idea. But in the mid 1990s London Electronic Arts approached me about bringing out some of my films on VHS. I wasn't very sure about it but agreed because I thought it might get a wider audience for my films. I never looked back. Many more people discovered my work on VHS than would have done through attending Co-op screenings every six months. *[Laughs.]*

As far as online is concerned, that's been an interesting one. Having tapes out in the world was fine, and then LUX, the distributor of artists' films, published a selection of my films on DVD. I liked having my films on DVD, but when I started working on HD in 2010, I really didn't want to show my new films in a lower resolution format. Blu-ray never took off that well, so that didn't seem a viable



Om (John Smith, 1986).

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option. So actually, now that broadband is faster and more reliable, the Internet has become a good way of showing things in very high quality without great hitches. But I still try to encourage people to see my work in the more focused setting of the cinema, particularly because I'm a real believer in the communal cinematic experience. When I first had films online, I deliberately made sure that you could only view them on a small scale. That's still the case with the clips on my website. It's an encouragement to seek out the real thing. But the positives of online screening really outweigh the negatives now.

This was all heightened during lockdown. When I made *Citadel* and showed it to various people, [the curator] Gareth Evans urged me to put the film out there because it was a film about COVID, about what was happening at the time. Many festivals weren't running because of COVID, and those that were running were only running online. MUBI seemed like the perfect opportunity, especially as the film concerned a subject that had an impact on everyone. I'm very excited by the broad demographic of MUBI subscribers as I don't want to make films for elites. I want to make films that anybody who is open-minded can get something from without knowing any references, without having seen other avant-garde films. When *Citadel* was shown previously, I enjoyed reading the incredibly diverse range of viewers' comments from around the world, both good and bad!

NOTEBOOK: Like an archivist, your films capture the quirks of local communities, whether focusing on left-behind objects, old street signs, or dying trades. Yet these films are not nostalgic, or not completely so anyway. Is this intentional? I know nostalgia is a loaded term: how do you feel about it?

SMITH: I can be very nostalgic about things but I'm also suspicious of nostalgia. In *Slow Glass*, the voice-over features artist Ian Bourn as a nostalgic glazier, looking back at how things were. The film is partly about the loss of craft industries, glassmaking, and glassblowing. I had read a fair bit about people working in the glass factories, which you can imagine would have been the most horrendous places to work in. I'm talking about Victorian times. I read that the glassmakers used to go into the factories at weekends to make things of their own—glass ornaments like model ships, animals, musical instruments, guns—and they would

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have these parades on a Sunday where they walked around, showing off their wares. This all sounds very romantic and wonderful. And then you think, hold on a minute! Working long hours all week in a sweltering factory, then going in to work on the weekend, unpaid, to make artworks that you parade around the streets? Was it really like that? There is a lot of nostalgia in the film, including my own nostalgia for my 1950s childhood, but also a deep suspicion of nostalgia.

Most of my films involve documentary images of the present day, often filmed in or around the place where I live. But I still show films that I made many years ago, so they come across very differently to present-day viewers than they did then, as historic records rather than observations of the here and now. Looking at the mundane street scene in *The Girl Chewing Gum* 46 years after it was made, even I find it hard not to see it through slightly rose-tinted spectacles and be a little nostalgic about the time before my local area became gentrified, and before mobile phones had been invented.



Blight (John Smith, 1994–1996).

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NOTEBOOK: *Dad's Stick* is a really moving portrait of your dad, Tony, told through various objects and sound recordings. How did the film come about? And can you tell me a bit about how it was made? What of the film's relationship to painting?

SMITH: I wasn't particularly close to my parents, although I did get much closer to

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Dad in his later years. After he died, I realized I had a lot more in common with him than I liked to admit when he was alive. I was much more deeply affected by his death than I thought I would be. I knew that I wanted to make a film about my father but had no idea where to begin. It was such an enormous subject, so I put it to one side. Then five years after he died, Frieze Art Fair commissioned me to make a short film. The brief was completely open but it had to be no more than five minutes long. I decided to take just one element from the planned epic about my father that would probably never have got made! I had this stick that he had stirred paint with when he was decorating the house and had shown me shortly before he died. He had sawn the end off so you could see all the layers of paint. Looking closely at the innermost layers I recognized the colors of the walls of my childhood and realized that this object held a record of more than 50 years of activity. It was a poignant moment. When I got round to making *Dad's Stick*, limiting myself to only five minutes and focusing visually on just three static objects helped me to make a film that I hope adds up to quite a lot more than the sum of its parts.



Dad's Stick (John Smith, 2012).

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The connection to painting in *Dad's Stick* is incidental. As in many of my films, I wanted to start it by misleading the viewer. I created a situation where you're looking at an extreme close-up of the stick's layers of paint, and the caption "My dad did a lot of painting" leads you to think you're looking at an abstract painting. I only reveal what it really is towards the end of the film. Quite a few people have asked me things like, "Did your dad have much success as a painter?" This is interesting to me, because although I deliberately suggest that he was an artist at the start of the film I clearly reveal the deception later, implying that all he ever painted was his house. Being all too aware of the power of narrative, I guess it was a bit short-sighted of me not to realize when I made the film that some viewers would inevitably hold on to what they were initially told.

NOTEBOOK: You seem to have avoided consigning yourself to any one particular genre, but films like *The Black Tower* contain the seeds of horror and science fiction, while others are studies of place, or film diaries. What is it about genre as a way of categorizing films that interests you?

SMITH: It's very deliberate. I don't want the films to be easily recognizable as belonging to a particular genre. I particularly don't want people to immediately think they are watching an experimental or avant-garde film. Very often I'll deliberately make something appear as different to what it ends up being. I like to be disoriented when I'm watching other people's films. I like to not be entirely sure what I'm looking at, at least to begin with, so I make the kind of films that I'd like to see myself. *Blight* starts off looking as though it might be a horror film, where houses seem to self-destruct, as if there is a poltergeist in the house, and only later reveals that it's all documentary material. I don't draw a great distinction between fiction and documentary. But I guess everybody thinks like that nowadays!

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NOTEBOOK: You were very much ahead of the curve there!

SMITH: It's largely to do with engagement. If a film is slightly mysterious you get drawn into it and want to find out where it's going. But you must be careful that you don't completely alienate your viewers, so you don't disorientate them too much. It's about striking a balance between bewilderment and getting it. A lot of my films are cat-and-mouse games like that, where they lead you to think you're seeing one thing when in fact you're seeing another. They are often quite manipulative but, importantly, viewers are always made aware that they are being manipulated. So hopefully they feel as though they are participants in the game rather than victims!

NOTES

1. Erika Balsom (ed.), *In Focus: 'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976 by John Smith*, Tate Research Publication, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/john-smith-the-girl-chewing-gum/the-girl-chewing-gum-1976-by-john-smith-r1175957>.