

PATRICK KEILLER



Interview *Steve Hanson*

I first came across Patrick Keiller via his two widely celebrated films, 'London' and 'Robinson in Space'. Since then I have tracked down his written and visual work wherever possible. 'The Dilapidated Dwelling' was a study of the UK housing market, which he directed in 2000. Patrick is currently working on a project entitled 'City of the Future', using documentary footage from the turn of the last century. I was honoured that he agreed to an interview during November 2003. Patrick is currently an AHRB Research Fellow at the Royal College of Art, a partner institution in the AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies.

SH: *'London' and 'Robinson in Space' almost contained stills within film, in that each shot was static. Were the immediate visual influences or predecessors for the aesthetics of those films found in the 1900s films you are now working with? Recently you said "The earliest films offer a kind of window" (Freize, issue 78). This long gaze or long exposure to one part of territory seems to be a preoccupation for you, would you agree? In light of your new work, I'm tempted to see the London and Robinson films as the post-1900's splicing together of single reel silents, with the addition of a War of the Worlds-influenced radio broadcast (fiction meets "fact" in phantasmagoria)...*

PK: The films were about modernity, but I have always seen them as inevitably rather postmodern, if only in that they are largely the work of one person, which is a postmodernist trait, no? I'm not sure what you mean by "stills within film". It seems to me there is quite a big difference between a "still", which is generally an instant of arrested movement, and a shot in which the camera doesn't move, but elements within the subject do (a crowd, say, or just the wind in the trees). People sometimes suggest that the shots in the Robinson films are long - the average shot in 'London' is about 14 seconds, in 'Robinson...' about 12 seconds - but this is much less than the average for most narrative cinema, in which dialogue often extends shots for as long as a minute. It is rather more than the usual length of landscape shots in such films, but compared with, say the films of Jim Benning, or Chantal Akerman's 'News from Home', never mind the films of Andy Warhol, 'London' and 'Robinson in Space' are really quite conventionally paced. My recent interest in c1900 films arose mainly as a result of seeing the early films, especially the street scenes and tram rides etc., but I did notice the similarities between the forms of my films and the evolution of early cinema. You can certainly see the Robinson films in this way - as assemblies of (rather short) single shot films - but this isn't how they were conceived or evolved - I never made any single-shot works, for example.

SH: *I found it interesting that you mentioned (Freize, issue 78) how everyday life is largely absent in the films of the 1900s. My own experiences viewing old footage of Bradford and Manchester are similar; representations of flag waving civic pride etc. Perhaps your use of that era's longer, less edited or interrupted meditation on space was coupled with an opposing preoccupation with the everyday, and a questioning of Britain's economic situation?*

PK: Everyday life (non-fiction everyday life, that is) is absent from nearly all films, isn't it, not just those of c1900? Even present-day surveillance cameras record relatively untypical circumstances, and moving pictures, especially those originated photographically, have generally been reserved for special occasions, often not the special occasions we most want to know about. (There is, for example, hardly any film of the General Strike, and almost all of what there is is footage of "volunteers" doing the strikers' jobs etc.) However, there are many early films (in particular those of the collection of 800 or so Mitchell & Kenyon films which were rediscovered in 1994) which do offer extended glimpses of everyday life in the 1890s and 1900s, much more so, it appears, than in films made since. There are 99 factory gate films in the Mitchell & Kenyon collection, photographed in towns and cities all over the north of England, and I have been looking at various series of views from moving trams. There are three films of Nottingham, for example, which together offer a spatio-temporal continuity of over 6 minutes. In many cases, the film-makers sought out or created situations where there

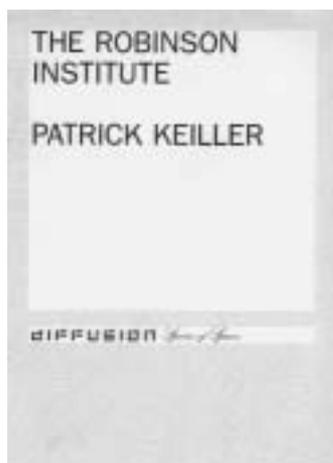
would be plenty of people around, so that their films would appeal to the largest possible local audience, but in others one does seem to be witnessing fairly ordinary scenes. I don't find it too difficult to look at this material without becoming preoccupied with the UK's economy and the imperial moment, especially as many of the most interesting films are not those made in London. I am interested in the films because they offer a glimpse into another world - a world which existed before that which moving pictures themselves subsequently helped to create. The world we live in now is being transformed, perhaps in a similar way, so that the early films might tell us something about this.

SH: *Do you have any faith that the further popularisation of photographic media (digital/phone cameras/cheap disposables etc) will leave us an archive of any wider importance than the ones from previous eras? I am thinking of John Tagg who wrote "there is little to support interpretations of the advent of mass photographic practice either as a triumph of democracy or as proof of the poverty of popular imagination".*

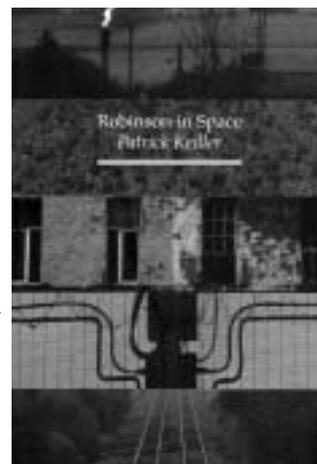
PK: If video made it any easier for people to make and exhibit films, I think we would have noticed it by now. In my experience making films for little money is more a question of time than technology.

SH: *With regard to your preoccupations with urban renewal, I'd like to invite you to comment on Walter Benjamin's statement that Haussman was "an artist of demolition"...*

PK: My interest in the replacement of buildings revived as a result of my own experience of the UK housing market etc. during the last ten years or so, as well as the observation that the film 'London' had become part of a largely London-centred, 1990s phenomenon in which the strategies of Situationism, the *dérive* and so on, were often referred to. The Situationists saw their explorations



The printed version of Robinson in Space is published by Serpents' Tail. The Robinson Institute is available for download free from www.diffusion.org.uk



at least partly as preliminary to the production of some kind of new space, but in 1990s London, they seemed to have become an end in themselves, so that "psychogeography" led, not to avant-garde architecture such as Constant's 'New Babylon', but to, say, the 'Time Out Book of London Walks'. There's nothing necessarily wrong with that - the replacement of buildings, especially residential buildings, has usually been more or less traumatic, and since about 1973 "redevelopment" has become largely discredited, following the writings of Jane Jacobs, Marshall Berman etc. and successful campaigns to oppose it as in, for example, Covent Garden in London. However, buildings don't last forever. I suspect that many people who (like me) live in old, hard to maintain, poorly insulated houses etc. wonder how they will manage in future when skilled building workers have become as scarce as judges, and the price of gas goes up by a factor of, say, between two or perhaps much more, as it quite probably will. At the moment, it is practically impossible for most people to replace their old dwelling with something slightly less inconvenient. I wouldn't like anyone else to come and knock my house down, but I wouldn't mind being able to do something similar myself. The housing market effectively prevents this. In a wider sense, it does seem that the production of successful domestic space (or, in fact, successful built space of most kinds) is something that many "advanced" economies find increasingly difficult,

despite gains in wealth during the 20th century. Although GDP per head has increased since the 1970s, on the basis of an "Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare" (ISEW) assessed by the UK's New Economics Foundation and others elsewhere, people of the advanced economies are now, on average, worse off than they would have been in 1976, and no better off than they would have been in the 1950s, so perhaps the predicament of the dwelling is part of a much wider environmental impoverishment.

SH: *The "collapse of the geographic" has been discussed, with regard to new media communications impacting on social or built space. In the meantime we have seen the advent of "flashmobbing", which I personally see as a kind of populist Situationism. Any thoughts on these phenomena?*

PK: The more I experience electronic interconnectivity etc., the more peripheral its effects seem compared to, say, the railways and telecommunications in the 19th century (see Schivelbusch, Kern etc.). On the other hand, alienation isn't what it used to be. Perhaps electronic connectivity has played a role in this (and perhaps replaced alienation with something else). Meanwhile, the geographic seems resilient. There is an essay by William J Mitchell 'The Revenge of Place' (in the book 'This is not Architecture', ed. K. Rattenbury, Routledge, 2002) which addresses

this rather better than I can. He doesn't write about "flashmobbing", but about "electronically mediated swarming", and gives a number of examples, including "a visit to Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli with a large group of friends and colleagues" and the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle. On "the revenge of place", he writes: "...the less the attractions of a place can be replicated or substituted for electronically, the more desirable and expensive it will be." He goes on: "Take the beach, for example. There is a fixed quantity of it, you cannot reproduce it (except in very imperfect form), and you cannot move it. You have to be there... etc." I don't know if this is an intentional reference to "Sous les pavés, la plage". Probably not.

SH: *Perhaps we could draw comparisons with the statement that, in the age of casual telepathy via technology, a modernist utopian engineering project such as Concorde has become virtually unviable at the same time as parts of our public transport system. How do you figure the links between these phenomena?*

PK: Well - let's not get onto Concorde. It was always unviable, and about as utopian as 'Thunderbirds'. I can't understand why people keep saying it was "beautiful". The only people I know who flew on it said it was cramped, rattled terribly and smelled of aviation fuel, rather like the wrong sort of fast car. Also, in many countries, public transport works very well. I was in Argentina earlier this year, and found the public transport quite good, which one might not expect given Argentina's economic predicament. People who had visited the UK were rather surprised by the state of public transport here. In Paris the public transport is pretty good. The UK certainly has a problem producing artefacts etc., which is why fixed items like infrastructure and housing appear so problematic, as these can't easily be imported. One explanation which is offered for this is that the UK is "peculiarly capitalist" (rather than "a peculiar capitalism" - see Ellen Wood's 'The Pristine Culture of Capitalism'). I oversimplify, but you might see this long established "traditional" aspect of the UK as being also characteristic of present-day postmodern capitalism. For instance Lord Revelstoke, senior partner of Barings Bank, in 1911 famously declared: "I confess that personally I have a horror of all industrial companies ... I should not think of placing my hard-earned gains into such a venture." On the other hand, Revelstoke was present at the inauguration of the London United Tramway's first electric network, in 1901, so presumably Barings had invested in it, as had many other City concerns. The network was officially opened by Lord Rothschild.

SH: *When reading your work I think often of "Moore's Law", the reduction of chip size/expense acting as a catalyst for social change. On one hand society appears to be becoming more fluid, yet people work longer hours than ever, the gap between rich and poor is historic and large areas of our physical environments appear to be neglected (the latter point you have already addressed).*

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Do you think that the promised technological autonomy (every desktop as a combined printing press, radio broadcasting studio, communications centre etc.) has simply not been taken up by the larger majority in a way that will cause a revolution in our physical environment?

PK: Many things (some food, domestic equipment, cars, air travel etc., the usual list) have become much cheaper/"better", especially during the last thirty years, so that people's purchasing power appears greater, but the cost of other things - often things that are probably much more important, but are not susceptible to mechanisation and automation - has increased: the built environment for example, housing in particular. (This is not to mention the negative impact of commodification and consumerism on people's relationships, and on children.) People often predict a technological transformation of building (see for instance the recent 'Building Futures' initiative by the RIBA and CIBE) but it doesn't seem to be coming any nearer. I think successful building is probably too difficult, too local, too material, too intimate for present-day technologies to have much of a positive impact. Perhaps there are other technologies that will change this, but they seem a long way off, and the building industry as a whole is very unimpressive. Where I live, it is very easy to read the negative effects of computers etc. on the design of, say, current school building, much of which is astonishingly poor. It seems that computers etc. make it possible for developed economies to increase their level of consumption (through automation etc.) when many people don't produce much of value (though obviously one can argue about what that might be), even though they are employed, often for long hours. Much of what is gained in productive capacity seems to lead to only marginal benefits. To try to look at this more positively, a great deal of time and effort is now devoted to economic and other activity in the virtual realm, some of which does offer a kind of emancipation. Even if much of the visible, material, "public" realm (everyday surroundings, for instance) is disadvantaged physically by this, it's very difficult to argue that nothing is gained. As usual, the question is not whether to argue for materiality or virtuality, but how best to negotiate their reciprocity.

Many thanks to Patrick for his time and patience.