



The Dilapidated Dwelling. Image courtesy of Patrick Keiller and LUX, London.

Tuesday 29 January 2019, 6.30pm / 8.45pm, Cinema 1

Architecture on Film: The Dilapidated Dwelling

The Dilapidated Dwelling (UK, 2000, Dir Patrick Keiller, 78 min)

A fictional researcher (Tilda Swinton) dissects Britain's relationship with its extraordinarily expensive, backwards housing. Past architectural innovations do battle with present day crises, through a narrative of facts, fiction and interviews.

Programme Notes by Owen Hatherley

Introducing *The Dilapidated Dwelling* at a rare screening at Birkbeck College a decade or so ago, Patrick Keiller described it both as his 'naughty film' and his 'New Labour film'. It's not hard to see why, in both cases. The film operates at a tangent to the Blair project, as part of a brief moment when Britain seemed to be moving towards a saner Euro-capitalism, rather than a less bigoted version of Thatcherism; a movement a left-wing thinker could try and influence. And it's a 'naughty film' because of its ambition to shift the Marxist-urbanist driftworks of Keiller's first two Robinson films into a mode of propaganda, like a GPO Film Unit documentary affected by paradox, irony and decades of defeat – as if filmmaker Paul Rötha had read Walter Benjamin.

Its topic is straightforward: British capitalism is relatively technologically advanced, and prices for the overwhelming majority of consumer goods have been falling consistently for several decades, yet housing has risen sharply and inexorably in price. An unnamed travelling narrator tries to investigate why, much as Robinson is commissioned to investigate 'the problem of London' and 'the problem of England' in Keiller's previous films *London* and *Robinson in Space*. Here, that problem is narrowed down to something quite specific, through interviews and archival footage mixed with Keiller's dialectical images of British man-made landscapes. The film was commissioned for Channel 4, who decided not to screen it, something which comments upon the populist conservatism and paucity of imagination of 1990s-2000s British culture as sharply as the film itself.

Arriving back in Britain from the far north at the start of 1998, Tilda Swinton's narrator – who has been absent from her home country for two decades and, while away, has seen the fine social housing of Sweden, the customised industrialised housing of Japan, and the houses of eskimos – comes back to a place where most houses are reduced versions of the houses of the 19th century. This puzzle is explored via the dreams of post-war social democracy – Charles and Ray Eames's houses, Buckminster Fuller's spaceship earth, Constant's New Babylon, Ralph Erskine's Byker, Archigram's flying cities, Walter Segal's self-build houses and Neave Brown's Alexandra Road (which Keiller himself had worked on briefly as a young architect) – this at a time when these ideas and buildings were still widely condemned. Keiller-Swinton contrasts these experiments in housing with views of both Britain's streets and streets of mouldy, draughty and worn Victorian houses, and the new estates of tiny neo-Georgian and neo-Victorian cul-de-sacs being built in the English suburbs.

Stylistically, leaving aside the interviews and the archives, there is much in common with the two Robinson films – the unreliable narrator, the imaginary research task, the overdubbed birdsong – it even begins at the Tyne Bridges where *Robinson in Space* ends. There is more movement in this film however, with many shots taken from a moving car, and memorably, many cityscapes taken from a moving train, perhaps showing the influence of Mitchell and Kenyon (use of whose footage would

form the basis of Keiller's next work, the installation *The City of the Future*, at the former BFI Southbank Gallery). Keiller even splices a Japanese house advert into the film.

The interviewees come in three distinct groups. There are the practitioners and defenders of the 'High-Tech' modular architecture that grew out of the 1960s (and was rejected by domestic architecture), including Cedric Price, the utopian designer who was a mentor to Archigram, and the critic Martin Pawley. These are placed alongside your actual capitalists – economist and government adviser Michael Ball, one Yolanda Barnes from Savills, and the industrialist James Dyson – and the Marxian academics Saskia Sassen, Doreen Massey, and most memorably Ellen Meiksins Wood, whose explanation of Britain's alleged 'backwardness' via the completely capitalist nature of its society in *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* was a major influence on the Robinson films. What is striking is how the different interviewees all point to similar factors. A picture come together where dilapidation and backwardness emerge from the lucrative fusion of nostalgia and the interests of property, symbolised strikingly by Martin Pawley's example of the design of a £20 note. The fact that, say, James Dyson is confused by the backwardness of construction is explained by his misunderstanding of British capitalism outside of his own corner of it. It's simply far more profitable to not build, or to build badly, than it is to use the advanced techniques of Sweden or Japan.

Perhaps at the time Keiller assumed that New Labour could sort all this out, and challenge these vested interests via a new technocratic settlement. Certainly the director seemed unsure about this aspect when reflecting on the film a decade later - 'I can't remember why I wanted us all to live in Tesco' he noted, with respect to his film's gleaming images of Norman Foster-like modular supermarkets, contrasted with the dreadful new-old houses. The film retains quite uncritically the rather questionable 1960s idea that resources are infinite, and that air travel is a good model for anything in particular. Some of the street shots, meanwhile, are of areas in the north-east that would soon be decimated by one of the only attempts to tackle 'dilapidated dwellings' – New Labour's Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder scheme, that has left many streets in the north derelict to this day.

For all that, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* is a strikingly prescient film, pointing to the now-inescapable housing crisis in a period when most of the media and the political class were exploiting an apparently endless boom (no wonder the film was effectively banned). Near its end, we find some 'modern' new housing in the form of Montevetro, a Richard Rogers-designed block of flats on the Thames. Impeccably High-Tech and high-rise, it was also astonishingly expensive. That was the future, right there.

Patrick Keiller was born in Blackpool in 1950. He studied at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, and initially practiced as an architect, until 1979 when he started studying Fine Art at the Royal College of Art in the Department of Environmental Media. Keiller has been making films since 1981, including the celebrated *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997), *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000), and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010). He has devised large-scale installations for gallery and museum spaces, including *Londres, Bombay* (Le Fresnoy, Tourcoing, 2006) and *The Robinson Institute* (Tate Britain, London, 2012), the latter accompanied by a book, *The Possibility of Life's Survival on the Planet*. A collection of Keiller's essays, *The View From The Train: Cities & Other Landscapes*, was published by Verso in 2014.

Owen Hatherley writes regularly on aesthetics and politics for, among others, *Architectural Review*, *Dezeen*, the *Guardian* and *Prospect*. He is the author of several books, most recently *Landscapes of Communism* (Penguin 2015), *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (Verso 2016), *The Chaplin Machine* (Pluto 2016, based on a PhD thesis accepted by Birkbeck College in 2011), *Trans-Europe Express* (Penguin 2018) and *The Adventures of Owen Hatherley in the Post-Soviet Space* (Repeater 2018). He is the culture editor of *Tribune*.

Architecture on Film is curated by Justin Jaekle on behalf of **The Architecture Foundation**.

Forthcoming Architecture on Film screenings:

Communion Los Angeles [UK Premiere] + ScreenTalk with Adam R. Levine & Peter Bo Rappmund
(USA, 2018, Dirs Adam R. Levine, Peter Bo Rappmund, 68 mins)
Tuesday 12 March 2019, 8.30pm

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