

Institution: University of East London (UEL)
Unit of Assessment: 34
<p>Title of case study: Using artists' film to develop an innovative film aesthetic that enhances public interest in and awareness of global conflict and geo-politics: John Smith's <i>Hotel Diaries</i> (2008).</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor of Film John Smith has completed over 30 films, videos and installations since joining UEL in 1984. The non-academic impact of this body of work arises from Smith's innovative narrative and filmic aesthetic, which combines carefully-crafted nonchalance with concerned political consciousness. Smith's videos use ordinary environments to raise awareness of and engagement with geo-political conflict, an approach exemplified by the consideration in his 2008 work <i>Hotel Diaries</i> of conflicts in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iraq. His work's deceptive informality and casual, playful manner achieves broad public engagement, thereby enhancing UK film's innovative reputation and contributing to national artistic heritage. This achievement has been acknowledged by Smith's receipt of many international awards, notably the 2011 Paul Hamlyn Distinguished Artist Award and 2013 Film London Jarman Award.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p><i>Hotel Diaries</i> comprises seven videos produced between 2001 and 2007: <i>Frozen War</i> (Ireland, 2001), <i>Museum Piece</i> (Germany, 2004), <i>Throwing Stones</i> (Switzerland, 2004), <i>B&B</i> (England, 2005), <i>Pyramids/Skunk</i> (Netherlands, 2006-7), <i>Dirty Pictures</i> (Palestine, 2007) and <i>Six Years Later</i> (Ireland, 2007) [1]. Originally disseminated as a 7 monitor installation it has, since 2008, been available as a complete film, the impacts of which are described in this case study.</p> <p>Smith's research critically examines how personal observations and apparently unrelated happenings stand as a microcosm for investigating the wider impact of global socio-cultural events. Previously a member of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative, Smith is interested in structural materialist ideas and sees aesthetic form as vital as content. His videos focus on the strange and unexpected interrelationships between individuals, their immediate social environments and wider socio-political events. They employ dislocations between image and narrative, the personal and the mass media, the local and the global, to creatively provide opportunities for personal self-reflection. Smith's earlier work: <i>Slow Glass</i> (1988-91), <i>Home Suite</i> (1993-94) [2] and <i>Blight</i> (1994-96) [3] explored the complex meaning of everyday spaces and objects in East London, affirming Smith's belief that 'You don't have to travel far to find meaning, it's all there in front of you'. (Interview: <i>TimeOut</i>, 2008).</p> <p><i>Hotel Diaries</i> further examines the familiar, but moves to the recognizable spaces of hotel rooms to engage a wider public with Smith's research. Using the vernacular of a hotel story and employing the ironic style pioneered in Smith's 1976 film <i>The Girl Chewing Gum</i>, <i>Frozen War</i>, (the first installation) was conceived in a hotel room in Cork a few weeks after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the UK and USA invasion of Afghanistan. The following videos in the <i>Hotel Diaries</i> series chart the 'War on Terror' era of Bush and Blair through a series of recordings made in foreign hotel rooms that relate the artist's personal experience with the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. Playing upon chance and coincidence, the videos use the bland hotel interiors - spaces that combine private and public realms - as 'found' film sets. Their architecture and</p>

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decoration become the means to interrogate major world events.

Deceptively unassuming, the films consist of improvised single takes, shot from the perspective of the artist's tourist camcorder as he delivers apparently unscripted monologues on his thoughts and observations about these interiors and contemporary political events. At once politically engaged and funny, these brilliantly structured ramblings connect the mundane observations with the horror of world politics in surprising and illuminating ways.

Compounded by his sophisticated, apparently artless filmic technique, Smith's ironic and humorous aesthetic allows *Hotel Diaries* to address the bridge between personal experience and media-saturated images of global warfare in a manner that engages diverse audiences, both within the art world and beyond. Smith has commented: 'I'm interested in making work that lots of people - including people who are completely uninformed about avant-garde cinema - would be interested in seeing. So to me, the accessibility that humour creates is an important part of the work' [4]. His distinctive style and numerous outputs are discussed in detail in essays collected in the 2002 book *John Smith – Film and Video Works* [5].

3. References to the research

[1] Smith, J., *Hotel Diaries* (2001-7). 82 minutes. Colour. Sound. Video. <http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf13.html> Boxed DVD set published by LUX in 2011 [ISBN 9 780956 794 1 23] of 20 film and video works by Smith from 1975-2007 accompanied by a 58 page book with critical essays by Ian Christie, Adrian Danks and Nicky Hamlyn. [ISBN-10: 0956794122 & ISBN-13: 978-0956794123]. For a detailed description and critique of the series see Adrian Danks, *Rooms with a View: Watching John Smith's Hotel Dairies*: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/cteq/rooms-with-a-view-watching-john-smith%E2%80%99s-hotel-dairies/>

[2] Smith, J., *Home Suite* (1994-1994). 96 minutes. Colour. Sound. Video. <http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf71.html>

[3] Smith, J., *Blight* (1994-1996). 14 minutes. Colour. Sound. Video <http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/sf8.html>

[4] Brian Frye, Interview with John Smith. Millennium Film Journal No. 39/40 (Winter 2003): <http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ39/JohnSmith.html> For further interviews with Smith about his work: http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/exclusive/john_smith.php (Nick Bradshaw) and <http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/april-2012> (Mark Prince, *Art Monthly*, April 2012)

[5] *John Smith: Film and Video Works 1971-2002*, ed. Josephine Lanyon and Mark Cosgrove. Picture This Moving Image and Watershed Media Centre, Bristol, 2002. 136pp. ISBN: 0-9539872-4-8

Smith won the **2011 Paul Hamlyn Distinguished Artist Award: £45,000** and the **2013 Film London Jarman Award: £10,000**.

4. Details of the impact

Smith has played an important role in the historical development of the distinctively English tradition of politically engaged artists' film, and in the increasing world-wide appreciation for that tradition. Using the ideas of structural materialism, yet fascinated by the everyday

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and by the power of film narrative and spoken word, he has developed a body of work which transforms reality, playfully exploring and exposing the language of cinema.

Hotel Diaries has been applauded for its use of banal objects and interiors to explore and analyse violent conflicts and media-transmitted political reality. Writing in *Sight and Sound* (2008), Ian Christie noted that:

'Nothing in John Smith's long career as Britain's wittiest maker of avant-garde films suggested that he would turn his deadpan gaze on the plight of the Palestinian people, yet this is the theme that slowly comes to dominate the diary pieces that Smith made during his travels around film festivals. Shandy-esque observations on his immediate surroundings gradually turn into a sustained reflection on what it would be like to be trapped in Palestine. Finally, Smith finds himself in Israel, able to see the territory that has begun to obsess him. A deeply engaging work that provokes an unexpected comparison with the master of oblique polemic, Chris Marker' [a].

Similarly, Maximilian Le Cain, in *Film Ireland Magazine* (2008) commented that:

'...these deceptively unassuming works consist of single takes from the point of view of Smith's camcorder as he explores the nocturnal spaces of hotels he is staying in and delivers monologues on his thoughts and observations. At once politically concerned and very funny, these brilliantly structured ramblings connect the observations of his surroundings with the horror of world events in consistently surprising ways' [b].

Hotel Diaries' inclusion in major international film festivals and exhibitions demonstrates the reach of Smith's research since 2008: the many museums, galleries and arts institutions in which his work has been shown around the world have been key beneficiaries of his research. It has featured in **7 solo exhibitions** (Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover (22/2-29/4/12); Grand Hotel Atlantic, Bremen (4 & 18/2/12), Pallas Projects, Dublin (2/3-3/4/11), Kunstbunker, Nuremberg (30/9-7/11/10), Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin (12/6-24/7/10), Royal College of Art Galleries, London (19/3-13/4/10)[6] and Sala Diaz Gallery, San Antonio (26/2-28/3/10); in **11 group shows** (Dorothea Schlueter Gallery, Hamburg (15/2-16/3/13), Site Gallery, Sheffield (13-17/6/12), Haus der Kunst, Munich (10/6-26/9/12)[3], ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe (17/9/11-19/2/12)[4], Israeli Center for Digital Art, Holon (19/11/11-4/2/12), Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt (27/3-24/7/11), Independent Art Fair, New York (3-6/3/11), National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, (15/10-19/12/10), KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (11/6-8/8/10), Kunsthalle, Basel, (28/3-24/5/10) and TR1 Gallery Tampere (8/2-9/3); and in **35 solo international festival and cinema screenings** [c].

The impact of *Hotel Diaries* is further demonstrated through Smith's involvement in **23 international symposia, conferences and artists' talks** that have stimulated debates about issues of aesthetics, fiction and censorship in media representations of conflict. The work has been programmed in **exhibitions addressing the artistic and media representation of conflict**, many of which have reached wide public as well as art-professional audiences. These have included *Image Counter Image* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 10/06-16/09/12) [d]; *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds after 1989* (ZKM, Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, 17/09/11-05/02/12) [e]; and *Serious Games: War Media Art* (Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt, 27/03-24/07/11).

Although audience demographics are not precise, feedback from the artist indicates interesting exchanges and lively discussions with participants reflecting localised concerns. For example, an audience in South Korea discussed military tensions with North Korea, while an online conversation with an Israeli curator explored boycott and the impact

of Britain's foreign policy [g]. Furthermore, *Hotel Diaries* has **generated 32 articles, interviews, reviews and essays in print, online and many radio broadcast in UK and internationally** [b, f, g, h]. Audiences can access Smith's work on DVD [1, above] or via **online platforms** such as TankTV and Lux Online. The series was included in Tate's collection in 2010 [f] and bought by Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 2013 thereby ensuring its wide public accessibility.

This widespread showing of Smith's work has encouraged a resurgence of interest in a genre that tests the limits of documentary and fiction, supporting new forms of artistic expression that engage audiences with complex socio-political topics via its sophisticated yet apparently artless aesthetic. Smith's work has also had important impacts on teaching and research at HEIs within and beyond the UK, as the next generation of curators, critics and artists continue to be inspired and influenced by his work [g, j]. In 2010 students of the Royal Academy's MA Curating Contemporary Art programme organised the largest exhibition to date of Smith's work and the first solo show curated by students in the MA's 20-year history [g].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[a] Ian Christie, 'Best of 2008', *Sight and Sound*, (2008)

<http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/pdf/films-of-2008.pdf> pp. 13-14

[b] Tanya Leighton and Katherine Meyer, eds., *John Smith* with texts by Ian Christie. Martin Herbert, Katherine Meyer and Ethan de Seife (Museum Publishing and Sternberg Press, in English and German 2013). [ISBN-10: 3943365603 & ISBN-13: 978-3-943365-60-3]. Maximilian Le Cain's *Film Ireland Magazine* review may be found on p. 130

[c] For full lists of exhibitions, screenings, symposia and publications:

<http://www.johnsmithfilms.com/texts/upcoming.html>

[d] For Smith's contribution to 'Image Counter Image' exhibition, Haus der Kunst, Munich:

http://www.hausderkunst.de/index.php?id=132&L=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=170art

[e] For Smith's contribution to 'The Global Contemporary' exhibition, ZKM, Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe <http://www.global-contemporary.de/> and http://www.global-contemporary.de/images/stories/TGC_Zeitung_en.pdf (p.73)

[f] Series shown at Tate Britain with interview with John Smith and Tate curator, Andrew Wilson, 18 October 2008: <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/tate-triennial-2009-prologue-3-john-smith-hotel-diaries> The work was acquired for the Tate Collection in 2010.

[g] Screening at Royal College of Art (8 April 2010) to accompany major retrospective exhibition (19 March-13 April 2012). <http://www.artrabbit.com/uk/events/event&event=17878> with catalogue *John Smith: Solo Show* by Thomas Cuckle, Gemma Lloyd and Gareth Bell-Jones (2012). [ISBN 978-1-907342-05-9].

[g] Review of *John Smith: Solo Show*, by Sally O'Reilly and Mark Prince, broadcast 9 April 2010 on Resonance FM: <http://podcasts.resonancefm.com/archives/3406>

[h] 'The Foreign Observer: Gilad Melzer talks to John Smith', published on-line *Maarav* (17 November 2011) <http://www.maarav.org.il/english/2011/11/the-foreign-observer-gilad-melzer-talks-to-john-smith/>

[i] 'John Smith, Worst Case Scenario. Films from 1975 till 2003', exhibition catalogue, Weserburg: Museum fur moderne kunst, Bremen, 21 January – 25 March 2012, p. 8 [ISBN 978-3-928761-91-8]