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Nation, Landscape, and Nostalgia in Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Space*

Given the relative infrequency of films which offer a sustained meditation on the history of English capitalism, Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Space* (1997) seems very much an anomaly. Even in an age when many examples of popular British cinema (*Trainspotting*, *Billy Elliot*, *Brassed Off*) retain a glimmer of the social and political engagement that characterised the now canonical texts of 1960s cinematic social realism (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *A Taste of Honey*, *Kes*), Keiller's film stands out for its direct engagement with matters of political economy. The film is not in any conventional sense a documentary, but neither does it entirely take the form of a fiction. It presents its argument in essay form, yet it also provides the spectator with a fictional protagonist and narrator whose travels throughout England serve to bind together the research that substantiates the film's understanding of English history and its criticism of present conditions.

The film's form is crucial in that it connects Keiller's efforts to diagnose the present to a long tradition of texts which take up the question of the condition of England through travel, most notably those written by Daniel Defoe. This mobilisation of an older form

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enables Keiller's film to provide an incisive critique of 1990s Britain and comment on its decline. At the same time, however, Keiller faces the problem that writer-travellers of centuries past faced. Spaces in decline often provoke nostalgia, and in unguarded moments, the perception of decay can be transformed into the picturesque. Such a tendency is perhaps exacerbated when the travelogue takes cinematic form since the picturesque, as its very name implies, privileges visuality even when it takes literary form. Keiller's film offers an erudite and trenchant assessment of the cultural and economic conditions of England in the mid-1990s, but for all its facility in diagnosing the present moment and tracing the symptoms back to historically distant causes, it is unable to present a vision of the future. While its images of decay offer the embers of a nearly-extinguished hope for transformation, they do not truly present the opportunity for any immediate socialist rekindling. Rigorous in its critique of English capitalism, the film does not initially seem to offer the hope for political change that ideally should be such criticism's constant companion. Yet, Keiller's film is symptomatic of the moment of its making. Filmed in the mid-1990s and released months before the general election that brought New Labour to power, *Robinson in Space* constitutes a desperate search for signs of positive political change. Since these signs remain frustratingly elusive, Keiller's camera is drawn to images of the past and the degraded objects of earlier eras which somehow hold buried deep within them the utopian desire absent from present things. In what follows, I will investigate the film's representation of the history of English capitalism and show how the formal features of *Robinson in Space*, drawn from an array of cinematic and literary antecedents, shape its representation of that history. But I will also propose that Keiller's film offers a form of nostalgia that is not politically regressive. Robinson's attachments to the past suggest that nostalgia is a species of utopian desire essential to an age in which more fully developed utopian visions cannot be formulated or imagined.

Robinson in Space tracks the movements of the eponymous character and his unnamed companion as they undertake seven journeys throughout the whole of England. The film begins when Robinson is commissioned by an advertising agency 'to undertake a peripatetic study of the *problem* of England'.¹ Syntax is important here. It is not that there are simply problems facing England, but rather the nation itself is construed as a problem. The crux of

¹ Keiller 1999, p. 6. All quotations from the film have been drawn from the published screenplay.

the problem seems to be one that links national identity to economic decline. Although the spectator is denied the exact instructions of the commissioners, it soon becomes clear that the agency wants Robinson to assemble out of his travels a composite portrait of English nationhood. National identity itself is conceived as the obstacle that must be overcome if England is going to survive the economic doldrums of the 1990s. The sense that England's economic woes are tied to a certain stagnancy in its image very much anticipates the way in which Tony Blair and New Labour sought so desperately in the early years of their rule to refashion Britain into 'Cool Britannia' based on focus groups and the reports of the so-called 'think-tank', Demos. *Robinson in Space* is set in the waning days of Tory rule, yet the film also, in advance, operates as a critique of various Blairite enthusiasms. For Robinson, however, the re-branding of Britain as a thoroughly modern nation is no more satisfactory than the familiar Tory idea of Britain as an imperial nation diminished in stature, but still noble in bearing. Both identities fail to account for contemporary everyday lived experience in the United Kingdom. One operates under the sign of imperial nostalgia, the other attempts to renovate the image without altering the substance. Even if they do offer a coherent image with which to identify, both are disconnected from matters of quotidian concern. *Robinson in Space* traces its fictional character's efforts to grasp the ways in which the confusions and contradictions of Britain's split identity, characterised above all by temporal and psychic discontinuities, are registered spatially on the economic landscape of the nation.

We never see Robinson, nor do we hear him. The film is narrated by his unnamed companion (wearily voiced by Paul Scofield) and consists of static shots of the English landscape: heritage properties, supermarket depots, shopping malls, disused industrial sites, military installations, motorways and so on. Through these images, Keiller reminds us of Raymond Williams's argument in *The Country and the City* that even the spaces seemingly most unaffected by economic development nevertheless register the effects of the mode of production; even though the factory may be the most potent symbol of an industrialised England, industrialisation reshapes the countryside as well.² Keiller modifies this somewhat to suggest that while the disused industrial site may be the ideal symbol of the transformation of England from an industrial to a service-based economy, the effects of deindustrialisation are legible even in those spaces and sectors of the economy seemingly the most

² Williams 1975, pp. 253–8.

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removed from the process. Indeed, any complete assessment of the state of things demands the inclusion of those places that seem to run against the grain of the time, the residual elements of an older mode of production or a way of life. Although residual, even anachronistic, the persistence of these places and ways of life nevertheless function as part of the texture of the present.

Keiller trained as an architect, and his films have always been attentive to the built environment and perceptive in their recognition of the political consequences of planning, development, and spatial organisation. Keiller directed a number of short films in the 1980s, and over the course of these a distinctive visual style and narrative voice began to emerge. Films such as *Stonebridge Park* (1981), *Norwood* (1983), *The End* (1986), *Valtos* (1987) and *The Clouds* (1989) anticipate the style of Keiller's feature films as they present images of landscape and built space with a soundtrack that consists of both narration and fragments of music. These films defamiliarise and poeticise space, rendering it at times uncanny, yet do not lose sight of the importance of space in political and social terms. Keiller's first full-length film, *London* (1994), extends this aesthetic experimentation and political enquiry in its focus on the capital. The film follows Robinson and his unnamed companion as they explore London around the time of the 1992 general election. They are dispirited by the Conservative victory and fear that it will result in the continuation of the denigrations that London suffered under Thatcherite rule. Although the film did cause some controversy when first released, and a special dossier dedicated to *London* in the film magazine *Vertigo* assembled a number of critical voices claiming the film is altogether too bleak, it also garnered much critical praise.³ Iain Sinclair championed the way in which Keiller draws on a European avant-garde tradition and imports into England concepts gleaned from the surrealists and the situationists. This, Sinclair claims, makes it 'the film of its period – essay, document, critique, poem'.⁴

³ While the *Vertigo* dossier begins with praise from artist and film-maker William Raban, subsequent contributors criticise the film for its dreariness and hopelessness. Mark Fisher, who at the time of the issue's publication was the Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent and Shadow Minister for the Arts, argues that the film's formal distance from its subject, consisting as it does primarily of long shots of places not people, strips the capital of its sense of life and struggle. Likewise, novelist Mike Phillips condemns the 'static guidebook view' of London that he feels Keiller's film presents (Phillips 1994, p. 45). Such vehement reactions are perhaps an index of uneasiness about a film that focuses not on the human relationships that constitute the city (although that between Robinson and the unnamed narrator is perhaps metonymic for the kind of caring relationship the city can foster), but on the spatial relationships that comprise it.

⁴ Sinclair 1997, p. 306.

Robinson in Space continues and extends the earlier feature's technique and concerns, shifting from "the problem of London" to "the problem of England." Since *Robinson in Space*, Keiller has made one further full-length feature, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000). Shot on digital video, the film does not feature Robinson and the unnamed narrator, but follows a researcher, voiced by Tilda Swinton, who has returned from the arctic to explore the UK housing crisis. Interpolating archival footage and interviews, the film marks a formal shift from *London* and *Robinson in Space*, but retains the sense of history that marks the entirety of Keiller's work. The images presented in Keiller's work depict a built environment that contains within it traces of earlier historical and spatial formations as well as the marks of future ones. As such, history is spatialised and space historicised, with memory and hope bridging the dialectical gap between them.

Robinson and his companion are especially fascinated by those things that are commercially and industrially discontinuous with the present, that have somehow persevered from an earlier historical moment or anticipate an as yet unrealised future one. Their identification of British-made automobiles from the 1960s, for example, becomes a motif in the film and marks what seems a melancholic attachment to the disappearing artefacts of an earlier phase of British industry. In *Requiem for Communism*, Charity Scribner argues that the passage of time can transform the everyday commodities of an earlier age into objects that bear the weight of an unrealised history. It is in this way that objects hitherto perceived as mere commodities may be invested with a utopian charge. These reminders and remainders of an earlier era are not simply the catalysts for what Walter Benjamin termed 'left-wing melancholia', but are metonymic for the utopian dreams and desires that fuel even capitalist production.⁵ Scribner explains how these commodities, once considered abject, can nevertheless function as bearers of collective memory:

Nineteenth-century modes of production that were long considered violent and destructive return to us as the object of nostalgic interest. At the same time, much recent art and literature manifests the desire not only to recollect ways of living and working that were imagined to be possible under the rubric of the socialist alternative, but also to resuscitate the principle of hope that inspired much of the last century's social and cultural production. The aesthetic response to the socialist crisis ranges from sober, historical description

⁵ Benjamin 1999.

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to melancholic fixation; from brutal erasure to the painful work of mourning;
and from dismissal to nostalgic longing.⁶

Scribner's primary focus is the disappearing object-world of East Germany, yet she is able to extend her analysis to Western Europe as the erosion of the welfare state has left behind its objects as much as the disappearance of the 'socialist' bloc. Indeed, Robinson's much-prized Morris Minor seems an analogue to the 'puttering, but reliable' East German Trabant that is emblematic of *Ostalgie*.⁷ Each automobile is somehow not at home in the present and operates as a reminder not simply of the past, but of the hopes from that past that have remained unfulfilled.⁸ The passage of time itself transforms the meaning of objects. When first manufactured, these automobiles bore the ideological burden of modernity itself, as they were meant to serve as a sign of progress and of the smooth functioning of a commodity system, whether that system was capitalist or Communist. Since their obvious imperfections made them incapable of doing so, they were frequently the subject of much popular disdain and denigration. Yet these same objects orphaned in the present and no longer made to bear the ideological weight of an entire production system acquire a kind of poignancy. Freed from their ideological task, they operate not as mere vehicles for sentimentality about the past, but as reminders of modernity's unfulfilled promises.⁹

In their travels, Robinson and his companion not only stumble on objects that trigger this sense of nostalgia, but also see the remnants of a traditional manufacturing industry which has a similar effect. Early in the film, the

⁶ Scribner 2003, pp. 9–10.

⁷ Scribner 2003, p. 114. Scribner's work aims to complicate any simple understanding of *Ostalgie*, or 'nostalgia for the East'. She focuses in particular on the way in which the commodities produced in the former East Germany are now being used by artists to investigate the operations of collective memory and to intervene in contemporary politics by cataloguing the possibilities that have been foreclosed.

⁸ They do so in different ways, however. The Trabant, like the Lada, is fetishised precisely because its idiosyncrasies and malfunctions belie any claim to real value. It is loved because it is so hapless. In contrast, the Morris represents, for Keiller at least, a lost opportunity for the British automotive industry. The innovative design of the Morris 1100, the narrator claims, 'could probably have given the company a ten-year lead over Volkswagen in the European mass market' (Keiller 1999, p. 56).

⁹ Keiller expresses elsewhere the way in which the encounter with a lost object from the past, in this case automobiles preserved from an earlier era, may trigger thoughts about different historical trajectories and future possibilities: 'Like the artifacts of some extinct, utopian (and perhaps more feminine) culture, surviving examples of the Citroëns and Panhards of the 1950s and 60s appear as evidence that things do not always have to be the way they are. Perhaps they also offer models for more benign cars in the future' (Keiller 2002, p. 353).

travellers stumble upon a Bendy Toys factory near Heathrow. Robinson's companion observes that it is the first factory they have 'seen since leaving Reading'.¹⁰ This, in itself, speaks volumes about the transformation of the economic belt surrounding London. But the travellers are taken aback by the continued existence of a toy manufacturer, and Keiller's camera lingers somewhat nostalgically on the faded factory sign. The narrator comments that the existence of a Bendy Toys factory outside London is 'all the more unusual since most toys today are made in China'.¹¹ So, while Robinson's geographic investigations allow him to compose a cinematic portrait of the nation, they also suggest a more fundamental connection between England, the spaces that constitute it, the things that occupy that space, and the time of those things. Keiller's film begins with the vexing question, 'What is England?' but insists that this question can only be answered after a spatial enquiry, a tour of the nation that will facilitate a piecing together of the system and the formulation of a larger organising logic, both spatial and temporal, behind it.

Despite its seeming lack of what one might traditionally call action, *Robinson in Space* maintains a certain narrative momentum and its analysis of England is generated out of the juxtaposition of the information conveyed by the narrative voice and the images composing the film. Attention to virtually any sequence of Keiller's film reveals this method. For instance, one series of shots begins with the image of the road sign pointing the way to the Samsung factory in Middlesbrough. This image is presented with information specifically related to the plant itself. The narrator tells us that Samsung received £58 million in government aid to build this plant that produces microwaves and computer monitors. Information that Middlesbrough has the highest rate of unemployment in the UK and that the UK is the least-regulated labour market in the industrialised world precedes the image and shapes our reception of it. This trade information is followed by the seemingly unrelated detail that the Samsung plant is located in an industrial park not so far from the house in which Laurence Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*. The film operates through this kind of juxtaposition of oral and visual information and the montage of filmic images is matched by the parataxis of narrated information. Since neither Robinson nor the

¹⁰ Keiller 1999, p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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narrator explicitly delineates the exact relation between Samsung and Laurence Sterne, the spectator is, by default, asked to speculate on possible connections.

This sort of speculation is, of course, very much part of the formal operations of montage, but *Robinson in Space* demands that the audience speculate at the narrative level as well. Keiller's film contains a number of sequences, even individual shots, that reveal the way in which different visions of England run up against one another, producing spatial and economic juxtapositions that express temporal discontinuities. The presentation of Samsung and Laurence Sterne in sequence, but largely without logical connection, becomes more than a matter of sheer geography; it demonstrates the economic demands on the space of the nation. England attracts multinational capital and foreign investment through an array of tax breaks and corporate incentives, but it also harnesses its own national past and repackages it in commodified form. The cinema itself has been central to this process with the heritage film emerging as perhaps the dominant form in British film of the 1980s and 1990s. Merchant-Ivory productions such as *A Room of One's Own* (1986) and *Howard's End* (1992) are often identified as the key culprits here, since whatever critique these films may offer of bourgeois habits and behaviour tends ultimately to be absorbed by the grander spectacle of the past itself. It is, of course, a partial past that is represented, one in which 'the nation itself is reduced to the soft, pastoral landscape of southern England untainted by the modernity of urbanisation and industrialisation'.¹² Such representations fuel a heritage industry that for the most part denies an industrial past and naturalises a conception of English national identity formulated around stately homes and an aristocratic way of life. Over the course of their journey Robinson and his unnamed companion visit many sites of the sort typically used as locations in heritage cinema. These sites, however, are presented in such a way that suggests their imbrication in a larger economic system. Robinson realises that such juxtapositions of old and new, anachronistic and futuristic, are not really contradictions, but readily complement one another. England's investments in high technology are concealed by the veneer of heritage. For all of New Labour's desires to modernise, Robinson discovers that the persistent image of England as a nation in terminal, yet interminable, decline masks an extremely profitable and to a certain extent hidden manufacturing industry that produces

¹² Higson 1993, p. 114. The study of the complexities of heritage cinema has been at the forefront of contemporary film studies, especially within the UK. See especially Higson 2003.

weapons and chemicals as well as the more visible consumer commodities of the sort Samsung produces. The state investment in heritage and the perpetuation, by both the government and private interests, of the idea of an economy in decline obscures the ways in which England profits from less than savoury enterprises usefully hidden, as Robinson discovers, 'at the ends of roads'.¹³

In terms of form, *Robinson in Space* draws on a number of cinematic antecedents. Insofar as Robinson is a man with a movie camera who has an interest in the state of the nation, the film draws on the work of Dziga Vertov, albeit it a Dziga Vertov stripped of all enthusiasm and seemingly suffering the symptoms of late-capitalist malaise. In terms of British national cinema, the conspicuous precursor is Humphrey Jennings who, in the very different historical context of wartime Britain, made films that examined what it meant to be British in his own characteristically idiosyncratic and non-jingoistic manner. The sounds and images of *Listen to Britain* (1942) and the voice-over narration of *A Diary for Timothy* (1945) both provide models for *Robinson in Space*. Keiller's juxtaposition of voice and image as well as his fascination with statistics drawn from government publications is anticipated by the early films of Peter Greenaway, especially *Windows* (1974) and *Vertical Features Remake* (1978). For the form of the film essay, which blends philosophical rumination, historical investigation and personal reflection, Keiller appeals to the work of Chris Marker, most notably his 1982 film *Sans Soleil/Sunless*. And, if one can follow in the path of an unmade film, *Robinson in Space* manifests some aspects of Eisenstein's proposed film of Marx's *Capital*. In 'Notes on a Film of *Capital*', Eisenstein writes of how through montage alone one might cinematically express the concepts developed by Marx:

the first, preliminary *structural* draft of CAPITAL would mean taking a banal development of a perfectly unrelated event. Say, 'A day in a man's life,' or perhaps even something more banal. And the elements of this chain serve as points of departure for the forming of associations through which alone the play of concepts becomes possible.¹⁴

Robinson in Space attempts to set in motion a similar 'play of concepts'. Unlike Eisenstein's proposed film, however, the structural principle that allows the

¹³ Keiller 1999, p. 233. The words are Keiller's own, from an interview conducted by Patrick Wright and published as an appendix to the screenplay of the film.

¹⁴ Eisenstein 1987, p. 127.

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formation of associations is not jettisoned. The travelogue that provides a frame for Robinson's observations remains. For this reason, I will set aside the cinematic for the moment and consider the influence of the literary on Keiller's film. The film's narration frequently echoes the elevated diction and the refined wit of eighteenth-century travel writing. Domestic travel increased dramatically in the eighteenth century as a result of the construction of an elaborate system of turnpikes that facilitated treks throughout the country. The appetite for travelogues also increased as improved transportation routes forged greater economic and social links between disparate parts of the nation that were hitherto conceptually distant, if not actually so. Through these works the nation could be perceived as a whole and the travellers who wrote them played a major role in producing the idea of England as an integrated totality. As much as they trafficked in the spectacle of internal differentiation – the representation of internal others who lived far from London was marked by the identification of local and regional peculiarities – these writers also generated through their travels the idea of a unified and integrated English, even British, nation.

Robinson in Space is structured around seven journeys that Robinson and his companion take throughout England. Keiller borrows this structure from what is perhaps the most important of eighteenth-century travel narratives, Daniel Defoe's *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, published between 1724 and 1726. Defoe's journeys function as a model and map for Robinson's investigations and, like Defoe's *Tour*, *Robinson in Space* blends documentary observation with idiosyncratic personal commentary. Each hazards an investigation of the vexed question of national identity. Pat Rogers argues that in the *Tour* Defoe 'deploys the resources available to a great imaginative writer, and it supplies less a picture of Britain than a vision of nationhood'.¹⁵ Defoe wrote the *Tour* at a time of great national uncertainty. The Act of Union was less than twenty years past, and Britain in the 1720s remained an insecure venture. Defoe's earlier work, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *The Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), had presented fictional tales as factual accounts and were an index of the author's 'remarkable ability to fuse documentary and novelistic forms in order to describe and explain the world'.¹⁶ Keiller's work, like Defoe's, draws on both a documentary impulse and the

¹⁵ Rogers 1972–3, p. 153.

¹⁶ Bowers 1993, p. 148.

form of the picaresque to create a text that is generically hybrid. Such an appeal to fiction does not compromise the force of the evidence or of the argument presented, but instead lends them an additional sort of legitimation. Like his namesake Robinson Crusoe, Robinson is meant to represent allegorically a certain condition of life as it is shaped by material conditions and circumstances. Although fictional, Robinson represents those who found themselves shipwrecked and stranded on the inhospitable island of Thatcherism and had to make the best of it to survive. Keiller's film is a document of the conditions of life under Tory rule, but it conveys the sense of isolation via recourse to fiction and its allegorical possibilities.¹⁷ Defoe's reflexive commentary on the form of his work also alleviates anxieties that might surround the vexed question of generic classification. Defoe categorises the *Tour* as an *essay*, and this resonates strongly with the form of Keiller's film:

To describe a country by other men's accounts of it, would soon expose a writer to the discovery of the fraud; and to describe it by survey, requires a preparation too great for anything but a public purse, and persons appointed by authority. But to describe a country by way of journey, in a private capacity, as has been the case here, though it requires a particular application, to what may be learned from due enquiry and from conversation, yet it admits not the observer to dwell upon every nicety, to measure the distances, and determine exactly the site, the dimensions, or the extent of places, or read the histories of them. But it is giving an account by way of essay, or, as the moderns call it, by memoirs of the present state of things, in a familiar manner.¹⁸

Robinson in Space is best identified in the terms Defoe uses. It consists of 'memoirs of the present state of things, in a familiar manner'.¹⁹ Defoe and Keiller both draw on statistical information and second-hand reports, yet they recognise that the sheer compilation of documentary evidence is insufficient. The principle that sets their respective trips in motion is that if one wants to

¹⁷ Robinson's isolation is exacerbated by his queerness. The narrator notes that while living in Reading, Robinson had been 'taunted by groups of homophobic youths' (Keiller 1999, p. 6). The relationship between Robinson and the narrator is never fully commented upon, yet forms one of the most hopeful aspects of the film. Their companionship, with its echoes of Boswell and Johnson, provides a model for intellectual curiosity and political camaraderie and escapes the inequality that plagues the relationship between Robinson Crusoe and Friday.

¹⁸ Defoe 1986, p. 239.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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grasp truly the present state of things one must do so 'by way of journey'.²⁰ It is only by travelling that one can begin to draw the connections between seemingly unrelated social and economic phenomena dispersed in space.

This idea of connecting isolated phenomena separated by geography has recently become a central theoretical concern, as the flows of global capital link seemingly discrete locations within a totality that frustratingly resists comprehension due to its sheer scale and complexity. Most notably, Fredric Jameson's call for a practice of cognitive mapping has ensured the emergence of spatiality as the key term in contemporary assessments of the postmodern condition.²¹ Film, as a medium intimately concerned with the representation of space, both in the basic phenomenological sense and in the various efforts to represent current global circumstances through the depiction of different spaces, seems a useful tool for this cartographic project that bridges the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the political. In a special issue of *Screen* on the theme of 'Space, Place, and the City', geographer Doreen Massey, in conversation with Karen Lury, maps out possible cross-pollinations between film studies and geography. Lury provides a list of recent works in film studies that draw on geography and the vocabulary of space and place in order to investigate cinematic representations of the city and to make larger claims about the experience of modernity or postmodernity. Massey applauds such cross-disciplinary affiliations, but identifies a rather curious elision in such efforts:

Let me just make a brief comment here, because we have already made a leap, and one which I think is very interesting. You begin by talking about 'space' and 'place' but, only a few paragraphs into our discussion, we have already specified this as 'the city'. Now, in our case of course, we have every excuse – the concern of this issue of *Screen* is to weave around the three

²⁰ Ibid. It is important to note the limits of the explorations each text undertakes. Robinson abandons his journey before he has the opportunity to visit Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. Although the film makes claims about the broader British economy, its primary focus is England. Defoe did travel to both Wales and Scotland, yet the latter presents an obstacle to Defoe's efforts to present Great Britain as an integrated totality. Betty A. Schellenberg notes that Defoe's 'rather forced invocation of the term "North-Britain" . . . underscored the problem of the Scottish portion of the *Tour*: England and Scotland never quite become Britain, because Scotland has not succeeded in becoming England; or, in other words, because Defoe's image of "Britain" is in fact one of England'. (Schellenberg 1995, p. 306).

²¹ See Jameson 1991, pp. 51–4, and 1988, pp. 347–59, for his explanation of the way in which cartographic processes offer a metaphor for the effort to construe one's position in the networks of global capitalism.

terms space/film/city. But I think it is worth reflecting on this as an elision which is commonly made, and with far less excuse.²²

Keiller's willingness to go into the countryside and to provincial towns and cities, drawn from Defoe's equally enthusiastic impulse to light out for the territories, is thus a valuable corrective to the elisions that plague cinema studies. London may be central, but Defoe and Keiller are both fascinated by smaller centres and provincial ports from which a significant amount of international trade occurs. This port activity, increasingly taking the form of discreet operations trading in banal (Keiller's privileged example is plasterboard) or controversial (chemicals and weaponry) commodities, operates below the radar of public consciousness, but nevertheless constitutes the bulk of English trade and demonstrates the continuing reliance on, and profitability of, an export economy.

Of course, neither Defoe nor Keiller would deny the importance of London. Defoe repeatedly notes the absolute centrality of London within the national and imperial economy. London is, in Defoe's analysis, the absolute centre of the system. Early in his first letter, a report on his tour of East Anglia, Defoe remarks that the local economy is entirely dependent on markets in London. He notes that such dependence on the appetite of the capital for commodities is not the exception but the rule:

I am the more particular in my remark on this place because in the course of my travels the reader will meet with the like in almost every place of note through the whole island, where it will be seen how this kingdom, as well as the people, as the land, and even the sea, in every part of it, are employed to furnish something, and I may add, the best of every thing, to supply the city of London with provisions.²³

Keiller's film does not make as strong an assertion for the absolute centrality of London, but it does nevertheless recognise London as a key nodal point through which global capital flows and around which the British economy is organised. Indeed, *London* explores the spaces of the capital and observes there the juxtaposition of structural decay and an architecture of prosperity. London, in both the early eighteenth century and the late twentieth, is central to the economy and identity of the nation, but to understand its centrality, it

²² Massey and Lury 1999, p. 230.

²³ Defoe 1986, p. 54.

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is absolutely essential to explore that which is peripheral to it. To this end, Defoe and Robinson set out from London, and their investigations into the present state of things are a form of cultural and economic geography grounded in the belief that any answer to the problem of England lies beyond the metropolis.

This is not to suggest, however, that Defoe and Keiller confuse the actual geographic space of the nation for the nation itself. Instead, they work on the assumption that the nation, whether it is thought of as a discursive formation or imaginary construct, can be analysed through its cultural and industrial products as well as the overall configuration of its mode of production. Indeed, as Henri Lefebvre argues, the nation's spatial organisation, the production of space itself, is perhaps the most crucial product of the nation.²⁴ Defoe's and Keiller's focus on nationalism and economics can perhaps be accounted for by their particular historical circumstances. Defoe, writing in the first few decades of the eighteenth century, is historically situated at the moment of modern capitalism's accelerated early development, which was spurred on by an almost uncontrollable enthusiasm for financial speculation and investment, and resulted in the coming together of the idea of the nation-state in its modern form. Keiller is historically situated at the end of the Thatcher-Major era, characterised by both the Tory party's jingoistic nationalism and leftist speculations on the imminent break-up of Britain. In both historical moments, the changing ideas of the nation are explicitly linked to radical changes in the workings of finance. Defoe writes in the age of the South Sea Bubble, the first major stock-market catastrophe caused by reckless speculation. Fraudulent investment schemes are a source of fascination for Defoe and he frequently avails himself of the opportunity to counsel his readers against the dangers of such schemes. Keiller films in an age when Britain is trying to redefine itself as a twenty-first-century economy centred around financial services and an array of high-technology industries. Robinson and his companion are wary of the process of privatisation and deregulation Thatcher insisted must underlie such a transformation. As Robinson's research repeatedly shows, the process of creating a free market has only deepened the connections, even the equivalence, between the government and business elite. The free market has only ensured that such connections are more consciously obscured

²⁴ Lefebvre writes that 'every society – and hence every mode of production with its subvariants . . . produces a space, its own space' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 31).

by those who hold them behind a nefarious web of holding companies and wholly-owned subsidiaries.

While Benedict Anderson and others have identified the importance of narrative (both in the form of the novel and in the quotidian continuity of the newspaper) to the ideological formation and legitimation of nation-states,²⁵ Patrick Brantlinger argues that public credit, or the national debt, is also a crucial condition of possibility for the ideological fiction of the nation-state. The national debt is the invention that underwrites the narratives which set up the nation as something in which one can both literally and metaphorically invest. Public credit operates on the assumption of a future. It assumes that a time will come when the debt will be reckoned. It is this permanently deferred future reckoning that allows the nation-state to come into being and grants it temporal extension. In this way, Brantlinger argues, the debt is a fiction out of which emerges the nation as an abstraction that nevertheless manifests itself as a tangible lived reality:

Nation-states are invented through a process of fetishistic misrecognition whereby debt, absence, and powerlessness are transubstantiated, mainly through class exploitation at home and war abroad, into their opposites – into wealth, a plenitude of laws and institutions, and power [. . .]. In economic terms, public credit underwrites this plenitude and power.²⁶

The nation, then, has its origins, and maintains itself, through speculation – the idea of a future when it will honour its debts. So when we look at the nation we are asked to see what is not there; the wealth of the nation is founded on its debt and the nation itself consists primarily of the narratives that sustain it. This, of course, does not mean that the nation is mere fantasy or illusion, wholly dematerialised and without substance. Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek points out, there is nothing more real than a fantasy that generates material consequences. In their travels throughout England, Defoe and Robinson record the material effects of England conceived in terms of what Žižek would call a ‘real abstraction’.²⁷ On the one hand, the nation is defined by its utter intangibility. It consists of narratives and fantasies, the accumulation of which

²⁵ Anderson 1991, pp. 37–46.

²⁶ Brantlinger 1996, p. 20.

²⁷ For more on the concept of a ‘real abstraction’ and in particular the role that it plays in the logic of capitalist accumulation, see Žižek 2000, pp. 15–18. For an account of the role that fantasy plays in the creation and maintenance of nationalist attachments, see Žižek 1993, pp. 200–5.

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grants it a kind of ontological consistency. On the other, this seeming intangibility nevertheless produces a landscape that gives material shape to the sustaining myths and investments of the nation. Landscape, however, is not a seamlessly effective vehicle for these ideologies of nationhood. It also registers the contradictions and compromises within the fantasy formation. So, as much as Defoe and Keiller produce compendia of the reigning mythologies of the nation in their respective periods, they are also afforded a glimpse of the inconsistencies that betray the conflicts within the formations themselves. Through their respective tours, they become close readers of the textualised geography of the nation, and as such come to see what is usually hidden in surveys written from a fixed vantage point content to remain on the surface of things.

Robinson takes us to the spaces outside the city, not only the disused industrial spaces of old England, but the largely unseen economic spaces of postmodern England: container ports, weaponry and chemical manufacturing plants, distribution depots, privatised prisons, and landfills. It is in this spatial investigation that we see the import of Doreen Massey's comment, itself an echo of the passage from Raymond Williams I cite above, that the spaces and places of modernity and postmodernity are everywhere and not isolated to the urban. Keiller's film uses static shots to force us to see what is there, this 'there' being the unseen spaces of late capitalism that lie not only on the fringes of the urban but in what seems like the middle of nowhere. The strength of Keiller's film is that it gives a very different sense of space from how it has been used in various theorisations of postmodernity. The irony, of course, is that this insight is made possible through a form Keiller borrows from Defoe, and from an earlier, but no less tumultuous, era of economic transition. As Keiller strikingly demonstrates, the postmodern is figured not only in Jean Baudrillard's visions of hyperspace or in Jameson's much-prized example of Los Angeles's Bonaventure Hotel, but also in places far more banal and much less cosmopolitan. In traversing these out of the way places, Keiller constructs a very different view of contemporary capitalism, its wide array of social inequities, its diverse landscapes, and the people who inhabit them. As Doreen Massey writes, and, as Keiller quotes her in his film, 'Much of life for many people, even in the heart of the First World, still consists of waiting in a bus shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes'.²⁸

²⁸ Massey 1994, p. 163.

Such images from the outskirts are too often elided from the glittering contemporary visions of postmodernity that see its transformations only in the urban or in the suburban spaces of the shopping mall or retail park. *Robinson in Space* by no means ignores commercial spaces, taking spectators to Merry Hill, near Dudley, which at the time was the largest mall in Europe. Yet, despite the importance of the retail sector, *Robinson* is more drawn to the elaborate network that supplies the system with goods: the distribution depots and lorries which travel to and fro are as much a sign of postmodernity as the malls so frequently identified as such. Thus, *Robinson in Space* re-orientes our perspective and, even if it never yields a conclusive solution to 'the problem of England' its protagonist sets out to investigate, it does show us another England, the hidden spaces that perhaps hold the key to an understanding of England, its place in the circulations of global capital, and the manufactured sense of crisis that help perpetuate its profound economic inequities.

But Keiller's film serves as more than a valuable corrective to some of the blind spots of contemporary theorisations of the postmodern. In its focus on the apparent decline of the British economy, *Robinson in Space* also engages with contemporary political debates about the historical trajectory of the larger British economy and sounds a warning about the dangers of underestimating the strength of the system. Although it does not explicitly acknowledge them as interlocutors, the film engages with the work of Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson. In the pages of the *New Left Review* in the 1960s, Nairn and Anderson formulated a theory of British economic development. Over a series of articles, they argued that the 'Origins of the Present Crisis' (the title of Anderson's inaugural article on the subject) lies in the peculiarity of the conditions of the development of British capitalism.²⁹ The lack of a proper bourgeois revolution, combined with the overwhelming success of the British economy in the nineteenth century, left twentieth-century Britain utterly incapable of competing with those economies that developed later (France, Germany, and the United States). Its success came too early, as did the revolution that catalysed it, but since it never really purged itself of its pesky feudal remnants, the aristocracy, it never developed into a properly functioning modern capitalist economy. Indeed, in Martin Wiener's extension of the Nairn-Anderson thesis, Britain is represented as constitutionally incapable of such modernising renovations,

²⁹ The key articles are Anderson 1964, pp. 26–53, and 1968, pp. 3–57, and Nairn 1964a, pp. 19–25, 1964b, pp. 43–67, 1964c, pp. 38–65 and 1964d, pp. 33–62.

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as if culturally inoculated against them.³⁰ The decline of Britain thus hinges on its inability to modernise, to shake free of the success of its past and the anachronistic social structure that enabled it.

Robinson in Space, influenced by the work of W.D. Rubinstein, generates a very different reading of British historical and economic development. Rubinstein challenges the Nairn-Anderson thesis and argues that the concomitant 'cultural critique' that casts Britain's economic decline as virtually inevitable blinds us to the success of English capitalism, however damaging and unprofitable it is to the wider populace. Keiller's film adopts Rubinstein's position, and in the film Robinson is given Rubinstein's *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain: 1750–1990* by his employer.³¹ The argument of the film, and *Robinson in Space* invites such an old-fashioned formulation of its purpose, is that the scenes of decay visible throughout England are not an indication of a faltering economy or the results of the inherent faults of the system, but are, instead, the signs of the economy's robust health. Robinson soon discovers that what lies behind the anachronisms of the heritage industry, the decline of the industrial sector, the seeming lack of a manufacturing base, the perpetual crises in agriculture, the ongoing unevenness of development, and the continued existence of an impoverished underclass is a successful economy that needs the appearance of crisis and decline to function most effectively. In opposition to the Nairn-Anderson thesis, Keiller suggests that the appearance of collapse and imminent economic peril serves a very particular ideological purpose. Crisis and decay obscure the signs of success and enable the perpetuation of an economic system that is hugely profitable for the select few.

The realisation of this seems to lie behind both the narrator's melancholic tone and Robinson's increasingly erratic behaviour. Each symptom points to the maddening disjunction between actual lived experience in contemporary Great Britain (the crumbling infrastructure, the perpetual cutbacks) and the

³⁰ Wiener 1981.

³¹ Although Rubinstein's text, *Capitalism, Culture, and Decline in Britain, 1750–1990*, (Rubinstein 1993), plays a part in the film itself, there are a number of other texts which challenge the basic tenets of the Nairn-Anderson thesis. Originally published in 1965, E.P. Thompson's 'The Peculiarities of the English', reprinted in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (Thompson 1978), was the first, and remains the most blistering, critique of Anderson and Nairn's claims. More recently, Ellen Meiksins Wood's *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (Wood 1987) takes issue with Nairn and Anderson's original formulations as well as their later efforts to revise them. Keiller notes in an interview with Wright that although he discovered Wood's book only after the film was released, its analysis resonated with his own, and 'it is full of references to things I have been photographing for years' (Keiller 1999, p. 233).

nation's place in the upper tier of global economies. The film shows the destruction wrought by Thatcherite economic policies, but also considers the ways in which decay is put to political use. Accompanying the destruction of towns and communities, and indeed of entire ways of life, is the manipulation of these signs of decline to further a regressive political programme. Decay and decline are real enough, but what is especially pernicious is the way that contemporary capitalism (and I think it fair to generalise here, as such tendencies are not restricted to Great Britain) manipulates these signs to create an almost permanent sense of crisis. This, in turn, is used to justify a whole series of economic measures that are in no way meant to alleviate the crisis, but to manage it and exploit it for political ends. As such, crisis, though real enough, becomes a structural component in the operations of a system that uses decay and decline to conceal private wealth and prosperity. Keiller's film examines this in terms of economic geography, the ways in which the spatial organisation of capital relies on both visibility and concealment to justify and perpetuate its claims and commitments. For instance, Robinson's increasing obsession with military installations and the affiliated aerospace and weaponry sectors speaks to a recognition that the grassy expanses that surround the windowless sheds and seemingly innocuous corporate headquarters of such concerns not only naturalise them as part of an actual landscape, but do so within the economic one as well. The task of the film, then, is to defamiliarise that which, if seen at all, seems benign: a corporate logo for a company that, unlike the trademark of a producer of consumer items, has no popular purchase and is usually only glimpsed from a passing car. The peripheral zones between country and city are the habitat for such installations, and it is there that the British economy flourishes, unseen by most.

Writing in a very different historical moment, Defoe accounts for decay as part of natural cycles not yet explicitly connected to the processes of capitalist development. Although lamentable, decline enables growth elsewhere and is not a sign of any fatal disequilibrium within the system, but is rather part of a natural cyclical order. Defoe writes of the economic decline of the east coast of England with evident distress. However, he can nevertheless reconcile such scenes of impoverishment with his view of a prosperous nation:

From Albro' to Dunwich, there are no towns of note, even this town seems to be in danger of being swallowed up; for fame reports, that once they had fifty churches in the town; I saw but one left and that not half full of people.

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This town is a testimony of the decay of public things, things of the most durable nature; and as the old poet expresses it,

By numerous examples we may see,

That towns and cities die, as well as we.

The ruins of Carthage, or the great city of Jerusalem, or of ancient Rome, are not at all wonderful to me; the ruins of Nineveh, which are so entirely sunk, as that 'tis doubtful where the city stood; the ruins of Babylon, or the great Persepolis, and many capital cities, which time and the change of monarchies have overthrown; these, I say, are not at all wonderful, because being the capitals of great and flourishing kingdoms, where those kingdoms were overthrown, the capital cities necessarily fell with them. But for the private town, a sea-port, and a town of commerce, to decay, as it were of itself (for we never read of Dunwich being plundered, or ruined, by any disaster, at least not of late years); this I must confess, seems owing to nothing but to the fate of things, by which we see that towns, kings, countries, families, and persons, have all their elevation, their medium, their declination, and even their destruction in the womb of time, and the course of nature.³²

Such reconciliation is no longer available, and Robinson comes to understand the decay that he discovers throughout England to be an indication of, and condition of possibility for, prosperity elsewhere. Rogers argues that the 'main rhetorical ploy' Defoe uses 'is the repeated use of contrast'.³³ He does so in order 'to set off an idiom of growth – "rising" towns or "flourishing" country – against counter-images of exhaustion – "barren" land or "broken" remains'.³⁴ Although unnerved by scenes of decay, Defoe can nevertheless imagine a larger harmony between growth and decline on a national scale with the balance in favour of prosperity and development. However, he does not do so by reference to a systematised political economy. Instead, he must rationalise the fortunes of place via an appeal to the workings of fate and nature. What Defoe can chalk up to various cosmic rotations, Robinson recognises to be the result of a system that thrives upon the perpetuation of decay and a sense of decline as part of its effort to centralise and consolidate its power. Decay is thus not simply a sign of itself, but of its opposite as well.

The recognition that success flourishes under the cover of decline presents various problems for those on the Left. The signs of crisis so frequently

³² Defoe 1986, pp. 78–9.

³³ Rogers 1972–3, p. 174.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

generated by operations of capital itself, and so often taken as signals of the system's imminent collapse, are in fact the mechanism by which the system sustains itself. As Paul Dave concludes in his article on the film,

the 'problem' of England that Robinson is asked to investigate in *Robinson in Space* is not, as he first presumes and as the 'cultural critique' understands it, the *failure* of English capitalism, but rather its *success*. Instead of a weak economy caused by an anachronistic culture, we have a vigorous capitalism that conceals its destructive effects under the cloak of oldness.³⁵

Crisis is manipulated as a front, a means to justify stringent and repressive measures that serve only to strengthen the system. Faced with this predicament, Robinson's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic. The narrator observes that his friend seems to have succumbed to paranoia. Robinson breaks into a British Aerospace assembly plant and steals a piece from a Tornado fighter jet, fulfilling his desire to engage, as it is speculated Defoe did, in espionage. News comes soon after that the advertising firm has terminated the contracts of Robinson and his companion and that a Tornado fighter jet has crashed in the North Sea.

Robinson's descent into paranoia connects the film to a larger leftist thematics. Faced with a system of global capital that seemingly exceeds our ability to perceive it in its totality, let alone represent the density of its interconnections, a sense of conspiracy soon gives way to the temptations of paranoia. *Robinson in Space* hardly takes the form of the sort of conspiracy thriller that Fredric Jameson has identified as tapping into the profound anxieties, suspicions, and hopes of the present moment.³⁶ Nevertheless, it manages to establish a bracing narrative out of information usually banished to governmental reports or the business sections of the newspapers. Given its conclusion, the film seems to be yet another symptom of the same late-capitalist malaise that it seeks to diagnose. The success of Robinson's investigations, measured in terms of the connections between phenomena he is able to uncover, results only in paranoia, which hardly seems a politically productive state of mind. Despite this, and despite his being decommissioned, the film implies that Robinson nevertheless forges on. The film, a document not merely of his travels but of what can be revealed by way of journey, exposes the logic that guides the construction of England as a fantasy formation. The perpetual

³⁵ Dave 2000, p. 350.

³⁶ See Jameson 1992, pp. 9–10 for a discussion of 1970s conspiracy thrillers.

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state of crisis is not a sign of capital's imminent collapse, but is manipulated by the state and corporate interests, including the media, to make the system stronger. Likewise, the appearance of economic decline serves to obscure the success of the system, and to justify the stringent measures taken, which it is often said *must* be taken, to make Britain competitive in the global market. Decline is neither artificial nor illusory, and crisis is by no means a matter of mere ideological appearance. They are both real enough. Yet *Robinson in Space* points to the ways in which decay and decline have been used to disenfranchise further those who bear the brunt of it in the first place.

During his journey through the North Midlands and Yorkshire, Defoe renews his pledge to give his reader a full account of British industrial production and remarks on his commitment to see and convey the visual evidence of the results of that production:

as I was resolved to have a perfect knowledge of the most remarkable things, and especially of the manufactures of England, which I take to be well worth a traveller's notice, as the most curious thing he can meet with, and which is so prodigious great in this quarter, I made no less than three journeys into, and through, this part of the country.³⁷

The desire to see underlies Robinson's investigations as well. For the contemporary traveller the landscape conceals as much as it reveals. While research and observation will force some of the secrets from the landscape, much has to be gleaned from what cannot be seen. Robinson tenaciously pursues the unseen, and Keiller's camera frames that which usually goes unnoticed. Even if Robinson succumbs to paranoia, the spectator emerges with a deeper understanding of the resilience of English capitalism and a deeper suspicion of the political uses of crisis.

Yet, for all of Keiller's tenacity in exposing the mystifications inherent in the discourse of decline, the film does lapse into nostalgia for an earlier phase of capitalist production during which Britain produced a greater amount of tangible consumer goods. The film itself acknowledges this nostalgia when Robinson and the narrator visit Portsmouth. There they see the *Victory*, Nelson's flagship and a symbol of the strength of the British empire and the global economic supremacy Great Britain secured in the eighteenth century through its command of the seas and its control of export routes. During the initial stages of their journey, the narrator comments, 'The narrative of Britain since

³⁷ Defoe 1986, p. 485.

Defoe's time is the result of a particularly *English* kind of capitalism'.³⁸ The particularity and peculiarity of English capitalism lies in the way that, even in the moment of its greatest industrial productivity, it remained a capitalism organised around 'land, finance and commercial services'.³⁹ As such, the visible decline of an industrial economy that produces consumer goods obscures the continuing success of the financial services sector as well as the transformation of the economy into one that produces for export all manner of non-consumer items that by and large remain invisible to ordinary Britons. The narrator laments the absence of the sort of economy that can be seen:

Those 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, are inclined to view this English culture as a bizarre and damaging anachronism, but if so, it is not an unsuccessful one.⁴⁰

It is thus the film establishes a fetish of visibility, and to a certain extent, a renewed fetishism of the commodity. Robinson and his companion are nostalgic for a time when England produced things and a journey throughout the whole of the nation would have allowed them to see the material and commercial signs of English economic strength.

The absence of these signs of strength alerts Robinson and his companion to the more pernicious operations of a hidden economy, but it also catalyses in them a tremendous sense of loss. Thus, Keiller's static framings at times take on the attributes of the picturesque, even if they differ in choice of subject. In its traditional guise, the picturesque took as its subject a rural landscape populated by agricultural labourers whose way of life was rapidly disappearing. The picturesque was, in effect, a way of seeing this transformation. The degradation of those within its cognitive frame was aestheticised in such a way that sentimentalised and naturalised the inevitability of their destruction. Keiller evacuates his frame of human subjects (other than incidental passers-by, human subjects are absent from Keiller's cinematic gaze) and focuses on the melancholic images of industrial decay. Juxtaposed with the sleekness, anonymity, and newness of distribution warehouses and aerospace installations, these images record the passing of an era, and are invested, even suffused,

³⁸ Keiller 1999, p. 20.

³⁹ Keiller 1999, p. 90.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

with a powerful emotional resonance that one might initially think a scrap-heap or disintegrating industrial unit could not possibly bear.⁴¹ In an article for *Sight and Sound*, Keiller suggests that the cinema is particularly capable of representing everyday landscapes in a manner that leads to their re-enchantment. Speaking of films such as *La Jetée* and *Listen to Britain*, Keiller remarks, 'the memory of these films remained as a glimpse of utopia, a world in which actually-existing airports, museums, canals, railway stations, streets – the ordinary surroundings of everyday life – were transformed, became part of a changed world'.⁴²

A sense of nostalgia may be the by-product generated by the absences, innocuous fronts, and signs of decline that Robinson and his companion confront in their travels, but this feeling of loss and their tremendous psychic investment in the residual remnants of an earlier era of production suggest that there exists a form of nostalgic longing that serves to sustain political hope in the darkest moments. Perhaps the surest symbol of this comes near the end of the film when the travellers visit Blackpool. Under gloomy skies, the illuminations glow and Robinson's companion quotes E. Prentice Mawson, the designer of Blackpool's Stanley Park, who claimed 'Blackpool stands between us and revolution'.⁴³ Speaking at the moment of the 1926 General Strike, Mawson perhaps imagined that the transformation of Blackpool into a space of pure spectacle would ease the growing tensions between industry and labour. The illuminations and distractions of the seaside playground may have been meant to absorb the transformative energies of a restless working class, but the film offers another reading of Mawson's claim. Robinson, we are told, was born in Blackpool and the city 'holds the key to his utopia'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ In his efforts to seize a sense of hope from a landscape shaped by the inequities of capitalism that does not simply celebrate that heritage or gloss over its brutalities, Keiller finds an ally in Patrick Wright, his interviewer in the appendix to the screenplay of *Robinson in Space*. In *On Living in an Old Country*, he argues that landscape and history cannot be conceded as the natural property of the Right: 'Perhaps we should start in the knowledge that the "national past" doesn't fully exhaust or fully express everyday historical consciousness, and that everyday nostalgia therefore has a critical, subversive potential as well. . . . While it can indeed be expressed jingoistically, the everyday sense of historical existence also testifies to the radical needs which – finding neither realization in present everyday life nor recognition in the complacent grandeur of official symbolism – may still be reaching out to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin)' (Wright 1985, p. 26).

⁴² Keiller 1994, p. 35.

⁴³ Keiller 1999, p. 194.

⁴⁴ Keiller 1999, p. 187.

Instead of being an obstacle to revolution, Blackpool, as Robinson imagines it, is a stage on the way to a future utopia. Brash, noisy, and even garish, Blackpool is not merely a distraction factory in the service of industrial relations, but represents what Keiller himself calls 'the carnivalisation of everyday life'.⁴⁵ As such, it affords a vision, sometimes glorious, sometimes nightmarish, of the world thrown off its usual axis. In this sense, then, Blackpool holds the key not simply to Robinson's utopia, but to the reading of the film itself. In an era when the possibilities for meaningful change seem all but extinguished, the decaying buildings, degraded objects, and dismal landscapes held over from an earlier historical moment are invested with a utopian charge. They attest to the transformation of circumstances even in those darkest moments when revolution seems impossible.

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⁴⁵ Keiller 1999, p. 230. Keiller has the surrealists more in mind here than Bakhtin when he speaks of carnival: 'if Louis Aragon had come to England and someone had taken him to Blackpool, he might have been intrigued, and England wouldn't have been left off the surrealist map of the world. . . . The statement is based in *revolutionary subjectivity*; it's not about hitting the streets, it's about Blackpool as an alternative to hallucinogenic drugs. Which it seems to be: you can go to Blackpool and have a good day, but you can also go to Blackpool and have a bad day' (Keiller 1999, p. 230).

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