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# GHOST OF THE FIELDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK KEILLER

## NINA POWER TALKS TO THE BRITISH FILM ESSAYIST ABOUT *ROBINSON IN RUINS*

Patrick Keiller is Britain's foremost film essayist, part historian, part poet, part landscape photographer. *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) is the third part of what we could loosely call his Robinson trilogy, a highly idiosyncratic and strongly evocative set of journeys around Britain narrated by an anonymous speaker who in each film has a strong personal relationship to a mysterious figure known only as Robinson. The late Paul Scofield narrated the first two films, *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997), while Vanessa Redgrave narrates *Robinson in Ruins*. (The warm, rich, port-soaked tones of these eminent actors lend a wry and knowing air to the proceedings.) Keiller's cinematic technique is designed to almost slow down time itself. Frequently unpopulated long takes permit a view of the slightest movement: the swaying of crops, a stray insect, a passing car.

Keiller is not only a filmmaker and writer, but also a former architecture lecturer and his most conventional documentary, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000), deals with the housing crisis, or as he puts it in one interview "the predicament of the house in advanced economies" ([www.audacity.org/Dilapidated%20Dwelling.htm](http://www.audacity.org/Dilapidated%20Dwelling.htm)). The past, present, and future state of British industry and politics are Keiller's main concerns, but in *Robinson in Ruins* he moves away from the first two films' mainly urban settings to observe the English countryside, that curious zone subject in the minds of suburbanites and city dwellers everywhere to a prelapsarian fantasy far removed from the reality of its revolutionary political history and heavy militarization. *Robinson in Ruins* is filmed in and around Oxfordshire (where Keiller lives) and is a contribution to The Future of Landscape and the Moving Image, a three-year research project involving Keiller and other researchers, which "sets out to explore received ideas about mobility, belonging and displacement in terms of landscape and images of landscape, in a context of eco-

nomic and environmental change" ([thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com](http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com)).

It is hard for any filmmaker to avoid accusations of pretension the moment he or she starts including references to philosophers, artists, poets, urban theorists, scientists, political thinkers, and complex critiques of the global economic crisis, as Keiller does in *Robinson in Ruins*. Yet he manages it with charm, due to a combination of his mordant literary wit and his utterly serious (and very informative) investigations into what the narrator calls "the problem of England." The fictional character of the narrator and the ghostly presence of Robinson serve to lighten the often heavy theoretical load; their strangeness, their outsider situationism, prevent any sense of academicism. As Robinson and the narrator wander offscreen, often impoverished, barely relating to the world in its quotidian banality, yet all the time looking for some deeper meaning (in *Robinson in Ruins*, the title character is looking for ley-lines, among other things), Keiller weaves their anachronistic, pilgrim-like journeying into a trenchant account of national politics.

Following the first two films' investigation into Conservative rule during and after the Thatcher government, *Robinson in Ruins* is Keiller's attempt to come to terms with the New Labour project and to document the financial crisis that began in 2007 and continues to this day (the film concludes with the recent election of the U.K. coalition government). A slow but steady stream of references to oil prices, IMF warnings, the Iraq war, and the death of David Kelly (the British weapons expert who committed suicide after he was named as the BBC's source for critical remarks about the government's dossier on Iraqi weapons) are intermingled with shots of foxgloves, opium poppies, and rape-seed fields. Any separation between the countryside and political life we may have entertained vanishes completely, just as the film's antihero disappears before *Robinson in Ruins* even begins (leaving behind him nineteen film cans and a notebook in an abandoned caravan, which the narrator then pores over at a later date).



Patrick Keiller  
Courtesy of London Film Festival.

In one of the single most brilliant shots, a spider is filmed meticulously spinning out its web while the narrator lists a series of recently failed banks, pointing to the utter fragility of a system built out of cobwebs and spun by those determined to structure the world in their own image, however delicate that world turns out to be. But the countryside has hidden strengths of its own: the narrator attempts to understand Robinson's interest in biophilia, symbiosis, and mutualism. In these marginal theories, nature is understood to work by cooperation (and we should not exclude machines from the possibility of coexistence—shots in which a tractor or combine harvester are seen in *Robinson in Ruins* are images of calm and productivity not exploitation). The revolutionary history of the British countryside—the Captain Swing riots, the fights against the enclosure acts, and the general rambunctiousness of the British peasantry of centuries past—are all remembered here with great and burning reverence. *Robinson in Ruins* may well be a document that explicitly takes its cue from a rather gloomy statement by Fredric Jameson in “The Antinomies of Postmodernity,” collected in *The Cultural Turn* (Verso, 1998), “that it seems

to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations,” yet it is also a profoundly hopeful film, digging up the ruins of England and finding radical passion beneath.

Patrick Keiller answered my questions by email on October 17, during the London Film Festival (October 13–28), in which *Robinson in Ruins* was shown.

**Nina Power: the British countryside is very unlike the ruralist fantasy many have of it, being in fact heavily militarized and crisscrossed by industry. *Robinson in Ruins* makes this very clear, yet there is at the same time in the film a specific politics of the countryside in the shape of symbiosis and mutualism (which could apply to the partnership of farm vehicles and other machinery as much as to the codependence of insects and plants). How far do you share Robinson's biophilia?**

Patrick Keiller: during the years before I began the film, I had made a few still photographs of lichens, and had learned at some point that they were examples of symbiosis, though I think the lichen in the film was probably recruited more as part of a lichen–road sign hybrid. A hybrid, perhaps, as in

## CITY AND COUNTRY



Left column: *London*. © 1994 British Film Institute. DVD: BFI (U.K.). Right column: *Robinson in Space*. © 1997 BBC. DVD: BFI (U.K.).

Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991], which also led me to the Boyle–Hooke plaque [in Oxford, seen in the film]. I had been photographing foxgloves, too, for some time, without having any particular idea why, apart from their association, for me, with hilly landscapes in the north of Britain, and with the work of Beatrix Potter. I think it's probably also because they're quite zoomorphic, especially the tall ones. We have some in the garden. They're biennials.

When I encountered the term biophilia, only relatively recently, I was intrigued by the discussion, in a scientific context, of what seemed to be an aesthetic response. Also, while photographing the film, I had copied out a sentence from an obituary of Albert Hofmann: "Hofmann was born into a working class family in Baden, northern Switzerland, and as a child experienced memorable, revelatory encounters with nature." Looking it up now, I notice that this was on the evening of the day I photographed the cowslips, a few weeks before encountering the fields of opium poppies.

I tried to avoid using the word "nature" in the narration (though it does occur, in the quotations from Fredric Jameson and Edmund Burke, in the title of Marx's thesis, and as the name of the journal) in case it seemed to imply a view that some things are "natural" and others aren't. Obviously, there are differences in the way things come about, but the simple dichotomy seems unhelpful.

**I was initially surprised to hear the narrator say that Robinson was originally German. I had thought of him (on the basis of the first two films) as being a grumpy, slightly paranoid Englishman, out of both time and step with the world, yet endlessly looking beneath it for patterns of meaning. On reflection, however, his not-quite-nativeness seems to make sense—did Robinson always have this specific background and character for you, or has he changed over the years?**

I don't think he is German. Vanessa Redgrave's character says that "Robinson wasn't his real name, and he wasn't English. He had arrived in London in 1966, from Berlin, before which his history was uncertain." In *Robinson in Space*, Paul Scofield's character said, over a picture of some industrial greenhouses: "Blackpool is Robinson's home town. His parents used to have a nursery which specialized in strains of giant vegetables." This is both an attempt to evoke *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956, 1978], and a reference to a real nursery not very far from Blackpool. I can imagine various ways in which the two statements are compatible (his parents were Polish, perhaps, and settled in Lancashire after World War II). It's also possible that one of the narrators is misinformed. From what Vanessa's character says, he does seem to be the same individual as in the other films. If there is a book or similar expansion of the film, I hope to write more about the name. Samuel Robinson, for example, was the name

adopted in exile by Simón Rodríguez, the tutor of Simón Bolívar. Ray Charles's name was Robinson. Rimbaud coined the verb *robinsonner*. To begin with, I assumed the name was an Anglicization, and that he came from somewhere in central or eastern Europe, then wondered, later, if he might not be from somewhere more distant, perhaps South America or the Caribbean. On the other hand, the name was suggested to me by Kafka's *Amerika*, in which the character Robinson is supposed to be Irish.

**The "uneasy bickering sexual relationship" that the narrator has with Robinson in the first two films is here replaced with a relationship between the narrator of the first two films (who is Robinson's research associate) and Vanessa Redgrave's character, the narrator of *Robinson in Ruins*, who tells us she met Paul Scofield's character at a conference on documentary filmmaking in China. Given that Robinson is a former academic—whose career ended in obscure disgrace and confinement—can we be sure he would have approved of such professional globetrotting?**

Some of the fictional aspects of *Robinson in Ruins* date back quite a long time, as there were several reworkings of a proposal for a third film in the series. None of these involved very much other than a description of what had happened in the increasingly long interval between the end of *Robinson in Space* and the proposed sequel, and new "problems" for exploration: environmental impoverishment and *dwelling*. In most versions, after Robinson's disappearance at the end of *Robinson in Space*, Paul's character published an account of their unfinished study and, as a result, became a government adviser. It wasn't clear whether he knew that Robinson had been shut up somewhere, or if he could have got him out. He then met Vanessa's character, who is rather wealthy, and together they founded a research organization, which eventually recovers Robinson from incarceration and puts him back to work. It did sound a little as if Paul's character might have first betrayed and then exploited his former companion. However, in the realized version of the film, I don't think much of this applies. It doesn't sound as if Vanessa's character has arranged Robinson's release from prison and it seems to be his project, not hers. In any case, although he supposedly goes shopping and carries around a camera, I'm not sure to what degree he retains, or has ever possessed, conventional materiality.

Tilda Swinton's narrator in *The Dilapidated Dwelling* also met the patron of her research ("a representative of a leading multinational chemical manufacturer") at a conference in China, but I don't think that one was about documentary film.

**The revolutionary character of the British countryside is an explicit theme in *Robinson in Ruins*. We are perhaps more used to thinking of the reactionary elements of rural Britain in recent years (the pro-fox-hunting Countryside**

**Alliance and all the whiteness, smallness, and Toryness of much of what passes for rural politics). Can we save the British countryside?**

In the short term, the rural landscape does seem to be blue, at least in England, though I imagine there are a lot of people there who aren't on the right, and don't fit the stereotypes of financial-adviser-in-a-barn-conversion etc. It does seem to be difficult to live there if you don't have, or don't want, a car. I can't imagine that the general predicament of rural settlement will change very much without something resembling radical land reform (as for example in Assynt, in the far northwest of Scotland), and while I have no idea how this might be brought about in the context of current political and economic "common sense," it seems to me that it simply isn't possible for this "common sense" to persist for very much longer. One of my hopes for the film is that it is understood to be questioning that, by making references to manufacturing and agriculture, and to episodes of resistance to enclosure since the sixteenth century, and in its lengthy encounters with nonhuman living things. During the research project of which the film is a part, an initial question about *dwelling* and "belonging" to the landscape fairly soon gave way to one which asked instead to whom the landscape and, by implication, the state effectively belong. The visible landscape is an interesting phenomenon: it's a public good, in that very many people can see it, but it isn't diminished in use—by people looking at the view—as common resources often are. Perhaps this is why people in the U.K. are so keen on landscape and imagery of landscape, because it permits us to possess something we don't possess in more tangible and constitutional ways.

**Robinson's caravan is a sorry, if intriguing, indictment of the current state of housing. What role would you like to see the British countryside play in any positive future housing development?**

I didn't intend to suggest that he was actually living in the caravan, merely that he left the film cans there, having "haunted" the surrounding landscape. By the end of the film, I think any corporeality he may have possessed earlier is wearing pretty thin.

I would like to think it would be possible, one day, to develop interesting domestic architecture in the rural landscape. The settlement suggested toward the end of the film is supposed to be reminiscent of proposals such as New Babylon, or those of Fourier, that would radically refashion the currently prevailing mode of living toward something more collective. However, there are two sites in the film that were among the initial proposals for "eco-towns": the disused cement quarry, where the Robinson settlement is supposed to have been established by Vanessa's character and her colleagues, and "Weston Otmoor." The cement quarry wasn't

shortlisted, and Weston Otmoor was successfully resisted by nearby residents, particularly those of Weston-on-the-Green.

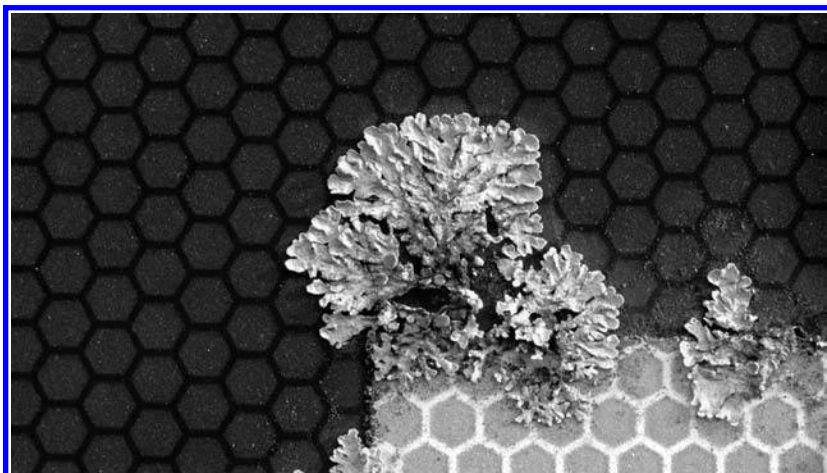
When nearly all new housing is designed and built by the private sector, mostly for owner occupation, and is subject to the kind of investment imperatives that characterize the U.K.'s housing market, and while alternative models of housing are outlawed or severely constrained, the prospect of rural development doesn't seem very inviting. In any case, it seems to me that the most urgent requirement for the U.K.'s housing stock is to develop feasible scenarios for its replacement, rather than merely add to the number of dwellings. The former might perhaps involve new settlements in the rural landscape, but replacement didn't seem to be the motive behind "eco-towns" or their predecessors.

**Robinson in Ruins has a quote from Fredric Jameson near the beginning. Jameson's discussions of the "cognitive mapping" of the transformations of capitalism seem very important at the moment, as people try to untangle what the financial crisis means in relation to global patterns of production and distribution, as well as political climate that seems both vicious and uncertain. How do you go about attempting to understand the current state of the world?**

I suppose one has to try to work out what is happening, though it is very difficult to know much about the present. I grew up in the 1950s and 60s, when it looked briefly as if the U.K. might become a progressive producing economy, so I tend to concentrate on production, particularly the production of artifacts. During the most recent project I was more interested in agriculture and the implications of dependence on oil. I imagine the price of oil and its effect on the cost of shipping will eventually begin to restrict global trade. Even today, there is a tendency to perceive more global trade than actually occurs. There are, for example, a large number of disused or derelict cement factories in the U.K., so that it's easy to imagine that the U.K.'s cement industry has disappeared and that cement is now imported from lower-cost economies. It turns out, however, that as cement is a heavy, cheap commodity, it isn't worthwhile to ship it about, and about ninety percent of the cement purchased in the U.K. is produced in the U.K. The derelict factories signify worked-out quarries, not a vanished industry. One wonders why the same logic was not applicable to coal.

**In Robinson In Space, you used a motif from Powell and Pressburger's A Matter of Life and Death (1946). In the new film there is no musical soundtrack, beyond the sounds of the countryside itself. Does nature need no soundtrack beyond the one it provides?**

I was interested in the *dwelling* of birds, but I'm not a very successful ornithological cinematographer, so I recorded birdsong. The film's sound is all post-synchronized, with each location's sound recorded at or very near the camera position at the time of year at which the picture had been photo-



English pastoral

*Robinson in Ruins*. Courtesy of London Film Festival.

graphed. I did wonder whether to include some Marvin Gaye: “What’s Going On” perhaps, or “Mercy, Mercy Me,” but it didn’t seem to match any of the footage, and would probably have been expensive. There is some music in the trailer: the orchestral beginning of Brahms’s Alto Rhapsody, which is a setting of Goethe’s “Harzreise im Winter.”

**What are the main features of the current “problem of England”?**

I don’t think the “problem” has changed much. I’m still inclined to agree with Ellen Meiksins Wood, who asked: “Is Britain, then, a peculiar capitalism, or is it peculiarly capitalist?” and argued, in opposition to [Tom] Naim and [Perry] Anderson, that it is the latter. I’m sure that any such theory-of-everything can be challenged, but the fact remains that the U.K. has an economy dominated by the imperatives of finance and property, rather than those of production, in which various unattractive elites receive rewards that are quite unrelated to their contribution, just as in “Old Corruption.” This leads to all sorts of ruinous consequences: to inequality, with all the social ills that accompany it; to the undervaluing of manufacturing and agriculture, and to the

increasing “enclosure” of national assets and state activities by private owners, as at the AWE [Atomic Weapons Establishment], for example, and by companies such as Serco. Above all, it leads to an astonishing poverty of imagination—political, economic, technological, and cultural. I was very struck by the degree to which “the politics of Cockayne,” as John Walter memorably characterizes Bartholomew Steer’s polemic in 1596, is echoed by some of the output of the Situationist International.

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CREDITS *Robinson in Ruins*. Photographer, writer, editor: Patrick Keiller. © 2010 Patrick Keiller and the Royal College of Art.

ABSTRACT An interview with Patrick Keiller, British director of essay films on the occasion of the release of *Robinson in Ruins*, the follow-up to *London* and *Robinson in Space*. Keiller discusses his engagement with history, politics, landscape, biophilia, and the mysterious character of Robinson.

KEYWORDS Patrick Keiller, *Robinson in Ruins*, essay films, *London*, *Robinson in Space*