2016

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Recommended Citation

Özgün, Aras (2016) "Patrick Keiller, Robinson in Ruins (2010)," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 9.

DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2016-01-01-09

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol1/iss1/9>

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Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Film Review

Patrick Keiller, Robinson in Ruins (2010)

Introduction

Essay Film is a form much appreciated by film connoisseurs. Yet, due to the limited commercial circulation of “non-entertaining” films, the works in this category remain largely unfamiliar to even a literary and academic audience outside the festival crowds. Essay films are often blessed with the purest forms of cinematic reflection; free from narrative constraints (or freely playing with narrative structures) they reflect the filmmakers thought process in a direct manner. A filmmaker’s thought process is different than philosopher’s or sociologist’s, as Deleuze (1989) reminds us — for filmmakers, it is the other way around; images come first, and trigger the thought. Essay film is a process of thinking with images, an attempt to arbitrate the images of the outside world with language. Coming from the most critically reflexive filmmakers who dare to venture into such impossible attempt, essay films often come across as not complicated but complex filmic texts. For example, Chris Marker’s *Le fond de l’air est rouge* (A Grin Without A Cat, 1977) reflects on the bitter history of the revolutionary struggles of postcolonial times not only with wailing images, but also with graduate level references to recent political history. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s famous *Reassemblage* (1982) presents a similarly sophisticated problematization of the modes of representation in visual ethnography.

The Robinson Trilogy

Patrick Keiller’s films in his Robinson Trilogy are refined examples of such intellectually engaging filmmaking practice. *Robinson in Ruins* is the final edition of the trilogy that Keiller started with *London* in 1994, and continued with *Robinson in Space* in 1997. The film was released in 2010 as one of the outcomes of a three year research project Keiller (2010) was involved with Doreen Massey, Patrick Wright, and Matthew Flinham, titled *The Future of Landscape and the Moving Image*.

Robinson is a fictitious character that Keiller uses as a narrative device to convey his visual and textual annotations, reflections and observations. He remains as the invisible protagonist throughout the trilogy: He “appears” at the beginning of *London* as a university professor, ex-roommate and ex-lover of the narrator, urgently asking him to come to London before “it’s too late” after seven years of silence. In *Robinson in Space*, he contacts the narrator again after a long absence, having been dismissed from his position at the university, this time asking him to come

to Redding where he lives and teaches English. In *Robinson in Ruins*, the narrator changes to a woman (voiced by Vanessa Redgrave) and the continuing story of Robinson she tells us is now gathered from a box containing 19 films and a notebook found by recycling workers while dismantling a derelict caravan. Robinson's drifts at the countryside described in the findings starts on January 22, 2008, after he was released from Edgcote open prison in England. Equipped with an "ancient cine camera", he makes images of his everyday surroundings, while he looks for "somewhere to haunt" following his release. The narrator tells us how he tries to "communicate with a network of non-human intelligences that had sought refuge in marginal and hidden locations, who were determined to preserve the possibility of life's survival on the planet and enlisted him to work on their behalf." Over the image of red postoffice box at the corner of a decaying gray street, the narrator reads the Jameson (1994) quote that Robinson photocopied from the library: "It seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism. Perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations" (p. xii). "From a car park he surveys the middle of the island of which he is shipwrecked —the location of a great malady" she says, "that he should dispel in the manner of Turner by making picturesque views on journeys to sites of specific and historic interest".

Wanderings of Keiller's imaginary friend takes us to a journey to "sites of historical significance": To Newbury, where amendment to the Settlement Act was enacted as a poor relief legislation in 1795 —which, according to Karl Polanyi (1944), he notes, had been the origin of the 20th century catastrophe, the development of market society in England; to a motor factory turned into the international Lidl supermarket, where the Mini (that is sold to BMW in 2000) was first produced in 1959; to an abandoned US short range ballistic missile bunker, which had been the site of peasant rebellions in 1590s following the enclosure of commons by the landlords, thus a milestone in the property relations that led to the development of capitalism; to decommissioned nuclear research facilities and privatized nuclear power plants; to military airfields that became the stage of anti-nuclear protests in 1980s; to rapeseed fields, opium fields, and wheat fields. While Robinson annotates different epochs of capitalism through these "historically significant" locations, his journey also chronicles the unfolding of the financial crisis of 2008, the rising oil prices in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in another, the climate change, the rainy summer, the disastrous harvest, the rising food prices, etc., day by day. In a nonlinear fashion, Keiller connects these events, sites, stories and

images which otherwise exist in different registers of their own within the temporality of British landscape. From the organic design of the Mini Cooper, he jumps to morphogenesis of life forms, E. O. Wilson's theory of biophilia, and Lynn Margulis's anti-darwinism (see Margulis 1991; Wilson 1984). Over the images of lichen that grows on the road-sign to Newbury, by the way of the symbiotic hybrid of fungus and green algae that constitutes the lichen, Robinson contemplates on mutualism as a political alternative. Following forking and then reconnecting paths, Robinson's journey turns into a multilayered, fragmented narrative – weaving current events and historical anecdotes with rich geographical, ecological, political and economic references.

Reflections

Keiller's cinematography (Robinson's ancient cine camera) constitutes another layer by either resonating or creating counterpoints to Robinson's story narrated by Redgrave's dry voice. Keiller's images never illustrate the story/text in the way mainstream documentary films do. Just like his previous work in *London* and *Robinson in Space*, Keiller's camera surveys the landscapes and cityscapes with quaint static compositions. Yet, rather than just showing these beautiful sceneries from a distance, Keiller insistently focuses on the intricate details of objects and things with consecutive close-up shots. In accordance with the narrative, we see more of the landscape, the countryside and the remains of capitalist modernity than people in Robinson's last journey. Unlike the previous parts of the trilogy (in which Keiller utilized more dynamic soundscapes through various types of music and sounds that intervened during the narration) *Robinson in Ruins's* soundtrack is entirely composed of location sounds recorded at the places filmed. The steady voiceover is frequently interrupted by very long pastoral shots with quiet location sounds, some of which lasting more than a few minutes: opium flowers, wheat harvest, close-up shots of butterflies and bees, panoramic sceneries, etc. These pastoral shots not only create visual counterpoints to the narration, but also function as refuges from the political/economic/ecological decay portrayed in the story as well as its theoretical sophistication. At these moments, Keiller's work breaks with the multilayered story and its literary references, and forcefully shares with its viewer the sublime pleasure of watching the nature unfold itself.

Six years after its release, in the aftermath of Brexit and the uncertainty it creates, *Robinson in Ruins* (as well as the other films in Keiller's trilogy) finds a new relevancy for an intelligent audience. *London* was made two years after the Maastricht Treaty and the general elections

of 1992 (in which John Major was reelected). It was reflecting Keiller's disappointment with the birthplace of industrial capitalism becoming a global center of postfordist service economy, and the conformism of the British middle class after 13 years of Conservative Government. *Robinson in Space* was made in 1997 —the year the Tory rule had finally ended, but Tony Blair's new Labour government already showed their dedication to the consolidation of neoliberal policies introduced by their predecessors. *Robinson in Ruins* documents the economic meltdown triggered by the 2008 mortgage crisis, three decades after Thatcherism. In short, Keiller's trilogy chronicles an elongated failure that would eventually lead to current political crisis and frustration. One should not expect comprehensive critical political-economic analyses with illustrations from Keiller's films. Robinson's musings rather remain as fragmented histories of neoliberal globalization with images.

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