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Patrick Keiller, Stonebridge Park, and the 'subjective transformation of space'

By David Anderson

Patrick Keiller, an architect 'diverted' into making films in the late 1970s, is best known for his 'Robinson' series, a loose trilogy running from *London* (1994), through *Robinson in Space* (1997), to 2010's *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). Often situated within the capacious genre of the 'essay film', these works occupy a formal space some distance away from conventional narrative cinema, and almost as far-removed from straight documentary filmmaking too. They stand as a rare extension of the English 'legacy of "poetic" documentary cinema', as the late producer Keith Griffiths characterised it, referring above all to the director Humphrey Jennings (1994). Yet Keiller, avowedly a disciple of Jennings, also intended his films to constitute a kind of cinematic research into what he ultimately called the '*transformative potential*' contained within 'images of the English landscape', and how this visible surface variously displays or conceals social and political relations (Keiller 2012, 3). In doing so, the films record and bear witness to the explorations of an eponymous, unseen protagonist, while a separate narrator figure — the protagonist's former lover — describes their journeys in a tone that undulates between camp whimsicality, luxuriant distain and mordant jeremiad. All this is set over a sequence of almost exclusively still-camera shots. The vision of these films is so startlingly complete that it can almost seem to have arrived from nowhere, and Keiller's handful of early works are rarely studied in detail. This essay seeks to correct that, augmenting our understanding of Keiller's practice by paying closer attention to how the 'subjective transformation of space' is cultivated in his very first short films, 1981's *Stonebridge Park* and 1983's *Norwood*.

To return to this beginning, it is necessary to step back even further – to the late 1970s – when, already disillusioned with the architectural profession, Keiller began assembling a 'collection' of slides depicting 'found architecture' – 'old industrial buildings, scaffolding structures, air-raid shelters, and so on', motivated by 'the desire to find, already existing, the buildings that I wanted to build but for a number of reasons was unable to' (1982, 75). Describing these activities at a later date, Keiller sounded a despondent note, presenting photography as a kind of default mode of engagement with the built environment: a practice resorted to in lieu of the ability to actually acquire and make use of the sites in question. Writing later in Iain Sinclair's collection *London: City of Disappearances*, he observed of his subjects that 'none were for sale, but even if they had been, acquisition seemed at first neither appropriate nor

practical, and so the collection consisted of 35mm colour slides' (in Sinclair (ed.) 2006, 292). Hence, his 'encounters' with these structures marked the point of his diversion in careers: a shift in focus from the actual construction of buildings to their subjective re-construction in the imagination.

In 1978 Keiller began a course at the Royal College of Art, hoping – as he put it – to 'develop' his photographic practice (2002, 125). There he discovered that his creatively melancholic approach to the London cityscape had a history, albeit one mostly derived from Parisian traditions – from the 'flâneurs and daydreamers' of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire and Apollinaire, to the 'profound despair' of the Surrealists and their 'tours' through rundown quarters of the French capital, precursors to the Situationists' *dérives* of the 50s and 60s. Keiller wrote about this heritage in a 1981 essay entitled 'The Poetic Experience of Townscape and Landscape, and Some Ways of Depicting It', whose opening sentences declare a newfound confidence in the validity of non-material transformation, achieved by activating and foregrounding the sensibility of the artist:

> The desire to transform the world is not uncommon, and there are a number of ways of fulfilling it. One of these is by means of the adoption of a certain subjectivity, aggressive or passive, deliberately sought or simply the result of a mood, which alters experience of the world, and so transforms it. (1982, 75)

Such a mood might be the result of 'reveries, revolutions or the poignant aspects of war'. But given the unlikelihood of the latter two (within an atmosphere of political stagnation that would later inform *London*), it is normally subjective by necessity. The difficulty, then, lies in communicating such a sensation, but, simply enough, Keiller found this element to be coterminous with the activity of moving-image-making. The subjective part aligned with the filmmaker's cultivation of 'photography as a way of seeing', while the communicative part was satisfied by film's mode of presentation, for 'the experience of having seen a film', he wrote, 'is nearly always a collective experience' (1982, 75).[1]

Keiller was keen to distinguish between 'depicting space, and depicting experience of space' although, he claimed, 'this is in a way an unnecessary distinction: nearly all films depict space and in doing so establish, if only inadvertently, a presentation of how that space is experienced, an atmosphere', the result of 'narrative, editing, camera movement and so on'. Still, there was a key difference between the use of locations 'not as spaces, but as signs' in films like The Long Good Friday (1980), 'conceived as a television movie', and the possibilities afforded by the cinema-screen, whose scale 'permits depictions of

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[1] This section, though crucial to the sense of the essay, was curiously removed from the subsequent reprinting in the 2013 edition of Keiller's collected essays, *The View From the Train*.

space that approximate to life size', granting the possibility for 'a sort of realism'. Asserting that, in this format particularly, 'the hollowness of space is what characterises the experience of it, and is what must be depicted in order to depict this experience', Keiller concluded that '[t]he first way that occurred to me … was the device known as "subjective camera"'. Accordingly, 1981's Stonebridge Park, his first film proper, was composed of two long 'subjective camera' shots in which the camera 'walks' across a pair of footbridges, overlaid with a first-person, stream of consciousness narration voiced poker-facedly by Keiller himself (Keiller 1982, 81-2).

Set in the bleak west London district denoted by its name, Stonebridge Park's genesis can be traced to an encounter with a landscape seen from a train window, on the main line out of Euston station in late 1980. Passing swiftly by, Keiller saw a landscape that 'seemed to present a Nordic aspect, uncommon in London', and thought it might respond well to monochrome photography. Returning by bicycle his attention was diverted by a footbridge, which he had not seen from the train. 30 years later, in the essay 'Imaging', he described its seductive effect – seductive in the fullest, Latinate sense of seducere, or 'leading astray':

> About 200 metres long, it carries pedestrians over both the main line and a branch that passes underneath it, at an angle, in a tunnel. The longer of the bridge's two spans is oriented so that Wembley Stadium is framed between its parapets. The bridge's architecture suggested a renewed attempt at moving pictures: its long, narrow walkway resembled the linearity of a film; its parapets framed the view in a ratio similar to the 4x3 of a camera, and its elaborate articulation, with several flights of steps, half landings and changes of direction, offered a structure for a moving-camera choreography.

A few weeks later, he returned with a hand-held cine-camera to record a walk across this bridge, one continuous take lasting ten minutes, recorded on 120 metres of 16mm, monochrome film stock. Such a method recalled early cinematic 'actualities', such as those of Alexandre Promio and the Lumière Brothers, but '[b]y this time', Keiller noted, 'I think I had already decided to write a fictional narration to accompany the picture' (2013, 182-3).

But the image-making itself was not yet complete: Stonebridge Park is, as its opening titles make plain, 'A film in two parts', and the footage so far accrued became its second part. The other, composed of two takes totalling just over 8 minutes, was made in response to the discovery of another footbridge, this time over a nearby junction of the North Circular road. This other bridge's quadrilateral arrangement does not appear to be so instantly suggestive of the medium's 'linearity', and in this part of the film the camera traces a circumlocutory path around it, absorbing the surrounding landscape and the

'tin hulks' of the cars rushing below, before finally teetering over the railings towards the traffic in a highly unsettling manner. The structure's non-linearity necessitates this sequence's solitary cut, made to enable the camera to cross the road.[2]

Stonebridge Park (01:36)

After a muffled burst of Beethoven's third symphony, a first-person tale of theft, robbery and attempted murder by a disgruntled and recently dismissed employee at a second-hand car dealership gradually unfolds. The narrator's marginalised state of mind sits neatly with the location's anonymous peripherality, although an overtly philosophical, stoical register seems at first to be oddly bolted-on to both the mundane turpitude of his acts and the oppressive ordinariness of the setting. From the opening meditation on 'promiscuity' a self-conscious, essayistic poise (the ur-form of Keiller's later work) is gradually revealed.

> Promiscuity, in my case, results from an inability to recognise that it is not necessary to do all the things that I possibly could do. Such compulsive behaviour is not confined to acts that come about as a result of feelings of lust. Hate, greed, envy: all these passions can promote actions of a more or less consequential nature which may result in greater or lesser feelings of remorse. A thoughtless blow with a bottle; a casual theft; a hastily written fraudulent cheque; the impulsive purchase of a desirable and inexpensive second hand car; the subsequent disobeyance of a traffic signal, owing to its faulty brakes, and the resulting fatal injury to a pedestrian crossing the road. Any abandonment of oneself to sudden passionate desires can conventionally be reckoned to end in tears. (Keiller 1981)

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[2] The practical necessity of this is discussed in a 1981 Funding Application to the Arts Council of Great Britain, held at the British Film and Video Artists' Study Collection, Central St Martins College of Art, London.

Stonebridge Park (08:07)

As the tale continues, the measured flow of images keeps pace with meandering digressions in the narrative. Taken together, they generate a mesmeric effect, something which becomes particularly clear when the film is projected at anything approximating a full cinematic scale. As the camera works its way across the bridge, the space is soaked up as if by the vacuum cleaner that a passer-by carries (and to which the narrator alludes). In the process, we might think of the claim of Henri Lefebvre — whose The Production of Space was then seven years old but yet to be translated into English, that '[s]pace appears as a realm of objectivity, yet it exists in a social sense only for activity — for (and by virtue of) walking or riding on horseback, or travelling by car, boat, plane, or some other means' (1991, 191). Likewise, as the similarly disembodied voice of Keiller's film relays the narrative, the sense of interiority effected by the 'subjective camera', compounded by a lack of environmental sound, is reminiscent of the Surrealists' enthusiasm for 'film language as an analogue of oneiric thinking' (Hammond 2001, 9). The form establishes a rhythm conducive to acute introspection, just as this marginal public space becomes an empty vessel into which private anxieties are poured. The setting becomes a 'crime scene' even if its relation to where the actual murder took place is only indirect: as our narrator contemplates the inescapability of his own sense of guilt, 'written everywhere on the surfaces of things around me', we scrutinise the image, confronted by the clash of intense narrative subjectivity and grey, indifferent objectivity of the everyday surroundings. In fact, for the narrator, the environment becomes not only a crime scene but a parallel of that 'prison-world' which film, according to Walter Benjamin, was supposed to have 'burst asunder' (1969, 236), and all of this is mollified only by the assertion that '[e]very man, after all, lives in his own prison to a greater or lesser extent, whether he knows it or not' (Keiller 1981).

Stonebridge Park (13:54)

So locked is the narrator into his private reverie, that there is only occasionally a direct reference to what we can see. One of these comes at the point when the vacuum cleaner-bearing figure passes, and the voice refers to people 'finding strange objects on which to fasten their desire' (Keiller 1981). An allusion, perhaps, to Keiller's own diversion into exploring these footbridges, this moment produces a vertiginous effect by suddenly telescoping the temporalities of text and image into explicit unison: a point which is immediately followed by a renewed longing for a return to safe, voyeuristic distance. In tandem with the passing of a train in the upper part of the shot, the narrator mourns:

> Oh, how I longed to be on that train, in the safe world which exists only between railway stations, and demands only the passive acceptance of the view out of the window. Why was it that existence always implied that one should intervene in the world? Why could one not somehow contrive to remain a spectator of the picturesque bunglings of others?

At this point time, to him, seems to be 'slowing down, or more probably, I thought, my own frantic perception of it was speeding up' (Keiller 1981). And as the riveted sheets of the bridge move past in measured rhythm, we might be reminded of the individual frames of the film passing through the projector and cinema's most basic form in the photographic image, that which Laura Mulvey has called its 'secret, ... hidden past' (2005, 67). For us, however, there is a different 'hidden past': developing the metatextual suggestiveness of the vacuum-cleaner moment, the reference to the train can be readily inferred as an echo of Keiller's original encounter with his visual subjects, so that the narrator's yearning to undo his 'crime' becomes synonymous with a desire to unravel the creative acts of film-making and return to that original, indifferent glance from the train window — to be disentangled from the troublesome

project of constructing a film at all. The narrator's agonies thus become an ironic send-up of the aberrational act of making the film in the first place, drawing on the notion of art-making itself as a hubristic, possibly (in the light of contemporary politics) even an anti-social act. Any contemporary allusiveness is tempered, however, by a longer-reaching historical reference: in this moment, we might also find an echo of one of Keiller's favourite texts, The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), in which Robert Burton repeats Plutarch: 'Seek not after that which is hid; if the contents please thee, "and be for thy use, suppose the man in the moon, or whom thou wilt, to be the author"' (Burton 2001, 15).

The involvement of the train and the suggestion of subjectivity as a 'prison' also recalls the writings of Michel de Certeau, whose 1974 book The Practice of Everyday Life characterised rail travel as an 'incarceration-vacation' that 'generalises Dürer's Melancholia, a speculative experience of the world' (1988, 111). Meanwhile, the whole mise-en-scène seems also to draw on works like Giorgio de Chirico's 1914 painting Gare Montparnasse: Melancholy of Departure, in which, as the Situationist Ivan Chtcheglov wrote in 1953's 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' 'an empty space creates a richly filled time' (2006). Indeed, Keiller's 1981 'Poetic Experience' essay referred to the 'deeper sensation of place' cultivated by de Chirico (1982, 75). It also featured photographs by Eugene Atget, whose own desolate Parisian landscapes pictures — desolate, in fact, out of the necessity for long exposure times — were anecdotally compared with crime scenes. Walter Benjamin picked up on this in his 1931 'Little History of Photography' – 'It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit?' (1999, 527) With rather more restraint, Keiller wrote that Atget's photos 'captured, in the most modest way (this is surely their strength), the sense that anything could happen' (1982, 78), but his film testifies to the validity of Benjamin's interpretation.

Stonebridge Park (18:12)

When the camera finally reaches the view of Wembley Stadium, the narrator experiences a moment of resolution correspondent with the neat 'framing' of the stadium by the bridge's walls, and the subsequent escape from that frame as these walls slip out of view. At this moment, visual and narrative temporalities conclusively coincide, and the effect of resolution is reinforced by the arrival of a satisfying landscape, complete with football players in the foreground and a refreshingly extensive perspective.

> And then it hit me! A revelation. Though it was perhaps less a revelation than a realisation that at last the panic had subsided. The boys who passed noticed my elation. I have never been a believer but I am bound to say that I felt it as a message from God. I would escape. My disconcerted ambitions were finally united to this end. I knew what I had to do. I was absolved. I gazed transfixed at the view, secure in the knowledge that I would now transcend the iron grip of history. (Keiller 1981)

At this moment we might finally acknowledge the unassuming footbridges as elaborate visual puns on the 'bridge between imagination and reality' which the Belgian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem insisted 'must be built' in his book The Revolution of Everyday Life (1967, in Gray 1974, 111). It seems highly likely that Keiller should have been thinking of this kind of ironical pun, since his narrative, complete with its mock-serious intertitles like 'SOME TIME LATER', veers constantly towards bathos: as Stonebridge Park comes to a close, the narrator's agonies turn out to have been largely unwarranted; his crime 'perfect', in the sense that, like the act of film-making, it left no trace of itself.[3]

> Soon after my arrival I made enquiries in London, and it turned out that my employer's wife had recovered consciousness unhurt, and that not an hour after my dismissal from the garage, the bank had installed a receiver. My employer had been subsequently declared bankrupt, and as the money I had taken was the result of his having defrauded his own company, he never reported the theft. (Keiller 1981)

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Keiller's second film, *Norwood*, takes up the same narrative as *Stonebridge Park*, although in the space between the two films the narrator has died, and speaks in the second mostly not from Norwood at all, but 'quite another plane'. Subtitled austerely 'an idyll', the film recounts the narrator's murder and subsequent return to physical form, and in it Keiller hoped to capture 'the atmosphere of unemployed reverie peculiar to certain parts of South London on sunny days'.[4]

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[3] c.f. Baudrillard (1996).

Whilst still alive, our narrator had returned to London and built up a substantial property portfolio, his financial assets having been put to increase in the 'criminal underworld' of Nice, France. After spending a long (latterly realised as 'unnecessary') time there, 'I packed up and came back to London, settling in Norwood, after the example of the painter Camille Pissarro, who had done so 111 years before' (Keiller 1983).

Though inspired by Pissarro, he is keen to counter the suspicion that 'I had any idea of a new life as an artist': 'I came not to paint the streets of Norwood, but to buy them, for I have never felt that a picture is really any substitute for the real thing'. Throwing himself with gusto into the London property market, he is ultimately murdered by an 'unscrupulous' contractor, during the failed redevelopment of a triangular cul-de-sac called Bloom Grove (a real place, about 100 yards north of West Norwood station). The contractor turns out to be the brother of the former employer 'whose stolen money had become the foundation of my wealth. This unwitting benefactor was my murderer's brother – my death was his revenge'.

Bloom Grove, in Norwood (12:09)

As with *Stonebridge Park*, the film does not actually show us these things, but recounts them whilst showing the sites on which they supposedly took place, as if on a location scout, although in this case the narrator's imminent position as the camera itself, 'haunting' the areas in which he has formerly lived, is implicit. In such a state, 'I tried to concentrate on the present. I was beyond death, but not yet resident in eternity. A fragile condition, to be sure, and the one in which I steeled myself to face oblivion'. The narrator's comment that 'I have moved to quite another plane, but Norwood persists', apart from being a send-up of the banality of Norwood as a place, might also be taken as *Norwood* the film,

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[4] Keiller, July 1981 application to the Arts Council, held at the British Film and Video Artists' Study Collection.

which, too, stubbornly persists and endures. This combines with the way in which *Norwood's* anonymity, its spatial peripherality, acts as an analogue of the narrator's ambiguous state of existence, on the threshold of physical form.

Structurally more complex than *Stonebridge Park*, the film's internal rhythm of recurrence and return to already-visited places is established early on by the structure of Handel's air, *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth* (from his 1741 oratorio *Messiah*) where the organ follows the vocal melody, always a short distance behind, as if tracing its steps. Following its use here, in the film's preamble, the same music recurs at the point in the narrative immediately after the narrator relates his own death-by-hammer. At the point of his reincarnation – after realising the true identity of his murderer – we witness an abrupt moment of formal self-reflection: 'There, I am observed!', declares the narrator, accompanied by an incursion of the camera's lens into the visible frame. *Stonebridge Park* had made the spectator self-aware by its oblique references to a voyeuristic visual pleasure separated from any need to 'intervene', and the tension between this experience and the narrator's subjectivity. Here, the process is embellished with the apparatus of film-making, its artifice, suddenly revealed to the audience.

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A contemporary review of *Stonebridge Park* noted the 'inevitable re-creation of a transformed world which comes into existence at the moment of re-counting' (Danino 2003, 105), whilst another of *Norwood* stressed a 'surrealism […] where the stress is on the real' (O'Pray 1984, 322-3). Their images depicting a townscape that, like Atget's Paris, 'looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant', Keiller's cinematography perpetuates that proto-Surrealist 'estrangement between man and his surroundings' that Walter Benjamin wrote about in his discussion of 'aura' — a modernist defamiliarisation of space which sets the scene for its radical rediscovery (1999, 519). The perambulations of the camera-consciousness certainly resemble the Situationist *dérive*, 'with its flow of acts, its gestures, its strolls, and its encounters', whilst also drawing on the Surrealists' notion of film-language approximating to the forms of dream-language, of man being 'soluble in his thought', and the preoccupation with a 'haunted' sense of self that is radiated by texts such as André Breton's classic *Nadja* (1928), also presented in a reportage form.

What we are left with is the figuration of space as crime scene: but by this is not meant solely the putative crimes of the films' narratives. Rather, these offences need to be read as analogues for the idea of film-making itself as a kind of unwonted transgression, a superfluous act of dubious validity, fuelled by an extreme melancholic diffidence on their maker's part, and a correspondently mordant humour centred on perpetual, bathetic clashes between triviality and high seriousness. It is from this basis that Keiller's first two films experiment

with a transformation of space that attempts to smudge the border between the fictional and the real. In absorbing their drama into 'camera-I', they toy with the insertion of fictional pasts into a cinematic document that, like photography, is 'at once reality in a past state' or, in other words, 'an hallucination that is also a fact' (Barthes 2000, 82). These are 'imagined' events and experiences which are also real, and this liminality corresponds with the narrator's own marginalised, even spectral, state. Keiller's first two films may have been overshadowed by attention paid to his later work, but in them we find the clear lineaments of his attempt at a depiction of space that also reaches towards transforming it, and it is in this respect that *Stonebridge Park* and *Norwood* vault from the peripheral to the critical.

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