
The Background behind Gregg Smith

An essay on Gregg Smith's work

by Jill Magid - 2006

In his work Gregg Smith employs various devices that focus a lens into or release a protagonist's inner monologues, preconscious spaces, or spaces of the not yet spoken. One consistently witnesses a pressing desire to convert a subject's inner monologue into an external dialogue, in an attempt at a shared social space. The precise moment Smith reveals the protagonist's life, by way of the camera or performative act, exists at the edge of this possible transformation. While his protagonists embody their personal narratives and are in some stage of expressing them, they do not recognize these stories as their own, and are therefore unable to integrate them into their identity. The way Smith is using narrative is less about a story's content and more about its telling as a creative and potentially revelatory act.

There is mental disorder reminiscent of this phenomenon present in Gregg's work. It is called alexithymia, and literally means "without words for emotions." Coined by Peter Sifneos in 1972, alexithymia describes people who appear to have deficiencies in understanding, processing, or describing their emotions.

I am taking the liberty to define preconscious space as the space between conscious and unconscious thought, where an emotion lies latent, slightly below the surface. In Smith's video work, the camera dislodges this feeling, and the emotion becomes manifest. It appears, for example, via his animated wallpapers, mobile blue screens, or in *Underexposed*, as a rhythmic burst of the body. The stories that contain these emotions come forth in a raw, preanalyzed, form.

The Protagonists

The context of Smith's video works often begins within the everyday activities of life: riding the trams, working in the office (*The End*), having a drink at a bar (*Notorious*), jumping rope or swimming laps (*Trams Taken and Trams Missed*). The activities are for the most part solitary; his protagonists are singular. They are alone in the world, often traveling as tourists, recent arrivals to a new city, or wanderers in a familiar one, yet nevertheless disorientated by a breakup or rift in a relationship. Due to various circumstances, the once familiar has become unfamiliar.

Smith situates his protagonist in one of these cliché positions—the lone man in a new city, the tourist, the newly broken-hearted lover without a home to return to—in order to tap into our collective knowledge of basic narrative structures. We approach his protagonist feeling as if we already know him, or have certainly seen him in a number of films. As Smith has stated, he uses cliché as a tool for accessibility. Given *this* protagonist in *this* environment, the viewer immediately recognizes the context into which he is stepping. Once situated within familiar narrative ground, Smith can then take us, the viewers, on the mental trip he wants us to go.

Although we are faced with both a familiar character and a familiar site, the narrative in Smith's works quickly progresses into the realm of the strange. This strangeness is not related to the plot; rarely does a plot exist in any traditional sense. Rather, what we experience is the protagonist involved in a series of incidents, with no imposed narrative arc or summarizing conclusion. This strangeness comes forth through the manner in which the story is recounted.

An early example of this is the jumping rope performance *Trams Taken and Trams Missed*, performed in Biella, Turin, and Amsterdam in 2001. In this performance Smith narrates four stories from the point of view of a singular protagonist. The stories recount experiences the protagonist has had while commuting on trams in Amsterdam. While the underlying theme of the stories is a search for human intimacy, they are told in a deadpan, unemotional manner—further distanced by the fact that their narrator is telling them whilst skipping rope. The viewers are simultaneously confronted with two disparate gestures: the voice of intimate longing and the body under repetitive physical activity.

I was an audience member when *Trams Taken and Trams Missed* was performed in Amsterdam. For this version, the audience congregated around Gregg under an arch in a small public square with a somewhat private feel. What made the performance even stranger than the already odd situation of a man telling stories while jumping rope, was that I felt displaced in my role as audience member. As Smith narrated the stories, he looked straight ahead of him and seemed to speak to no one. While these stories were told in the first person, he was not confessing, nor asking for advice, nor releasing for therapeutic means. It was simply relaying, to no one in particular, events that had occurred, to an audience I could not find.

Storytelling in this performance occurs before analysis. It is as if the protagonist is sweating out the words by the physical action of his skipping. While the stories have moments that could be embarrassing, there is no shame in what's revealed. There is only action and the physical release of what the body had taken in. Somehow, perhaps by the physical act of jumping rope, the protagonist's agency is distanced enough to let the truth come out, without self-consciousness and before self-awareness.

Perhaps it is this distance, devoid of judgment, that gives the space for the viewer to enter. By speaking, the protagonist permits our own recounting of our own stories of our own longing. Whether we tell our stories to ourselves or displace them back to the artist, we take the first step towards recognition. Gregg has noted that after he performs, viewers, confusing him for his character, often confess their stories to him.

I refer again to the condition of alexithymia. The protagonist's actions are somatic—physically acted out but not yet processed, understood, or dealt with. There seems to be a gap, a disconnect, between the protagonist's story and his context. Somehow he is not truly occupying the space he is in. Or is it that the two are not proceeding contemporaneously? Smith's protagonists are consistently caught in this position, slightly separated from their environment via slower tempos or discordant gestures. The slippage manifests in various ways, depending on which work of Gregg's we are watching.

In the video work *Should We Never Meet Again*, the protagonist is a young man walking through Paris, voicing an inner monologue. He has argued and split with his wife and is trying to figure out a friend to stay with for the night. In his mind and aloud, he runs through his entire circle of friends, but does not contact any of them. From time to time a canvas, painted or wallpapered, emerges from behind him. It is carried by a faceless person, as if the assemblage is both a device and a character. The canvas comes forward and engulfs him, expanding into an interior space consisting of its pattern. The canvas likewise transports with the protagonist a series of strangers who have innocently stepped before the canvas beside him. Once engulfed, the strangers appear to have detailed knowledge of the problem of the protagonist.

The first man transported along with the protagonist asks him if he still sexually craves his wife, if she makes his nipples feel like “fresh rose buds.” Before the protagonist can answer, the man reaches under the protagonist’s sweater and begins to feel his chest. Initially his touch follows like an examination, as a doctor feels for illness. The movement then slows down, changes intensity, and becomes a caress. The protagonist looks aroused and begins to be carried away. At the moment of his surrender, when he has succumbed to the touch, he becomes aware. He ruffles himself back to ‘normal,’ and shakes the man off—who then recognizes that he, too, has crossed a boundary. The moment is cut short, the screen falls away, they return to being strangers. The loss of control is sensed but not permitted, and order returns until the screen comes again.

We are left to wonder if this moment truly happened, as concerns the protagonist, who simply continues walking through the city and running through his friends. Perhaps this second reality is accessible only to the viewer, by way of the canvas and camera. Our vision goes further than those involved, into the protagonist’s subconscious, a place that we can visit but the protagonist dares not to go.

The untransported extras in *Should We Never Meet Again* are part of the background, on level with the city. Whereas this is to be expected with extras in films, Smith calls attention to their position as objects, devoid of subjectivity. This situation is made apparent when an extra gets singled out, in relation to the protagonist, and is pulled into his world as an embodiment of his inner voice. While the extra is suddenly invested with a subjectivity, it is not his own, but an element of the protagonist himself. This stranger, like the man who caresses, reflects the protagonist’s inner desires. He appears as his inner voice—as an angel, devil, or sage, both a mirror and an alias. The extra-come-stranger is just another device to dislodge the protagonist’s unarticulated thoughts.

Yet the divides are not as clear as this. In *Should We Never Meet Again*, the wallpapered canvas is a device that is part interiority and part exteriority. The first appearance of one of these screens is covered in a soiled flowery wallpaper, as one would find in an old Victorian house. Yet, like the city façades around it, it has spray paint on it.

When the protagonist turns a corner, the canvas leaves its resting position against a building, crosses the city street, and pulls the protagonist into its interior space—the space of his subconscious. What this screen is and to whom it is visible is ambiguous. If it is in fact invisible to those on the street and linked intimately to the subconscious mind of the protagonist, then who vandalized it? Someone must see it, someone must be conscious of it in order to interact with and damage it. Although we do not see who this could be, we must wonder at the implied accessibility and vulnerability of one's subconscious within the context of a shared social space.

Like the narrator in *Trams Taken and Trams Missed*, the protagonist in *Should We Never Meet Again* relates his inner monologue aloud to no one in particular. In this case, no one even notices him speaking to himself. And yet, as a viewer of the film, it does not seem like he is talking to himself. It is more like he is simply voicing what is only audible in his mind. A related technique used in traditional film narratives would be the voiceover, but here in this case the protagonist's mouth is moving. Neither is this the device of a monologue in the theater, which is clearly spoken for the audience, within the context of the story. Neither is it found in the directness of a theatrical aside, that speech act for the audience that steps outside the narrative to add another layer to, or explain, its understanding.

Where are we as audience? There is something between us and the story as recounted by the protagonist, for it appears that the latter is not speaking directly to the former.

It may be that in *Should We Never Meet Again*, the canvas is the visual clue for the viewers. The protagonist and the strangers who come with him do not look around to consider the space to which they have moved, nor do they question it. Once the screen has engulfed them, they simply behave differently, in a more direct and sensual way. As the actors seem oblivious to their environmental change, it must be we, the viewers, who require a context to place their new behavior.

The Background

In Smith's films, the restaurant, the bar, the office become analogous to the canvas. This is illuminated in the video work *Background to a Seduction* when the wallpaper begins to take on an animated life of its own. In this film, a man and a woman talk quietly over a glass of wine. Although the two refer to a past, the conversation plays out like a first date. While there is an undeniable sexual tension between them, it remains unspoken. The background—a floral papered wall—plays out the characters' desires: that which cannot be verbalized is fetishized in the paper. Instead of the couple reaching out to touch one other, the flowers dislodge from the background to play out the flirtations gestures that lie latent between the couple.

This phenomenon of displacement is not always made so visible. Without the device of the wallpaper, it is the city-as-background that manifests the unspoken desires of those within it. The people, or in the case of the films—'the extras'— which take on that which cannot be expressed by the protagonist.

This is taken up in Smith's most recent film project *Underexposed*. In *Underexposed* the visual device of the animated wallpaper and moving canvases is bypassed. Disconnected, physical gestures of the actors occur within the very spaces they occupy.

In the script version of *Underexposed* (the only version to which I have access), Lucky, the protagonist, is an arrival to a new city. He is attempting to make the necessary connections he needs to start his new life there. Through his efforts he enters into a series of exchanges and encounters in a variety of settings such as offices, bureaus, or city streets. In a summary of the action Smith writes: "The peculiar aspect of these encounters is that, at times, the characters display unusual bodily movements, ranging from small repetitive twitches to more elaborate dance routines, as if they are charged from the ground up by a powerful internal rhythmic force." Although music behind the movements is sensed, none is audible, and no character remarks on another's rhythmic motions. Either they are not conscious of them, or they accept them as normal behavior, and continue to interact.

What then was the background canvas that rose out from the environment to embrace the protagonist and transport him to another realm; was it really a foreign element or was it the precursor to what we see in *Underexposed*, where the character's inner world is displayed without any mediation, invisible to the other characters, visible only to the viewer? It seems clear now that the background functioned as transitional device. Without it, the viewer sees the inside and the outside of a character simultaneously. What is always already there, yet inaccessible to the eye, is visualized for us via the lens of the camera. It is as if the camera is a laser or an x-ray machine giving us access to 'the true reality,' invisible until captured and projected. But clearly, the camera does not create the space: it is always there. It is only that through Smith's all-seeing lens, we are made more aware of it. We become conscious of the individuals' simultaneous realities and take the clear point that the inner one predominates, and therefore must be dealt with.

As viewers, we are thus profoundly confronted with the complex nature of public space. What Lucky and the rest of the characters go through in the narrative seems arbitrary. Rather, the insight lies in the transparency of the characters' individual movements, in and out of psychic space, as revealed in the public realm. The resulting effect is a feeling that social interactions are unevenly weighted towards the individuals who participate. It is as if everyone is wearing his own individually set iPod on full blast while holding a conversation. In this sense, 'plugging into one's own personal energy' seems to imply that one's ability to be aware of an underlying, shared frequency may prove to be quite difficult.

The Next Device

What then is the nature of the social interaction in Smith's work? Are the people in the script ever really communicating or knowing one another, is there any real sense of intimacy between them? Within his work one could feel alone in a social space of nonreal interaction.

And yet there is a strong sense of hope and possibility that comes from the work, as well as with telling stories. In Smith's artist statement he talks about narrative as a way to tell one's story to oneself. *Underexposed* addresses life in the public realm as a flow of harmonious and discordant rhythms, effecting and colliding inside the body of the individual, even if he—like Smith's protagonists—is not aware of it himself.

“Someone who cannot verbally express negative emotions will have trouble discharging and neutralizing these emotions, physiologically as well as psychically. All feelings, whether normal or pathological, are ultimately bodily feelings... The inability to express emotions verbally implies a deficient interior life. Inevitably, those who cannot match words to feelings will live out that deficit in their contacts with others as well. To have no words for one's inner experience is to live marginally, for oneself and for others.” Alexithymia, Ren J. Muller, Ph.D.

Smith's works stress the need for our words, for ourselves and for society. This is the work's political level. Only through voicing one's personal narrative can he create the potential for his own recognition, and take responsibility for his actions. Smith's work can thus be seen, in its entirety, as a transitional device. Through the special lenses he employs, we see personal and social behavior revealed. Although his protagonists have not taken the next step to be cognizant of their own actions, we can. This is the responsibility of the viewers, to use the protagonist's expression of personal narrative as an impetus to dislodge our own, so once spoken we can take the next step of reflection. Only from here is a truly shared social space possible.
