Varia

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Robinson in England: A Conversation with Patrick Keiller

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Abstract
Patrick Keiller, a British artist and filmmaker, made five short films and three film essays: *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). The main characters of the latter works are Robinson and his nameless companion – the narrator. They set off on a series of journeys to places nearly completely devoid of human presence or activity, investigating their semantic and myth–making potential. Keiller's film essays are multi–layered narratives exploring, among others, such issues as the production of space, the functioning of memory, and the feeling of nostalgia. "Drifting", understood as a game of spatial and verbal associations, reveals Keiller's fascination with architecture, which is filmed in an innovative way. The contribution is a record of two interviews with Patrick Keiller, made in Oxford in September 2018 and 2019.

Patrick Keiller, a British artist and filmmaker, was born in 1950 in Blackpool. Educated at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, Keiller practiced his original profession until 1979, when he enrolled as a postgraduate student in the Department of Environmental Media at the Royal College of Art. He taught architecture at the North East London Polytechnic (1974-1992) and fine art at Middlesex Polytechnic, later University (1983-1999), and was afterwards (2002-2011) a research fellow at the Royal College of Art.

In his first film, *Stonebridge Park* (1981), made while he was a student, the narrator recounts the story of his robbing his employer, panicking when he realised what he has done, then fleeing to the south of France. Footage shot, with the camera climbing up steps and moving across a footbridge over the nearby road junction, is accompanied by voiceover narration. The closing caption states: *Soon after my arrival I made enquiries in London, and it turned out that my employer's wife had recovered consciousness unhurt, and that not an hour after my dismissal from the garage, the bank installed a receiver. My employer had been subsequently declared bankrupt, and as the money I had taken was the result of his having defrauded his own company, he never reported the theft. Norwood* (1983), a sequel of sorts to *Stonebridge Park*, continues the story of the narrator, who becomes involved in property speculation. Yet on this occasion it is he himself who falls victim to the machinations of his business partners. Eventually, the narrator describes his own murder and subsequent ascent to heaven. With a running time at twenty-odd minutes, both films were made in black and white

The End (1986), a slightly shorter tale, exposes the viewer to musings about the nature of thoughts, their succession and significance. It was followed by *Valtos* a year later. From this 11-minute short the viewer learns that the narrator suddenly realises he is turned into a replica of himself while asleep at night. The pursuit of the phantom eventually leads to a disastrous culmination at the eponymous location. In 1989 Keiller completed *The Clouds*, made in the North of England. Like all his previous films, it is shot in black and white, with the camera lingering over the landscape combined with architectural imagery. Again, the sequences are accompanied by the voice of the narrator recounting the story of his life and heritage, as well as making references to Epicurean philosophy.

All these works helped establish the distinct narrative and visual patterns that Keiller will develop and refine in his subsequent full-length productions. Their thematic focus is the built environment, landscapes of urban decay or the degradation of the English countryside; supposedly insignificant details of city life are mixed with its chaos and flux and mutability. Melancholic overtones are filled with irony, yet they remain hauntingly compelling and strangely hypnotic. This is an original blend of poetic (sur)realism firmly nodding at the avant-garde filmmaking that would eventually lead to his later and more accomplished film essays: *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010).

In a number of ways, these works explore various themes developed in the earlier shorts, while utilising and perfecting Keiller's filmic technique. All three films, this time made in full colour, feature the voice of a narrator recounting the journeys undertaken in the company of his friend, Robinson. Although neither can be seen on screen, their (imaginary) presence is truly compelling. In the first journey (*London*) they embark on a trip across the town to research 'the problem' of

London, a problem identified as 'not being Paris.' There follows a string of references to a long tradition of urban texts and authors (Poe, Baudelaire, Aragon, Benjamin, or Montaigne) offering accounts of London (supposedly) lacking a certain European urban experience and therefore making it stand out from the Continental urban heritage. A 'peculiar' version of English capitalism is to be blamed, based on the assumption that England should be considered to have a backward, outdated and generally failing economic system, since the country has never experienced a 'proper', or successful (bourgeois) revolution. London, in the narrator's words, *has always struck me as a city full of interesting people most of whom, like Robinson, would prefer to be elsewhere.*

The 'elsewhere' might be the English countryside investigated in their subsequent seven journeys that make up *Robinson in Space*. Inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* and supported by a *well-known international advertising agency* the explorers decide to undertake a study of another (unspecified) 'problem' of England. They wander across the countryside stopping at villages and towns, visiting ports and factories, exploring various non-places. Along the way they look for manifestations of English culture and tradition, making comments on the state and decline of the country's manufacturing economy. England, to them, appears to be provincial and a place that is collapsing yet masquerading as a developed country in the continually deregulated and corporate global economy. Then Robinson disappears for over a decade.

While Robinson went into hiding, Keiller made *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000). This time, a fictional researcher investigates a particular paradox of British life: how is it that one of the most advanced world economies becoming ever more digitised remains at the same time riddled with inadequate housing conditions. Domestic space, increasingly synonymous with working space and equipped with all sorts of electronic gadgets, seems to be insufficient and substandard to meet such modern demands. Twenty years later, at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea of one's home turned into a work place sounds all but prophetic. The film also marks an important gender shift, with Tilda Swinton taking the role of the narrator.

In 2008 Robinson returns, believing that *he could communicate with a network of non-human intelligences determined to preserve the possibility of life's survival on the planet. Robinson in Ruins*, the third and (so far) final instalment in the series, came about as a result of a research project entitled "The Future of Landscape and the Moving Image", in which Keiller was involved alongside Doreen Massey, Patrick Wright and Matthew Flintham. The objective was to explore *received ideas about mobility, belonging and displacement, and their relationship with landscape and images of landscape, in a context of economic and environmental crisis*[1]. The Robinson of the 2008 financial crisis walks through *the new ruins of a neoliberal culture that has not yet accepted its own demise and, for the moment, continues with the same old gestures like a zombie that doesn't know it's dead.*[2] Paul Scofield, who provided the voiceover narration in the first two films, is replaced by Vanessa Redgrave, who acts as a team leader striving to reconstruct and organise Robinson's ideas and thoughts – this is necessary since a box was found in his caravan containing 19 films and a notebook. As in the earlier films, Robinson's journeys make up a meandering and multilayered narrative punctuated by constant references to current social and political events, re-

marks on the economy, recollections of historical moments… All these are inter-
twined with geographical descriptions or ecological musings creating a one-of-a-
kind flow of narrative akin to a stream of consciousness.

What follows is a record of two conversations with Patrick Keiller held in
Oxford. The first took place in September 2018 in the Bodleian Library café and
focused on the figure of Robinson, followed by a discussion on current affairs,
mainly Brexit. At that time, there was still a ray of (vain) hope that the process
might be averted, or at least delayed indefinitely, since Theresa May seemed to
be unable to push the necessary legislation through Parliament. Exactly a year
later, this hope was all but gone. Boris Johnson had managed to assume the office
of Prime Minister and it became clear that the UK was firmly set on a collision
course with the EU. The setting for the second session in September 2019 was the
spectacular interior of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. This
time the conversation was chiefly dedicated to the technical aspects of Patrick
Keiller's art of filmmaking.

**Obviously, the name of Robinson brings to mind Defoe's novel, but your
preferred reference is Kafka's *Amerika*.**

It's not so much that he isn't Defoe's Robinson, merely that the immediate
prompt was Kafka's character. Robinson appealed to me as an English name well
known to people who are not English. I remembered that when I was learning
French at school, we'd had a textbook that featured a fictional family called Des-
champs – presumably its English author's idea of what a typical French family
might be called. I imagined that Robinson might be a similarly well-known name,
though I didn't then realise that the Robinson diaspora was so extensive.

I was attracted to Kafka's Robinson partly because he is one of two itiner-
ants, and because he's Kafka's. In *Amerika*, there is an exchange after Robinson has
visited the protagonist, Karl, at the hotel where he's been employed and got him-
self into trouble. Karl is being interrogated by the head waiter, who demands to
know why a drunk man has been found asleep in Karl's bed in the lift boys' dor-
mitory. Karl explains that the man is called Robinson and that he's Irish, at which
the head waiter says: *I don't even believe that his name is Robinson, for no Irishman was
ever called that since Ireland was Ireland*. I was intrigued that Kafka had known that
Robinson was not a common name in Ireland. As far as I know, it is or was mostly
a Protestant name – there are a lot of Robinsons in Northern Ireland.

Most of the Robinsons in literature have only one name, but outside fiction
Robinson is a surname. Crusoe is not a very sympathetic figure – having escaped
from slavery himself, he becomes a slave-owning sugar grower! I think the most
important things for me are that he is shipwrecked, and the implicit suggestion
that the name is probably an alias.

**Did Robinson graduate from the University of Reading or Barking? The
names seem to crop up in interchangeably.**

I don't think anyone has ever asked me about that. There isn't a University
of Barking – it's a fictional amalgam of two outer-London institutions, the Univer-
sity of East London and Middlesex University, in both of which I taught, mostly
in the 1980s. Robinson moved to Reading after losing his job as a part-time lecturer

at the University of Barking when its management became aware of his work on the 'problem' of London. When in *London* the narrator says *He lives on what he earns in one or two days a week teaching in the School of Fine Art and Architecture of the University of Barking*, I thought we might include a dog barking on the soundtrack, though in the end I wasn't sure it would be funny. Barking is also barking as in 'barking mad'. We might understand the University of Barking as an institution that trains people in madness.

Similarly, in *Robinson in Space*, Reading is reading, although not in the narration, since in speech Reading, the town, is pronounced 'redding', whereas reading is pronounced 'reeding'. In the book based on the film,[3] there is a note that *Robinson's decision to move to Reading was reinforced by his hasty misreading of Michel de Certeau's "The Practice of Everyday Life": Reading frees itself from the soil that determined it*. I didn't notice the possibilities of Reading/reading until I had finished the film.

Robinson moves to Reading because when Arthur Rimbaud left London, it was to take a job in a 'coaching establishment' there. This was probably a place where the sons of minor gentry and similar young men who had not done very well at their public schools were 'coached' for application to university, or the law, or the army, or whatever. Reading is not Soho, but it does have a few literary associations – the Gaol, Jane Austen, and Sherlock Holmes. The Maiwand Lion commemorates the Battle of Maiwand, in which Dr Watson was injured and consequently invalided out of the army. The Lion is an anatomically incorrect monument in a small park next to Reading Gaol and the ruins of the abbey, where Jane Austen went to school. In the film, the relationship between Robinson and the narrator might be seen as a parody of that between Holmes and Watson.

Is this Holmes-Watson relationship a hint at the homoerotic relation between the narrator and Robinson?

I thought that if they were queer, they could be more credibly alienated by the 'beef and beer' characteristic of London, which was then and perhaps still is prominent. I also wanted them to have – or rather to have once had – a close relationship, but doubted that I was skilled enough as a writer to deal adequately with the politics of heterosexuality, especially in the very compressed form of voiceover. At the same time, although I didn't seem to know about it when we were making the film, the rediscovery of London as a cultural entity was by then a fairly widespread phenomenon, and it involved a lot of gay people. Francis Bacon, for example, is almost an icon of 20th century London. I should add that for part of the time I lived in London, I was in a relationship with a man.

Is Robinson the narrator's double?

Not really. In the lengthy preparations for *London*, Robinson was initially conceived as a first-person narrator. The first line of narration was to have been *My name is Alfred Robinson*, suggested by the first line of Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: *My name is Arthur Gordon Pym*. Robinson was an alias, the assumed name of someone perhaps from central or eastern Europe. It seemed to me, however, that in a film with some polemical intent, the opinions of a first-person narrator would quickly become tiresome. But such views reported, sometimes sceptically, by a long-suffering companion might be tolerable. Robinson became

a device to enable the film to explore ideas that one might entertain but would perhaps not wholeheartedly endorse.

Since you have mentioned Bacon and Poe – in the films there are many references to the French literary tradition of city walking. Why would you stick to this, so to speak, continental heritage, somehow avoiding or neglecting the English one?

I had read Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, but otherwise I wasn't aware of an English tradition of city walking. In fact, I am still not really aware of one, unless you mean the work of present-day writers – Iain Sinclair, mainly – or Arthur Machen. In the 1980s, I had written about *flânerie* and the Surrealists' exploration of Paris. *London* was conceived, to some extent, as an attempt to find out why that kind of urban experience was so difficult to find in London. I was interested to know what visitors, especially visitors from France, made of London.

During several summers of the 1980s, my partner and I had set off at the end of August and made our way slowly to somewhere in Europe. Returning to London after these trips was invariably depressing. There was a widespread awareness, especially among architects, that London was not a European city in any conventional sense, that it didn't support certain kinds of urban experience. I wanted to understand this, to see the city through other eyes, and to know what people from other places had thought about it. *London* can be summarised as a joke about a man who thinks he would be happier if London were more like Paris, or more like his imagination of Paris. The first line of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* is *They order, said I, this matter better in France*. Sometimes people say this as a joke, though I don't know whether they know it's from Sterne.

I found a book, Cecily Mackworth's *English Interludes*, about a succession of French visitors to London in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Marcel Schwob, Paul Valéry and a couple more. Mackworth quotes Verlaine describing London as *flat as a bed-bug, if bed-bugs were flat*, and Apollinaire, for whom the south London suburbs were *wounds bleeding in the fog*. John Adlard's *One Evening of Light Mist in London* is an account of Apollinaire's visits to London in pursuit of Annie Playden. They had met as employees of a family in Germany, he a tutor and she a governess. She had returned to her family's home in Landor Road, in Clapham, but then emigrated to America to avoid him. I read Enid Starkie's biography of Rimbaud.

One of the starting points for *London* was the passage from Alexander Herzen's memoirs that is quoted at some length in the film and identifies, among other things, the *absence of Continental diversions* characteristic of London.[4] I had found Herzen's paragraphs several years earlier and they had seemed to me to describe 1980s London very well. It turned out that there was a large literature to draw on for non-English perceptions of London, especially from the late 19th century. I concentrated on the idea that there was something about London that did not conform to the expectations of a city that were then resurgent in architectural discussion. I was lucky in that *London* came out at just the right moment, at a time when the things that the film professed to be seeking were becoming more possible. It was a case of 'be careful what you wish for.'

Patrick Keiller, photo by Artur Piskorz

You refer to some of your films as travelogues.

The first two, *Stonebridge Park* and *Norwood*, were made in outer suburbs of London. *Stonebridge Park* has two parts: the first about ten minutes long, two five-minute walks on a footbridge with a hand-held camera, cut together; the second (photographed a few weeks earlier) also about ten minutes long, a single, shakier walk with a hand-held camera across another footbridge above a nearby expanse of railway tracks. The third film, *The End*, which began as a holiday film, starts on the ferry leaving Dover and ends in Rome; the fourth, *Valtos*, is a journey from London to the Outer Hebrides, which is about as far as you can go without leaving the country; and the fifth, *The Clouds*, is from the Jodrell Bank radio telescope in Cheshire to Whitby, on the coast of Yorkshire – not very far.

Could you discuss the evolution of the later films?

Well – each film evolved in a different way. Given that I knew what each of them was to be about, or was supposed to be about, there was always some basis on which to identify camera subjects. I tend to talk more about the films' subjects, but the primary goal has probably always been to make pictures. As the years pass, I have got better at this, becoming confident I can get a picture out of most locations.

London was developed over a long period with some money from the British Film Institute. I began by looking at potential locations, trying to work out what we were going to do. I had quite complicated plans for the film. Initially, people were to appear speaking on-screen. I decided it would take a year to photograph the film and that the narrative would begin at the end of September but that – not knowing when we would be able to start – the photography could start at any point during the year.

We began the cinematography at the end of January. I had arranged some of the intended locations into sixteen possible 'journeys', of which only three were completed. The film is structured more by the calendar, the journeys frequently interrupted by various events of 1992 – IRA bombs, the General Election and so on; the opening Tower Bridge sequence is the only section that appears out of chronological order. We worked on two days a week and, increasingly, I would go out on another day or evening on my own. A lot of the takes were repeats, since there was always a wrong bus, or the wrong traffic, or something. Every day we

worked, we would begin by deciding where to go – either to continue one of the journeys, or to record something that we'd heard about or, occasionally, to an appointment made for us by the film's production manager. In this way, *London* made itself up as it went along.

Robinson in Space was commissioned by the BBC and was made more quickly, as if we had industrialised the method of *London*. It was photographed in a series of two-week journeys signalled by numbers in the film. We worked two weeks on, with a break for the weekend, then two weeks off. I had prepared a detailed itinerary, having accumulated a large archive of press cuttings suggesting potential camera subjects, mostly locations, in a file in chronological order. Before we started off on each of the two-week excursions, I would go through the file, pick out the cuttings relevant to that particular journey, and arrange them in the order in which we'd encounter them. So the film was driven by a kind of data management. In the two-week intervals between journeys, we would edit the rushes. The assembly was generally in chronological order, even more so than that of *London*, so that *Robinson in Space* was more demonstratively a journey and more structured.

For *Robinson in Ruins*, I didn't travel very far, and was more selective than previously about what to photograph. The film was made from sixty rolls, whereas the first two were made with over a hundred. There were some much longer takes: as I wasn't expecting television exhibition, at least not in the UK, I didn't have to worry about broadcasters' expectations, although perhaps by then they would have found slowness more palatable. I started off with an image of a house that, while awaiting refurbishment, had been almost completely encased in plywood. I knew this would eventually be removed to reveal the building underneath, hopefully at some point during or near the end of the cinematography. There was an unusually zoomorphic post box that I'd had my eye on for a long time, and we found a pattern of lichen on a road sign that looked like a human head in profile. These three subjects repeat throughout the film: the house, the post box and the lichen on the road sign.

As the film was supposed to have been prompted by a question about 'dwelling' – hence the image of the encased house – there wasn't the same motive to travel around as there had been for the two previous films. I had noticed a new concern with social coherence among mainstream politicians and in the media, especially after the London bombings in 2005. For some time, mainstream opinion had seemed to celebrate the UK's diversity and its supposed openness to incoming cultures, so that this new focus on national identity and so on was a little disconcerting. It also seemed to me that notwithstanding the cultural and critical attention devoted to mobility and migration, there was a tendency to fall back on what I described as 'formulations of dwelling derived from a more settled, agricultural past' – Heidegger's famous passage, for example, which begins: *Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house*.[5]

In England hardly anyone has lived like this since the early 19th century, the rural workforce having been by then reduced to the status of landless labourers. Most English people, I imagined, are more or less displaced. One can identify

a 'moment' in their displacement in the amendment to the Settlement Acts in 1795 that enabled the landless poor to migrate more easily to factory towns. For Karl Polanyi, whose book *The Great Transformation* (1944) was widely referenced during the 2008 financial crisis, which was unfolding as I was photographing the film, the imposition of the "stark utopia" of a self-adjusting market is necessarily accompanied by measures without which it would destroy the fabric of society. The 1795 legislation was one part of what he called the "double movement".

The other, opposing part was the "Speenhamland System" of poor relief introduced in the same year, a time of severe dearth. By augmenting rural workers' wages, it helped them to remain on the land. It was inaugurated by a meeting of Berkshire magistrates in a place called Speenhamland, a name known now, if at all, for its 'system', the location largely forgotten. It turned out to be not much more than a road junction in the centre of the town of Newbury, about 40 kilometres south of Oxford, overlooked by what used to be the Pelican Inn, where the magistrates had met in 1795, a large coaching inn on what was then the main road from London to Bath.

The lichen profile on the road sign was on one of the uprights of the 'u' in Newbury, so I decided to make Newbury and the Pelican Inn the film's first destination. Newbury is the site of two major battles during England's civil war and a major anti-road protest of the 1990s. It is the town nearest to Greenham Common, on which there are surviving traces of the USAF base where cruise missiles were first deployed in Europe in 1983, prompting the internationally influential Women's Peace Camp. This was the film's next destination, and it continued in this manner: each location suggesting the next. Until at the peak of the banking crisis in October the camera arrived at the site of a sixteenth-century attempt at agrarian rising, having more or less circumnavigated its starting point.

How do you determine the length of individual shots?

The average length is about 14 seconds in *London*, 12 seconds in *Robinson in Space*, but there are some very long takes in *Robinson in Ruins* – sometimes two or three in a row. I didn't really know what to do about that. It was difficult to edit them – there seemed to be no point in making them shorter. Had I cut them shorter, they would still have been very long, and they seemed to have some sort of 'organic' length. I hope that people can take in the film in one viewing, but that it can also withstand more than one – especially if you've bought the discs. But if it's a choice between a film that one can only be bothered to watch once, and another that requires being watched more than once, I suppose I'd go with the latter!

And the 78-minute running time limit?

Quite early on Keith Griffiths, the film's producer, and I decided that *London* should be relatively short. I can't remember where the 78-minute target came from. I used to think it was from Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934), but I can't find any record of *L'Atalante* ever having been 78 minutes long. Whatever the reason, I thought 78 minutes was quite a good target, but in the end, we settled for 85 minutes. *Robinson in Space* is 82 minutes. I find it more interesting than *London*, both to look at, and because it corrected a mistaken perception that the 'problem of England' was due to some inevitable economic decline, rather than political choices which can, po-

tentially, be changed. So that the real problem is that they so rarely are. *London*, on the other hand, merely set out a critique – although I suspect that more people watch *London*, mainly because they either live or have lived in London, or have visited it.

London and _Robinson in Space_ were shot in the 4:3 ratio whereas you made _Robinson in Ruins_ in the 16:9 format. How did it influence the image composition?

I was used to 4:3 because I had previously made films in 16 mm. One reason to stick with it was that London's streets are quite narrow, so I wanted the frame to be as tall as possible. Architecture and landscape are traditionally photographed in large, high-resolution formats, usually 5 by 4 inches or larger. With the small frames of 16 mm, I had found myself becoming an expressionist! Another reason was because in those days television was also 4:3. I knew the film would probably be broadcast and didn't want it to be cropped. By the time I began *Robinson in Ruins*, television screens had widened to 16:9. I imagined the film would have very little exposure in the cinema, but would have a fairly long career in some sort of domestic high-resolution digital form. I wasn't sure what sort of camera to use, though as I already had a 35 mm cine camera, and did not have and couldn't afford to hire a Sony HDCAM camera – then the 'best' digital alternative – there wasn't really much choice.

How did this switch between the formats affect the colour palette?

The first two films were photographed on Kodak 5245, a slow (50/18°) day-light colour negative, then quite new. I had spent some time looking for a high--contrast, fine-definition stock with highly saturated colour, wanting it to be as much like Technicolor as possible. All the 16 mm films had been black and white, and I had never found a 16 mm colour stock I liked apart from Kodachrome, which was difficult to print. But Kodak 5245 seemed to produce the desired result. I read recently that Quentin Tarantino chose the same stock for *Pulp Fiction* (1994), for similar reasons.

Near the beginning of *London* there is an image that includes a large area of plywood, partly painted with red and yellow graffiti as a kind of advertisement for the Montaigne School of English. It had struck me that this would be a good test of the film stock because of the pattern of the wood grain and the bright colours of the paint. I was intrigued that the colours were those of a Kodak box. The results were very encouraging, with both the contrast in the wood grain pattern and the colours reproducing very well. I did something similar for *Robinson in Ruins*. The first image in the film is the stock test: a plywood hoarding with posters on it. *London*, however, does not generally look much like a seaside postcard – in *Robinson in Space*, England outside London is much more colourful.

London seems to be evocative, even melancholic, whereas _Robinson in Space_ is much more dynamic.

I've found it difficult to find frames in *London* to use as representative images, whereas *Robinson in Space* is full of them, almost like a photo project. There are some British films from the late 1960s and early 1970s that seem to me a high point in UK

landscape cinematography, such as *If…* (dir. Lindsay Anderson, 1968) and *Accident* (dir. Joseph Losey, 1967), both of which have locations near here; *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *Get Carter* (dir. Mike Hodges, 1971), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1967) and *Performance* (dir. Donald Cammell, Nicolas Roeg, 1970). I tried to achieve a similar quality, as if to recover the 'look' of the more social-democratic Britain that existed before the mid-1970s.

By the time I came to make *Robinson in Ruins*, Kodak had stopped making 5245, but had replaced it with something very similar – 50D 5201, also 50/18°. The irony in all this is that until recently, most people who have seen the first two films have probably seen them only as DVDs, so all my efforts towards image quality have been at best only marginally effective. The BFI's DVD of *London* was made with a telecine from 1994, that of *Robinson in Space* with one from 1997. When the films were released in France in 2003, the distributor made their own telecine of *London* – though seemingly not of *Robinson in Space* – and the French transfer of *London* is much sharper than the older British one. All the UK prints of *London* eventually wore out, the last one being withdrawn in 2016. The negative was scanned in 2017 and the film is now distributed to cinemas as a 2K DCP, and on the BFI's Player in HD. The 35 mm prints of *Robinson in Space* and the DVD set of both films are still in distribution.

The first aim in writing narration is…

… to write something, anything, that doesn't put the viewer off. It would have been much easier to make the films if I could have managed without, but that seemed to be difficult. Obviously, it's possible to make a topographical film without narration, but it requires planning. Whereas, unlike people whose approaches are more conceptual or structured, I just wander around with the camera, looking for subjects.

Yet this impressionistic approach might be quite appealing: wandering around, joining the dots, trying to make sense out of all these seemingly disconnected elements…

Yes. I was encouraged by Laurence Sterne who, in *Tristram Shandy*, has Tristram's father Walter try to explain Locke's idea of *duration and its simple modes* to his brother Toby, a veteran soldier.[6] Before I made any films, I had the idea that in some clumsy, perhaps comical way they might mimic consciousness, with the subjective-camera picture as vision and the narration as thought, interiority. But when I came to make a film, narration offered continuity, a way of holding a viewer's interest.

It's noticeable how many of the early cinema pioneers – the Lumières, William K. L. Dickson, R. W. Paul and so on – left the industry after the early 1900s, audiences having tired of films that were mostly less than 3 minutes long, and mostly actualities: street scenes, phantom rides and so on. There seems to have been a lapse in production during the mid-1900s, until exhibitors, fairground proprietors or others in the entertainment industry developed narrative, initially from sequences of shorter films. There is a famous film *A Kiss in the Tunnel* (dir. G. A. Smith, 1899), an insert made to be cut into a phantom ride through a tunnel.[7] The suggestion here is that narrative was introduced to keep the audience watching

for long enough for the spectacle to compete commercially with theatre and the music hall. Films became longer, edited assemblies of shorter fragments, and played fiction came to dominate. Eventually, as John Naughton wrote a few years ago, *a freewheeling, chaotic and creative industry was cornered by a cartel of vertically integrated corporations which for decades channelled all cinematic creativity through a set of narrow apertures.*[8]

Some artists make films somewhat similar to mine, but without narration. If I could, I would devise a form of film that didn't depend on the enchanting sound of someone telling a story, if only to make it easier to reach a global audience. It's also very difficult to write credible narration – it takes ages. On the other hand, if there is any experimentation in the films, it's in the narration. Firstly, in writing it after having photographed and fine-cut the picture, and secondly, in writing it for a sequence of disparate images. The picture cuts in *The End* occur, on average, about every ten seconds, which required a fairly agile approach. I used to entertain the idea that if I were to change the order of the pictures, they would yield a different narrative, and didn't like having the negative cut, because it was such an irreversible act. I adopted the analogy of the dry stone wall: as an architect, I always believed that buildings should be easy to dismantle, and for this reason had a horror of cement.

What is the function of the voiceover?

Well, as above... after the first film, *Stonebridge Park,* the cinematography was unplanned, and it seemed the most easily achievable way to connect a sequence of disparate images. More than ten years earlier, I had seen Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). Marker's still images are of played action; whereas my films are much more rudimentary and, to begin with, were technically quite inept. But for me, Marker legitimised voiceover. At the time, there was a view that voiceover was to be avoided.

Where was this aversion coming from?

I think the aversion was to the kind of voiceover you find in some of the great *films noirs* – Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), for example. Voiceover runs the risk of infringing the film-school cliché 'show, don't tell'. But an aversion to voiceover in documentary is less questionable. For the longer films, which have a documentary intent, I was more cautious. I thought it would help if the narration were funny. And if it avoided expressing polemical views directly, but instead described those of another character, hence the deployment of Robinson.

An interesting aspect of the voiceover narration in your films is the politics of accents…

The accents were initially attempts at genre. I narrated *Stonebridge Park* and *Norwood* myself, although for the second one I would ideally have asked Vincent Price. I once suggested to a commissioning editor at Channel 4 that I might remake *Norwood* more professionally with Price narrating, but the idea didn't get very far. By the time I finished writing the narration for *The End*, which is quite short but was completed very slowly, I had seen Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (1982), about Werner Herzog making *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). Herzog denounces the rain forest in an

emphatic monologue to camera, saying at one point *Even the stars here are a mess*. I wanted my narration to be delivered in a similar manner. I could hear the words in my head, but I couldn't speak them that way.

I have a friend, a German architect then living in London, who speaks in a slightly similar, ironical manner, so I asked him to record my narration. But he's not an actor and his performance was not as I'd hoped, so I looked for a professional actor. After a while I plucked up the courage to ask Vladek Sheybal, who didn't really sound like Herzog, but had a wonderful voice, and he agreed to do it. Vladek had been a familiar figure in UK film and television since the 1960s. He was in several Ken Russell films, and was often cast in genre roles. He was very kind to me, and very patient. I had hardly any spare frames, so the timing of each paragraph had to be very accurate. He narrated the next film, *Valtos*, too, but for the *The Clouds* I got it into my head that I wanted someone who sounded like the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) in the film portrait of him by Margaret Tait.[9] So I asked Iain Cuthbertson. He didn't really sound any more like Hugh MacDiarmid than Vladek sounded like Herzog, but one has to make these decisions somehow.

When I started to develop *London* in autumn 1989, I wasn't sure it would include much narration. The idea to attempt a film about the city had occurred to me during a screening of Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's *Le Joli Mai* (1963) that summer. Their film is in two parts that each begin with sequences of views of Paris, across rooftops and along the river, though it mostly comprises interviews with people in the streets. To begin with, I thought our film might also have some people talking, but after a few months of cinematography this didn't seem very likely. The film would be longer, wider (35 mm), and in colour, with a subject and a third-person protagonist, but would otherwise be similar to the films I had already made.

Then in October 1992 Vladek died. He was only sixty-nine. I was photographing *London*, and didn't start writing the narration until more than six months later. I had once heard someone on the radio suggest that the stereotypes of English Gothic fiction are the mysterious middle-European and the Byronic Englishman, so I thought to try the latter. Though I wasn't sure who, other than Byron, might be a Byronic Englishman. Keith suggested Paul Scofield, but it wasn't until Liz Reddish, BFI Production's publicist, told me that he'd been in another BFI film – Hugh Brody's *Nineteen Nineteen* (1984) – and I'd had a look at it, that I was confident enough to ask him. Paul seemed very well cast in Freud's Vienna – one of two former patients of Sigmund Freud, who meet in 1970 and recall their experiences nearly fifty years earlier. I bought an audiobook of his reading an abridgement of Dickens's *Bleak House* to accustom myself to his voice; we sent him the first twenty or so pages of the script, that I was then still writing, and to my amazement and great relief he agreed to narrate the film.

A Byronic Englishman, I assume, is someone who goes away, to escape or perhaps to forget, as many English men and women do, because they find England so hard to bear. As Alexander Herzen wrote: *Imagine a hothouse-reared youth … face to face with the most boring, with the most tedious society, face to face with the monstrous Minotaur of English life … it is no wonder that, with his own Childe Harold, he says to his ship: "Nor care what land thou bearest me to, But not again to mine".*[10] Herzen also wrote that *Byron, lashing at English life, fleeing from England as if from the plague, re-*

mained a typical Englishman.[11] Over the years, people have occasionally asked why I chose someone with what they perceive to be a middle- or upper-middle-class accent, by which I assume they mean that he didn't have a regional accent. I've always answered that although his voice was, I think, geographically neutral, he didn't speak with 'received pronunciation' – the accent traditionally associated with the elites of private schools and Oxbridge, and people who present themselves as members of these. He sounded like I thought a 'European' English person might sound, a person from a less class-ridden England.

Still, Paul's narration sounds learned, educated. Posh?

Educated – yes. But if you were to listen to a selection of Shakespearean actors from the past seventy or so years, I don't think you would think that Paul Scofield was 'posh'. He wasn't educated at a public school like Eton or Winchester. His voice is quite authoritative – if he says something one tends to believe it – and a bit camp. Both of which, I think, suit the character. The problem with English accents is that they are still so much identified in terms of class. Iain Cuthbertson's Scottish accent was an attempt to avoid this. Never having lived in Scotland, perhaps I don't notice class in a Scottish voice, but I think the issue is less problematic there. With English accents it is quite specific. Interestingly, there are quite a lot of regional accents from the north of England in the UK's media now, but very few from the south. There is 'Estuary English', certainly, but one hardly ever hears accents from other parts – East Anglia, the south-west and so on. Perhaps they are perceived as rural, whereas people with northern regional accents are more likely to be from cities.

***Robinson in Ruins* has a female voiceover.**

The literary business of wandering about London is quite male-dominated. I had been thinking it was probably time for a change, and had already made *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000), which Tilda Swinton narrates. There wasn't then any possibility to make a third Robinson film, but I had imagined how it might begin. At the end of *Robinson in Space*, Robinson disappears in mysterious circumstances, and when he eventually reappears, it turns out that he has been in prison. He is depleted in some way, psychologically or physically, or both. In the early years of his absence, Paul's character has exploited their research, and does not seem to have made any effort to find Robinson after he disappeared.

Robinson's commission in *Robinson in Space* was suggested by *Nations for Sale*, a study by Anneke Elwes for the international advertising network DDB Needham, published in 1994.[12] Elwes's conclusions included the suggestion that Britain was a "dated concept" difficult "to reconcile with reality", and 'Nations for Sale' was among the prompts for the early Blair years' project 'Cool Britannia', an attempt to reimagine and rejuvenate the UK. Although the film pre-dated 'Cool Britannia', it was a joke about the same thing. 'Cool Britannia' did not last very long, but Paul's character did very well out of it, becoming a government advisor.[13] He met Vanessa Redgrave's character, who was imagined initially in Blair-era terms as a philanthropic supermarket heiress. She isn't described as that in *Robinson in Ruins* – by then she's the co-founder of the 'team of researchers' who are supposed to have made the film – but that's where the character came from. I had

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established that there would be a couple who start a think-tank. The film wasn't realised until much later, and Paul died in 2008, but I think by then I'd already decided that his character's 'co-founder' should succeed him as narrator.

Alongside the narrator's voice there are also ambient noises, bird songs, cars passing… They cannot be there only because they happened to be there at the time of filming. To what extent are they supplementary to the image?

They're there partly to allow breaks in the narration, to give the writer and the viewer a rest, but also because sound expands the space of the film beyond what's visible, which is perhaps more important. With the exception of *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, which was originated as video, all the films have been post-synchronised. There isn't much sound from the actual locations in *London*, though there is some. The view of Concorde landing, for example, is accompanied by the sound of a Concorde recorded later. Footsteps, rattling luggage and so on were recorded in a studio. Sometimes there is voice and no ambient sound, or voice and music. Sometimes there's only music. There isn't much traffic noise in *London*, so that the film portrays its subject as a quite different, almost fictional, city. *Robinson in Space* was also post-synchronised. We were minimally equipped for sound but failed to record anything usable, always in a hurry to move on to the next location.

For *Robinson in Ruins*, I recorded all the ambient sound myself with a small digital recorder and a very good microphone. None of the locations were very far away, so during the period in which I was editing picture and writing narration, I revisited them at the same time of year as when I'd been there with the camera. If the sound was unsympathetic – loud traffic, for instance – I would find somewhere quieter nearby. The sound was used to connect the pictures spatially: by continuing the same sound over several views, such as those in different directions from the same position, I hoped to convey that they were close to one another.

We are in a very specific moment in time. Brexit is eventually happening and the Tories are in power again. How do you see London around the time of the first film in the early 1990s and London today?

Most of London probably hasn't changed much physically since the film was photographed in 1992.[14] There have been some very visible redevelopments, especially along the river. But I suspect that most of the changes to the built fabric have been incremental, certainly nothing like those during the period from 1945 up to the late 1970s. London now has better public transport than it did in the early 1990s – one of the most frequent complaints about London then was the state of its public transport system. I imagine energy consumption has increased: about fifteen years ago, I noticed that there was more artificial light than there had been at the time of the film, and that cars were bigger, noticeable in a city with relatively narrow streets, especially if one is a cyclist.

But socially and economically, I think the city has changed a great deal. It is much more difficult to live on just a little money now. In the film, it's said that Robinson *lives on what he earns in one or two days a week teaching* at the (fictional) University of Barking, and that *he isn't poor because he lacks money, but because everything he wants is unobtainable*. One reason why there were a lot of artists and a lot of new art in London between, say, the 1970s and the end of the century was be-

cause for a time it was possible to live like that: there was 'short-life' housing, much of it in east London, with a well organised artists' housing association that managed houses, sometimes whole streets, awaiting redevelopment. There were studios in industrial and warehouse buildings awaiting demolition, often for years. One could live quite cheaply, and many people did.

In the early 1990s, London had been without a metropolitan governing body since Thatcher's abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986. The post-1997 Labour government established the Greater London Authority in 2000, but it has only limited scope and powers. Thatcher also deregulated the financial sector, since when London has become Europe's major financial centre. The big US investment banks arrived, hedge funds proliferated, and so on. Londoners, meanwhile, find it more difficult than ever to secure decent housing. Fewer than fifty percent of London households are owner-occupiers now – an electoral break point, London now voting overwhelmingly for Labour. Much of the city's public-sector housing has fallen into private hands, bought initially by tenants exercising the 'right to buy', but later sold, often to small landlords speculating on the continual rise in property prices. Many of the recent high-rise private sector 'luxury' developments, such as those along the river, attracted speculative investors. For years after completion, flats have appeared to be unoccupied, their windows unlit at night, most visibly at One Hyde Park, in Knightsbridge.

And Robinson? What has he been doing in this Brexit context?

I don't really know. It seems to be assumed by most of the people who are interested that he's no longer with us. In *Robinson in Ruins*, he was said to be *increasingly insubstantial*. The three films are now described, although not by me, as a trilogy, as if there aren't going to be any more. So perhaps that's that. I was inclined to think that he's dormant, waiting to see what has eventually happened in the aftermath of 2008. Or that perhaps he has undergone some kind of transformation. But I don't really know. I don't think he's very interested in Brexit. It's merely confirmed some of his more pessimistic assumptions about England.

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1 *The Future of Landscape and the Moving Image*, https://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com (accessed: 15.09.2020).
2 M. Fisher, "English Pastoral", *Sight & Sound*, November 2010, p. 23.
3 P. Keiller, *Robinson in Space*, Reaktion Books, London 1999, p. 2.
4 *There is no town in the world which is more adapted for training one away from people and training one into solitude than London. The manner of life, the distances, the climate, the very multitude of the population in which personality vanishes, all this together with the absence of Continental diversions conduces to the same effect. One who knows how to live alone has nothing to fear from the tedium of London. The life here, like the air here, is bad for the weak, for the frail, for one who seeks a prop outside himself, for one who seeks welcome, sympathy, attention; the moral lungs here must be as strong as the physical lungs, whose task it is to separate oxygen from the smoky fog. The masses are saved by battling for their daily bread, the commercial classes by their absorption in heaping up wealth, and all by the bustle of business; but nervous and romantic temperaments, fond of living among people, fond of intellectual sloth and of idly luxuriating in emotion, are bored to death here and fall into despair.* A. Herzen, *Ends and Beginnings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, p. 431.
5 M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Harper & Row, New York 1971, p. 157.
6 *Now, whether we observe it or no, continued my father, in every sound man's head, there is a re-*

gular succession of ideas of one sort or another, which follow each other in train just like – A train of artillery? said my uncle Toby. – A train of a fiddle stick! – quoth my father, – which follow and succeed one another in our minds at certain distances, just like the images in the inside of a lanthorn turned round by the heat of a candle. L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Penguin Classics, London 2003, p. 172.

[7] G. A. Smith, *A Kiss in the Tunnel* (1899), https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-kiss-in-the-tunnel-1899-online (accessed: 15.09.2020). In this example, Smith's insert is cut into Cecil Hepworth's *View from an Engine Front – Shilla Mill Tunnel* (1899).

[8] J. Naughton, "The Master Switch by Tim Wu – review", *The Guardian*, 2.04.2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/02/master-switch-tim-wu-review (accessed: 15.09.2020).

[9] M. Tait, *H. MacDiarmid: A Portrait*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8f3Bb

uqaiY (accessed: 15.09.2020). For Margaret Tait, see https://www.margarettait100.com/.

[10] A. Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 389.

[11] Ibidem, p. 246.

[12] P. Wright, "Wrapped in the Tatters of the Flag", *The Guardian*, 31.12.1994, http://www.patrickwright.net/wp-content/uploads/pwright-wrapped-in-the-tatters-of-the-flag-final.pdf (accessed: 15.09.2020).

[13] A. Kinik, "'A Bridge Between Imagination and Reality Must Be Built': Film and Spatial Critique in the Work of Patrick Keiller", *Intermédialités: histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques / Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies* 2009, no. 14, p. 105-125, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/59351629.pdf (accessed: 15.09.2020).

[14] P. Keiller, *London*, FUEL Publishing, London 2020.

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Słowa kluczowe:
Patrick Keiller;
Londyn;
Anglia;
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Robinson;
architektura

Abstrakt

Artur Piskorz

Robinson w Anglii. Rozmowa z Patrickiem Keillerem

Patrick Keiller, brytyjski artysta i reżyser, jest autorem pięciu filmów krótkometrażowych oraz trzech esejów filmowych: *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) i *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). Głównymi bohaterami tych ostatnich utworów są Robinson oraz jego bezimienny towarzysz – narrator. Obaj wyprawiają się do miejsc niemal zupełnie pozbawionych ludzkiej obecności i aktywności, eksplorując ich znaczeniowy i mitotwórczy potencjał. Filmowe eseje Keillera stanowią wieloznaczne opowieści zgłębiające takie zagadnienia jak produkcja przestrzeni, funkcjonowanie pamięci czy uczucie nostalgii. „Dryfowanie", rozumiane jako gra przestrzennych i werbalnych skojarzeń, odsłania również fascynację Keillera architekturą, którą rejestruje, w innowacyjny sposób operując środkami filmowymi. Tekst stanowi zapis dwóch rozmów przeprowadzonych z Patrickiem Keillerem w Oxfordzie we wrześniu 2018 i 2019 r.