LISTEN

Voice

The Black Tower – Hotel Diaries – The Girl Chewing Gum – Soft Work

The voice has a gentle, relaxed presence. A London accent, but not particularly strong. Maybe a slight lisp, although the speaker tells us he can't hear it himself. The monologue seems to ramble, reflecting on everyday personal experience (the recent loss of a tooth, the exorbitant price of Toblerone purchased from a hotel minibar) or the technical problems of filmmaking (poor focus, dust on the lens, prehardener dirt in the film emulsion). The tone is warm, humorous, self-mocking: "before you start to lose interest in this, I should preface this video by letting you know that I'm actually one of the most famous experimental filmmakers in the world". Anxious about filming "corny", "romantic" sunsets at Margate, the voice explains, "I don't want to get typecast as a sunset filmmaker".

The use of humour, the self-reflexive focus on filmmaking, and the concern with the everyday, the personal and the domestic, identify the work as that of filmmaker John Smith. And it is the voice itself, as much as the thematic and stylistic consistency of his films that identifies Smith as auteur – a sonic presence inscribed across a body of work shot in and around spaces and places the filmmaker has either inhabited or visited. Weaving its way through four decades of creative activity the voice is heard in early films such as *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), later works including the *Black Tower* (1985-7), and the more recent *Hotel Diaries* series (2001-7). If there is something unmistakably documentary-like in Smith's work, then on first hearing, his rambling, casual voice-over seems to be the very antithesis of the polished narration delivered by media professionals in most film and television productions. Where voice-over narration in documentary often works to constrain and anchor the meaning of an image, Smith's voice works to multiply, extend and complicate meaning, gently prompting us to interpret an image in surprising, unexpected, and sometimes troubling ways. Over one of the many 'imageless' black screens that populate *The Black Tower* we hear the film's unseen protagonist, voiced by Smith, recalling, "I decided to take another look at the tower near my house when I got back, but by the time I got there it was dark. There was no moon and I couldn't see it over the rooftops. That night I dreamt that I was imprisoned in the tower. My body was paralysed and only my eyes could move. At first I thought that I was in complete darkness, but after a while I noticed a greyish speck which remained in the same place when I

moved my eyes. I realised that I was facing a flat black wall. I got the feeling that the room was in fact brightly lit but I couldn't be sure".
In most filmmaking practices a black screen would be thought of as the absence of an image – an empty frame devoid of meaning. But in response to the suggestions of the voice-over, in *The Black Tower* this same black screen comes to represent a moonless night sky, the darkness of an unlit room, and then the black wall of the tower that haunts the film's protagonist. So persuasive is the voice-over that we may ourselves search the screen for the grey mark described by the narrator. Heard in the gallery Smith's hypnotic voice transforms the nothingness of the black screen into an image invested with meaning. At the same time, aware that we are in fact also looking at 'nothing', we may become more aware of the space around us – aware of the mechanics of projection, the materiality of the screen, the space of the gallery. The suggestive power of the voice-over may appear to rest primarily on Smith's linguistic skills, but this would be to ignore the role played by the voice itself. In its casual, spontaneous, improvisatory feel, Smith's voice-overs feel wholly unlike the Voice of God narration of the classic documentary tradition. But nevertheless, Smith's voice-over manoeuvres the spectator into position – guiding, nudging and leading us to the point at which a new perspective will suddenly become evident. In distracting us from the manipulatory power of Smith's disembodied voice, the casual tone serves to create a self-reflexive space in which we may become aware of our own imaginative engagement with the films – aware that we are investing an image with meaning, making connections, finding our own way. Paradoxically this self-awareness is most acute when Smith reveals his hand, letting us know that he knew exactly what we were thinking all along, and thus laying bare the filmmaker's control over the audience, the manipulatory power of cinema, the mediated nature of representation.

This power of the voice is central to the impact made by a number of the videos in the *Hotel Diaries* series. In *Dirty Pictures* (2007) Smith relates a distressing scene witnessed at a crossing point on the Separation Wall in Bethlehem. As Smith describes the technology of the checkpoint, his camera plays across the furniture in his hotel room in East Jerusalem. Conjured by the descriptive power of the improvised voice-over, the familiar mise-en-scene of his immediate surroundings begins to double and recreate the Israeli checkpoint – the door on a dressing table stands in for a turnstile, the shelf holding his suitcase becomes a conveyor belt transporting personal belongings through an x-ray machine, while his drifting handheld camerawork mimics the zigzag passage of travellers through the checkpoint facility itself. There, on the previous day, Smith had witnessed a distraught, disabled Palestinian woman being refused access to the other side

of the wall after repeatedly setting off the alarm on a security scanner. Following a number of unsuccessful attempts she is ordered to remove her orthopaedic shoes and hobbles through the security arch, only to be refused entry yet again. Lying innocently on the floor of his room - in the western tourist's privileged space of comfort and leisure - his own shoes return and transport us to the plight of the Palestinian woman as Smith explains that he had been waved through the checkpoint, his British passport given only the most cursory of inspections by the Israeli security staff. Here the everyday, unremarkable mise-en-scene of travel is made meaningful through the power of spoken narrative, as Smith animates and reframes the mundane surroundings of his hotel room, charging even the prosaic image of a pair of shoes with political significance.

Ambient sound

Lost Sound

Stanway Court N1. Sunday April 12th. Birdsong, traffic passing in the distance. The whipping and crackling of abandoned audiocassette tape animated by the wind. A jet passes overhead, and we catch a short snatch of what might be Arabic music, muffled and indistinct. The sound is accompanied by a shot of cassette tape caught around iron railings, trailing like streamers in the breeze. On first hearing, the soundtrack seems to consist only of ambient sound – recorded on location with the image, laminated to it.

This is the unremarkable, everyday background noise of the urban environment: sounds that we hear, but rarely listen to - sounds that, under normal circumstances, barely inscribe themselves on our consciousness. The location recording helps to give the video a documentary aesthetic, bolstered by the precise details of location and date given onscreen. The very mundanity of the soundtrack suggests a lack of mediation - a guarantee of the indexicality and objectivity of the recording. The music we hear could be ambient sound, issuing from some unseen source in Stanway Court. But in fact it has been harvested from the abandoned audio tape we see in the shot. In this way *Lost Sound* (1998-2001) documents fragments of discarded cassette tape found by Smith and his collaborator Graeme Miller in a small area of East London. The tape is shot in situ, wrapped around clumps of grass, snagged by the peeling bark of a tree, stuck behind a satellite dish, submerged in a kerbside puddle. At one level *Lost Sound* is a video in which little seems to be happening: much of the project features static shots of street furniture, tree trunks, fences, aerials. Similarly, the ambient sounds recorded in these locations present familiar and unremarkable urban soundscapes, varying in density depending on location, time of day, and proximity to roads, factories, shops and the flight paths of aircraft. However, as the video develops Smith and Miller quickly begin building formal, narrative and musical connections between places, events and sounds.

How's Street E2. Monday April 13th. Rap music accompanies a shot of tape caught on barbed wire - a chance juxtaposition of sound and image suggesting embattlement, ghettoisation, resistance to the problems of urban decay. An old, rusting, wrecked car located behind the wire seems to speak of the deprivation of this grim inner city environment. As we contemplate this image, we hear the sound of a car being started somewhere offscreen – a fortuitous combination of sound and image that creates a nice gag about a vehicle that's going nowhere? Or Smith beginning to show his hand, subtly combining, aligning, juxtaposing sounds and images to gently suggest meaning or to create a particular effect. We can't be sure. But while in some sequences there is little visual evidence of artistic intervention beyond framing and composition, the soundtrack increasingly announces itself as a construction. Smith layers and orchestrates sections of ambient sound in such a way that, although remaining laminated to the image, they form a subtle, almost undetectable musique concrète of the environment. At the same time we find ourselves listening to sounds that distinguish themselves from the formless banality of the everyday soundscape. What marks these particular sounds is their ability, when sutured to the image, to create meaning – their ability to signify something other than their own indexical status as witness to the world.

Whitby Street E1. Sunday May 17th. A can rattling down a street. Voices of a man and young child. An empty piece of wall above a lock-up unit. In the street below, the man carries the child in his arms, entertaining the infant by striking an empty can with a broom, as if playing polo. The wind blows a piece of cassette tape caught in the wall into the top right hand corner of the frame. As it enters the shot a slightly fuzzy recording of a female Soul singer is heard on the soundtrack. The wind subsides, the tape disappears from view, and the music cuts out. Here Smith playfully suggests that the movement of the tape somehow creates the sound we hear, challenging our common understanding of the causal relationship between sound and image, undermining our belief in the veracity and objectivity of what at first appeared to be an almost forensic documentary project. As *Lost Sound* builds, other examples of this type begin to appear: the chevrons on a roundabout << cue Smith to repeatedly rewind the section of video in which they feature; when a weather vane on top of a school roof swings to indicate a change in wind direction, the sound from the harvested cassette plays in reverse; tape lying on the floor at a street market appears to produce sound when sunlight falls upon it, but becomes silent when shadows cast by of passing shoppers throw it into shade. Here, as in other works, the connections that Smith forges between sound and image alert us to the processes of signification, alert us to the fact that meaning is an effect generated by combining

sounds and images in particular ways. The very impossibility, yet absolute plausibility, of the events he creates from his sonic and visual source materials alert us to the mediated nature of representation, as well as our own acts of perception and involvement in meaning making. What presents itself as natural, we come to realise more and more, has been selected, arranged, organised – an orchestration of individual moments sifted from many hours of videotape. By the time we reach the closing sequences of *Lost Sound* the authorial control that was at first hidden has becomes wholly evident, as Smith repeatedly loops increasingly brief sections of footage to create a rhythmic and progressively more abstract audiovisual musique concrète. With characteristic elegance and wit, Smith's collaboration with Miller opens our eyes and ears to both the world around us and to the mediation of that world through cinematic experience.

Music

Blight

The heavy impact made by a sledgehammer is looped to create a rhythmic foundation for other sounds gathered around it: splintering wood, crumbling masonry – the sounds of demolition. Fragments of speech. Different voices located in amongst the soundscape of destruction: "red brick tiles", "plaster roses", "imitation primroses". A man's voice, the word "sorry" repeated several times, takes its place with other shards of speech: "knock the wall down", "splinters everywhere", "gouge it out." Simple, stark piano chords create an understated elegiac tone, lending the sequence an undertow of sadness, loss. Accompanying this we see images of workmen in hard hats reducing houses to piles of rubble. With an old joist, a pickaxe, or bare hands, walls are pushed over or pulled apart, the sync sound of these shots entering the mix as another element of Smith's elegant and moving musique concrète of demolition. The voices we hear are those of unseen residents, forced to leave their East London homes as a result of the construction of the M11 link road in the mid-1990s.

With the exception of *Lost Sound*, composed or recorded music has never been a dominant feature of Smith's work. It is heard briefly in *Leading Light* (1975), one of Smith's earliest films, in which he tracks the movement of light across a domestic interior. Here music is introduced into the otherwise silent film only when sunlight falls onto a record player sitting on the floor of the room, the volume of the music determined by the amount of light playing across it (an audiovisual figure that will re-emerge in *Lost Sound*). Flamenco guitar is heard briefly in *The Black Tower* as the film's protagonist contemplates an ornate plaster moulding in his bedroom, reimagined as "the sleeping Mexican who sat cross-legged on my ceiling". More recently a quick blast of Acker Bilk's *Stranger on the Shore* finds its way into *Soft Work* (2012).

The result of a collaboration with the composer Jocelyn Pook, *Blight* (1994-6) is perhaps the most musical of all Smith's films, weaving speech, music and location sound into a sophisticated and emotionally powerful continuum, blurring the distinctions between composition, sound design and editing. If Smith has always been an ear-minded filmmaker – attuned to the sounds of the environment and the rhythms of speech – then the collaboration with Pook appears to have intensified the musicality that has always been inherent in his approach to sound. This musicality is evident from the very first moments of the film, as the Doppler swish of passing cars gives way to the creaking of wood, the crunch of falling rubble, and the repeated phase "Jordan and Kim" – a mother, perhaps, calling her children in from the street. As the sequence gradually builds in complexity, texture and depth, it becomes evident that Smith is a composer, choosing, placing and combining sounds as much for their affective impact as for what they might mean or represent. The musical qualities of the woman's voice seem to be what has motivated the extraction of this particular phrase from what was presumably once a longer recording – a technique that is used elsewhere in the film, generating poignant leitmotifs from fragments of everyday speech. It is precisely this mix and play between materiality, form and meaning that identifies John Smith as an original voice in experimental cinema.

For Smith humour, experimentation, and reflexivity are never goals in themselves, but part and parcel of cinema's potential to engage with the world and our understanding of it. In investigating what is at stake in the creation and transmission of meaning Smith brings us back to the social sphere, reminding us that the practice of art is political, and has political potential. And what distinguishes Smith's work, in this regard, is its lively, entertaining, thoughtful and playful sensitivity to sound - prompting us to take pleasure in listening, prompting us to listen.

Andy Birtwistle