

# I Think He's Got a Helicopter in His Pocket: The AI Chewing Gum

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Chunk 1

## The Girl Chewing Gum

In the first 30 seconds of the 1976 avantgarde movie *The Girl Chewing Gum* by British artist John Smith we see and hear different things: The image depicts the trailer of a lorry that, after some seconds, begins to move out of the frame to the left. Meanwhile, pigeons fly by and a girl in a coat walks from left to right.

Chunk 2

Before the lorry vanishes, more people cross the screen from and to different directions. On the audio layer we hear the constant ringing of an alarm bell drowning out the general ambience of a city. The voice of a director is audible who appears to give stage directions: "Slowly move the trailer to the left ... and I want the little girl to run across, now. Hold that trailer there ... Now move the trailer off".<sup>1</sup> There is obviously something off

1: John Smith. (2015). *Original script for the voiceover to the girl chewing gum*. tate research publication.

<<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/the-girl-chewing-gum-john-smith/original-voiceover-script>>

with the voice directing the image: Why does the director give orders to the lorry and the girl but doesn't direct the other people in the scene? In a highly controlled situation like the film set this feels somehow odd.

Chunk 3

The movie continues in the same way, but the voice that gives directions and the things that act and react to it become more and more separated. In the emblematic shot of a clocktower, where the camera pans up to frame the clock in a somewhat steady shot, the director seems to give stage directions to the pointer of the clock, which seems both absurd and technologically impossible. Later on, a shot with very similar camera movement comes up, and the voice talks in detail about the plate glass manufacturer located in the building of the clock. This includes a lengthy comment on the manufacturer's signage which the narrator apparently misreads as Greek, but actually the signage is seen

from behind and thus “upside-down and back to front English”.<sup>2</sup> This time, the same scene as shown before does not need stage directions to the camera or the depicted things in front of it at all.

Chunk 4

It becomes obvious that the voice we can hear is a voice-over and not the directing voice. As the film proceeds, Smith drops all pretense of directing the film: While still showing the same street scene, the voice-over describes a rural scene including a golf course. The voice speculates about one of the golfers: “I think he’s got a helicopter in his pocket.”<sup>3</sup> As the voice returns to the street scene in front of the camera, it accuses a random passer-by of having robbed a post office. Just as we hear the voice saying, “the burglar alarm is still ringing,” we notice the alarm cannot be heard anymore, only to return later.

Chunk 5

At the end of the film, the camera reveals that the director is at a completely different location, standing on a meadow with trees, fields, cows and electricity pylons (we can still hear the alarm, though).

The interplay of image and sound is an illusion that demystifies the scenes we just saw. Smith’s work uses the technique of voice-over from documentary and film noir to question authenticity, authority and authorship in mainstream narrative cinema.<sup>4</sup> By doing so, the director becomes the narrator. On a larger scale, Smith’s film is a critical commentary on filmmaking in general, problematizing the relationship between narrative and the moving image, the tension between what is said and seen, and the fact that words never describe or prescribe images in full. In 2015, Tate Modern published the script written by Smith and beside the already mentioned interplay of sound and image, the script reveals yet another layer of inconsistency: that between written and spoken word.

2: John Smith. (2015). *Original script for the voiceover to the girl chewing gum*, tate research publication. <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/the-girl-chewing-gum-john-smith/original-voiceover-script>>

3: John Smith. (2015). *Original script for the voiceover to the girl chewing gum*, tate research publication. <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/the-girl-chewing-gum-john-smith/original-voiceover-script>>

4: Quigley, P. (2012). The man giving orders: The girl chewing gum. *Short Film Studies*, 2(2), 151-154. <[https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs.2.2.151\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs.2.2.151_1)>

Chunk 6

In the beginning of the movie, script and spoken word correspond to each other, whereas later on both increasingly disconnect.

Chunk 7

After about eight minutes, the narrator tells us: “I am shouting into a microphone on the edge of a field near Ledgemoor Heath, around 15 miles from the building you are looking at.” The corresponding passage in the written script reads: “I am speaking into a megaphone, which I am pointing at a microphone, on the outskirts of Epping Forest — about ten miles from the building you are looking at.”<sup>5</sup> Between both spoken and written places lie about 160 miles of British landscape. This inconsistency let us wonder where the artist really stood and where the street scene was actually filmed.

Chunk 8

## The AI Chewing Gum

In the project *The AI Chewing Gum*, we reenacted Smith’s classic using generative artificial intelligence (AI). Using a text-to-video system,<sup>6</sup> we generate moving images according to the prompts from Smith’s script.

Chunk 9

The system was state-of-the-art when we used it, but at the time of writing it is already outdated. Line by line the script was fed into the system while we used still images from the movie to initialize individual scenes visually. In addition, we recreated the camera movement of the original film using the camera control features of the system. John Smith’s voice was re-synthesized using AI technology as well.

Paradoxically, while trying to follow the script’s directions, the generative systems did both: they stayed truer to the prompts than Smith’s film itself while simultaneously diverging farther from it. Within the limits of their generative potential,

5: John Smith. (2015). *Original script for the voiceover to the girl chewing gum*, tate research publication. <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/the-girl-chewing-gum-john-smith/original-voiceover-script>>

6: Runway Research. (2023). *Gen-2: The next step forward for generative AI: A multimodal AI system that can generate novel videos with text, images or video clips*. <<https://research.runwayml.com/gen2>>

they failed to follow the prompted instructions: The result is that people morph through the frames of the video instead of exhibiting anatomically or physically correct motion. The content of the prompts sometimes appears on the images, sometimes it does not — as if the English prompts quite literally were processed upside down and back to front. More generally, while each scene starts with the look of the original film and follows the prompted script from there, the scenes end up with different aesthetics and visual language altogether — moving from black-and-white to color images, and from specific street scenes to very generic. Starting each scene with one frame of the original movie hence was necessary, because the generative process constantly pushed the resulting images towards a contemporary cinematic aesthetic.

The simulated voice of the resulting generated film likewise follows the script accurately, but by doing so erases the difference between written and spoken text that was essential to the original movie. Of course, the burglar alarm is erased as well. To the system, it appeared to be a noise

distortion in need of correction. Instead of questioning authenticity, authority and authorship in mainstream narrative cinema, the generative systems employed in the project raised questions about their own status as tools for filmmaking and as “world simulators.”<sup>7</sup> They revealed that video generation systems do not possess an understanding of the physical world or, for that matter, film. They showed how prompting is not about controlling generative processes but about loosely guiding a process of stepwise optimization according to statistical plausibility, revealing more about the training data than about any creative intention.

Chunk 10

This process ultimately yields standardized images from a “flat world,”<sup>8</sup> that has been flattened towards an ahistorical accumulation of styles.

II. p. 42, Chunk 19: The Cognitive Style of ChatGPT

II. p. 106, Chunk 11: Infinite Boredom

I. p. 186, Chunk 8: Algorithmic Culture...

Chunk 11

This article is separately published as 10.25358/openscience-13024.

Chunk 12

7: OpenAI. (2024). *Video generation models as world simulators*. <<https://openai.com/index/video-generation-models-as-world-simulators/>>

8: Meyer, R. (2024). It's a flat world. The synthetic realities of sora. *Rrrreflect. Journal of Integrated Design Research, Special Issue 1: Hidden Layers*. <<https://doi.org/10.57684/COS-1267>>

## IN FOCUS

Original script for the voiceover to *The Girl Chewing Gum*

JOHN SMITH



*The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 by John Smith

*The Girl Chewing Gum* 1976 by John Smith

Original script for the voiceover to *The Girl Chewing Gum*

Context and Conception

A 'New Face' at the Co-op

[Not] the Voice of God

Dalton, Then and Now: An Interview with John Smith

A Film in the Age of Video

Acknowledgements

This is a transcription of the original typescript for the voiceover written by Smith as he edited the film, reproduced courtesy of the artist. Its content differs slightly from the final voiceover used by Smith.

## Directions –

Slowly move the trailer to the left... and I want the little girl to run across, now. Hold that trailer there..... Now move the trailer off.

Right – now I want the old man with white hair and glasses to cross the road – come on, quickly..... look this way, now walk off to the left. OK, fine.

Now let's have the man in the peaked cap... put the cigarette in your mouth..... good..... and I want the two girls to come in from the right talking to each other.

Now I want the Jamaican family, father first – look in front of you..... now the mother and the two boys..... and I want the smaller boy to point to the right, and now cast a glance behind him.

Now I want the bus ticket to blow across the pavement.

Fine – now I want the girl with the bag under her arm to walk to the right. Now let's have the man rubbing his eye..... good.

Right. Now I want everything to sink slowly down as the five boys come by..... hold it..... and I want the clock to move jerkily towards me... stop.

Now I want the long hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour, and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours... fine.

Now two pigeons fly across, and everything comes up again until the girl chewing gum walks across from the left.

OK. Now – the van, the woman, and the boy... the man with the bag of chips, the car roof, the whole car, the old man, the car, the car and the boy, the boy, the motorcyclist and the lady.

Now when the woman at the window looks in this direction, I want everything to move a bit further away.

Right – let's have the man in the white boiler suit coming in from the right..... stop at the lamp-post and fold your arms..... now look around you.....

walk back to the left again, and look left and right as you cross the road....

Now I want the man reading exchange and man to come in from the right.

Now a man comes by and bites his nails, two pigeons fly past from right to left and two boys run past from left to right... the woman at the window looks this way and then goes on talking.

In a second I want four boys to come from the left, and I want one of them to look this way and flap his arms up and down. I'd like the boys to remain in more or less the same position, while everything else moves to the left and goes away a bit at the same time..... Got that?..... OK..... go.

Lift up your arm – now bring it down.

Now I want the man with the turban and briefcase to come in from the right, and now the van marked 'University of London, Senate House, London WC1'.

In the cinema queue, I want to see a boy and his mother. The boy will be about eight years old, and his mother about thirty-two. They will both have collar-length hair, his dark and hers fair – she will be wearing a suedeette coat with a white imitation fur collar. They will be talking to each other and looking around them. The boy will look at his watch and yawn, then look at it again and say something to his mother about the time.

Now I want the man coming in from the left in the grey peaked cap to put on his glasses. The three children eating chips, the French woman, the window-cleaner in his van, the greengrocer, the pigeon, the red jaguar, the taxi, the van, the man, the negro with the briefcase and the newspaper, the woman firmly gripping the hands of her two young sons. They stop, and now they cross the road.

The man in the grey peaked cap takes off his glasses again and puts them in his breast pocket. The man with the walking stick is going home. The dentist continues on his way to the bank, and the two naughty boys appear from behind Steele's and cautiously cross the road.

Steele's the plate glass manufacturers is situated in an area with a high immigrant population, predominantly West Indians and Greeks. Outside the building, above its main doors, is a board advertising vacancies at the firm. Until recently, I thought that jobs were advertised on the board in two languages – English and Greek. However, a few weeks ago, I studied the board carefully, and realised that I had been wrong. Each vacancy has its own slot in the board – the words (glass-cutters, bevellers, bench-fitters etc.) are at part of these slots, which are made of perspex. When a vacancy no longer exists, the slot advertising it, which has a central pivot at each end, is swivelled around. The words that I had believed to be Greek were in fact upside-down and back to front English. Steele's also has another interesting feature. Along each wall of the building, there are eight large doors that are kept wide open throughout the year.

I am speaking into a megaphone, which I am pointing at a microphone, on the outskirts of Epping Forest – about ten miles from the building you are looking at. The traffic noise will now fade down. I am standing on the edge of an enormous golf course, and there are trees behind me and to my left. In the distance I can see three golfers. One of them is wearing a blue jumper, and the other two are both wearing red. They are all men. The shortest of the three is standing by a trolley, which is laden with their clubs. The one with the blue jumper, who seems much older than the other two, is looking this way. Now the short one has put a ball on the ground and is taking a club from the trolley. I think he's got a helicopter in his pocket. In a tree about fifteen yards away, I can see a large blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet.

This young man has just robbed the local post office and is attempting to appear inconspicuous. He is trying to remain calm, but his hand is sweating as he grips the butt of the revolver in his coat pocket even harder. He is wondering whether the woman at the window would recognise him if she saw him again. The burglar alarm is still ringing.

Now disappear.

## How to cite

John Smith, 'Original script for the voiceover to *The Girl Chewing Gum*', in *'The Girl Chewing Gum' 1976* by John Smith. Tate Research Publication, 2015. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/the-girl-chewing-gum-john-smith/original-voiceover-script>, accessed 27 May 2025.

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Slowly move the trailer to the left ...



... and everything comes up again until the girl chewing gum walks across ...

Chunk 13



... and I want the two girls to come in from the right talking to each other.



... I want everything to move a bit further away.

Chunk 14



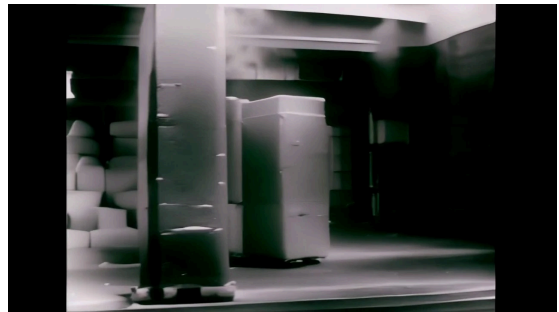
Now I want everything to sink slowly down as the five boys come by ...



... two pigeons fly past from right to left and two boys run past from left to right.



... and I want the clock to move jerkily towards me ...



... while everything else moves to the left and goes away a bit at the same time.



... and now the van marked 'University of London, Senate House, London WC1'.



Each vacancy has its own slat in the board ...

Chunk 15



They will be talking to each other and looking around them.



Along each wall of the building, there are eight large doors ...



... the French woman, ...



I think he's got a helicopter in his pocket.

Chunk 16



The man with the walking stick is going home.



I can see a large blackbird with a wingspan of about nine feet.