GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE: PATRICK KEILLER'S EXPLORATIONS OF THE IMAGE WORLD

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Is Patrick Keiller an "English speciality," in the way that perhaps Humphrey Jennings used to be regarded; or, until recently, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger? The question may sound defensive, but it stems from an uncertainty about the extent to which Keiller is already recognised internationally as an important contemporary image maker. "England" may indeed be his most common theme, but this is an England seen through cosmopolitan (and often French-tinted) eyes. And it may be the British who need to be reminded most that Keiller speaks to wider concerns that our traditional "condition of England" questions [1]. As an artist, he is peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, sensitive to the "condition of the image" today – aware of its history, its implications and its power. If images are in some sense "ghosts," then Keiller is both a creator and a collector with an acute sense of the historicity of the image, as well as its intrinsic eeriness.

A sentence from the soundtrack of his first feature, *London* (1994), says of the unseen hero: "Robinson believed that, if he looked hard enough, he could cause the surface of the city to reveal to him the molecular basis of historical events, and in this way he hoped to see into the future." This returns us to 19th century ideas about time and space, informed by new scientific discoveries as well as by folk tradition – like the astronomer Camille Flammarion describing in his science-fiction novel *Lumen* (1867) how a character travelling faster than the speed of light can see into the past [2].

Keiller trained as an architect before starting to make short avant-garde films in the early 1980s, moving from a "structural" form towards more poetic combinations of image and sound. His first feature, *London*, formalised a pattern of fixed camera images accompanied by voice-over narration, spoken in this film and its successor, *Robinson in Space* (1997), by the distinguished actor Paul Scofield. An essay-film, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000) inquired into Britain's architectural heritage; and in 2010 Keiller released the third instalment in the Robinson series, *Robinson in Ruins*. Meanwhile, in parallel, he has created a series of gallery installations: notably *Londres, Bombay* at the Studio national des arts contemporains, Le Fresnoy, in Lille in 2006; and *The City of the Future*, shows at the BFI Southbank Gallery in London in 2007.

These exhibitions have enabled Keiller to escape from the linear constraints of single-screen film and give free rein to his interest in both architectural spaces and the archive. *The City of the Future* consisted of large screens filled with the grainy monochrome images of actuality film from the first decade of filmmaking, and maps of the locations that Keiller has managed to identify. Most of the 68 films used were shot in Britain, and the majority of these in London, although the maps also included the US, South Africa and China, almost as if these were part of the imperial aura radiating out from London. The spectator could observe like a gallery visitor, accepting what was on screen, or could use the controls provided to navigate a particular journey. So those

critics who remembered the early phase of interactive museum displays weren't entirely wrong: this was indeed a kind of steampunk, Victorian-themed science fiction. We were looking at *our* world, recognisable in much of its architecture and forms of transport, yet as it was before we arrived. Remember Virginia Woolf's meditation on the cinema in 1926: "More real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life. We behold [these scenes] as they are when we are life. We behold [these scenes] as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it" [3].

We now know that Woolf was responding to contemporary newsreel images in the first part of her essay, even though she implies that they are older [4]. But for us these images are over a century old, and Keiller's installation invites us to cross over from passive spectatorship to something else – something at least symbolised by the control we are offered over the images around us. We have all become, as Laura Mulvey suggests, "pensive spectators" in at least part of our viewing, "interactive and detached from a collective audience" in our ability to stop, reverse and review [5]. What Keiller was proposing was a form of literalised time-travel, almost exactly in the terms that it was first broached by cinema's contemporary H.G. Wells, whose 1895 time-traveller "visits" scenes from the future [6]. Indeed, Wells' novella immediately prompted the British film pioneer Robert Paul to propose a collaboration that would consist of "a novel form of exhibition whereby spectators have presented to their view scenes which are supposed to occur in the future or past, while they are given the sensation of voyaging upon a machine through time" [7].

Paul's project never materialised, but what we know as cinema did. Soon it provided that "sensation of voyaging through time" as a familiar experience – although crucially *not* with any constant sense of mechanical contrivance in the standardised conditions of the cinema auditorium, with its careful arrangements to facilitate the suspension of disbelief [8]. But in the contemporary gallery, equipped with near-seamless digital projection, many different illusionistic sensations are possible.

Keiller's introduction to the potential of installation came through his experience of creating the exhibition at Le Fresnoy, near Lille, in 2006. The shape of this space, designed by Bernard Tschumi, reminded Keiller of a railway station train shed, which in turn led him to think of the Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai, formerly Bombay's Victoria Terminus (seen briefly in David Lean's *A Passage to India* [1984]), now as then, the resplendent headquarters of Indian Central Railway. With Indian and French resources, Keiller was able to realise a representation of Chatrapati Shivaji projected on thirty suspended screens in Le Fresnoy – a virtual reconstruction. But even before this liberating experience of working on a larger scale than ever before (already embraced by Peter Greenaway in numerous site-specific exhibitions), he had long felt the dissatisfaction that has troubled so many filmmakers in recent decades: the in-built linearity of film. While *London* and *Robinson* had adopted the travelogue form in their spatialised narratives of discovery, how could any linear presentation do justice to the emergent world visible in the films of 1896-1909?

Nor are these mere fragments of film, taken from larger wholes as moments to be refashioned into a new montage. Keiller's own earlier experience as a filmmaker working in the "structural" paradigm has left him sensitive to the minimal forms of early filmmaking, where even a single shot film may reveal careful construction. By respecting the integrity of the films collected in his archival research, *The City of the Future* actually returns us to the visual perspectives of the era, and especially to one of its most distinctive tropes: films taken by cameras mounted (usually) on trains, which later became known as "phantom rides." We know these had a palpable impact on contemporary audiences, with one reviewer describing the experience of watching as "an unseen energy swallowing space" [9].

We are back at the heart of the paradox of Victorian modernity, invited by Keiller to ponder what *we* feel, as we travel vicariously on an Ealing tram in one of the most remarkable of these films, more than a century after this first electrified tramway in Britain opened? [10] Nostalgia for the future it so confidently anticipated? The sense of "living in an old country," in the evocative words of Keiller's friend and collaborator, the cultural historian Patrick Wright? Or even the rueful conclusion drawn by Robinson's companion that this semi-modernised, de-industrialising country we love to criticise "is not an unsuccessful one" [11]. Keiller's *City of the Future* crystallises so many current debates and concerns – about cities, archives, film as evidence, and "locality" – that it is tempting to read it primarily as a guide to the *Zeitgeist*. But it's also an art-work that challenges us, as city dwellers and sated viewers.

What has led Keiller to this position? After the early tape-slide works and "structural" films, he produced two short films in the late 1980s, benefiting from Channel Four's support for independent experimental film. The first of these, *Valtos* (1987), is driven by a sense of personal apocalypse that lies somewhere between James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Wells' *A Dream of Armageddon* (1901). The narrator believes he has been duplicated and searches frantically across Northern England for his true self. In *The Clouds* (1989), the scale is greater, with the narrator's life measured against geological and cultural time, recalling William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* (1863) in which the poet sees "a world in a grain of sand" [12]. Both of these point to a side of Keiller which might be described as Blakean or mystical.

In contrast, the three "Robinson" films employ the device of a wry commentator, not unlike the voice of such 18th century authors as Daniel Defoe, in his *Tour Through Great Britain* (1724-7), or Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768). The narrative form Keiller uses, with an unseen and unnamed narrator describing what he and his companion have seen and done, also inevitably recalls another English classic, James Boswell's account of his travels with Samuel Johnson [13]. In *London*, Keiller's invisible pair view the city through a modern sensibility that combines an appreciation of the past, as recorded in buildings, names and narratives, with an ironic attitude towards "progress." Their disillusioned modernists, outlying members of the tribe of "psychogeography" led by Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd, which in turn takes its inspiration from an eclectic mixture of New Age "wisdom," Bachelardian "poetics of space" and Guy Debord's Situationism, but is also liberally studded with literary and filmic references. Keiller's protagonists, existing only in the austerely ironic voice-over supplied by Scofield and in the precise framing of images found images by Keiller, offer a survey of the city that makes it a city of ghosts. As the narrator remarks, "the true identity of London is in its absence" – recalling T. S. Eliot's "unreal city" [14].

For *Robinson in Space*, Keiller not only wanted to move outside London, but also to focus on what he has called "the production of new space." The phrase inevitably recalls Henri Lefebvre's classic *The Production of Space* (1974), itself a major influence on Situationists and on modern cultural and economic geography. Here, Keiller's travellers tour England, inspired also by Defoe and by many later writers who have set off to "discover England" [15]. What they find are new factories and ports that have taken over the economic role of long-defunct sites such as London's docks. Yet the film is also coloured by the disappointment of "us aesthetes who view the passing of the visible industrial economy with regret, and who long for an authenticity of appearance based on manufacturing and innovative, modern design."

Keiller is far from merely a latter-day *flâneur*, in spite of his sharp eye for contradiction and absurdity. His architectural training is often in evidence, most obviously in *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, where he asks directly why so many people in Britain are apparently happy to live in

ageing, often "dilapidated" houses. Why have we not embraced the promise of modernism to make new domestic as well as public spaces? Why has the English home so doggedly resisted architectural revolution? This theme also runs through his latest film, *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), which traces the economic and political forces that have shaped the English landscape, while also musing on the peculiarities of the nation's architectural taste.

Keiller's first two feature-length films have deservedly won wide appreciation, speaking to many different audiences, but they have also perhaps made his concerns seem focused – for all their eclectic allusions – on "the condition of England." As a more open work, freed from the Faustian pact of linear narrative, *The City of the Future* reminds us of both the traditions and formative moments that have made possible such works. First among the traditions is the project of the encyclopaedia, which was in fact pioneered in Britain by Ephraim Chambers in his *Cyclopaedia* of 1728, before the project to translate it became the *Encyclopédie* of the French Rationalists, led by Diderot and D'Alembert. Whatever superstructure we may wish to call it, "the Enlightenment project" rested on the ambition to amass a comprehensive body of knowledge, potentially accessible to all and making use of the semi-new technology of the affordable printed book.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* followed, with all its lesser imitators. And I would guess that Keiller belongs to the generation for which browsing such dusty repositories of information was still an adolescent pleasure. Atlases, postage stamps, postcards and all the other forms of collectable ephemera also fed a culture of personal curatorship that survived into the 20th century – until it was transformed by the entrepreneurial world of car-boot sales and *eBay*. Alongside such popular cultures of taxonomy and collecting, Jules Verne flourished as an "encyclopaedic" storyteller, with his *Voyages Extraordinaires* taking countless armchair travellers on thrilling journeys around the world, as well as beneath its crust and under the oceans. And there is surely something Vernean in Keiller's combination of the didactic and the phantasmagoric. A more prosaic, yet equally ambitious counterpart of Verne's global vision was provided early in the 20th century by the banker Albert Kahn, who launched a photographic inventory of the contemporary world to be known as the "Archives of the Planet." Kahn commissioned photographers, using the new Lumière Autochrome colour process, and filmmakers to record peoples and places, seemingly on the basis that they might at some point disappear – and the intervention of the Great War demonstrated his prescience, ensuring that the Kahn collection can now bear witness to a vanished world [16].

Kahn's "cinematographic atlas," though relatively little known, is a reality and reminder of the grandiose vision that filmmaking could still inspire in the decades immediately after its invention, on which Keiller draws. But there is surely another dynamic at work in *The City of the Future* – something more fantastic. In his story *The Library of Babel*, Jorge Luis Borges created a fable about the universe conceived as an infinite library, which its keepers serve but cannot interpret. Although first published in 1941, this began to circulate in translation in the early 1960s, at the beginning of the information era, and it seemed to chime with other evocations of the awesome weight of accumulated knowledge, such as Alain Resnais's film about the Bibliothèque Nationale, *Toute la memoire du monde* (1956). Borges' suggestive fiction also intersected with growing interest in the history and power of media, and with the concept of simulacra, or imitations that may become as or more real than originals [17].

Many of these influences can be located in Hollis Frampton's 1972 essay "Digressions on the Photographic Agony" [18], in which the filmmaker and theorist conceived an "imaginary relic," a great metal sphere found floating in the ocean like a latter-day *Nautilius*, but bearing the name *Atlantis*. This turns out to contain a vast collection of photographs in all states of preservation, which are judged worthless until a research proposes the bold hypothesis that they represent the legacy of a lost civilisation that spent its entire energy on fabricating an imaginary culture *only to*

be photographed. Frampton, who was a photographer before turning to film, lived through the revaluation of Victorian photography, and was not only a connoisseur of its great figures, but also felt the metaphysical puzzle that it suggests: how do we truly *know* that this solid world portrayed really existed? Compare this with Keiller's lines in *London* on "the surface of the city [revealing] the molecular basis of historical events."

Keiller has not abandoned the linear, feature-shaped film for the exhibition space, as *Robinson in Ruins* attests. Many of his models and influences may appear almost antiquarian, like traditional cinema itself – as his older contemporary Peter Greenaway insists [19]. Yet I want to suggest that he is one of our most prescient guides, as we grapple with the rising tide of images that record and constitute our world, and seek to navigate through them in more meaningful ways.

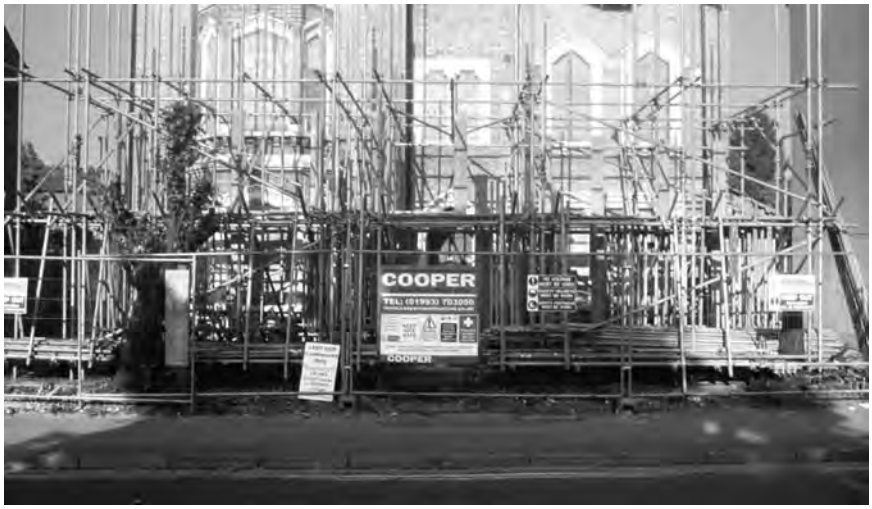

Fig. 1. – Patrick Keiller, *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). Courtesy of Patrick Keiller.

Fig. 2. – Patrick Keiller, *Robinson in Space* (1997). Courtesy of Patrick Keiller.

1 The "condition of England" question was identified by Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843): "England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition."
2 In addition to his scientific work, Camille Flammarion published a number of popular fantasies based on astronomical themes. *Lumen* appeared in 1872 as part of his *Stories of Infinity* series. A new translation by Brian M. Stableford appeared in 2002 from Wesleyan University Press.
3 Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema," in *Nation & Athenaeum*, July 1926, available at the address http://www.woolfonline.com/? q=essays/cinema/full, last visit 12 June 2011.
4 See David Trotter, "Virginia Woolf and Cinema," in *Film Studies*, no. 6, Summer 2005.
5 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, Reaktion, London 2006, p. 190.
6 H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* first appeared in serial form in 1894-5, and as a book in 1895.
7 The text of Paul's patent application is reproduced in John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England in England: 1894-190*, University of Exeter Press, Exter 1976, vol. 1. See also Ian Christie, "Contextualising Paul's *Time Machine*," in *Cinema & Cie. International Film Studies Journal*, no 3, Fall 2003.
8 Sometimes carelessly described as "illusion," although this is problematic, since the images we watch in a cinema are perfectly real *as images*. See, among many others, Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, pp. 19-38.
9 This phrase became the title of Tom Gunning's essay, *An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and Its Relation to American Avant-Garde Film*, in John L. Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1983, pp. 355-366.
10 Ealing's trams were among the first to be electrified, in 1901, and ran until 1936, when they were replaced by trolley buses. In 2003, Ken Livingstone proposed a new West London tramway, which has been vigorously debated, before apparently being dropped. Thus, films from c.1900 can still shed light on our "future city." See "West London Tram – A Short Obituary," in *West Ealing Neighbours*, http://www.westealingneighbours.org.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=41&catid=52&Itemid=52.
11 Patrick *Keiller*, *Robinson in Space*, Reaktion Books, London 1999, p. 90.
12 Blake's poem, believed to have been written around 1803, was first published in 1863.
13 James Boswell wrote a *London Journal* in 1772-73, and *A Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* with Samuel Johnson in 1785.
14 A famous phrase from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).
15 Among the most notable of these are J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (1934) and George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).
16 Kahn's *Archives of the Planet* were explored in the BBC 4 series *Edwardians in Colour: The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn*. See also Teresa Castro, "'Les Archives de la Planète:' A Cinematographic Atlas", in *Jump Cut*, no 48, 2006, available at the address http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc48.2006/Kahn Atlas/index.html, last visit 12 June 2011.
17 See, for instance, Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Universitu of Toronto Press, Toronto 1962; Id., *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1964. The paradox of the simulacrum that doubles its original has a long history, before being theorised in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (*Simulacres et Simulation*, Éditions Galilée, Parigi 1981), University of Michigan Press, Ann Harbor, 1994.
18 Hollis Frampton, "Digressions on the Photographic Agony," in *Artforum*, no. 11, November 1972, pp. 43-51.
19 Interestingly, after nearly a decade of installations and performances, Greenaway has returned to feature-shaped filmmaking, with *Nightwatching* (2007) and *Goltzius and the Pelican Company* (2011).