



Smith on Heroin. A Short Film by Smith & Willing

Paul Antick
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<https://vimeo.com/466574928>

For more information about Smith & Willing, see: www.smithandwilling.com

Smith and Willing are fictional characters and in the following interview that accompanies this film, they discuss with an anonymous interviewer the relationship between lens-based technologies, audience expectations, and Smith on Heroin's capacity to invoke feelings of 'stuck-ness'. In doing so, they reflect on



the ways and extent to which a film audience's felt or affective responses can be structured ideologically.

Smith and Willing is a Paul Antick project.

Smith on Heroin. An Interview with Smith & Willing

Interviewer: I'm interested in the use of the fixed camera position in *Smith on Heroin* and the way that it potentially engenders a feeling of 'stuck-ness' in the viewer. I say this because I personally felt very 'stuck' when I was watching your film. Also, given that the film seems to implicitly reference photography – courtesy of said camera position – I wonder if you could say something about that as well, I mean specifically in relation to the idea and feeling of 'stuck-ness'?

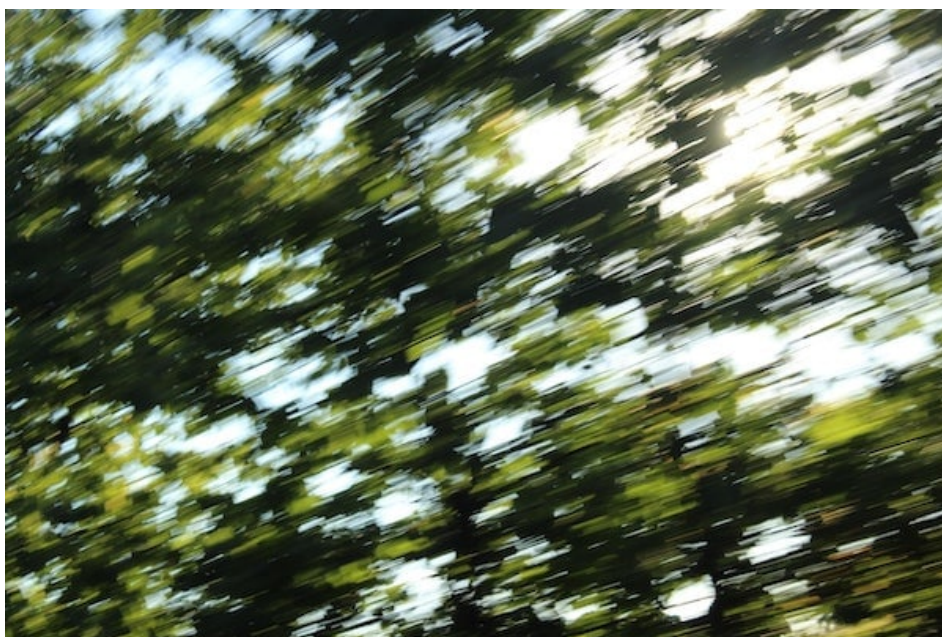
S&W: The thing about 'stuck-ness' hadn't really occurred to us until a friend of ours recently told us more or less exactly the same thing you just did. She asked us if there was anything about the film – some kind of formal device peculiar to the film itself – which, in our opinion, could have made her feel the way that she did when she watched it – i.e. stuck. We said we didn't know. But then, it occurred to us that this feeling of stuck-ness could have more to do with what consumers expect a film to *do*, and the extent to which those expectations are frustrated, than anything inside the film itself – an implied camera position, for instance.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

S&W: One of the things that distinguishes the idea of photography from film is that audiences don't generally expect a photograph to reveal more information within the frame of the photograph than what is initially made available to them. Over a period of time, the viewer might see or notice more things, more objects,



in a photograph, but that isn't because the photograph has actually made more things available to them. Moreover, someone engaging with a photograph doesn't generally expect to be led through the scene in the photograph and, as a result, to find additional visual information in and about the scene. Despite the fact that the context in which any photographic image appears will, in one way or another, impact the value or meaning of an image, and regardless of the speed at which photographs are now routinely exchanged across innumerable online platforms, it seems to be the case that irrespective of the context of its distribution, our knowledge of what's actually being denoted in the photograph itself is still based almost entirely on what appears to have been the case from the get-go. (If differences do emerge between one version of a photograph and another then perhaps it makes more sense to talk not about different versions of a photograph but about the existence of a completely different image altogether.) Finally, there is this expectation that most of us have when we look at a photograph, that we'll remain exactly where we always have been in relation to the 'world' contained in it. This is based on having engaged with innumerable photographs before – all of which obeyed the same basic principle: a commitment to the idea and practice of 'immobility'.



[Image](#) by [Siora Photography](#) (courtesy of Unsplash.com).



Our expectations of film in relation to the idea of movement are usually quite different. Partly because the idea of film itself is actually predicated on the possibility of movement, which usually occurs in at least two ways. Evidently it involves the movement of objects through the film space itself. Within a particular scene, for example. People walking across a street; a truck going by, or whatever. But the film also contains the possibility of movement by the audience – or at least the hallucination of a kind of movement. This effect is triggered by an identification with the often rapidly fluctuating changes in camera position. Which, courtesy of the editing process, are eventually stitched together to provide the viewer with a relatively seamless, although not necessarily naturalistic, journey through the film space. This is what film's meant to do! This is what we generally *expect* it to do! Despite the relative popularity and familiarity of so-called 'slow' or 'still' films, by people like Andy Warhol, Sam Taylor-Wood, James Benning, *Béla Tarr* etc., it's curious how when we watch them, Smith and I still often feel like we're watching, and also actively participating in, the perpetration of a tiny act of symbolic violence – 'This film isn't doing what a film should be doing!' – the thrill of which compensates, to some extent perhaps, for the feelings of boredom that we also sometimes experience when we're watching them. The point being that if the value or potency of this kind of 'violence' was merely contingent on the absence of movement in a scene, by which we mean the absence of what appear to be different camera positions, then the photograph would presumably engender similar feelings – of 'stuck-ness', for example. But photographs don't generally do that, mainly because, as we say: no one seriously *expects* them to.

The point being that if the value or potency of this kind of 'violence' was merely contingent on the absence of movement in a scene, by which we mean the absence of what appear to be different camera positions, then the photograph would presumably engender similar feelings – of 'stuck-ness', for example.

So, the feeling of 'stuck-ness' you mentioned at the beginning has something to do with what film implicitly promises to do for us, and the extent to which its



betrayal, of both the promise it made and the expectations that arose from that promise, can invoke feelings of disappointment, frustration, and disorientation. In *Smith on Heroin*, these feelings are specifically inflected, thanks to the camera position, with this quality of 'stuck-ness'. To reiterate, though, we think that the feeling of 'stuck-ness' has as much to do with what one expects in the first place, as it does with anything purely technical. It's perhaps interesting to consider at this point the extent to which a non-naturalistic anthropological film like this one might provoke a similar set of responses, precisely because its anti-naturalism could also disappoint the expectations and demands of those viewers for whom the 'anthropological' film can only by definition be 'anthropological' if it is devotedly naturalistic.

Interviewer: Can you say a few words about the representation of drug use in the film? You haven't mentioned that at all so far, which seems strange to me given that the film is after all called *Smith on Heroin*. I was *expecting* you to mention it.

S&W: It's been a long time since Smith and I used heroin. When we did, there was nothing very glamorous' about any of it - or degenerate either for that matter. We say this because our experiences back then - it was a long time ago! - actually had very little in common with most of the 'addiction stories', or narratives, that seemed to be around at the time - or, with a few notable exceptions, that we've ever engaged with since, except insofar as they structured some of our own junkie fantasies, about ourselves I mean, and the kind of roles that we imagined for ourselves. Fantasies that often jarred with the physical practicalities and necessities - the realities, so to speak - of our own everyday lives. It seems to us that most of these narratives were stuck in, or stuck somewhere in between, two divergent ideas of abjection. The first was typified by the kind of public information films about the 'dangers of heroin' that Smith and I had to watch at school in the late 1970s, in which the dereliction of the user's body was usually conceived in purely eugenic terms: their physical abjection basically functioning as a sign of an intrinsically and irredeemably degenerate personality or character. We thought those films were just great! We wanted to be just like the people in them. Perhaps because the condition which these films



described was, so far as we were concerned, the first necessary step on the user's long and appealingly arduous journey to another kind of condition, the one represented in those other more romantic, more 'positive' – but in many ways no more or less absurd – images of abjection that we were also familiar with. Images of abjection as a redemptive event, where the user's wretched demeanour signals what appears to be a wholly rational, in the circumstances, repudiation of an especially wretched social system, the effects of which are precisely what heroin appears to inoculate the user against. Here the user, or more specifically, the user's body, which is invariably male, operates as an ironic and also deeply paradoxical sign in which, typically, the user's dissociated gaze – (their dreamy distracted eyes) – provides us with vital visual evidence of their having finally ascended, Christ-like, to an elevated position of spiritual good health and quasi-moral authority. Think images of a 'beautiful', out of it Keith Richards, circa 1971, suffering the pleasures and pains of heroin use for us. For our sins and the sins of our culture, our history, our politics etc. etc. *ad infinitum* – on the front pages of newspapers, in music and fashion magazines, and now of course in videos on YouTube.

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Interviewer: Smith is no Keith Richards!

S&W: No. And we're pleased that *Smith on Heroin* isn't like Robert Frank's *Cocksucker Blues* (1972) either – a film we like very much, incidentally.

Interviewer: To that extent, the user in your film certainly isn't constrained by, or stuck in, the tropes you just described, tropes through which many of us perhaps expect the figure of the 'junkie' to be constituted, even if perhaps his or her 'redemptive' value depends very much on the existence of tropes like that.



S&W: It's true! Smith isn't stuck like that. But unfortunately he is stuck in the UK in 2021! If the film's *about* anything, then for us it's probably about that as much as anything.

Interviewer: I think we'll end it there! Thanks very much.

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[Featured image](#) by [Denise Jans](#) (courtesy of Unsplash.com).