

# *Robinson in Ruins*

## New materialism and the archaeological imagination

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*Robinson in Ruins* (2010) is the third of Patrick Keiller's fictionalized documentaries featuring the investigations and struggles of his character, the 'wandering, cracked scholar' and political visionary, Robinson.<sup>1</sup> The first in the trilogy, *London*, was released in 1994, and the second, *Robinson in Space*, in 1997. Together they represent, aesthetically and politically, some of the most enlivening work produced in contemporary British cinema, with comparisons being made to Chris Marker and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub.<sup>2</sup> Whilst the range of his work has been diverse – since the 1970s he has produced architectural photography, academic essays, journalism and books, installation art and films from 16mm experimental shorts, to the art-house 35mm Robinson features and more conventional televisual documentary forms – there have been certain preoccupations unifying this output, specifically an interest in what Brian Dillon calls the exploration of the 'culturally occluded material infrastructure that subtends daily life in Britain'.<sup>3</sup> In the Robinson trilogy this exploration is linked to a political interest in the utopian transformation of these everyday realities, and this has involved him in a critical engagement with the agendas of the twentieth-century 'historical avant gardes', such as Surrealism, the Lettrists and Situationists, and Russian Formalism.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his critical successes, the fortunes of Keiller's working life, ghosted in the tribulations of his character Robinson, contain an instructive story on the relationship between cultural research and aesthetic practice, on the one hand, and the encroaching reach of neoliberalism as it has reshaped public bodies responsible for culture and the arts, on the other. Through relationships with the British Film Institute's Production Board, Channel 4 and the BBC, Keiller managed, from the period of his earliest 16mm shorts to his television documentary *The Dilapidated Dwelling* (2000), to find assistance from institutions capable of offering public funding. The gathering constrictions

on such film-making, including the increasing exposure of Channel 4 to commercial imperatives in the early 1990s, the inbuilt favouring of mainstream work in National Lottery funding in the mid-1990s and the continuation of this logic under the rubric of the 'cultural industries' with New Labour in the late 1990s, and the eventual closure of the BFI's Production Board in 2000, led to a situation in which the hopes for a projected sequel to *Robinson in Space* were curtailed. As Keiller himself puts it, after the BBC withdrew their offer of further collaboration, it became apparent that 'the possibility of realizing such works [the Robinson films] in television or as public-sector "cultural" film, disappeared'.<sup>5</sup> As if in confirmation, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* was abandoned without being screened by Channel 4. It was only through a reconfiguring of the Robinson project in terms of 'collaborative research in an academic context' that *Robinson in Ruins* was finally able to take shape.<sup>6</sup> Along with Keiller's film, geographer Doreen Massey's contribution to that project will form the main focus here.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that shortly after the film's release, the shadow of the neoliberal agenda fell upon the academic funding body, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) which had provided this support.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, one can imagine Robinson, with his quixotic desire to bring about the collapse of neoliberalism, producing an interesting investigation of the Tory 'Big Society' project.<sup>9</sup>

### **The mood of electoral cycles**

1992, 1997, 2010. Timing is important in the Robinson trilogy. One way to organize *London*, *Robinson in Space* and *Robinson in Ruins* is in terms of the dates of last three British General Elections. The first bringing with it the dismay and shock of another Tory government following on from the long night of Thatcherism; the second marking the advent of a New Labour government able to capitalize on the intense suspense

and excitement generated by this delayed change; and finally, the moment of May 2010, coughing up the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition...

1992: dismay, depression, puzzlement and anger. 1997: excited but uncertain expectation. For those on the left, such as Robinson himself, these abiding affects of '92 and '97 constitute the tonal dominants of *London* and *Robinson in Space*.<sup>10</sup> But what of 2010? How does Keiller capture and characterize this moment? *Robinson in Ruins* began filming in 2008, and the writing was completed in early 2010.<sup>11</sup> One would therefore expect it to be overcast by the general political anxiety provoked by the escalating crisis of financial capitalism of 2008. For Robinson, and those like him, such crises, in the era of neoliberalism, are bad news. Indeed the key discovery of *Robinson in Space* is precisely the effectiveness of neoliberal political ideology in managing to use such economic crises as a means of further increasing the burden of those suffering under such socio-economic systems. *Robinson in Ruins* is set, then, during a period that in the trilogy's own terms can only be viewed as emergency times. The possibility of and need for historic change haunt the film. Whilst the earlier films take place within a context in which neoliberalism is so thoroughly naturalized that any revelation of the mechanisms of its ideological operations appears to offer a sustaining breakthrough for its opponents, the making of *Robinson in Ruins* accompanies a more extensive exposure of the frailty of that system in turmoil, and consequently it raises the possibility of genuine change emerging. This is what the narrator (Vanessa Redgrave) refers to as the possibility of a 'historic shift' well in excess of any 'ordinary crisis'. However, the passing of that moment of breakdown in late 2008 is also registered in the film, along with the moment of May 2010 and the return to a dogmatic politics of *laissez-faire* (which is not explicitly addressed by the film, except through the discussion of Karl Polanyi's work, to which we will return below). There is a pause registered by *Robinson in Ruins*, then, a lull, a watchful stillness, in which apparently epochal rupture and its resealing take place, but not without the release of the haunting spirit of revolutionary politics, such as the life of Cokagne called for by Bartholomew Steer, 'carpenter and choreographer'<sup>12</sup> of an attempted rising in northern Oxfordshire in 1596 in response to food shortages, whose effects on the poor and working people were exacerbated by the enclosures.

A complex combination of hope and foreboding for the future marks the film, creating a very different political mood in contrast with its predecessors. The

diverse political postures of *London* and *Robinson in Space* include: an interest in the historical avant-gardes and the project of the 'carnivalization' or 'revolution' of everyday life; an allegiance to traditions of municipal socialism and a culture of cosmopolitanism (London under the GLC); a support for the republicanism mandated by theories of Britain's incomplete bourgeois revolution; and 'anti-capitalist' style direct action in stealing parts from a Tornado warplane. *Robinson in Ruins* moves in new directions, suggestive of a keen political inventiveness. But, as we will see, this inventiveness, which can be explored through 'new materialist' and 'speculative realist' inspired philosophies, also evokes an older tradition of historical materialism, and this contributes to the film's peculiar strengths and its tensions.

### The sound of friendship

Isolating aspects of the film's form helps to clarify these differences in tone between the three films. We might start with the narration. As with the earlier two films this is characterized by third-person voice-over (when referring to the invisible Robinson) combined with first-person address to the audience. In *Robinson in Ruins*, however, there is a key difference. The implied relations between the narrator and Robinson are more mediated. Recall that in both *London* and *Robinson in Space*, the queer Robinson is largely accompanied by a lover who subsequently narrates the film (Paul Schofield). As Andrew Burke comments, the relationship between Robinson and the narrator in *Robinson in Space* (and, we might add, *London*) 'forms one of the most hopeful aspects of the film'.<sup>13</sup> However, in *Robinson in Ruins* the narrator is a lover of the previous narrator, who has subsequently died. The absence of the indulgent intimacy sustained between Robinson and his former narrator-partner gives his present isolation and loneliness a sharpness lacking in the earlier films. That this isolation represents a political problem is perhaps given further emphasis by the interest Robinson has acquired in Bartholomew Steer. Like Robinson, who does his habitual disappearing act at the end of the film, Steer disappears from the historical record after his capture and torture. But equally, the rising led by Steer failed to gather, at the crucial moment, the necessary support it needed. Four men, including Steer, waited at night on Enslow Hill, at a rendezvous which was not kept by their sympathisers. Later two of them were to be executed at the same spot.

During the period of filming, from the beginning of 2008 to the autumn of that year, Robinson makes

contact with the narrator through the postal system – a virtual connection given an odd resonance by repeated shots of the mouth of a red, Royal Mail postbox. Just as his previous lover has now died, so Robinson himself is described as leading a kind of posthumous existence – he ‘haunts’ a house in Oxford (unnamed) and is described as increasingly ‘insubstantial’. His ghostly attachment to abandoned, hidden and marginal sites – and to ruins – is perhaps most effectively evoked by the film’s absence of music. That is to say, when compared with the previous two films, in which diverse musical motifs gave a precise, appealing vivacity to the swiftly changing affective states experienced by Robinson and the narrator on their journeys of discovery, here the musical silence, which is only alleviated by the ambient soundscape of birds and machinery along with the largely monotone narrator, keeps us at a distance from such representations of Robinson’s perceptions and experiences, and therefore acts to heighten our impression of his disconnection.

But Robinson, it seems, has other friends now. As in *Robinson in Space* and *London*, there are patrons whose intervention set the nominal objective of the adventure. On this occasion, however, it is a ‘non-human intelligence’ that has recruited Robinson. The lichen (*Xanthoria parietina*), as a kindred spirit, seeks out hidden and marginal locations. It is referred to in the third-person plural (‘they’), a word with extraordinarily welcome associations in this world of tenuous social links. As the narrator tells us, ‘they are determined to preserve the possibility of life’s survival on the planet’. Here the playful popular science fiction which had been part of *Robinson in Space* (see, for instance, the references to H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*) is, it seems, more literally intended. And it is with the theme of Robinson’s biophilia that *Robinson in Ruins* might be brought into contact with what has been referred to as the ‘new materialisms’, an eclectic philosophical, political and ethical set of arguments which are unified by a desire to decentre the human and to expand our understanding of agency and which, coinciding with the release of the film, have begun to acquire a greater visibility in the academy.<sup>14</sup>

Once again, the soundtrack can be used to open up these new materialist resonances. If the absence of music as a mimetic accompaniment to the narration of the image is replaced by a more autonomous, ambient soundscape in *Robinson in Ruins*, it cannot but help underline the phenomenological-realist tenor of the latest film. As Elsaesser and Hagener have pointed out, recent theoretical attention to the soundtrack has helped to uncover a cinematic experience which is

less about a ‘passive recipient of images at the pointed end of the optical pyramid’ and more concerned with ‘a bodily being enmeshed acoustically, spatially and effectively in the filmic texture’.<sup>15</sup> The materiality of sound, and its ability to engage in demanding, even overwhelming ways with our sense of physical integrity in space – balance, orientation, distinctions between outside/inside the self – make it a useful filmic resource in pursuing encounters between the human and the non-human that clearly fascinate Robinson. That is to say, sound’s enveloping as opposed to its directional qualities, its ability to free itself from the image, to act as more than a subordinated supplement to the visual, can help to lead towards an apprehension of the precious matter that all ‘things’ share, an ecological sense, captured by Jane Bennet’s stirring phrase ‘vibrant matter’.<sup>16</sup> In *Robinson in Ruins* this sense of a world which is shared by a diversity of forms of vibrant matter that override traditional human exemptions (agency, soul) is carried not just in the relationship between the invisible Robinson and the visible lichen, flowers, bees and spiders which, for long periods of time, are allowed to do their thing within the camera’s unmoving frame, but perhaps most insistently in the susurrance of a world which is indiscriminately human/non-human. The metamorphic, malleable qualities of sound are in evidence here, as the space provided by the absence of music on the soundtrack allows us to listen for longer to the rising and falling waves of what is often an indefinable mixture of traffic and wind playing on the trees and on other forms of vegetation in the predominantly rural locations selected by Robinson’s investigations.

This sound is peculiar and insistent. Conventionally judged it has an undeniable monotony, but at the same time it does effectively estrange our distinct sense of the opposition between human world of sound (machinic, linguistic) and the sound of brute, agitated matter in motion, or of meaning and noise, in favour of a common vibrancy. It is the sonic trace of what Coole and Frost refer to as a monolithic, ‘massive materiality’ which they argue is increasingly pressing its claims on us.<sup>17</sup> At each moment that the narrator’s voice cuts across this continuum we experience a shock, as if even the relatively ‘soft’, husky qualities of Vanessa Redgrave’s voice are a startling exception to this whispering vibrancy of the world. Robinson, then, is not all alone after all. But this leaves some of us, those of us convinced of the urgency of regenerating the affect of solidarity not just across modern onto-theological boundaries, but within shared and imperilled human societies, feeling more alone.

## Neoliberal exterminism

If the film can be aligned with new materialist ontologies, with their more 'distributive' sense of agency and their desire to resist the image of 'dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter' that fuels 'human hubris' and prevents the patient attentiveness to non-human forces, it nevertheless remains attached to the project of critique, and demystification.<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of new materialism, the problem with the latter is, as Bennett points out, that it leads to a restrictive focus on the human, thus presuming and seeking to demonstrate the primacy of 'a human agency that has illicitly been projected into things'.<sup>19</sup> This leaves us with nature acting as little more than a cover or diversion for human culture and history – a result which obscures 'non-human vitality'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, for Bennett, older materialisms, such as historical materialism, tend to view the political as an exclusively 'human domain'.<sup>21</sup> Whilst recognizing that a certain anthropomorphism (the 'agency' of 'things' for instance) is unavoidable even in a political project of vitalist materialism doggedly resistant to anthropocentrism, new materialists prefer to place their emphasis on the 'positive and constructive rather than the critical or the negative', seeing their 'task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality'.<sup>22</sup> In a similar spirit Bennett borrows from Adorno's prescriptions for negative dialectics. Ascribing agency to things ('thing-power') is perhaps in some respects naive and 'clownish', but it keeps open a respect for the object whose ethical and political value is crucial.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, *Robinson in Ruins* is imbued with a similar sensibility, and is prepared to take a similar gamble.

But perhaps this dissonance of approaches to the political problem of 'life' is more apparent than real. Indeed, as Coole and Frost point out, the 'positive' ethos of new materialism does not necessarily exclude critical variants of materialism which are seeking to go beyond the cultural turn/constructivism and to re-engage with 'more realist, empirical modes of investigation' in a political analysis of 'actual conditions of existence and their inherent inequality'.<sup>24</sup> Here under the rubric of a 'critical new materialism'<sup>25</sup> an eclectic range of approaches converge, including biopolitics, critical geopolitics, political economy, and genealogies and phenomenologies of everyday life.<sup>26</sup> Keiller's work has long been marked by a methodological realism and an interest in sociologies of everyday life (Lefebvre, de Certeau) and critical geographies of space and political economy which retain relationships with Marxism.<sup>27</sup>

Before attempting any evaluation of the film from the perspective of different models of materialism, it is necessary to clarify what the object of its critique actually is. Each film in the trilogy has presented its own 'problem'; however, in *Robinson in Ruins*, it is as if the scope of that problem has continued to expand. From the 'problem of London' in *London*, to that of England in *Robinson in Space*, the two earlier films moved from a focus on a failed bourgeois revolution (*London*) as an explanation of the compromised British variant of modernity to a perception of the historical 'success' of English capitalism (*Robinson in Space*) as lying at the root of national dilapidation. The point of departure in *Robinson in Ruins* is, then, quite logically, the problem of capitalism. Thus, although Robinson's central location is in Oxford, there is no reference to that city as the headquarters of the Royalist cause during the Civil War – an observation which one could not imagine being omitted in the previous two films with their interest in class historical narratives. However, there is a reference, triggered by a visit to the Civil War battle site of Donnington Castle, to the consolidation of capitalist forms of property ownership as a clear result of those revolutionary wars. Generally, then, the national dimension in the film is used as a point of departure rather than a destination. We might speculate that it is because of England's historical role as the incubator of capitalism that it is of interest. Thus, the quotation from 'The Masque of Anarchy', Shelley's response to the Peterloo Massacre (1819), concerning the 'homelessness' of the English, appears to fit with the account in the film of the protracted construction and social exposure of the world's first mass proletariat through strategies of primitive accumulation.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the English perspective of the film is used mainly to get into focus wider political issues linked as effects to the planetary problem which is globalized capitalism. For instance, the stories from the English past of the problems of survival faced by the agricultural workforce during the consolidation of 'natural' market capitalist relations of production fit with the problems, noted by Massey in her essay, that face the global South under the impositions of the WTO and the IMF as rural–urban migration approaches one-third of the global population. As Massey points out, in such ways neoliberalism is destroying older systems of production and survival in favour of global armies of free labour. The problems of hunger and starvation, as experienced in the English countryside undergoing a similar process, are thus echoed in a contemporaneous globalism in the film – see, for instance, the prophetic reference to Egypt's bread riots of 2008.<sup>29</sup>

Early on the narrator tells us that Robinson has been prompted by Fredric Jameson's 'anticipation of the crisis':

It seems to be easier to us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the Earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism. Perhaps this is due to some weakness in our imaginations.

The irony here lies in the fact of the breakdown of financial capitalism charted by the film in 2008, counterposed not just to a sense of the fragility and jeopardy of the Earth and the natural world, but also to the inspiration which nature offers in fortifying such weakened human imaginations. Thus, Robinson refers to the importance for designers of artefacts to emulate the morphogenesis of life forms (the latter observation accompanying a prolonged take of some nodding foxgloves); to the inspiration of Lynn Margulis's endosymbiotic theory which stresses the evolutionary role played by symbiotic relationships between organisms and can be used to challenge a neo-Darwinist focus on the 'competition' between organisms and other, 'capitalistic, cost-benefit interpretations of Darwin' (here the same image of the foxgloves is accompanied by the patient attentions of the bee – see also the butterfly and the teasels); and to the mutualism of *Xanthoria parietina*, which is actually a 'hybrid of a fungus and green algae or photosynthesizing bacteria' and which provides a model of interaction in which 'all partners benefit from their association'. The challenge the film sets itself, in other words, is not just to denaturalize capitalism (critique), but to see the non-human world and its relationship to the human one as an enlivening, incomplete, *strange commonality*.<sup>30</sup>

Alongside Jameson, Robinson is also reading Karl Polanyi's seminal and recently much discussed text *The Great Transformation*, first published in 1944.<sup>31</sup> Polanyi's interest is in the emergence of the market system of capitalism in Britain in the nineteenth century. As the narrator puts it, Polanyi 'locates the origin of twentieth century catastrophe in the development of market society in England'. Polanyi's text counters the myths of liberal laissez-faire by reconstructing the historical shock and discontinuity that the self-regulating market imposed on society. Such a market does not emerge naturally (as it was deemed to do by the political economy of Malthus and Ricardo), but requires the intervention of the state. Take, for instance, the 1795 amendment to the Settlement Act, cited by the narrator, in which the state intervened to ensure the mobility of labour without which capitalist labour markets could not flourish. It was through the

changes to the Poor Laws in 1834, and the consequent abandoning of the more traditional mercantilist restraints of capitalist 'improvement' which recognized and sought to protect the principle of 'habitation', that laissez-faire revealed itself as a 'satanic mill'<sup>32</sup> grinding up the 'human and natural substance' of society.<sup>33</sup>

There is, then, in Polanyi a fine counter-thrust to the myths of laissez-faire, which Robinson takes aim at with his sarcastic reference to the very idea that it was Anglo-Saxon 'customary freedoms' which lay behind the development of labour-market flexibility. (Ellen Meiksins Wood offers a similarly devastating response to the myths which intertwine national/ethnic *longue durée* with ur-capitalist social forms.<sup>34</sup>) Thus, in Polanyi's work, the opposition between socialist 'artificiality' and social engineering, on the one hand, and the natural laws of the market economy, on the other, are reversed. This reversal is supported by Polanyi's 'double-movement thesis' according to which the destructive, artificial imposition on society of the crude 'fictive' commodities of land, labour and money leads to a naturally occurring countermovement by which society protects its human and natural substance.<sup>35</sup> Placing the fate of the land and people in the hands of the market in this way is to subject them to annihilation.

Returning to the Amendment to the Act of Settlement, it seems likely that 1795 is an important date in the film precisely because it signals not just the movement towards the consolidation of a capitalist labour market, but also a countermovement in the form of the protective measure of Speenhamland. The lichen literally points the way, growing as it does on the road sign to Newbury, the place where in 1795 Berkshire magistrates instituted a system of poor relief to counteract the effects of an agricultural depression. The threat of starvation was to be fended off by expanding relief to the 'able bodied', whose wages were unable to keep up with food prices. For Polanyi, Speenhamland is significant because it represents a point of pressure around which the emerging science of political economy was able to identify the problems attendant on traditional mercantilism and then elaborate an ideology of the self-regulating market, which was to be given a vital push through the change in state policy towards the Poor Laws in 1834. Thus, for Malthus, tinkering with the wage – in the way condoned by Speenhamland – upsets its natural 'iron law' by letting loose the dangerous biology of the subordinate classes (appetites for food and sex). These appetites would sooner or later run up against the natural scarcity of the food supply by creating an unsupportable increase of the

population, but equally an increase in the population drives down the demand for labour and its price. Thus, Malthus supposed a 'natural price' for labour at which working people subsist without any dangerous population increase. This naturalization of political economy then permitted a moralization of working-class culture (its inherent tendency to ill-discipline and reproductive excess) and a politics which detached itself from all mistaken attempts to ameliorate the insecurity of working-class existence. If the critical fear of hunger had to be maintained, for the working classes' own good, then starvation had to remain a reality untampered with by governments. The basic facts of natural scarcity must be respected, or else the consequence would be working-class demoralization and the collapse of economic efficiency, as supposedly evidenced by the Speenhamland experiment.

Robinson's step back in time dredges up contemporary political debates. The first point to note is that the Malthusian narrative of Speenhamland is a tenacious myth. Fred Block and Margaret Somers synthesize the post-Polanyian research on the rural economy of this period in order to establish the following: an agricultural downturn and crisis were worsened by government policy, which included the deflationary consequences of restoring the pre-Napoleonic War value of the pound in relation to gold.<sup>36</sup> This policy was enacted on the prompting of Ricardo.<sup>37</sup> The Malthusian account of the old Poor Laws and their Speenhamland supplement worked then to cloak the destructive impact of the laissez-faire policies, and to present such rural distress as the fault of the victims of those policies, and as the vindication of the principle of 'non-intervention'.

However, Speenhamland is a point of ideological controversy that still resonates in the context of neoliberal austerity measures, anti-welfare policies and the related political discourse of the socially problematic 'underclass'. As Block and Somers argue, in the USA the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996, which ended the long-standing entitlement of poor families to assistance, was passed with reference to the supposedly supporting historical data of Speenhamland.<sup>38</sup> This Act owed much to Nixonite politicians, and scholars such as Charles Murray who in the 1980s updated Malthusian political economy to argue that a generous welfare system 'undermined the work ethic and sexual restraint amongst the poor'.<sup>39</sup> The neoliberal attack on the welfare state is, then, encapsulated in the Speenhamland myth.

Speenhamland, as presented by the political economists, represents the origin of the contemporary 'dirty

ontology of class struggle'.<sup>40</sup> As Polanyi points out, behind Malthus lay the work of Joseph Townsend:

Hobbes had argued the need for a despot because men were *like* beasts; Townsend insisted that they were *actually* beasts, and that precisely for that reason, only a minimum of government was required [i.e. natural equilibrium could only be achieved if the government desisted from interfering in the market].<sup>41</sup>

This literalization of the trope of the class bestiary has acquired a renewed virulence over the last three decades. As Bennett argues, it is perhaps one defence of a vital materialist politics that it forestalls such class, and of course racial, ideologies. As she puts it: 'If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated.'<sup>42</sup> It seems that Robinson's sensibility works in a similar fashion.

### Forces of resistance

Unfortunately, Polanyi's account of Speenhamland is itself distorted by his desire to maximize the historic rupture of the market capitalism installed in 1834 and to differentiate the artificial system of market capitalism from the more 'natural' mercantilism that preceded it. That is to say, he sees Speenhamland as standing as some kind of troubled transitional moment (1795–1834) in which capitalist forces and paternalist ones produced an incoherent and actually socially paralysing situation. As Gareth Dale points out, this is to underestimate the long historical development of capitalism in Britain, which significantly pre-dates the installation of the self-regulating market model in the early nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> This problem of historical periodization is related to a further problem in Polanyi, the argument that capitalism and state regulation are contradictory (a thesis which cannot capture the actual polymorphic powers of capitalism in its relationship to state forms). *Robinson in Ruins* is aware of both of these problems. Its historical span leaves us in no doubt that the trauma of 1834 was by no means without the benefit of a long preparation. Equally, consider its subtle account of the welfare state – predicted by Polanyi to spell the inevitable demise of capitalism. Robinson's journeys and discoveries make clear that both social protection and its opposite flourished together in the postwar period. Thus the National Health Service is celebrated (Robinson commemorating its sixtieth birthday). At the same time, he traces the morphing of the war economy into the Cold War and then later a New World Order, a genealogy pursued

throughout the film, especially through images of the fuel infrastructure (oil/gas pipelines whose marker posts, depots and multiple destinations are followed by Robinson all over the region, and by extension globally inasmuch as they subtend international wars engaged in by both the UK and its ‘special’ ally, the USA.)

This more complex historical sense of the larger problem of capitalism (as opposed to the variant, laissez-faire) works to put pressure on Polanyi’s countermovement thesis. The latter already simplifies the problem of identifying the social forces capable of resisting the damage of neoliberal capitalism. That is to



say, its naturalist spontaneity and functionalism necessarily leave such questions vague, and consequently it is a feature of Polanyian-inspired social science to be able to accommodate a promiscuous range of social forces working to offset the destructive drives of neoliberal capitalism. Dale gives a useful list of proposed agents of any contemporary countermovement, all exhibiting a ‘protective response’ to the depredations of neoliberalism.<sup>44</sup> Candidates include: a benignly mercantilist EU; globalized Keynesianism; the anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movement; neo-corporatist forms of cooperation between management and workers; micro-economy projects such as communal kitchens; the family; trade unions; Chinese Triads, the Mafia and stockbrokers (the latter on the strength of traders marking down businesses rushing

into mergers, given the risks to the capitalist system of overheated merger booms), and, finally, imperialist nationalisms.<sup>45</sup> Thus, whilst the countermovement thesis, as Dale argues, remains useful as an expression of a tendency of a wide range of people and institutions to react defensively against the insecurities imposed by the market, it cannot be given any ‘more determinate’ content without collapsing in this way into a kind of vacuous political comedy.<sup>46</sup>

One can imagine interpreting the relationship between Robinson and the lichen in *Robinson in Ruins* as on one level a playful elaboration of this suggestive vagueness in the Polanyian double-movement thesis. However, it is interesting that the film makes reference – also possibly playfully – to another candidate of the countermovement, one which has, during the neoliberal period, been driven from the field: the working class. Thus, during Robinson’s visit to the Lidl supermarket, located in a surviving fragment of the old Morris motorworks, the narrator informs us both of the social deprivation of the local working-class suburb it serves (identified by Lidl as an ‘underserved market’ fitting its customer profile) and of the same suburb’s election in 2002 of members of the Independent Working Class Association, who are quoted as saying:

As the state gradually withdraws from areas of social responsibility, rather than condemn their desertion and plead for them to come back the IWCA will seem to fill the void both socially and politically.

There is much in this brief moment. First, it reminds us of Robinson’s nostalgia for the manufacturing sector of the economy, noted for instance in *Robinson in Space*, where he ruefully accepts the success of finance and manufacturing’s sacrifice to it (a regret reiterated in *Robinson in Ruins* in the very different context of the disgrace of the financial sector during the 2008 crisis). Along with this nostalgia is a re-invocation of postwar Fordist regimes in which the working class acquired a certain cultural prestige lost in the neoliberal fracture of the late 1970s. The socially devastated working-class suburb around the old factory (we are told it has high levels of unemployment, child poverty and sickness) is testament to this shifting of the macroeconomic gears. All this makes the election of the IWCA appear to fit with the supposition of a potential Marxist countermovement to neoliberalism. Clearly Robinson’s eye has been caught by the chance Polanyian phrasing of the IWCA’s defiance – it being ‘nature’ which abhors a vacuum/void and which rushes in to fill it. However, as with the

lichen, the film seems ultimately less concerned with identifying predetermined social forces constituting any possible countermovement to neoliberalism than it is with exploring the possibilities for alliance and new forms of solidarity which the poetic vagueness of the Polanyian formulation supports – and on this level, as I have argued, the human/non-human alliance acts not just literally, but as a useful metaphor instructing us in the necessity of extending our sense of the boundaries of the identity and political potential of the working class to include what Townsend and his heirs see as its bestial parts. However, equally, and as Dale points out, the political usefulness of the double movement needs to be viewed with circumspection, especially as it implies a popular movement from below through its rhetoric of spontaneously occurring resistance, an implication that has little substance.<sup>47</sup>

So perhaps here the film is having its cake and eating it. The idea of a spontaneous countermovement might then be seen as a consolation to the left in a period of defeat and, more worryingly, such a movement might just as easily be from above rather than from below. Indeed, this is precisely what the crisis of 2008 seemed to bring – capitalism seeking shelter from its own systemic havoc. Despite this, and, as the narrator puts it, after the state interventions in the fall of that year in support of the banking system, it was possible to ‘imagine for a moment that this was no ordinary crisis, that some larger historical shift was occurring’. This, it transpires, is a shallow optimism. What then becomes crucial for the structure of the film is the electoral cycle, the relationship between 2008 and the period that elapses after the end of Robinson’s recorded wanderings – a period that includes the General Election of May 2010. The narrator refers to the result of the election as ‘surprising’. Certainly, the precise complexion, and the terrible, fortuitous effectiveness of the coalition government could not have been easily foreseen, but New Labour’s defeat and the vigorous attack on the working class, the public sector and welfare recipients within a structure of austerity policies, can hardly be a matter of surprise. There is something odd about this moment in the film, which is compounded later by the puzzling statement from the narrator that the research institute she heads – it has been renamed in honour of Robinson – is working for the government and has been appointed as ‘one of the eleven regional centres created to direct economic reconstruction’. This suggests that perhaps the Robinson Institute has not fully understood the lichen’s interest in reviving the memory of Speenhamland. That is to say,

Speenhamland has two faces. The first is a benign one, in which old-style mercantile paternalism appears to prefigure more contemporary forms of society’s ‘natural’ resistance to marketization – the delusive hope of October 2008. The other face has a more menacing appearance: it warns not of epochal change, but of the grim historical repetition in which market liberalism passes the burden of its structural dysfunctions on to the working class.

Generally the representation of Robinson’s relationship to political events is that of a spectator. Indeed, in one of his written pieces Keiller has discussed the characteristics of such a political subjectivity in terms of the aesthetic of landscape. Here he is describing the experience of political defeat in London in the late 1980s:

As we felt ourselves losing ground, both politically and economically, our sense of loss was mollified by observing ... visible changes in the detail of the landscape as spectators at some sporting event might watch the opposition winning. We might not like the way things were going, but at least we had a good view.<sup>48</sup>

He goes on to describe his sense of the urban landscape in this period in terms which are reminiscent of the vital materialism of Bennett. The view outside his window over London starts to suggest ‘a very slow but visible movement of self-organizing matter’.<sup>49</sup> This impulse to ‘poeticise’ the landscape, he speculates, might be related to periods of ‘heightened political tension’ (London had lost the GLC at this time).<sup>50</sup> There is, then, here a complex combination of new materialist motifs, a sense of political blockage and regression and a structure of consolation. Which is not to say that the ‘picturesque views of landscape’ pursued in *Robinson in Ruins* necessarily function in the same way. Indeed Massey makes a good case for viewing the function of landscape in the film very differently, and we will return to this below.<sup>51</sup> But it remains important to note that a different situation obtains in the period covered in *Robinson in Ruins* than the one operative in *Robinson in Space*. In the latter, Robinson speculates that ‘laissez-faire’ has been kept off the political agenda whilst the political elite (those involved at ‘decision-making level’) of the war years have not yet left the scene. Whatever we make of this belief, it remains clear, in the terms of *Robinson in Ruins*, that the sinister ‘utopianism’ of the market liberals – clear for all to see in the ruthlessness of the Thatcherites – was at least obstructed by the drag of the managed welfare capitalism still in existence



in the earlier period of New Right ascendancy (the long 1980s). By 2010, however, it was equally clear that the earlier period's barriers to marketization had largely fallen, leaving people like Robinson exposed. Recall that he was once a university lecturer, a group containing many now destined to experience rapid proletarianization through the accelerated construction of higher education as yet another facet of the marketplace.

This historical transition makes May 2010 more dangerous than May 1979. As the Conservative MP Greg Baker proudly announced at a talk given at the University of South Carolina in April 2011, 'the unprecedented good housekeeping' of the current British government involves pursuing policies which the Thatcher governments could only 'dream' about.<sup>52</sup> In this context, then, a political sensibility tuned to extracting aesthetic pleasures from political defeat is potentially more dangerous, and the habit of 'poeticizing the landscape' needs to be seen more clearly as a form of alienation. In the light of this, and returning to the issue of the isolation that the figure of Robinson conveys in slightly different ways in each film, Keiller had described *London* as an attempt to express the shared experiences of disenfranchisement of those associated with the sphere of higher education during the period of the Tory ascendancy.<sup>53</sup> On this level the attractiveness of the figure of Robinson in the trilogy was related to its functioning as recognizable political and aesthetic sensibility, a way of life, with its generalizable habits of survival, its snatched pleasures in often disagreeable circumstances, including that illicit, wandering, outsider's view, with its surrealist ironies, and its clear sense of what neoliberal politics means, materially, for those existing in such circumstances.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in *London*, Robinson predicts what a Tory re-election will mean for him and those like him in 1992: 'His job would be at risk and subjected to interference, his income would decrease, he would drink more and less well, he would be ill more often, he would die sooner.' It is perhaps this dimension of the trilogy which is weakest in the most recent film. Robinson has disappeared again by the time of the election in 2010, and we are left with nothing more than his unfinished project, edited and presented to us by the perplexing Robinson Institute. Despite the suggestion of a continuing political struggle at the end of the film as Robinson leaves us a final image of a milestone on the same route to London that Bartholomew Steer's failed uprising intended to take, the coyness of Robinson's disappearance is dispiriting, and his isolation seems more complete.

## History in ruins

In his discussion of Benjamin's 'On The Concept of History' Michael Löwy makes the argument for an 'open' conception of history, by which he means not just that the future *is* open, and that revolutionaries seeking to make history must sustain themselves without any guarantee of success, but also that the past must be prised open.<sup>55</sup> The forces of barbarism are forever trying to shut the door on the defeated struggles of the oppressed, but the revolutionary cannot afford to allow these struggles of their transhistorical kin to be lost for all time. In *Robinson in Ruins*, their names are Bartholomew Steer, Edward Bompas, Robert Burton, Richard Bradshaw and James Bradshaw. Whilst this history of the losers is one of deadly familiarity and repetitiveness, the 'wreckage upon wreckage' upon which Benjamin's Angel of History gazes (a historical 'emptiness' which is grotesquely gilded by the heritage story passed down by the victors), it nevertheless contains counsels of hope and inspiration which are needed to steady those who seek to break out of this woeful historical dead end.

The landscape of ruins which Robinson inhabits in this film needs to be understood in terms of Benjamin's last essay, his 'fire alarm'. Robinson's interest in *romantic* 'ruins' (conventionally, residues of the past) needs then to be linked to a sense of ongoing and possibly future ruination, or history as catastrophe. This is a process – the possibility of 'common ruin' – which Marx and Engels talked about as a likely occurrence if a revolutionary reconstitution of society proved impossible.<sup>56</sup>

What does a life in ruins mean? It certainly cannot mean, as Robinson appears to suggest at one moment, a retreat into the Heideggerian romanticism of dwelling in 'simple oneness with things'. As Massey makes clear in her essay, the film sets itself against the deeply problematic critical and cultural opposition pitting settledness/belonging against mobility/displacement/flow. Such abstract spatial metaphors cannot guide any reliable left politics. As she puts it of boundaries and fences: 'The real political questions concern their roles and functions and the degree of democracy in their constitution.'<sup>57</sup> What the film is more interested in is placing the issue of belonging within a history of dispossession. Thus, belonging needs to be understood in terms of the problematic of ownership:

Rather than the dwelling saturated question of our belonging to a place, we should be asking the question of to whom this place belongs. Who owns it? Materially, and in terms of power, the 'national' working class (of whatever ethnic origin) has no

more ownership than does the recent migrant. There is common cause here.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, as with the previous two films, there is a preoccupation in *Robinson in Ruins* with the exclusions effected by private property. The latter is regularly opposed to the desire for access, to a return of the 'commons' whose memory is evoked within the traditional iconography of the English countryside. But such desires may well demand a revolutionary rhetoric which is paradoxically 'traditional'. That is to say, it may well call not for the throwing down of all fences, but the protection of the many from the few precisely through rituals like the 'possessioning' enacted at Otmoor in 1830, where those dispossessed by the enclosures there staked out claims to former boundaries.

For Massey the political challenge of the film lies in its ability to return to the representation of landscape a temporal dimension lacking not just in the static models favoured by powerful interests, but also in contemporary philosophy and cultural theory which associates space with the defeat of becoming. Space as stasis is by definition, then, what stands outside newly established, normative ontologies of becoming which, for instance, associate change with 'geographical flow and migration' and the restrictions of power with place and territory.<sup>59</sup> Thus, she pays particular attention to the formal qualities of the film, which 'evokes space/place/landscape as alive with temporalities'.<sup>60</sup> This is landscape as 'stories-so-far'.<sup>61</sup> A complex structuring calendar accompanies Robinson's journey – based on a reconstruction of his abandoned diary – that involves attention to human and non-human times, including historical anniversaries, the passage of the seasons and the micro-daily events of the financial crisis in the autumn of 2008. This helps to break up what Massey and Keiller refer to as the 'smoothing' effect of the landscape – or, rather, of the impression that a conventional landscape can give, through the clarity of its visual continuity and stability, of being the mere precipitate of a simple, linear, developmental process. By contrast, *Robinson in Ruins* reminds us of the different temporal trajectories 'corralled' in the landscape – what Massey calls its 'open multiplicity'.<sup>62</sup> In journeying into this landscape Robinson's recorded path is not a linear one – it is constituted out of a criss-crossing and at times circling movement which necessarily involves a periodic return to places already visited – Broad Street, Oxford, the Gothic-Revivalist house, the land around Hampton Gay – and which moves about already identified landmarks at different distances and from different angles, for instance the

chimney from the disused cement works. The stories that emerge from this complex of timed trips and mazy wanderings constitute what Massey calls a 'dynamic simultaneity' of 'distinct, though sometimes related, specific histories'.<sup>63</sup>

The quality of 'unfinishedness' inhering in these landscapes as 'stories so far' brings us back to Benjamin, for, as Massey puts it, in ways which are reminiscent of his last essay, this 'unfinishedness addresses our today'. For Benjamin, historical materialism demands a partisan link between the past and the present. The 'secret agreement between past generations and the present one' loads us with a 'weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim'.<sup>64</sup> Massey assumes such a partisan orientation when she describes the England of 'little villages and grander estates' as one 'face of the [class] enemy' and when she refers to the defeated Bartholomew Steer as one of 'us'.<sup>65</sup> This 'us' is not to be understood in terms of some revival of Little English radicalism, but rather as a collective spread out in time and space, one which includes those rioting against bread prices in Egypt in 2008 (referred to by Robinson) and Mozambique in 2010, as well as several centuries ago in Otmoor and Thatcham.

But Massey tends to overemphasize the availability of the stories of past oppressions; for instance, she talks of them 'shooting out of the ground'.<sup>66</sup> Certainly, they are profuse, but they are not always easily retrieved. Benjamin, on the other hand, gives us a more pressing sense of the tenuousness of the past of the defeated, a past which is constantly in threat of disappearance. However, having said this, it is interesting to note that generally in her response to the film Massey does implicitly underline the importance of a tradition of historical materialism which has in recent years been in eclipse. References to E.P. Thompson, George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm inevitably remind us of the Communist Party Historians Group and the journal they founded *Past and Present* – a journal through which the story of Steer makes its way to us. Also, she references the work of two of the most significant heirs of this tradition, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker. Finally, it should be noted that in *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, the film Keiller made between *Robinson in Space* and *Robinson in Ruins*, he interviews Ellen Meiksins Wood, who has done much to keep this tradition of historiography alive.<sup>67</sup> As Massey points out, the eclipse of such history from below must partly be understood in terms of the political conjuncture of New Labour, a moment in which 'modernization' drove out all sense of 'learning positively from the past', and in particular the 'popular past'.<sup>68</sup> It was of

course precisely such a popular past that the British Marxist Historians sought to invoke and shape in their work in the 1950s.

### The archaeological imagination

Massey makes a point of distancing the method and form of the critique of the landscape in *Robinson in Ruins* from any apparent dependence on archaeological tropes. Thus, she rejects the historical imaginary of the ‘palimpsest’ and the ‘excavation’. The idea of excavating ‘exploitative history’ is rejected because ‘it can have a tendency to leave the horror in the past (we don’t do that kind of thing now) and even to pacify us (feeling good for having acknowledged this past)’.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the landscape in the film is best not imagined as a palimpsest ‘in which layers of history simply overlie and partly obscure and erase ones that went before’.<sup>70</sup> Such a method for viewing the past is problematic inasmuch as it fails to leave us feeling fully implicated in the ongoing story of dispossession – as if in simply registering such erasures we comfortably assign blame to a class enemy, and in doing so lose that precious sense of being challenged to make a contemporary response.

Kitty Hauser, however, in an interesting aside in her study of representations of the British landscape in the first half of the twentieth century, has suggested that the first two Robinson films display features of a specific ‘archaeological imagination’.<sup>71</sup> This link is a suggestive one and is worthwhile considering in the light of the most recent film. Hauser explores the work of the ‘topophilic generation’ of the 1930s and 1940s, who have in common a fascination with the tangible remains of the past, immanent in the landscape and therefore recoverable. (Her main examples are neo-Romantics, such as John Piper, Geoffrey Grigson, Graham Sutherland, John Minton, Paul Nash, Basil Spence, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, David Lean, Bill Brandt, Edwin Smith and Eric Ravilious.) Although anti-modern, this loose movement’s work is not to be confused with preservationist nostalgia, or a ‘historical imagination’<sup>72</sup> which seeks to re-create a past considered to be irretrievably absent. These artists, she tells us, were concerned with landscape not as ‘vista, picture or space but as *site*, the place where things have occurred...’ Landscape becomes, then, ‘the very index of time’.<sup>73</sup>

This neo-Romantic ‘archaeological imagination’ is, then, one in which the form of the reconciliation, or ‘smoothing’ which Massey sees as implicit in the very notion of landscape, is complex. That is to say, it does not represent a simple erasing of the evidence

of the stress and fractures of the past in the sweeping visual continuities of the face of nature turned to the present; on the contrary, the gritty remnants and temporal juxtapositions discoverable in that landscape are treasured. However, what is lost is a clear sense of the significance of this peculiarly resonant, ‘ancient’ landscape, and the perceived surplus of historical event it contains. This is a kind of amnesia in which the evidence of the event is carefully retained, but its larger meaning misplaced.

The profound sense of the tangible solidity of national identity provided by material evidence of its apparent longevity and the density of event constituting its heartlands are important aspects of the archaeological imagination. And whilst this view of a reassuring continuity of national history can acquire a determinate content, such inflections are necessarily changing. Thus, for Rudyard Kipling the view of the landscape opened up by Puck in *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910) speaks of the racial persistence of ‘country stock’ in the face of the sickliness of empire.<sup>74</sup> In the interwar countryside guides published by the artist Donald Maxwell, the archaeological imagination ‘echoed and reinforced the idea of the tourist as the discoverer of ‘old England’. And to bring us closer to the present, for ‘[Simon] Schama, writing in the 1990s, the archaeological imagination as demonstrated by Kipling offered a way of reinstating storytelling at the heart of historical writing.’<sup>75</sup>

It might be argued that what is paramount in the archaeological imagination is an apprehension of the grand ‘passage of time’ itself.<sup>76</sup> The sense of persistence and continuity thus generated acts as a promise of the continuing endurance of the nation. But ghosting this sense of Englishness are the actual traumatic discontinuities caused by the precociously early emergence of capitalism in England – as described, for instance, in Marx and Polanyi, from primitive accumulation to the annihilating class cruelty of market liberalism. Again, we might speculate that it is this unidentified ghostliness in the landscape which is aestheticized as the object of a profound – and unintentionally comic – fascination in the archaeological imagination. Peering into the landscape so many seem to ask, what happened here? – circling as they do around the great riddling absence in the English cultural imagination. There are clues to this difficulty in the way that the archaeological imagination, as described by Hauser, sees the landscape as a ‘site’. This means that

It sees it in the same way as Sherlock Holmes would see the scene of a crime. It sees what is, in a sense, invisible: the irrevocably absent past, the events that

occurred in a place, or the processes that cause the place to be the way it is and look the way it does.<sup>77</sup>

There may indeed be a deductive fascination with the traces of the past in the archaeological imagination, but what is revealing here is the relationship of this interest with the idea of crime. And it is one of the virtues of the Robinson trilogy to place precise emphasis on this eerie quality of the landscape. Take *London*, which develops the same trope of landscape site as a 'crime scene' through the use of a photographic style similar to that practised by Eugène Atget in his shots of deserted Paris streets. Keiller's subject in *London* is the City of London – the historic abode of finance capital.<sup>78</sup> Of course, any such analogy between the landscape as 'site' and the crime scene forcefully poses the question: what is the nature of the crime, the consciousness of which remains inchoate and fixed on its 'ineluctable and material immanence'?<sup>79</sup> By comparison, all three Robinson films do seek to provide detailed accounts of English 'crimes'. Clearly, then, if Hauser is right and Keiller's work can be understood within the general framework of the archaeological imagination, it is important to hold on to such distinctions.



In 1937, the young boy from the film 'The Boy Who Saw the Ruins' was seen sitting on a pile of rubble in a desolate landscape, looking towards the camera. The image is a reproduction of the original photograph.

## The English angel of history?

The unusualness of *Robinson in Ruins*' concern with figures like Steer and his companions is well timed. The importance of the kind of historical materialism proposed by Benjamin, with its concern for the victims of the long history of oppression, and its desire to construct out of that sorrowful tale redemptive responses in the present, is particularly evident in the light of the manoeuvres of the current government. Simon Schama's appointment by the secretary of state for education Michael Gove, in response to what the Conservatives claim is the 'trashing of our past' through inadequate history teaching in schools, represents a moment of danger in the ongoing struggle for the ruined past remembered by Robinson. If we consider Schama's pronouncements on this subject we can see the convergences with Hauser's prescient reading of his interest in the archaeological imagination. Thus Schama, in agreeing with Gove, argues that the 'coherence' of our 'epic' national historical narrative has become fragmented, and that children are being deprived of the 'whole story'. Teachers under the strictures of the current National Curriculum are unable to 'span the arc' of the national *longue*

*durée*. And, as he puts it, there is 'no coherence without chronology'. These comments seem to fit with Hauser's description of the 'dream of total historical knowledge – the infinite knowledge of Puck that hovers over this [the archaeological imagination] sensibility'.<sup>80</sup> And so we find ourselves back with Benjamin – on this occasion not just Thesis III, rightly highlighted by Hauser, but also the famous Thesis IX on the Angel of History.<sup>81</sup> Here Benjamin spells out the arduousness of historical materialism – its tenuous, ever-endangered grasp on the past, which is always subject to the uncertainties and vicissitudes of the class struggle. The Angel of History's gaze is fixed on the past, but what it sees is 'one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'. It would 'like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in its wings.' The reasons why the Angel of History's powers are limited in this fashion are to be found in Thesis III: 'Of course, only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past.' Any 'chronicler' (and such a figure fits well with Puck) who pretends that this 'fullness' of the past is possible now, in 2011, is offering grotesquely premature assurances of redemption. Note the

phrasing in Schama's call to arms: it is the 'whole story' which we, teachers and adults, are in possession of, and which we are denying children with their hunger for historical 'plenitude'. But, as Thesis VI explains, the redemptive desires of the Angel of History are impotent without the assistance of the Messiah in the battle with the Antichrist – or in the religious/secular double-coding of Benjamin's essay, the activities of the historian and the revolutionary need to be joined. It is, then, this assumption of the easy availability of a complete past that is a defining feature of both the archaeological imagination and the Gove/Schama project. Thus, in Hauser's account of Kipling's Puck stories, she points to the way that past and present interpenetrate 'mysteriously' (as one would expect in such mystic nationalism).<sup>82</sup> Puck himself is a kind of cheery English Angel of History, opening up a vision of the past not as 'one single catastrophe' but as a celebrated continuum. What Benjamin's Angel of History could not do – return to us the 'fullness of history' – Puck can.

The importance of *Robinson in Ruins*, then, is that its emphasis on the historical process of ruination forces us to resist the prematurely reconciled unity – what Schama refers to as the history of 'a common family' – of this Puckish national narrative.<sup>83</sup> Within the confines of such master narratives the stories told in *Robinson in Ruins* could only emerge, if at all, as colourful detail to the pageant. However open Schama's position seems to be to processes of conflict and struggle (he talks of a national past of 'rowing and raging'), as Richard J. Evans argues, this is essentially a Whig view of a healthy disputatious tradition that has produced what Gove calls 'the liberties of the present'.<sup>84</sup>

### Inhuman nature

This argument about the importance of Benjamin's concept of historical materialism, and its relevance to our reception of *Robinson in Ruins*, needs, finally, to reconsider the issue of the relationship between such 'old' style materialism (even if 'heterodox' or Gothic)<sup>85</sup> and the new materialism which equally appears to offer a fruitful way of approaching film.

These issues are most acute in those sections which seek to explore the problem of ecological collapse. Again, Massey's essay is helpful. She points to the 'long concentrations: the cowslips, the lords and ladies, the teasels. Perhaps above all the white foxglove', during which we are 'forced to look' in recognition at a nature whose 'implacable otherness' and 'indifference', its 'power of the non-human', acts to block our human

sense of 'ownership' and emphasizes the vulnerability of non-human life to human actions.<sup>86</sup> In such ways the film rebukes human self-absorption, and refuses to 'go off on some human-centred story, a vaguely related anecdote, or something about "meaning" for an undefined "us"'.<sup>87</sup>

Such arguments fit with the anti-anthropocentrism of new materialists such as Bennett. However, Massey strikes another note here. The other side of the vulnerability and the 'danger of anthropogenic ecological collapse' captured by shots of flowers and insects and the talk of a more rapid than expected acceleration of the extinction of species is '*the marginality of the human in relation to the planet*' [my stress]. This observation suggests that a consideration of the work of Nigel Clark, with its chastening and provocative vision of an 'inhuman nature', might also be a useful point of reference in this discussion of the film.<sup>88</sup>

Clark combines an interest in Earth sciences and the speculative realist philosophies of 'things in themselves'<sup>89</sup> in order to offer a critique of the contemporary neglect in critical thought of an inhuman or 'originary nature'.<sup>90</sup> Thus he notes that in the new relational-materialist work of Bruno Latour and others, emphasis is placed on 'symmetrical' or 'flattened' ontologies in which 'hierarchies of being' are resisted and agency is equally distributed among interacting entities, human/non-human, animate/inanimate, real/imagined.<sup>91</sup> This, then, grants to 'things' their 'constitutive force' in social and political life and allows Latour to attend patiently to the consequent 'mutual entanglement between nature and human life'.<sup>92</sup> However, Clark remains concerned that such work tends, in practice, to give insufficient attention to the fundamentally asymmetrical relationship between the nonhuman and the human. That is to say, the conditions of our possibility – 'physio-chemical, biological, geological and astronomical' – impose on us a 'primordial passivity' in which our 'constitutive vulnerability' to the inherently exorbitant forces of the cosmos must be faced.<sup>93</sup> Earthquake, tsunami, flood, fire, and rapid climate change, these irreducible aspects of our world can lead to the 'unworlding blast of a withdrawn ground'.<sup>94</sup>

For Clark the avoidance of the problem of the 'autonomy of geo-physical materiality' is related to a fear in critical social science that focusing on nature as a ground forecloses radical politics and ethics.<sup>95</sup> (Clark tracks this back to a Kantian insistence on the quarantining of 'natural necessity' from 'moral-political negotiability'.<sup>96</sup>) The given that cannot be remade, being that is not open to collective deliberation, here is the vey home of the forces of regressive

depoliticization.<sup>97</sup> But the paradox is that the fear of the depoliticizing pressures associated with ‘nature’ and the concomitant democratization of agency to include the nonhuman has encouraged a delusive magnification of the scope of politics. That it to say, affording greater agency to nonhumans, relational materialism entails a ‘massive expansion of the dominions of being upon which collective human agency imagines it has purchase’, and this ‘fusion of ontology and politics’ forgets, or evades, the way that subtending nature problematizes ‘this critical colonization of the entirety of material existence’.<sup>98</sup> By contrast, for Clark the challenges human life must endure on a dynamic planet push at the very limits of conventional conceptions of politics – precisely because they pose the problem of our necessary passivity. Thus, in response to this weakness of relational materialist politics he draws on the work of continental post-structuralists such as Levinas, Derrida, Serres, Bataille, and makes the asymmetries taught us by Earth sciences resonate with the insistence in this tradition on a certain ethico-political embrace of unilateral, exorbitant, generous, and riskily hospitable relations between self and other, precisely in the face of the excess of that human and natural other.

A good place to explore these issues is around the problem of anthropogenic ecological collapse. That is to say, there is a danger that the exclusive emphasis on the human aspect of ecological change can screen off the normality of rapid climate change that has emerged through the work of Earth scientists on the Greenland ice cores.<sup>99</sup> The more general point is that the science of rapid climate change takes us into the disturbing, asymmetrical causality of non-linear systems, with their extreme temporal disjunctions. Clark:

Whether it is a case of significant spatio-temporal delays in the transmission of agency into outcome, or abrupt and runaway consequences of relatively small stimuli, the result is a gaping disproportionality of cause and effect.<sup>100</sup>

This problem of disproportion is added to by ‘the difficulty of isolating specific causal agents and measuring their contribution to overall change’ in a ‘single complex global system’.<sup>101</sup> The clear dilemma, then, is that if establishing ‘anthropogenic’ climate change is beset with such problems, it nevertheless remains imperative for social and environmental justice to make such attributions.

This characteristic of nature to exceed our conceptions of proportion, equivalence and causality, which the ethico-political can not do without, is a challenge that Clark meets with the help of the post-structuralist tradition mentioned above. A good example of this

in action is to be found in his account of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Looking at a critical framing of the event by Rebecca Solnit, Clark comments that, in recognizing the limits of ‘the predominating model of social critique’,

Solnit’s evocation of a suffering which cannot be wished away by political thought and action points the way not only to an ethics which is incited by events that are irreducible to a topology of existing social divisions, but also to a kind of receptiveness to the needs of others which does not wait an accounting in order to go forth.<sup>102</sup>

It is not Clark’s purpose to confirm some conventional division between the ethical and the political, but rather, in the way this passage suggests, to insist on a fundamental, prior ethical charge which requires careful working up into the reciprocalities, mutualities and the just judgements of political settlements. Current international discussions of climate change, Clark suggests, need to pay heed to these imperatives and difficulties.

But what of *Robinson in Ruins* and this problem of nature? If the natural world is one which inspires Robinson in the ways enumerated earlier – the mutualism for instance of the lichen – then is it not also the case that the eerie qualities of the film conveyed by the long takes of the flowers and insects, the general exclusion, visually, of the human form, and the insinuation of an atmosphere of apocalypse, might prompt us to consider other ways of learning from Robinson’s biophilia. As Mark Fisher argues, the film’s engagement with the idea of environmental catastrophe ‘provides what a political unconscious totally colonized by neoliberalism cannot: an image of life after capitalism’.<sup>103</sup> He adds: ‘Still, this life may not be a human life.’

These insights return us to Robinson’s interest in Jameson. It seems that the Earth and the nature we find easy to imagine in a state of ‘thoroughgoing deterioration’ are not the Earth or the nature described by Clark – which does not need us and cannot even meaningfully be described as going through a process of deterioration. The former Earth is captured within an anthropocentric frame which screens off our own possible disappearance or ‘unworlding’. It is this that we find truly hard to imagine.

As Fisher’s acute perception suggests, this more difficult act of the imagination is addressed in the film through its apocalyptic atmosphere, and it carries a charge which dialectically transfers itself to that other problematic act of the imagination – getting beyond capitalism. Again, in terms of Jameson’s formula, paradoxically the film shows us how easy it is to get

swept up in certain superficial excitements about the demise of capitalism. But the chatter of the narrator's chronicling of the financial collapse of 2008 is relayed precisely over these images of a nature doing its own sweet thing. And it is precisely here, in a different register perhaps from the sublime one focused on by Clark, that we might see the film offering not a grim, punitive, sinister vision of the post-human, post-capitalist world, but an image of the nonhuman, which whilst imposing a certain check on us also inspires a different mode of human being in the world. One is no longer hopelessly ensnared, for instance, in the delusions that bring together the rationality of capitalist modernity (equivalence) and marries it to a certain anthropocentric vision of ecology (a human made 'crisis' which human making can solve, even through its most degraded inventions – the tragic farce of carbon trading, for instance, which Massey attacks in her essay).

That kind of alert receptiveness called for by these images of nature in which, conventionally speaking, nothing much happens is marked by qualities of excessiveness. To use Clark's idiom this is, at base, the vision of the excessiveness of the gift of the Earth as a habitation fit for humans, and the response to that gift in Robinson's biophilia. These impressions are created not just by the content of the images, but also in Keiller's use of the form. These sequences carry an excessiveness in their length in relation to the other shot lengths in the film. But equally, as Keiller observes on the process of filming, the decision to shoot in 35 mm, because of the relative expense of photographic over digital formats, 'tends to involve a greater commitment to an image before starting to turn the camera, and there is pressure to stop as soon as possible, both to limit expenditure and to avoid running out of loaded film'.<sup>104</sup> There is a kind of courage, then, in the very choice and specific use of the medium here. The economizing urge to switch off the camera, to want to know what you have got in the bag, has to be suspended in order to bring these images into existence. The profusion of the natural world, seen in close-up, is matched by the 'squandering' of the precious film, itself materially a point of intersection in the immoderate cosmic circulations of the atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere and even lithosphere. Keiller comments on how the preciousness of film leads him to reconceptualize its material form as a mineral substrate, an idea which then accompanies a figurative slowing down of the practice of film-making, making it a kind of 'rock carving', which in turn helps to touch on the heterogeneous temporalities of nature.<sup>105</sup>

If we bring together these thoughts on different materialisms and *Robinson in Ruins* they suggest various points of convergence. Clark's critique of new materialisms, or relational-materialisms, is clearly a salutary and useful one, and inasmuch as it demands that we push beyond what Quentin Meillassoux refers to as Kantian correlationism and explore the inhuman, it can be used, as we have seen, to add to our sense of the complexities of *Robinson in Ruins'* visions of nature.<sup>106</sup> Equally, it might be argued, to return to the issue of the film's engagement with historical materialism, that the apparent unbridgeable distance between the latter and such versions of materialism offered by Clark might be too readily assumed. Thus, although this is not something that concerns Clark, there are contemporary historical materialist engagements with such themes. Terry Eagleton, for instance, has in his recent work frequently returned, in a theological idiom, to the problem of nature and the fraught junction between the ethical and the political.<sup>107</sup> For Eagleton this exploration has taken place, most insistently, under the sign of his concern with the tragic. Like Clark, he has sought to recognize natural, material limits to the political – limits which mark what he calls his tragic humanism.<sup>108</sup> Eagleton's summation of his understanding of tragedy is illuminating when considered alongside Clark's view of inhuman nature:

Tragedy for me concerns the paradox by which we can begin to move beyond our desperate plight in the very act, and by the very power, by which we confess that this state of permanent catastrophe is how things fundamentally are with us.<sup>109</sup>

With due alteration of terms it is not difficult to see Clark's irreducible, primordial passivity in the face of 'originary nature' echoed in Eagleton's insistence on natural, embodied limits. And, likewise, it is out of a recognition of such limits that for Eagleton an ethics and a politics need to be constructed – an ethics and a politics which he refers to as the 'political love' carried in our response to one another's common vulnerabilities and needs.<sup>110</sup> Again, the latter is not too far from Clark's ethic of 'abyssal generosity' as the ground for justice.<sup>111</sup>

Eagleton's tragic humanism brings us back to Benjamin, with whom he shares a tragic philosophy of history, and to *Robinson in Ruins* and the figure of Bartholomew Steer. Steer is the failed revolutionary carpenter who, when faced by the lack of response to his insurrectionary call, was reported to have said:

if all men were of [that] mind they might live like slaves as he did. But for himself happ what would,

for he could die but once and ... he would not all-waies live like a slave.<sup>112</sup>

For Eagleton, following in the footsteps of Raymond Williams, revolution is coupled with tragedy.<sup>113</sup> Thus, ‘those who can fall no further [symbolized by the tragic scapegoat] are dangerous because they have nothing to lose.’<sup>114</sup> Steer would doubtless be identified by Eagleton as the tragic scapegoat lurking in the historical account of the rebellion of 1596. He is a figure of possible political redemption that clearly fascinates the wandering outsider Robinson who follows in his footsteps on the London road. Indeed in retrospect it becomes apparent that over the three films Robinson himself in some ways resembles the social profile of the scapegoat.

The sacrificial inner logic of tragedy, made manifest in the scapegoat, counsels us to remain open to the natural limits of being human, to our ‘frailty, neediness and dependency’.<sup>115</sup> This human nature, Eagleton suggests, can ground a materialist ethics and politics. For him the ‘socialist project’ is a tragic one because it recognizes that ‘redemption can only spring from bowing to our own mortality’, and, we might add, our precariousness on a volatile planet, ever exposed to the potentially overwhelming powers of inhuman nature.<sup>116</sup> Steer is also precisely the type of figure that Benjamin counselled us to remember in his last essay and, as Eagleton says, in lines which seem to resonate with the story of Steer, his doomed companions, and perhaps, in some ways, with the life course of Robinson too:

Only the political action that maintains this fidelity to failure [of human frailty, neediness and dependency] can bear fruit. Only in the knowledge that failure is definitive can we succeed.<sup>117</sup>

## Notes

1. <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com>.
2. See Mark Fisher, [www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49663](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49663).
3. Brian Dillon, [www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/nov/20/robinson-ruins-patrick-keiller-dillon](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/nov/20/robinson-ruins-patrick-keiller-dillon).
4. Patrick Keiller, [www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-robinson-institute](http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-robinson-institute).
5. <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com>.
6. Ibid.
7. Doreen Massey, ‘Landscape/Space/Politics: An Essay’, <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/landscape-spacepolitics-an-essay>.
8. As well as Massey, the other members of the research team operating within the AHRC’s interdisciplinary Landscape and Environment project included the cultural historian Patrick Wright and doctoral student Mathew Flintham.
9. [www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-future-of-landscape-patrick-keiller](http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-future-of-landscape-patrick-keiller).
10. *London* is structured in part around the election of 1992, the year in which it is shot; whilst *Robinson in Space*, although released before the election of May 1997, nevertheless clearly belongs to the long period of expected change which duly materialized with a New Labour landslide victory.
11. Whilst the script was substantially finished in early 2010, it was clearly added to and revised up to and beyond the General Election of May.
12. John Walter, ‘A “Rising of the People”? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596’, *Past and Present* 107, May 1985, p. 90.
13. Andrew Burke, ‘Nation, Landscape, and Nostalgia in Patrick Keiller’s *Robinson in Space*’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2006, pp. 3–29.
14. See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2010.
15. See Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2010, p. 132.
16. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2010.
17. Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 1.
18. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. xi.
19. Ibid., p. xiv.
20. Ibid., p. 14.
21. Ibid., p. xvi.
22. Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 8.
23. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 15. Thus ‘thing-power’ has affinities with Adorno’s nonidentity (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 14). However, from Bennett’s perspective Adorno gives up playing the clown too soon. For her, his fear of setting the object up as ‘idol’ in place of the subject has less purchase. See *ibid.*, p. 16.
24. Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, pp. 25–6.
25. Ibid., p. 27.
26. Ibid., p. 28.
27. Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, p. 28.
28. ‘Asses, swine, have litter spread, / And with fitting food are fed; / All things have a home but one – / Thou, Oh, Englishman, hast none!’ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ (1819).
29. Massey, ‘Landscape/Space/Politics’.
30. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 17.
31. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation; The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1957.
32. Ibid., pp. 33–42.
33. Ibid., p. 42.
34. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: An Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*, Verso, London, 1991, pp. 117–60.
35. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, p. 130.
36. Fred Block and Margaret Somers, ‘In the Shadow of Speenhamland: Social Policy and the Old Poor Law’, *Politics and Society*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2003, pp. 283–323.
37. Ibid., pp. 309–10.
38. Ibid., p. 285.
39. Ibid., p. 313.
40. Imogen Tyler in Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, ‘The Undeserving Poor’, *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 41, 2009, p. 109.
41. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, p. 114. The reference is to Townsend’s *Dissertation on the Poor Law*, which appeared in 1786.



42. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 13.
43. See Gareth Dale, *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010. My reading of Polanyi is indebted to Dale's excellent account.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 216–20.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
48. Patrick Keiller, 'Popular Science', in *Landscape*, British Council, London, 2000, p. 61. Keiller's flat at the time gave him panoramic views of London.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Massey, 'Landscape/Space/Politics'.
52. See [www.counterfire.org/index.php/news/news/11768-thatchers-dream-tory-mps-speech-in-us-exposes-huge-scale-of-cuts](http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/news/news/11768-thatchers-dream-tory-mps-speech-in-us-exposes-huge-scale-of-cuts); accessed 21 May 2011.
53. See Patrick Keiller interviewed by David Martin Jones, *Journal of Popular British Cinema* 5, 2002, p. 128.
54. Iain Sinclair catches all this well in his description of Keiller himself as 'the epitome of the part-time man', especially if we understand this part-timeness in terms of the dynamic of the experience of precarious casualized labour markets. There is a very wide constituency then signalled by the term 'part-time'. It would include many of those participating in the post-1992 expansion of British universities, both those teaching and those studying, in their differently inflected 'part-time' relationships to the labour market.
55. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, Verso, London, 2005, pp. 107–16.
56. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 79.
57. Massey, 'Landscape/Space/Politics'.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*
64. Benjamin in Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, p. 30.
65. Massey, 'Landscape/Space/Politics'.
66. *Ibid.*
67. See Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism*.
68. Massey, 'Landscape/Space/Politics'.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*
71. Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology and the British Landscape 1927–1955*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 55.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
78. See also Patrick Keiller, 'The Poetic Experience of Townscape and Landscape', *Undercut* 3–4, 1982, pp. 42–8.
79. Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, p. 32.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
81. Benjamin's Thesis III states: 'The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course, only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation à l'ordre du jour. And that day is Judgement Day.' See Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, p. 34.
82. Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, p. 34.
83. [www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/09/future-history-schools](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/09/future-history-schools).
84. See Richard J. Evans, 'The Wonderfulness of Us (the Tory Interpretation of History)', *London Review of Books*, vol. 33, no. 6, 17 March 2011, p. 9. This Whiggish liberalism of Schama needs to be contrasted to the position of Tory reactionaries such as David Starkey.
85. Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, p. 11.
86. Massey, 'Landscape/Space/Politics'.
87. *Ibid.*
88. Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet*, Sage Publications, London, 2010.
89. Clark mentions his debt to the work of Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Levi Bryant.
90. Clark, *Inhuman Nature*, p. 52.
91. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–4.
92. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
94. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
99. *Ibid.*, pp. x–xxii.
100. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.
103. Mark Fisher, 'English Pastoral: Robinson in Ruins', [www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49663](http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49663).
104. <http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com>.
105. *Ibid.*
106. On Clark's use of Meillassoux, see *Inhuman Nature*, pp. 47–8.
107. See Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2003; Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005; Terry Eagleton, 'Tragedy and Revolution', in Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2005; Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2009. See also Paul Dave, 'Tragedy, Ethics and History in Contemporary British Social Realism', in David Tucker, ed., *British Social Realism in the Arts Since 1940*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2011.
108. His historical materialist precursors include figures such as Sebastiano Timpanaro.
109. See Terry Eagleton and Matthew Beaumont, eds, *The Task of the Critic: Terry Eagleton in Dialogue*, Verso, London, 2009, p. 277.
110. *Ibid.*, pp. 302–3.
111. Clark, *Inhuman Nature*, p. 136.
112. John Walter, 'A "Rising of the People"?', p. 101.
113. See Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, Verso, London, 1979.
114. Eagleton, *The Task of the Critic*, p. 289.
115. Eagleton, 'Tragedy and Revolution', p. 13.
116. Eagleton, *The Task of the Critic*, pp. 279–80.
117. Eagleton, 'Tragedy and Revolution', p. 13.