

Credits

London

Director

Patrick Keiller

Producer

Keith Griffiths

Script

Patrick Keiller

Camera

Patrick Keiller

Assistant Director

Julie Norris

Editor

Larry Sider

Narrator

Paul Scofield

Production Companies

A Koninck/BFI production
in association with Channel 4
Television

UK | 1994 | colour | 82 minutes |
Ratio 1.33:1

Robinson in Space

Director

Patrick Keiller

Producer

Keith Griffiths

Associate Producer

Julie Norris

Script

Patrick Keiller

Camera

Patrick Keiller

Assistant Camera

Jason Hocking

Editor

Larry Sider

Narrator

Paul Scofield

Production Companies

A Koninck production for
BBC Films in association with
the British Film Institute

UK | 1997 | colour | 78 minutes |
Ratio 1.33:1

London and Robinson in Space

Patrick Keiller

The Secret City

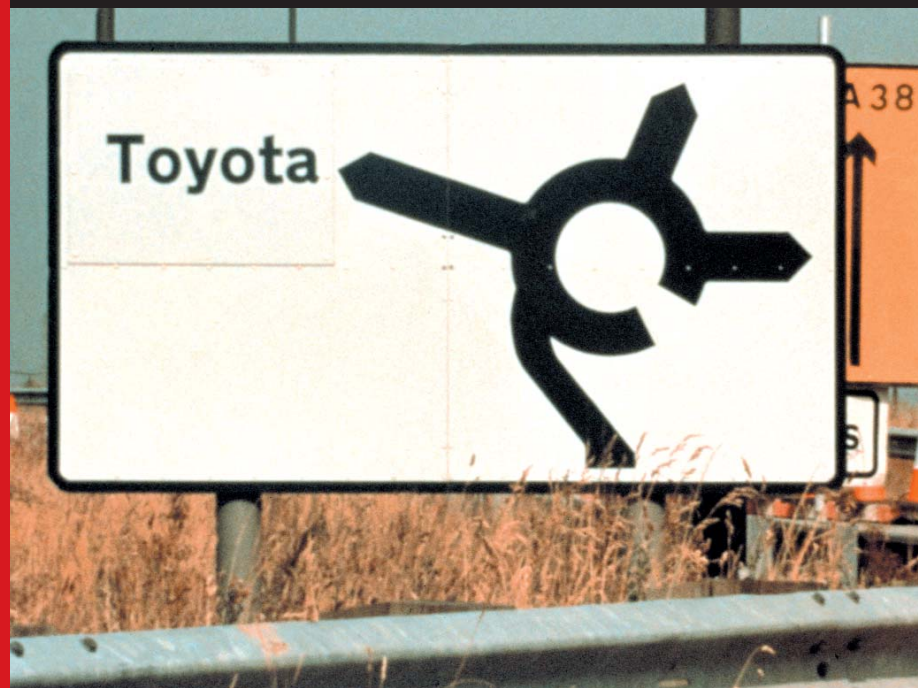
by Mike Hodges

London: Necropolis of fretful ghosts

by Iain Sinclair

A conversation between

Patrick Wright and Patrick Keiller





The Secret City

by Mike Hodges

There are two moments in Patrick Keiller's **London** I'll always remember. One made me explode with laughter; the other with pain. The first – at the Trooping of the Colour – was the sight of a sergeant major swivelling a giant pair of wooden dividers, meticulously measuring the spaces between the guardsmen lining the route. The obsessional madness of this moment might have been crafted by Lewis Carroll. The second – outside a Polling Station on the day of the General Election – was the sight of a willowy blonde exiting with two male companions. They exude privilege and power, and seem to already know a Tory landslide is in the bag. They could be outside their club in Pall Mall as they pause on the steps and laugh! That hurt.

I hasten to add that this film mosaic is eighty-four minutes of memorable moments. Why do I resist calling them scenes? Concorde rising like a heron over a row of miserable houses close to Heathrow; the big boots of Bomber Harris as his statue is unveiled; the row of TV news-gatherers outside the Commons at night interviewing a row of politicians – each in their own pool of artificial light. I'm told all these moments were filmed without sound; yet you can hear the sergeant barking into *that* ear under the bearskin, and the rhetoric being pumped into our homes via *those* cameras. One function this film fulfils is to remind us of the numerous wounds inflicted on London over the past two decades. As it jolted my memory, it made me realise how our governors have learnt that waffle is a secret toxic agent. If pumped out in sufficient quantity, it will eventually clog the minds of the electorate. They've learnt that, in the avalanche of news, their own senseless vindictiveness and destructiveness are soon forgotten. It's sad that we don't have the same built-in facility as a computer to AUTOSAVE – that regular moment when the machine decides to stop and quietly digest what it's been fed. If we did likewise, perhaps we wouldn't have heard that laughter on the steps of the Polling Station.

Patrick Keiller's ability to be in the right place at the right moment is comparable to that of Cartier-Bresson. His eye is impeccable – and witty. A sign for the Magritte Exhibition pops up while we're contemplating the vast sums of our money spent tunnelling under the Thames to provide an umbilical cord between the MI5 building with that of MI6. Can anything be more surreal than that? Later, a decaying shop housing a spiritualist appears as we're being told about Conan Doyle's use of Vauxhall in his fiction – a fact, but also a sly reference to his interest in spiritualism. While Mr. Keiller weaves his film with multiple strands from the past, he always brings it back to the present – to a city politically, economically and culturally ill.

It's a work difficult to capture on paper, let alone do it justice. That's because it's a rare commodity – a film revelling in images and sounds, complex, intelligent, free of overpaid stars and a formulaic script. The film is full of ideas and yet hugely entertaining. Instead of names on the marquee, it has two great unseen characters that glue the pieces into a satisfying whole.

It's the creation of Robinson and the unnamed Narrator that makes Patrick Keiller's conceit work so brilliantly. While the Narrator, of course, enjoys a material presence – the voice of Paul Scofield – Robinson is conjured up from words and what he – they – we – are observing. But what manner of man must Robinson be to allow Mr. Keiller the canvas he needs? Here, we witness a spark of inspired inventiveness. He makes him – I'm sure Robinson would approve of the term – a queer. We're even told that he and the Narrator once had "an uneasy bickering sexual relationship". It's worth remembering that queers of Robinson's age know what it's like to be pariahs – outsiders – subversives. His perception of London as a city of secrecy – that commodity much loved by those politicians and financiers with their hand on its windpipe – proves to be more acute than most. But not without another coup by Mr. Keiller – the character and casting of the Narrator.

The Narrator is a ship's photographer. We see the luxury liner on which he has arrived being towed helplessly by a small feisty tug towards Tower Bridge. The liner is full of rich passengers he must have been observing while his old friend Robinson, a part-time teacher, has been obsessively exploring the four corners of London seeking to understand its 'problem'. The Narrator has been away – cruising – for seven years. His diagnosis of the decline may be even more acute. He, too, doesn't disappoint. After all he does have the voice of Paul Scofield – himself something of a recluse who now and then has to come out into the spotlight. No wonder he sounds as though he understands and respects Robinson.

I often find myself – usually from the top of a number 23 bus – fantasising about the fate of those shoals of foreign visitors drifting aimlessly along Oxford Street – past the exchange bureaux, shoddy shops and fast food restaurants – like lost souls who can't quite believe they've ended up in Hell. Now I have a new dream: that some of them – possibly after visiting Madame Tussaud or the Rock Circus – may drift in to see Patrick Keiller's **London** thinking it another tourist attraction, or a way of avoiding the horrors of our capital city's transport system. Luckily for them the film's bigger and more profound than its title implies. But that's what you'd expect from Robinson even if – unlike Edward G – you never clap eyes on him. He happens to be the best guide in town.

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London: Necropolis of fretful ghosts

by Iain Sinclair

I only remember Robinson... the Doctor micturating in the Seine at dawn... Myself, I'm only an ex-sailor. I have no politics, I don't even vote. Jack Kerouac, *Céline*.

Patrick Keiller's **London** is not your London, not the ersatz moon base ceded to you by the image merchandisers, not cinema as we have come to know it. His locations are pedestrian. Literally so. The metropolis, its shrines and suburbs, rivulets, parks, ceremonies and literary mementos are investigated by pilgrims bearing a second-hand Eclair Cameflex, that most nostalgic of instruments. Keiller's concentration is so steady, we sweat for it: the steadiness of the outpatient, the 'care in the community' psycho outstaring rush-hour headlights. The film is a quiet provocation – provoking reverie, honouring accidental survivals (like the London Stone) which we have never quite got around to visiting. Postcards so familiar we can choose to ignore their origins. His journal is as honest in its fictions as Defoe's, conjuring a voice out of silence, an interior monologue, ironic but insistent – a nail of clear water boring into the brain. We are guided backwards and forwards across the sacred diagonals of a city we have ceased to deserve. The film is the only evidence of its existence.

The documentary in its present debased form (not a journey of discovery, but the justification of a script-approved argument) is franchise fodder, a trade-off between consenting production companies: television. "Steam on the glass," as East London novelist Emanuel Litvinoff describes it. *Laissez-faire* accumulations of meaningless evidence or the personality-led essay. Print journalism with jump-cuts. The world is explained (censored) as it is revealed, with language reduced to the function of cement – holding together disparate elements. Keiller's method, in which text and picture are independent, posthumously 'married' in the cutting room, is therefore a notable curiosity.

London has the meandering form of an epistolary novel, a fabulation backed by congeries of fact. The narrator, returning from a seven-year exile, takes a leisurely inventory of the city's consciousness, makes expeditions, bears witness to public events, the aftermath of violent political acts, fantasies of escape.

Paul Scofield, that most pared-down, Xanaxed of Lears, is the whisperer, the voice in the head, the syrup keeping authorial distemper in check. He is describing an absence, a necropolis of fretful ghosts, a labyrinth of quotations: not so much the ruin of a great city as the surgical removal of its soul. The casting of Scofield signals a weary

integrity; it is so clear that he is *not* the narrator. It's a performance – tired, slightly camp, detached. (The barber, out of the stage version of *Staircase*, a keeper of secrets, dispenser of healing unguents.) The man is too old for the adventures he is claiming, too careful; he uses English with such absurdist precision – a second language. "Bee-zaar," he says. And bizarre it is. Anecdotes rinsed, then swallowed.

"A journey to the end of the world." That's how it begins, reversing expectations. An immediate invocation of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the unacknowledged laureate of last-gasp Britain, present but rarely named, the blitz-culture Betjeman in a beret. *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. ("The greatest French movie ever made." Jack Kerouac. On the book.)

Keiller's narrator, a ship's photographer, is coming back to spend time with his reclusive, and possibly dying, former lover, Robinson, who is marooned (Crusoed) in a solidly built redbrick hulk in Vauxhall. ("His income is small, but he saves most of it.") Robinson, of course, is never seen; we take him on trust – Harry Lime without the shadow. He's a rumour corrupting complacency, a virus. The cruise liner, a creamy berg of threat (cabins: £4,000 per week), completes its stately progress through Tower Bridge and into the archives of London cinema.

The incoming vessel (no visible crew) is always a threat (Dracula at Whitby), while the downriver cruiser (Bob Hoskins in **The Long Good Friday**) is merely boastful and self-deluding. He's there to show off the Olympia & York skyline. No way out. Tower Bridge, like so much of London, is now a museum of itself, held together by frequent coats of paint. You buy a ticket to watch waxworks operate the gleaming Victorian machinery. The bridge is also the most convenient of establishing shots – anything beyond it is wasteland, unworthy of comment. It opens Jules Dassin's **Night and the City** [available from *bfi* Video]. It salutes Hitchcock's return from exile in **Frenzy** – one of the last films to draw on the rich midden of London sub-culture fiction, the swift narratives of lives at once on the margin and at the centre – based on Arthur La Bern's novel *Goodbye Piccadilly, Farewell Leicester Square*.

Perhaps the optioning of Alexander Baron's *The Lowlife* as a vehicle for Harry H Corbett (never made) was the end of it, this flirtation between a subversive (cheap to buy) literature and the chew 'em up/spit 'em out world of mainstream cinema. Or perhaps the Roeg/Cammell **Performance** was the final flare, the defiant burnout: an original screenplay using authentically subterranean material transmitted by David Litvinoff, a novelist manqué. Litvinoff wrote nothing, he made tapes. His life was the book, the forerunner of an age of ghosted gangland memoirs.

Hitchcock struck an eminently practical attitude towards all this. "I don't read novels, or any fiction. I would say that most of my reading consists of contemporary biographies and books on travel," he informed Truffaut. Jack Trevor Story, the backbone of the Sexton Blake Library, never recovered from Hitchcock's transfer of his first book, *The Trouble with Harry*, from its original scrubby heathland to autumnal Vermont. The paltry sum for which he let the property go remained a grievance to the end. But when producers grew bored with proletarian fables, publishers lost their nerve and simply airbrushed certain areas from the map. (The North, wherever that is, was still OK. Exotic, raw. Cab the proofs around to Woodfall. But London? Forget it.) Emanuel Litvinoff (David's half-brother) only managed to bring out his Whitechapel sketch *Journey through a Small Planet* by agreeing to follow it with a "serious" East European trilogy.

Tower Bridge: Hitchcock's camera swoops through the span and along the river in a conspicuous display of budget. (A prophetic summary of the *News at Ten* credit sequence?) Keiller's Cameflex, asserting the modesty of its status, never moves, moves only *between* shots – the unrecorded trek to the next set-up. The long-focus stare is mesmeric,



healing, a charm against frenzy (both the culture of speed and Hitchcock's malign virtuosity). Movement becomes a function of voice, voice an instrument. It's a mode utterly estranged from industrial cinema, with its basis in montage: Hitchcock's time-travel is revealed as nostalgia for the London of the silk-tie strangler.

Frenzy, exploiting the last rites of Covent Garden as a working market, is infected by a Europhobic terror of alien cuisines, trays of unwashed immigrant fruit. The leather elbow patches of La Bern's ex-bomber pilot – a tribute to his faded gentility – once filmed become a badge of raffish style, the retro fashion of Camden Lock. Anna Massey, fleeing from the career-threatening crisis of Michael Powell's **Peeping Tom**, distraught, nibbled to her essence like a Giacometti maquette, is cast perversely against type as a perky barmaid, a one-night-stand victim.

The silence of things that can no longer be said, locations stripped of their resonance. ("I had lunch with Hitch in his office." Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies*. "Silent movies are a dead duck, Micky.") The silence of Powell's film within a film, the diary, the snuff movie shot by the cameraman with the bayonet tripod. London as a labyrinth, a closed system.

Keiller perceptively defines this silence, the absence of debate, as a conspiracy of the suburbs, an attack on metropolitan life and all its amenities by small-minded provincials, careerists distrustful of the liberties of the café-bar, the aimlessness of the *flâneur*. He quotes Alexander Herzen, his "motivating source" who saw London life as a discipline of solitude. ("One who knows how to live alone has nothing to fear.") The city offers itself up to poets and exiles, men of silent watchfulness, visionaries (Rimbaud and Verlaine) wandering through the docks, opium smokers, dreamers, dowsers of invisible energy patterns. A dystopia run by uniformed enforcers, like the Victorian prisons, like Pentonville, on *The Silent System*. The soul of the place opposes cinema, the light. Its bureaucratic weather is against it. Skies like a hangman's hood. The scuttling of wife-killers in starched collars, eyes in the dirt. Backstreet chemists doling out paraquat.

Not since the Sixties has government demonstrated any practical interest in film, beyond inviting Michael Caine around for a sniffer. And, even in the days when the Social Democrats were falling for the glamour of photo opportunities, the memorable images were being captured by foreigners, visitors with work permits: Losey, Polanski, Skolimowski (Munich for London), Antonioni. It took an Italian to track down the mysteries of Maryon Park in Charlton, a perfectly ambiguous site for the crime discovered by the photographer in **Blow-up**. A site which filmmaker Christopher Petit (Polaroid in hand?) visited, as he recounts in an essay on Julian Maclaren-Ross, in an act of homage. The London he was beginning

to imagine. and which he later described in his novel *Robinson* and his television films, was a geography of disconnected locations.

Any future urban cinema, wanting to learn from Keiller and Petit, should become a cinema of vagrancy. There's no longer time for the laying of tracks, the crane, the cherry-picker: obsolescent industrial terminology. The truth of a city, divided against itself, can only be revealed, so Keiller believes, through a series of obscure pilgrimages, days spent crawling out on to the rim of things. The transcendent surrealism of airport perimeter roads, warehouses and reservoirs. J G Ballard. Shepperton.

London cinema in its pomp was in any case a creature of the suburbs – that's where the studios were. That's where a phantom metropolis could be built, civic dignity reduced to plasterboard. (Canary Wharf is the contemporary version.)

Monsters of paranoia, menageries of blood beasts – Fu Manchu, Jack the Ripper, Jekyll and Hyde – stalked from these sheds like a regiment of escaping battery hens. A second London, the floating capital of Swedenborg's visions, was laid out. A monochrome principality with no sky. A day-for-night mirror world where sweet tea was served in cups the size of slopping-out buckets. A busy thoroughfare of dripping raincoats, greasy trilbies, paste teeth. A polis devised for the convenience of voyeurs – where speech is meticulously coded, and the social classes divided by the strictest of faultlines. Even the clippies articulate like debutantes on laughing gas. Pocket watches can be checked against the regular nine o'clock toppings.

The city of cinema, born of low-life fiction, is a place of flight. It is defined by the distance a man can run in trying to escape from it. Arthur Woods' **They Drive by Night** (based on a novel by the admirably intransigent James Curtis) is a paradigm of the genre. Sniffing Emyln Williams, looking like an unfixed mutation somewhere between Charlie Chaplin and Nigel Lawson, is the innocent on the run, determined to prove that the countryside is never more than a few fake tussocks, a clapboard trucker's shack and perpetual rain.

The city as a self-cannibalising system. Pursuit: elegant tracking shots into clubs (linking interior and exterior), wrestling matches, the flats of chorus girls. Hatchet alleyways like lesions in the brain. Gerald Kersh's *Night and the City* is the apotheosis of this mode (both book and film). ("He saw London as a kind of Inferno – a series of concentric areas with Piccadilly as the ultimate centre.") Jules Dassin's translation of Kersh's novel into spatial terms is dynamic and exemplary, mixing

psychologically perceptive set design with an extraordinarily vivid account of the geography of post-war London: the open city of docks, rubble mounds, bridges.

Pursuit summons once again the figure of the Shroudy Stranger, the genealogy of Céline's Robinson, who slides, covertly, from the American poet Weldon Kees (and his parasite, Simon Armitage), through Burroughs and Kerouac, to Patrick Keiller, Jonathan Meades (*Pompey*), and Christopher Petit. Petit's assumption of *Robinson* (the novel) is an unmatched (and largely unnoticed) act of cinematic and literary retrieval: the junction point where the lost fiction engages with the new cinema. (On television, Petit's film **London Labyrinth** conceives of a city of memory shards, an accumulation from theatrical and documentary sources. Pathological modernism: the art of the dustbin, the skip thief.) *Robinson* exploits and celebrates the Soho of Maclaren-Ross, Mark Benney, Kersh. Then allows it to be colonised by Orson Welles (actor as much as director, gourmand most of all) and Fassbinder (claustrophobia, misogyny, camera working close as a rectal thermometer).



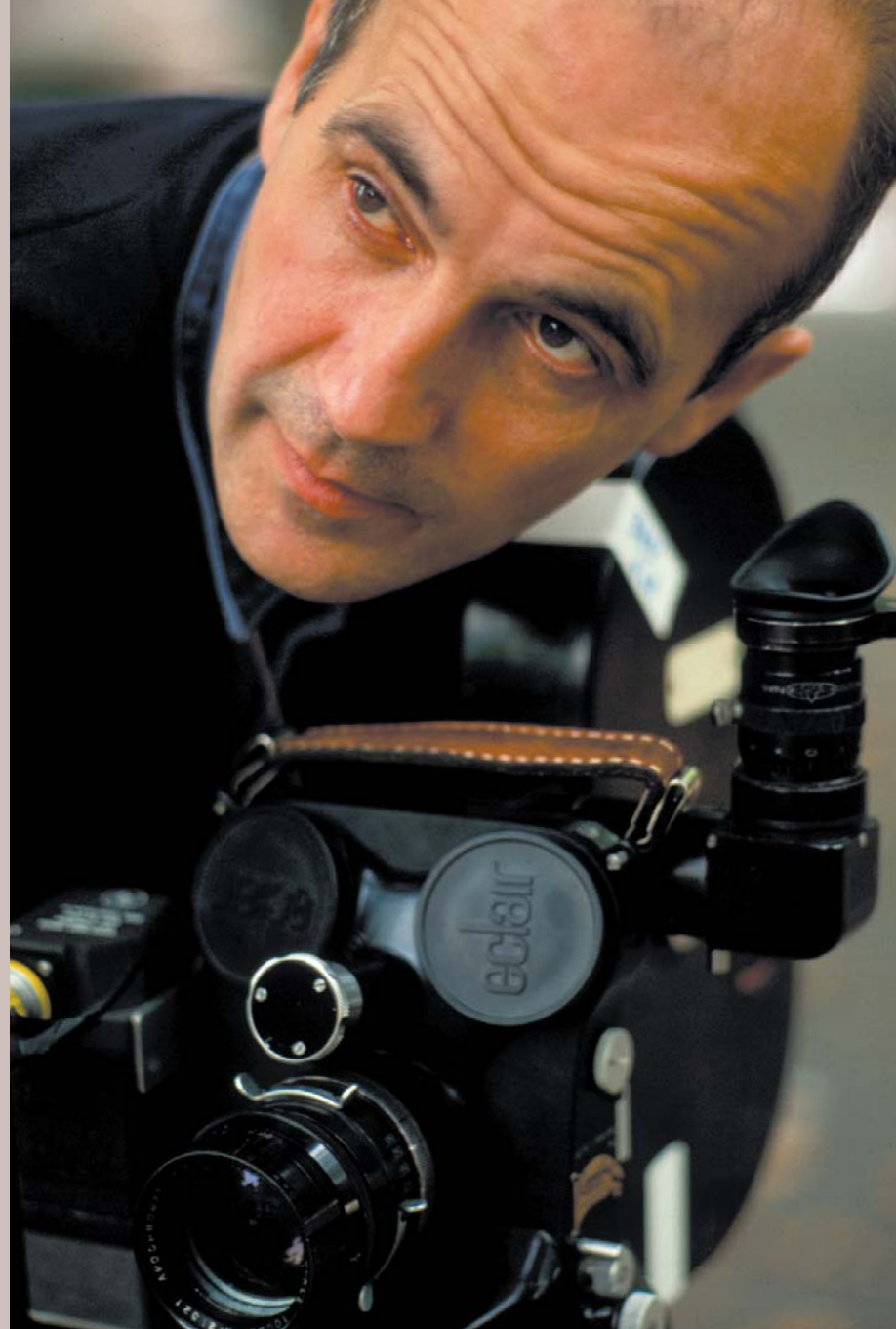
Petit's astute cultural truffling doesn't stop there. He pays his respects in *Robinson* to the legendary habitué of the Coach and Horses, Robin Cook. ("Robin behaved badly before anyone else did." Jonathan Meades.) Cook, between wives in the South of France, one career as a novelist nuked, decided to give it another shot, reinventing the London of the Edgar Wallace films and dosing it with Krafft-Ebing. His name had been pinched in his absence by an airport shelfspoiler, so he became Derek Raymond. His *Factory* novels – psychopaths on the loose in millennial weather – were acclaimed as the ultimate mapping of the posthumous dream city. A geography much closer to Céline's *Guignol's Band* than to the *London A-Z*. They were filmed, naturally. In France.

Where Cook and Petit, romantics, are drawn inwards to the heart of the labyrinth, Keiller resolutely explores the banks of the River Brent. Had he been a poet, he confesses, Brent Cross shopping centre would have been his inspiration. At last the camera *moves*, travelling upwards on an escalator, gazing on plashy fountains, a crowd numbed by the muzak of the spheres. Keiller's narrator speaks of noticing a "small intense man" reading Walter Benjamin, for all the world like a card-carrying Cambridge poet. The instant of sympathy is illusory. The fetch vanishes into Willesden. Could it have been Petit himself? Or Dennis Nilsen?

Beyond the vast hangars of consumerism, the city gives up. Keiller can wait, crouching in fields, watching the calligraphy of wind on water. He has already told us so much. But he can never tell it all. The multitude of solitary lives lived within the circuits of the crowd. There is more history than any one man can bear. So the filmmakers pass through Mortlake without noticing the estate of Dr John Dee (his Angel Magick): the point of departure for Derek Jarman's punk deconstruction **Jubilee**.

Keiller knows that London is finally an absence, a congregation of provincials. Having no culture of the centre, that is what we have become. Eliot's sleepwalkers commuting to a city of silence, a marketing device, the excuse for an anthology from some disgraced politician. The only cinema appropriate to this London is the cinema of surveillance. (Petit again. Eleven minutes on *The Late Show*.) Unedited, mute, riverine; menacing in its boredom. Diaries kept by machines. The home movies of multi-storey car parks. Be noticed and you're dead. A cinema that requires no audience.

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A conversation between Patrick Wright and Patrick Keiller

PW: *Robinson in Space* came out in early 1997, but you had been working on it for several years before that. Where did it all begin?

PK: The first public screenings of **London** [the first 'Robinson' film] were at the Berlin Film Festival in February 1994. I arrived in Berlin with two paragraphs outlining a sequel which was to be some kind of critique of English 'gentlemanly' capitalism. **London** was well received in Berlin, and I was offered a residency there the following year, so we structured the project to be made partly in the south of England and partly in Berlin, with visits to Prague and other places. It was supposed to be a comparison between the look of the south of England and that of landscapes where design and manufacturing had been and still were part of the culture.

PW: So you were going to use Middle Europe as a counterpoint?

PK: Yes, I'm interested in the link between subjectivities like that of Surrealism, which transform experience of what already exists, and the 'activities' of designers, architects and manufacturers, who produce *new things*. **London** was a project which aimed to change experience of its subject, and so is **Robinson in Space**, but in **Robinson in Space** the subject is production – the production of *new space* and the production of artefacts. England is interesting because it is a society, a culture, which appears to be largely uninterested in producing its own artefacts, which is not the case in, say, Germany – not yet anyway – and was not the case here when I was a child.

PW: Can you explain how *Robinson in Space* relates to *London*?

PK: Well, **London** claims to be a document of the research of someone called Robinson and its reception suggested another film in which Robinson researched something else, something that wasn't London. In **London**, Robinson predicts that he will lose his job, and in the synopsis I took to Berlin I wrote that, as a result of this: 'He leaves London, becoming an itinerant student of the English landscape, its economy and the sexuality of its inhabitants. He travels to the sites mentioned in the continual revelations about arms trading – little known ports, run-down factories in back streets in the West Midlands. He reads Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*. He wishes to become a spy, but is not sure whom to approach.'



Also, towards the end of **London** there is a line: 'the true identity of London is in its absence', to which the viewer might reply: 'Absence of what?' London began and grew as a port city; its port activity is now mostly absent, but it continues elsewhere. **Robinson in Space** was an attempt to locate some of the economic activity that no longer takes place in cities.

As well as the England-Berlin project there was another version, a plan B – in the end the version that appealed more to the BBC – which was to do a tour of England in the manner of Defoe, but in each case the motive was to explore a perception of the southern English economy – a lot of well-off people living in a suburban architecture driving imported cars to John Lewis to buy consumer electronics and so on that have been made somewhere else and you don't know where it is... though of course it might be Wales, but we don't know that yet.

PW: But Wales is a kind of Japan...

PK: Yes ... I already had an inkling that my perception of the UK's economy was completely out of date. It was an Eighties' perception.

PW: So you were investigating what, a few years previously, would have seemed a characteristically 'Thatcherite' reality?

PK: Yes. At about this time there was a piece in the *Financial Times* by James Morgan, who is or was the BBC World Service's economics correspondent. He began with a report in *The Spectator* of a meeting of a local Tory party association where 'when a man stood up to announce he would be standing as an anti-federalist, against a Tory candidate, in June's Euro-elections, the ovation from his fellow Conservatives verged on the hysterical'. Morgan identified this meeting as having taken place 'just outside Ewell, Surrey, [the landscape that Robinson wishes had been destroyed by H G Wells' Martians, or suspects of having been subjected to an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*] in the function room of Ye Olde Cocke House Inne, which stands between the Wok-on-By Chinese restaurant and a kitchenware shop call Hôte Cuisine. There was a delicious meal (breaded scampi on a bed of lettuce 'garnished with all the trimmings'). Morgan went on to quote Fernando Vallespin, in *El Pais*, identifying 'a connection which almost always exists between repressive societies and liberal states'. He continued: '...a liberal state has to impose artificial rules to replace the glue that exists in traditional systems. These rules are broken easily without society falling to bits. Britain is no more a traditional society than Ye Olde Cocke House Inne is a traditional inn.'

There is a certain English attitude which sees no inconsistency between driving a BMW and being anti-German. I wanted to explore the landscape that is the result of this, in the context of a widespread belief that the UK has lost most of its manufacturing industry and that this is a matter for regret because somehow an identity has gone with it, and because manufacturing industry is good for the community. This was a set of beliefs one encountered especially among people of my generation, especially in the Eighties. Coming from the north, with very distant memories of the 1950s, I imagined I might have grown up in a town where railway locomotives were regularly carried through the middle of town on the way from workshops to the docks – though I'm sure I never saw this except in photographs. As far as one could gather, Thatcher hated manufacturing – it was to be got rid of. We were all to live on 'financial services', to make our livings selling life insurance to one another. Now, of course that doesn't work – it wouldn't work anywhere. 'Financial services' don't bring in enough export earnings, so there's nothing to pay for the BMWs. So there's a big question – if everything in the shops is imported, and everybody works in mostly non-exporting service industries, how is this sustainable? It doesn't look nice, but probably that doesn't

matter – one gets used to it, it's all right, it's heterogeneous. England probably hasn't looked 'authentic' since the agricultural workforce was 'downsized' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – this is why we have so little indigenous cuisine and so on; in the end one questions this kind of authenticity, but there remain the questions of how the UK pays for its imports, where they come from and how they get here.

PW: And in that same floating world, financial concentration was ensuring that all the high streets in the country were converging: the same shops and street furniture everywhere, so that the very idea of a distinct place was becoming abstract, 'heritage' as the twin of industrial dereliction.

PK: In 1993 I'd gone to live in Oxford. When we arrived the greater part of the car factory in Cowley was being demolished. What was left was producing two Honda-based Rover models and a few Montegos for export. Then in January 1994 British Aerospace sold Rover (as it was by then called) to BMW, and developed the cleared site as a business park. It turned out that Bernd Pischetsrieder, the BMW chairman, was the great-nephew of Alec Issigonis.

PW: Issigonis being a great designer...

PK: Issigonis redesigned the car in the Sixties, and offered BMC the possibility of being first in a world market.

PW: ...who comes out of Turkey and conceives the Morris Minor.

PK: Yes, during the war.

PW: And then he designs the Mini, and they throw it away.

PK: He designed the Morris Oxford (which survives in India as the Ambassador), the Morris Minor, the Mini and the 1100, which in the early Sixties was the biggest selling British car and was designed as a 'world car', 15 years before the VW Golf. It's the same concept, but BMC threw away the initiative ... either because they were provincial conservatives and wanted to go on selling Austin Cambridges to men in trilby hats or because the car industry was a casualty of the UK's failure to join the EU in the Sixties, which is a much more plausible explanation. Issigonis's space-economy concept worked best for medium-sized and small cars, which need big markets to be profitable. With big cars the engineering tends to be more conservative – Mercedes and BMWs still have rear wheel drive. Technological innovation didn't sell at the top end of the market and without international sales the

bottom end of the market didn't work. As a result of that – well, either that or innate conservatism – the company brought in people from Ford and other non-automotive concerns who tried to make a car to compete with the Ford Cortina. The result was the Morris Marina, which was a failure.

PW: Yes, and then the Metro...

PK: Then the Allegro, which was a botched development of the 1100, and then the Metro, Maestro and Montego.

PW: With the Metro you had to get on your knees to put petrol in the tank, it was a depression car.

PK: There is a market for Montegos though, interestingly Blair...

PW: He pulled into Downing Street in one...

PK: In a Montego estate car ...

PW: With a hub cap missing ...

PK: It's a cheap seven-seat estate car, a doctor's car.



PW: I thought it was a car for retired people.

PK: No, it's for people with four kids, it's cheaper than a Peugeot, it's cheaper than a Volvo – difficult to sell I'm told, but where I live they're quite common. They're probably all right, robust cars. They sent them to Siberia.

PW: So *Robinson in Space* is about that rather shapeless, chaotic, constantly transforming reality that emerged in the Home Counties in the Eighties.

PK: There were these questions: how does the UK pay for its imports? Does it still have an manufacturing sector that exports and if so, what is it? Where do all the *visible* imported artefacts come from, and why don't we see them until they are in the shop window? When I was a child I used to see truckloads of 'Prestcold' fridges on the road, but now none of this is visible until it arrives in the shops. How does it get there? Where does it come ashore? Is it at Felixstowe, Southampton? Where are the UK's ports? Where are the spatial locations of import and export?

Robinson had moved to Reading, which is a very interesting place; there have been an unusually large number of television documentary series made about Reading, *The Family* was made in Reading, and the series about the Thames Valley Police. It also has a good art school, which has a respectability that Robinson might try to attach himself to.

PW: And it's also got that mixture you describe as characteristic of present-day England: extreme dilapidation plus conspicuous wealth, a telling combination.

PK: It's the fastest-growing region in the country, Berkshire has the fastest-growing population...

PW: But how does wealth coincide with ruin, in this theory? In a town like Reading – actually you pick this up throughout the film – you've got dereliction and also this sense of emergent prosperity.

PK: I think there's a distinction between *new space* and *old space*. New space is so-called *market-driven space* – somewhere like Thames Valley Park in Reading: a business park. Microsoft have built a big site at Thames Valley Park, you can see it from the train. There is a lot of new space – a lot of distribution estates, a lot of leisure parks.

PW: It's an interesting disjunction. If you consider what towns came to look like under a more social democratic disposition, there was always an idea, it was probably a pastoral myth most of the time but it was there nevertheless, that wealth generally improves the neighbourhood. This was part of the planning mechanism, and it was also what the advocates of gentrification assumed: that middle-class incomers may make a killing on rising house values, but the schools tend to get better and shops improve. But your Robinson is going out into a world where the wine bar and 'uplift' scenario has failed, and where the idea of a link between new wealth and general recovery or commonwealth seems to be busted completely.

PK: Yes, perhaps, but I think there's another reason. Although there is a lot of new space, and one tends to think of it as being modern, 70% of urban space is residential, and residential space is untouched by any of this. Residential space is old space and getting older: in the last twenty years house-building has fallen steadily. The rate of house-building is now very low – there is almost no public-sector house-building and houses are hardly ever replaced. Rich people's houses are dilapidated too – dilapidation doesn't result only from poverty – for a global economy anything local is very difficult to deal with, and you can't get much more local than a house. House-maintenance is a consumer's nightmare. The bits of the economy that deal with the home simply don't work very well – the telephone, well that's fine – it's not the home itself that doesn't work, it's the physical fabric of the house – the brickwork is crumbling and this seems to be the case for rich and poor alike, not equally perhaps, but unless one spends an enormous amount of money it's very difficult to keep up old space. But it seems to be equally impossible to replace it. This isn't the same everywhere in the world – the Japanese economy produces technologically sophisticated artefacts and one of the artefacts it produces is the industrialised house. House-replacement is quite common in Japan; but here, because we don't produce many artefacts or aren't very good at it or have to get other people to organise it for us, our housing is a mess. Looking back to the time of Engels, one wonders if this hasn't always been the case, as if house-building is somehow inimical to industrial capitalism. The best period for house-building in the UK was probably the time of the Arts and Crafts movement, which grew out of an opposition to industrial capitalism. In Japan, Toyota got involved in house-production only because there is a tradition that each generation of the Toyoda family has to initiate a new business, and Nissan had already decided to develop 'space travel'.

PW: So let's get back to this curious reality which has emerged in the Eighties: vast retail sheds along the bypass; ports that are invisible in the sense that nobody works there anymore, and the dockers and stevedores have given way to containers. You show a lot of barriers, a lot of wire, a lot of security cameras, a lot of private or privatised institutions, even prisons, these are some of the distinctive features of the world that you are focusing on.

PK: Yes

PW: Did you go out looking for that, or is it just as you got off the train or off the motorway this is what you saw? There you are, like Robinson eating in supermarkets, staying in roadside motels, is this just how the film composed itself as you went along?

PK: I think it's mostly as we found it. Partly because we were travelling by road, we didn't make many pictures in cities. From the film's point of view the most interesting city was probably Manchester – that was the only time we really made many pictures in a city. The subject was new space and generally new space is found outside or on the edge of cities. The pictures are more or less what we found; in fact we didn't find it for a long time, we spent quite a lot of time early on in the project wondering where the new space was, it wasn't visible enough. It did change: as we went along, it became more aggressive – the points on the fence got sharper; the difference between a prison and a supermarket became more difficult to discern, the atmosphere became more S&M. Again, I had a preconception about this, an idea that there is something up in the countryside, that the countryside is actually a rather forbidding place. The town seems more friendly, generally speaking.

PW: People still walk in the towns.

PK: They walk about... The countryside seems more scary. I don't know how real this is because I don't live in the countryside.

PW: I do, but I don't have a lot to do with it. I come to London to go for a walk.

PK: There's a film called **Night of the Eagle** made in 1961, with Peter Wyngarde as a lecturer at an educational institution in a country house with large eagles on its gateposts. His colleagues are practising witchcraft, which (I think) leads to some chilling effect involving eagles. I remember it whenever I drive past a pair of monumental gateposts. There's a new Gothic genre in the present-day English countryside...

PW: We've talked about this strangely placeless contemporary surface of the landscape, but I want to ask you about history, about the past because it seems to be a very strong presence in this film nonetheless, despite everything you're saying. You've got those white chalk figures in the green hillside – Cerne Abbas, Wilmington. You show these things almost as pauses, silent moments without words spoken over them, and you even turn off those ubiquitous birds you've scattered throughout the film. Does history as it is still written in the landscape provide some sort of perspective on the contemporary overlay? I mean, there's Robinson, looking for Rimbaud at the beginning, and digging up all sorts of cultural references as he goes... Is history just disconnected debris or does Robinson find it still potent and challenging?

PK: He's always trying to reconstruct his culture, so he looks for things in his culture which will enable him or other people to do this.

PW: So he's a reconstructor in that sense?

PK: Yes, he comes to Oxford and picks out Robert Burton, because *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was an important source for Laurence Sterne, and because Sterne was an important source for the Russian Formalists, for Shklovsky – for modernism, for the cinema, for the twentieth century. There's also the Neolithic rock art at the end, topographical abstract art, very contemporary, very modern, very international.

PW: As I watched *Robinson In Space* I found myself thinking about being driven in cars as a child in the early Sixties: particularly the A4 in Wiltshire, and almost certainly in a Morris Minor. I remember passing those great prehistoric presences around Avebury, Silbury Hill, and the many barrows on the skyline in that area – and getting a very palpable sense from that landscape that life was once completely otherwise. Do you feel concerned that the potency of the historical landscape is reduced by the curiously placeless landscape of 'new space' with its wire, its estates, and its giant retail sheds? Is that part of your concern in this film?

PK: I don't think it's diminished that much visually. I think it's threatened more in other ways. I read that skylark numbers have dropped by 50 per cent or so since not very long ago. When I was a child I don't remember seeing skylarks very often, but I wasn't very mobile. They are on the decline – one doesn't distrust the



figures – but somehow one is more aware of them, even though there are fewer birds. I certainly see more of them than I used to do, and not because I make films, just generally. And they are, I would imagine, more widely treasured than they were thirty years ago.

PW: So when we're not in a supermarket, we're joining the RSPB?

PK: Yes, and with all these things there's a kind of displacement. People don't seem to eat better just because the television is covered in cookery programmes. Domestic architecture doesn't get any better because the television is covered in make-over programmes. It seems to be a way of coping with it more than anything else. More people join Friends of the Earth and yet car use goes on increasing – there is obviously a conflict. But going back to the sheds, they are very ephemeral, so in a way one doesn't worry too much about them. I don't see them as being inimical – one can imagine the future being a few sheds and a lot of dilapidated houses.

PW: Let's talk about Blackpool, because if Robinson's utopia comes true anywhere, you suggest that it is probably in Blackpool. You've got this wonderful line in the notes from the landscape designer who put so much of Blackpool together, and who apparently once observed that what stands between England and revolution is Blackpool.

PK: 'Blackpool stands between us and revolution' – which he appears not to have borrowed from Le Corbusier. I thought maybe he had read *Vers une architecture* but he appears to have said it before this was published in England, so it's unlikely. In Le Corbusier's book there's a chapter entitled 'Architecture or Revolution'.

PW: Is this the old argument about bread and circuses?

PK: Well no, Robinson says that in Blackpool because he is a surrealist and believes in the carnivalisation of everyday life. Blackpool is probably the nearest you get to that ...

PW: ...in a mid-century form?



PK: Yes, or even earlier, the quote is from the Twenties. One can imagine that 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, although one doesn't know. Jennings went to Blackpool and he doesn't seem to have had his life changed by it. But that's another story. 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. Especially if you're a photographer and the sun doesn't come out, if you've got two days and one of them is no good. Maybe the next one is all right – that's what happened to us. The first day was dreadful. We had to wait until twilight to get a shot.

PW: Yes, it does look very gloomy in the photograph.

PK: The next day there was a gale. The wind was too strong for us to go up the tower. We waited with the men in red boiler suits who maintain the tower. It was a bit difficult, touch and go, but eventually we got up the tower and made these pictures of apocalyptic sunlight on the sea. Blackpool light is *radiation*, the sunlight up there: it's not just in the sea, it's everywhere. Absolutely terrifying, with the wind. The light is connected to the altered subjectivity which seems to go with... I don't know about a good day... with a successful visit to Blackpool. And Blackpool is modern – the Illuminations were borrowed from the Kaiser's birthday celebrations, and the tower is borrowed from the Eiffel Tower; the company that became Jaguar began in Blackpool, and they used to make aeroplanes there. The trams are very middle European. You can imagine that it's the Coast of Bohemia, if you're looking for the Coast of Bohemia...

PW: With a certain amount of radioactivity added in there.

I'd like to talk about the way you close or end these films. In Robinson, you've got a particular kind of camera use which is almost always static, and concerned with framing and putting lines around reality. You've avoided drama so there are no people there, and in that sense no narrative strings to be tied up. I guess what happens is that Robinson goes in to some sort of increased anxiety towards the end, and then he gets cancelled and the commission from this crazy London image consultancy which has told him to go off and investigate 'the problem of England' is withdrawn and that's about it. Were you troubled by that, or is that the end the subject demands?

PK: Well, there are obvious ways of ending a narration. It's like the end of a life – consciousness stops. The story has a happy ending because it ends with a celebration of a place – the last shot is of the Tyne – but the narration ends before that. Robinson finds his revelations increasingly difficult to contain, and he is becoming increasingly involved with military subjects and espionage...

PW: And the state behind the state and all that stuff.

PK: He becomes obsessional about Buckminster Fuller. He thinks that there are buckminsterfullerenes in a piece of equipment in a Tornado, which is unlikely, but he climbs into Warton and tries to steal the piece of equipment. Somebody has a quiet word with the agency and they drop him, his mobile phone's cut off which is one reason why you see the image of the phonecard. They're back on the street, they've lost their privileges.

There is another happy ending, another side to Robinson's certainty which is perhaps less obvious. The project was exploratory, and was an attempt to find out what had happened to the manufacturing economy. When I was writing the narration I had a clipping from 1994, an article by Bob Rowthorn entitled 'Brave new world of services exports is folly' which set out why the UK will never be able to sustain a trade balance by replacing manufactured exports with exports of services, because exports of services don't bring in enough to pay for imports. The UK's services exports had actually declined during the previous 25 years because of the decline of UK shipping and the rise of other service exporters. Manufactured items are still the major part of the UK's exports. 'Manufactured imports,' Rowthorn wrote, "have not been financed by exports of services... but by the export of other manufactures, especially capital goods and intermediate products such as chemicals.' We set out to find the sites of these industries, the search culminating on Teesside, where we found the largest concentration of successful manufacturing industry (producing things like polypropylene chips to make car bumpers and crisp packets), as well as the highest rate of unemployment and some of the most striking urban decay. The realisation that drives Robinson into his erratic behaviour is that the appearance of poverty which characterises so much of modern Britain is not the result of the failure of the UK's capitalism, but of its success. The perception of economic failure and backwardness that worries aesthetes, especially people like me who grew up in the Sixties, is based on a misunderstanding. The perception of decline that reduced our expectations of what the state can deliver – for education, the health service, state pensions and so on – is quite wrong...

PW: You phoned Rowthorn?

PK: I phoned him up while I was writing the script to confirm my perception a) of what he'd written and b) of what I'd found. He was talking about how the British economy is fairly well placed – we have agriculture, we have the City, oil, chemical exports, in those terms it's not really a problem; the question is whether it's very nice to live with. It works, on its own terms. The question I was asking, which is really one about the quality of life, is a completely separate question, it's a different question. To the question 'Does it work?', the answer is 'yes of course it works, otherwise we wouldn't have anything to eat'. Even so, a lot of people seem to have seen the film as a document of industrial decline. Most of the press, most of the arts press, they usually say something about 'economic decline', they haven't twigged.

PW: You're talking about London or Robinson?

PK: Robinson. As I read it it's a document of transformation, a discovery of these out-of-the-way places where they make plasterboard. Why plasterboard?

PW: And in such huge quantities.

PK: For re-export.

PW: And little jetties, which are not known about but are used to ship weapons.

PK: All that –

PW: Semi-secrecy.

PK: And no one around. I always wondered where the present-day ports were, where imports arrived. One never goes to these places, they're all at the ends of roads, and if one does go to one of them it seems so insubstantial that one thinks it can't be that important. You'd never think that Immingham was a big port – there's nothing there.

PW: So does this film about England actually resolve into a film about a more general kind of capitalism?

PK: Recently someone drew my attention to *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* by Ellen Meiksins Wood, which was published in 1991. She asks more or less the same question: 'Is Britain, then, a peculiar capitalism or is it peculiarly capitalist?' and argues that it is the latter. What I find interesting about her book is that it is full of references to the things that I have been photographing for years, for example: 'What American tourists today think of as the

characteristically “European” charm of the major Continental cities – the cafés, the fountains, the craftsmanship, the particular uses of public space – owes much to the legacy of burgherdom and urban patriciates... This kind of urban culture was overtaken very early in England by the growth of the national market centred in London... Today’s urban landscape in Britain – the undistinguished modern architecture, the neglect of public services and amenities from the arts to transportation, the general seediness – is not an invention of Thatcherism alone but belongs to a longer pattern of capitalist development and the commodification of all social goods, just as the civic pride of Continental capitals owes as much to the traditions of burgher luxury and absolutist ostentation as to the values of modern urbanism and advanced welfare capitalism.’

She then quotes Hobsbawm, who wrote:

‘The British roots of the “modernism” which led to the Bauhaus were, paradoxically, Gothic. In the smoky workshop of the world, a society of egoism and aesthetic vandals, where the small craftsmen so visible elsewhere in Europe could no longer be seen in the fog generated by the factories, the Middle Ages of peasants and artisans had long seemed a model of a society both socially and artistically more satisfactory.’

So we’re back to questions of design...

PW: And why not also the French town? I passed through Pau earlier this year, down in the Pyrenees, and spent some time in this amazing public square called the Square of Resistance, it’s got the war memorial, it’s got fountains and it’s got a church which is incorporated into it. That square embodied the monumental and normally quiescent face of the state – a face which is absent from Robinson’s England, except as punitive barbed wire, razor wire ...

PK: Which brings us to sex... This is an issue that Ellen Wood doesn’t deal with: ‘Why are the English so keen on S&M?’ Is S&M anything to do with England being ‘peculiarly capitalist’? It isn’t difficult to put together an idea that there is something sadistic about the implementation of the unregulated market – this seems to have been very strong in Thatcherism, for instance: inequality being very bad for people’s health, and not only for poor people’s health; Thatcher taking money from Philip Morris immediately after leaving office, that kind of thing.

PW: Your Robinson starts off with this brief from a research consultancy that has decided that the British brand is in need of re-making, that the traditional ‘brand’ has to be thrown off. I guess you weren’t surprised to see these ideas relaunched under New Labour, since you had already spotted a building opened by Mr Blair in his northern constituency, a very modest commercial building ...

PK: For a company that had given money to the Tory party.

PW: Which company was that?

PK: Forte, before it was taken over by Gerry Robinson.

PW: But now that the Labour government has taken over the project of rebranding Britain and lifting the nation with logos, this is presumably the right time for Robinson to get sacked?

PK: Well, yes, he went early on. I think we’re probably better off out of all that because I don’t think it can work – there are far too many contradictions. The fancy-dress universities, for example, of which Blair is a product.

PW: He’s started to look an awful lot like Prince Charles, especially in his mannerisms, have you noticed?

PK: Does he? He comes across as this guy who played second guitar in a pop group at Oxford, but actually when he was at Oxford, as far as I can gather, he spent a lot of time discussing theology with a middle-aged man from New Zealand in a bedsit... Even so, it feels a different place from the one I lived in under the Tories. I used to feel there was always a tension, a political tension... how can it go on? How can it last 18 years? I was on a train, about three days before the election, looking out of the window thinking ‘These people aren’t going to vote Labour’. I thought I could hear people bottling out – ‘Oh, I’m not sure, I don’t think I’m going to change my vote after all.’ But it was a complete fantasy. They won, beyond anyone’s expectations.

PW: Including their own, which is perhaps why they started out so tentatively.

PK: I still haven’t recovered from that.

PW: You mean as a critical filmmaker.

PK: Immediately – never mind the politics – suddenly there was this mainstream in the middle of British culture.

PW: Again.

PK: Yes again, and it was, "Oh – is *that* what's happened?"

PW: **So how have you responded? I mean, I'm sure you didn't get phoned by the new Culture Minister.**

PK: No – I got phoned, but not by them. I had decided to make a film about housing. Sitting on the bus going up and down the A40, I developed this idea about houses. When we were making **Robinson**, I was thinking 'Why aren't we doing any pictures of houses?'. It was because there wasn't really anything of interest, even new houses were not part of new space. I used to sit in supermarket cafés gazing at houses beyond the car park, and wonder why the house seemed to be immune to the kind of consumerist modernisation that – for example – has enabled supermarkets all over England to offer an approximation of Mediterranean food that was once available only in Soho. There were cheap international phone calls, banking by telephone, sending emails from the kitchen sink, a lot of other computer-driven developments in domestic life, but in twenty years the physical fabric of the dwelling had hardly changed at all. Supermarkets were offering mortgages, but generally the private sector seemed unable to modernise house-building, at least in the UK. No one was interested in housing under Thatcher because all we ever thought about was leaving the country [laughs], but if Labour were going to get in, maybe this would change...

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