



John Smith, *Frozen War* (2001),  
Ireland, 11 min.,  
from the series  
*Hotel Diaries*  
(2001–2007),  
video. Courtesy of  
LUX, London.

## Voice-off: John Smith's moving diaries

Reviewed by William Kaizen

These thoughts on John Smith's films and videos are occasioned by the three DVD set of his work recently released by LUX. I use the *Hotel Diaries* (2001–2007), which fill the whole of the set's final disc, as a framework for addressing the theme of the voice in his work. There are, of course, many other themes running through his practice, but what is striking about the set is the way it bookends the power of the voice and the undoing of its power.<sup>1</sup>

The *Hotel Diaries* begin with a silenced voice. An image of a BBC news correspondent is frozen on a hotel room's television screen, his mouth caught open in mid-declamation. Smith videotaped the image while in Cork, Ireland on 8 October 2001, less than a month after 9/11. He had been in the United States when the attacks took place and like many of us who lived through the events of that day, he was still in shock. A month later, anthrax was being mailed around the United States, and the night before he made the recording, the United States and Great Britain had invaded Afghanistan. Returning to his room following a long day's participation in the Cork Film Festival, he turned on the television hoping to catch the news, only to discover its image frozen and its voice muted. Having brought along a video camera, he spontaneously decided to make a tape, shooting the television

set and his room while meditating on current events. This first tape led him to create a series of seven more over the following six years, all shot from hotel rooms. The videos are formally linked by Smith's use of unedited, hand-held close-ups that travel around the rooms and hallways of the hotels where he was staying, with the film-maker speaking over the image. The content of each piece is linked to the next through his discussions of contemporary politics, and the transgression of the lines between the journal and journalism.

Smith titled the first section of the *Hotel Diaries*, 'Frozen War'. It opens with a shot of the room's luggage stand, then shifts to the frozen television newsreader. As the framing moves back and forth between the stand and the TV set, Smith, in voice-over expresses concern that the BBC's headquarters may have been bombed, thereby causing the image to freeze. He acknowledges that while people are certainly being killed in Afghanistan, nothing is likely to have happened in London. Nevertheless, he is still traumatized by having recently watched the events of 9/11 unfold on television and admits to feeling irrationally afraid. Because the television is immobilized, it is unable to provide the comfort of knowing what is happening back home. Smith's connection to his everyday life is severed. The news service that he usually relies on to tie his personal world to that of the wider world has been silenced. What he longs for, and cannot have, is not so much the TV set's moving image but the

1. Unless noted, all the films I discuss are collected in the set.

authority of its voice. No one is there to tell him that London is still standing even if Kandahar and Jalalabad are not.

The authority of the voice, and the disruption of its power, is a recurring theme in Smith's work. In his early films he undermines the seemingly natural connection between sound and image, making the viewer aware of the artificiality of their alignment. *Associations* (1975), which begins the DVD set, features an authoritative male voice actor reading the opening pages of a textbook on linguistic theory. Images shot from magazines and other mass media sources flash past, montaged by Smith into playful rebuses that simultaneously reflect and undermine the words being read. Their slippage – e.g. an ass/donkey for the first syllable of 'associations' – destabilizes the voice-over's high seriousness. The film further undermines the narrator's authority when it ends abruptly after he fluffs his lines and curses, suddenly losing his cool as his words fail.

Smith's best-known film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) follows, with Smith himself taking over as narrator. He 'directs', in voice-over, shots he filmed of random passers-by on the streets of Hackney in East London. His instructions to the 'actors' who appear on-screen were obviously recorded after the fact, but when his shouted orders closely precede what happens in the film, the events depicted seem to take place through his imposition of directorial control. As the film proceeds, the illusion that he is directing these events, as absurd as it clearly is, breaks down: at one point the traffic noise stops while the narration continues, clearly revealing that his voice was recorded in a studio; at another point he claims to be standing in a field, recording himself miles away from the on-screen events. More slippage occurs as his narration moves into and out of the future tense. Suddenly, at the end of the film, one passer-by is described as having just conducted a robbery, turning what seemed to be a structural/material film

into a heist movie. Both *Associations* and *The Girl Chewing Gum* are focused on the problem of the narrative voice-over. In documentary cinema, this voice is traditionally a disembodied, male, voice-of-God, which transcends the realm of the image. It captions the image from beyond the scene for the edification of the viewer, thus imposing control over how the footage is interpreted. In *Associations* Smith challenges this voice by producing images that seem to caption the sound rather than vice versa, and by ending the film with the narrator's breakdown. Similarly, the entirety of *The Girl Chewing Gum* is designed to turn the purported control of voice-of-God narration on its head. As Catherine Elwes said to Smith in an interview discussing the work, 'the real joke, and a very poignant joke, is that the voice-over "director" actually has no power whatsoever to direct the chain of events unfolding in front of the camera' (2002: 65). The film's critical humour arises from the tension between Smith's actual directorial authority and the disingenuous authority of his voice-over.

In later works Smith shifts his attention from the voice-over to its subspecies, the voice-off. Mary Ann Doane distinguishes between the two in her essay 'The voice of cinema' (1980). For Doane the difference hinges on embodiment. While the voice-over is disembodied and seems to come from beyond the world of the film, the voice-off is embodied through its attachment to a character that appears on-screen at some point or is otherwise directly tied to the film's events. The voice-off is connected to the presence of the speaker as established in relation to the space of the film. When a person speaks in voice-off, they seem to be just out of frame, as if the camera could shift right or left and they would be revealed. Doane, largely discussing the use of the voice in fiction films, writes: 'The traditional use of voice-off constitutes a denial of the frame as a limit and an affirmation of the unity and homogeneity of the depicted space' (1980: 37–38).

While in fiction films this serves to draw the viewer deeper into the invented world depicted, in documentary, the world depicted is presented as contiguous with the viewer's world. This situates the narrator as a member of the non-filmic, off-screen world, a strategy whose visual corollary is the image of the live television host addressing the viewer as if directly in front of her or him. If the power of documentary voice-of-God narration comes from its transcendence, the power of documentary voice-off lies in its immanence. The documentary voice-off narrator tends to speak to the viewer as if he or she was a friend, or at least a member of a shared community with related concerns.

Smith is particularly engaged with the voice-off in his diary films and videos. Unlike the purportedly objective voice of either the on-screen subject of *cinéma vérité* or the voice of the television news host, the voice in the diary film or video is 'intently and unambiguously subjective', as Catherine Russell has suggested (1999: 277). Smith plays with this subjectivity as did Jim McBride in his film *David Holtzman's Diary* (1967), a film that anticipated the legions of first-person, point-of-view documentaries that followed in the 1970s. The work features a young filmmaker, the eponymous David Holtzman talking directly to the camera, using it as a diary to record his musings on life. Holtzman moves on and off camera, narrating the events depicted both after the fact and as they unfold as one might encounter in the pages of a journal. But this is all a trick. McBride's film is a fiction. Its simulated nature is never revealed as part of the film itself, and many viewers upon first seeing the film thought it was a documentary. Despite the ownership that Holtzman claims for the events depicted, McBride really pulls all the strings, thereby undermining the film's apparent authenticity if not its sincerity.

*Summer Diary* (1976–1977; not included in the DVD), is Smith's first stab at a diary film. Made just after *The*

*Girl Chewing Gum*, he fools the viewer into believing a voice-over is a voice-off. A female narrator, who is unseen for most of the film, reads diary entries that are slowly revealed to be Smith's own while occasionally shifting into voice-of-God mode by switching to third person. In so doing he undermines the expectation that, however subjective, the voice in diary film should be properly embodied through a direct connection to a stably positioned speaker. He further undercuts the viewer's faith in the truth of voice-over narration by destabilizing the authority of its speech through the confusion of gender by giving the voice-of-God a woman's voice.

Smith continued his diary work after turning almost exclusively to video in the early 1990s. In the opening sequence of *Regression* (1998–1999) he details why, recounting, in a conversational mode, his switch from film to video. He describes how he was particularly enchanted with the ability of even amateur-quality video cameras to combine synchronized sound with a decent picture and ease of shooting. Smith's adoption of the medium marks a turning away from the more radical experiments of his previous work and his connections, however loose, with the traditions of structural materialist film. This change is exemplified by *Home Suite* (1993–1994), which is a strong precursor to the *Hotel Diaries* but unfortunately, the work is not included in the DVD set despite its importance in his *oeuvre*. Both works leave behind the obvious slippages and reversals of his earlier films and feature Smith behind the camera, speaking in a more direct, diaristic voice-off. *Home Suite* begins with the film-maker giving a tour of his dilapidated London home. In parts one and two, shot in long, unedited takes, he describes his relationship to various rooms in his house. The viewer only infrequently sees him directly, when his hands or legs slip into the frame. Nevertheless, his bodily traces are ever-present. The image shakes from the

hand-held camera work, and the sound of Smith's manipulation of the lens and the zoom trigger can also be heard throughout. Beyond the bodily traces inscribed in the image, the viewer knows this is voice-off and not voice-over because he speaks possessively about the spaces he shows, directly asserting his connection to them through reminiscence. If there is any ambiguity here, it enters through the shaky camera work that hints at a Proustian celebration of domesticity while embodying the fragility of his surroundings in both the squalor of what appears before the lens and the tremulations of the image itself.

*Home Suite* is a quintessential diary work inasmuch as it follows all of the requirements laid down by Philippe Lejeune in *On Diary* (2009): the author, narrator and protagonist are unified; the work is focused on the quotidian; it is narratively discontinuous, repetitive in structure and allusively personal. Foregoing the tricks of his earlier films, *Home Suite* is 'antifiction', to borrow Lejeune's term, because of the diary's inherent opposition to fiction. After all, as Lejeune asks, what would it mean to write a private diary in which one purposely lied to oneself? The diary is wedded to an attempt to produce a truth for oneself from the facts of one's own life. Fiction creeps in only when a diary is directed at an outside audience. In *Home Suite* Smith seems to spontaneously recount, for the audience as much as for himself, his connections to the space in which he lives. While diaries generally operate in the present tense and concentrate on recent events, they can also contain reminiscences. In the first two parts of the video, Smith recalls past events whose memories linger for him in the house. In the third and final part, the past collides rudely with the present, offering a broader, although still local, context.

It turns out that the house where Smith has been living for the past twelve years was slated for demolition because of a planned motorway extension. He taped part three on the

last day in which he was allowed to remain in his old home. Fortunate enough to have the means to purchase another house several blocks away, he takes the viewer on a journey from his old to his new home. Given this fresh information, the viewer suddenly sees the earlier parts of the video in a fresh light. His previous reminiscences were not simply a bulwark against time and forgetting, but an attempt to memorialize his home in the face of its imminent annihilation. In the first two parts, his voice acts as a way to further preserve the images of the past captured by his camera in opposition to the destruction of the community forged between himself, his housemates and his neighbours. In the third part, he turns to a more urgent present tense. The outside world's politics are fast encroaching upon his personal space. He goes out into the street where his voice captions the final protests against the proposed road, which he comments on in voice-off. Unfolding in real time, his personal journal suddenly becomes public journalism. His commentary includes the viewer in these events not just as a friend but as a fellow concerned citizen. Unlike mainstream news coverage, Smith's reportage is first person, told from the subjective point of view of one of the residents of the neighbourhood. Through voice-off, his diary becomes an early example of citizen journalism, as he connects his personal life to issues of wider public concern, which are ostensibly connected to the viewer. Ultimately, and despite the concern he expresses, he walks by the protests, continuing down quieter streets to his new home. The tape ends as he enters the house, offering an abrupt sense of closure. Knowing the battle against the motorway is lost, Smith retreats into the safety of his new house and the prospect of future memories divorced from outside politics. The personal journal wins out over public journalism.

*Home Suite* is an elegy to the disappearance of the objects it puts

on view, and it ultimately gives weight to privacy and the comforts of home insulated from outside political turmoil. In the *Hotel Diaries*, Smith allows his video journal to stand more concretely as a form of alternative journalism. Also discontinuous, repetitive and personal, the *Hotel Diaries* share many of the same formal connections to the diary as *Home Suite*. However, instead of focusing on the quotidian environs around his London home he engages with the pseudo-quotidian space of the hotel room and goes beyond local politics. In moving outside of his home to hotel rooms around Europe and the Middle East, he also moves away from personal reminiscence. While still memorializing his past, adrift in the wider world he pays equal attention to current events. By recording his own responses to these events, mixed with descriptions of the hotel interiors and the dignities and indignities of travel, he continues his imbrication of the journal and journalism.

The *Hotel Diaries* are a form of therapy journal, marking Smith's attempt to work through the anxiety he felt regarding the events of 9/11 and the conflicts that followed. In *Frozen War* he lends his voice to that of the silenced host, filling the dead air in an attempt to talk through his worries. In subsequent sections he builds on this task, voicing the pressing concern he felt in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in the form of a simmering dislike for American and British foreign policy. Foregoing the objective composure of the news host, he refuses to explain, and thereby makes no pretence to control current events. Although he mentions a number of specific policies, he uses inference and anecdote to express his general dissatisfaction with contemporary politics. He neither attempts to give an historical account of these conflicts, nor proscribes their resolution. Instead, he uses video to vent the continued, personal frustration he feels in response to larger events over which he has little, if any, control.

The second section of *Hotel Diaries*, 'Museum Piece', swings from 9/11 to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and Smith draws parallels between these events throughout. In the third section, 'Throwing Stones', he begins by recounting recent news: George W. Bush has been re-elected President of the United States; a major attack on Fallujah has just begun; Yasser Arafat was buried today. Smith devotes the first part of the tape to a discussion of Arafat's confinement in his final days combined with footage shot through the bars of the window in his hotel room. This is intended to evoke Arafat's condition, as is the story he tells about his own 'reverse incarceration experience' the night before, when he was temporarily locked out of the hotel. The comparison is absurd but darkly funny because it points towards the yawning gap between Smith's life and that of Arafat. In his telling of these events, the camera moves from the empty hotel bed, signifying loss, to the television set, now switched off, from which Arafat's death was transmitted. This leads him to tell the story of his own 9/11 experience. He was invited to the Art Institute to give a talk about his work and travelled through New York the previous day. In Chicago he watched the events unfold on television, just as the attackers had intended when they hijacked the power of mass media publicity along with the planes they commandeered. In telling these stories, Smith seems to be suggesting that the television screen is a glass house, and that the United States and United Kingdom should be careful about throwing stones through the mass media because its publicity machine cuts both ways, empowering friends and enemies alike.

Over the course of the next several sections, and with many digressions, Smith meditates further on his own privileged position as a film-maker who gets invited to travel around the world, staying in luxury hotels while at the same time, his government is carrying out military actions in his name that

cause immense suffering to others.<sup>2</sup> In Rotterdam, although his room is a bit dingy, he expresses dismay at the people who criticize the hotel in an online forum. They fail to recognize how privileged they are to travel when the living conditions in Gaza are such that 35 per cent of the population cannot feed themselves, nor can they leave their country. His commentary reflects similar sentiments expressed by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). Sontag recognizes the importance of sympathy as a first response to images of other people's suffering, but says that this is not enough. 'Our sympathy', she writes, 'proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence' (Sontag 2003: 102). What we must do, she concludes, is:

set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering. (Sontag 2003: 102–03)

Smith makes a connection between his own advantages relative to the privations of others by keeping his camera resolutely pointed at the hotel as an institutionalized space of global privilege. In the few instances when he appears on-screen he is always reflected in a mirror, his body mapped onto the surface of this space as if a product of the luxuries it offers. His voice-off evokes the encroachment on his private mental space, even in these enclaves, of others' pain delivered by the news, and he struggles to come to terms with the ways in which, as Sontag says, 'wealth for some may imply the destitution of others' (2003: 103).

The *Hotel Diaries* culminate in 'Dirty Pictures', in which Smith experiences the suffering of others at first hand. Made during his 2007 visit to Palestine, the work begins with a shot of the

separation wall, seen from the window of his hotel room in Bethlehem. After panning across the room and recounting how the hotel was recently remodelled following years of being requisitioned by the Israeli army, he stops speaking for the first time while the camera slowly sweeps back and forth across the landscape. Dirt on the camera's lens sullies the view of the wall, a jagged zigzag separating what otherwise appear to be identical clusters of sandy-coloured houses massed together between low mountains. Smith cuts to the next day in East Jerusalem, resuming his monologue in a new hotel room. His camera moves around the room, capturing every nook and cranny of its beige expanse. Retroactively captioning the previous day's image, he tells of an event he witnessed during one of the several border crossings he made during his trip. The crossings are done on foot, through a labyrinthine hall that he describes as being like an animal pen. The Israeli soldiers who run the crossing are hidden away behind glass leaving only their disembodied voices issuing commands. A Palestinian woman with a disabled foot was trying to cross but kept triggering the metal detector. She reluctantly removed her orthopaedic shoe, revealing bandages soaked in blood and pus. With absolute control over events, the voice of the invisible Israeli officer finally told her to go home, barring her from crossing. With the camera focused on his own empty shoes, Smith's voice is set in stark relief against the voice of the officer and the plight of the woman. While the woman hobbled back towards Palestine, he breezed through the checkpoint without even having to open his passport. Although he was not the one who sent the woman back, he finds himself forced to admit to the privileges attached to his own voice in this context, despite his many attempts over the years to question its authority by unmasking its fragility.

The final section of the *Hotel Diaries*, 'Six Years Later', acts as an epilogue. It

2. He discusses Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and the sanctions levelled against Palestine by the United States, UK and the European Union in the wake of the election of a Hamas Government in the Gaza Strip.

begins with Smith reciting an ABC of the similitude of international hotels: 'I'm in a hotel in Antwerp, or Brussels, or Birmingham, or Bremen, or maybe Barcelona, or Cork'. He actually was in Cork, having returned almost precisely the same day of the year that he shot 'Frozen War'. Once again, Smith focuses his camera on the television, capturing the time next to the text crawl as it turns to 1:41 a.m., the same time the set froze on his earlier visit. Financial figures roll past as Smith notes that 'everything is down except Chinese currency', presaging the economic downfall of Ireland, the rise of China, and the great western recession to come. The news provides no comfort in the face of the realities of the intervening years, and finally Smith admits 'I don't know where I'm going with this'. Thanks to an oncoming cold, his mouth grows dry.

Sounding miserable, his voice cracks, fatigue overtaking him. Overwhelmed by the continuous flood of current events, he finds no safety in the pseudo-home of the hotel room. Rather than work through contemporary politics, he has worked them over until he can stand them no more. The DVD set ends by returning full circle, back not only to the beginning of the *Hotel Diaries* but to the end of *Associations*, as yet another voice fails, only this time it is Smith's own voice that falls silent. Abjuring authorial control, he stops talking, letting his diary lapse.

Over the course of the DVD set and in light of related work such as *Home Suite*, it becomes clear that a primary aim of Smith's work has been to problematize the voice of authority. He continuously plays the subjective drift of the voice-off against the authoritative power of the voice-over. Whether using voice-over or voice-off, he returns throughout to the fragility of the voice and its inability to command events. His more recent work, from *Home Suite* through *The Hotel Diaries*, relies less heavily on the formally radical, Brechtian alienation effects of his earlier films. In part this is because these tactics

have come to seem dated given their connections to the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of structural materialist film. Even at its most Brechtian, Smith's work stood apart from the main current of structural film-making because of its humour. For better and worse, his more recent diary videos have lost much of their humour at the same time as they have lost their radical form, instead favouring a new sincerity. Nevertheless, while this work is more obviously personal, in blurring the lines between the journal and journalism Smith is able to engage with a wider panoply of current events, still without succumbing to the temptation to assert his own authority over them. He continues to question his own authority only with less trickery, making work that is all the more powerful for the directness of its searching, its questioning of privilege, and its highlighting of failure.

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