

Romanticism and the Problem of Capitalism in Post-War British Film

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A detail of a Neolithic rock carving. Courtesy of Patrick Keiller.

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Cinema, Romanticism and Historical Realism

This article provides a historical materialist approach to changing and opposed forms of romanticism in post-war British film culture. Using Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre's definition of European romanticism as 'a critique of modernity, that is, of modern capitalist civilization, in the name of values and ideals drawn from the past (the precapitalist, premodern past)', it mobilizes their typology of romantic cultural politics in order to compare the work of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944); Peter Jackson's trilogy *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003); and Patrick Keiller's concluding film in the Robinson trilogy, *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p. 17). These films, I argue, can be read respectively as articulations of conservative romanticism, restitutionalist romanticism and revolutionary romanticism. In developing these readings the article contributes to the literature on romanticism and film while introducing important distinctions between different forms of romanticism.

In addition, I will seek to show how an approach guided by a historical materialist perspective is capable of offering explanations of formal and stylistic features in films such as *A Canterbury Tale* that have created perplexities and symptomatic difficulties in the existing critical literature. Historical materialism, with its long view of history, appears well fitted to the task of analyzing romanticism, certainly in the formulation of it given by Löwy and Sayre. If their definition of romanticism, with its emphasis on the interplay between capitalist and pre-capitalist values, is accepted then it seems reasonable to assume that historical materialism can provide key grounding concepts (such as mode of production and primitive accumulation) to enable a critical analysis of British films since the early 1940s whose relationship to traditions of romanticism have long been recognized. These concepts can provide novel perspectives on the mediated and characteristically conservative romantic responses in the work of Powell and Pressburger to the traumas of the British experience of agrarian capitalism, just as they can be deployed to explore the utopian romanticism of Keiller's poetic documentaries on the neoliberal present, as well as the variants

of restitutionist romanticism found in the international blockbusters based on the Oxford medievalism of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* franchise.

The problem of how to move from a historical materialist concept such as the mode of production, rooted as it is in the long view of history understood as a dynamic process involving the production and reproduction of human life, to the more temporally localized, micro-levels in which cultural forms such as the films of Powell and Pressburger or Keiller acquire their immediate resonance, is one which Marxist cultural criticism and theory has engaged with. Fredric Jameson, for instance, makes the case for a historical materialist account of the cultural text in which the latter is related to several expanding interpretive horizons culminating in one organised by the concept of mode of production (Jameson, 1982). An important aspect of Jameson's use of this concept is his acceptance of the relative persistence and overlap of different modes of production within any given present (Jameson, 1982, pp. 74-102.) This phenomenon is clearly of vital importance in understanding cultures of romanticism, which draw much of their inspiration precisely from a developed sensitivity to the fraught transition between capitalist and non-capitalist social forms, as well to the related phenomenon of the haunting effects of multiple, conflicting temporalities erupting into the present. Romanticisms of the left and the right are preoccupied with this grand sense of history, its losses and convulsions. Indeed, as Jameson argues, we can pick up the mediated signature of these conflictual historical dynamics through close attention to generic form. I will seek to do that here in my discussion of the gothic, the pastoral and the sublime, and their complex relationship to the emergence and upheavals of the capitalist past and present in the films studied.

Before attempting to bring form and history together through a materialist inspired hermeneutic, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of Löwy and Sayre's Weberian important taxonomy of the ideal types of romantic revolt, which includes restitutionist, conservative, fascistic, resigned, reformist, and revolutionary and/or utopian articulations (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p. 58).

One of three forms this article concerns itself with, conservative romanticism aims “not to re-establish a lost past but to maintain the traditional state of society (and government)”, as Löwy and Sayre put it (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p. 63). It therefore seeks, they continue, “to restore the status quo that had obtained before the French revolution. It is thus a question of defending societies that are already well along on the road toward capitalist development, but these societies are valued precisely for what they preserve of the ancient, premodern forms” (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p. 63). This type of romanticism has made an accommodation with a capitalism, which it fails to perceive as a distinctive, historically bounded social form that operates according to a systematic logic. Capitalism is accordingly mediated by a ‘tradition’ that is a peculiar, reassuring hybrid of pre-modern and modern elements. Indeed it might be argued that the pre-capitalist past that seduces this kind of romanticism is precisely a naturalisation of agrarian capitalism, an apparent historical paradox that lies at the origins of the British experience. (Wood, 2002). With the historic rupture of capitalism concealed in the very space of its emergence—the countryside—it is possible for this pastoral romantic tradition to set its face against ‘industrialism’, which is not recognized as a metamorphosis and intensification of already existing capitalist processes, but rather is viewed as some satanic aberration. As we will see the dilemmas facing the principal character in *A Canterbury Tale*, Thomas Colpeper, can be illuminated by this (to be defined) Burkean inflection of conservative romanticism.

In contrast, restitutionist romanticism manifests itself as a strong nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past whose return it seeks. We see such restitutionism in twentieth century Oxford medievalism, which has become such a significant and profitable arm within the international film industry. Key examples include the C.S. Lewis and Tolkien fantasy franchises *The Narnia Chronicles* (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), *Prince Caspian* (2008) and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010)), as well as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and more recently *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012). With Narnia and the Shire representing pastoral idylls, the key romantic trope of the organic community grounds a well-established nostalgic representation of a traditional agrarian society, often

imagined as medieval and feudal, which is seen as securely non-capitalist. I will argue that Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy betrays a form of restitutionist romanticism – or a strong desire for a return to a pre-capitalist past – that amounts to a response to a diffuse fear of contemporary globalised capitalism.

Finally, for Löwy and Sayre, revolutionary or utopian romanticism invests 'the nostalgia for a precapitalist past in the hope for a radically new future... [It aspires to] the abolition of capitalism or to an egalitarian utopia in which certain features of earlier societies would reappear' (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, pp. 73-4). This conjunction of the future and the past in revolutionary romanticism will form the context in which I will consider Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins*. In this concluding film in the trilogy focusing on the peripatetic character Robinson, the hoped for return of a past that will help to transform the present and future rests on the mode of production referred to by Marx and Engels as 'primitive communism' (Engels, 2010, p.69). As we will see, *Robinson in Ruins* also strikes at the heart of conservative romanticism when it invokes inhuman nature. The film represents a clarification of the discovery made in the penultimate film in the trilogy, *Robinson in Space* (1996), that the 'problem of England' is ultimately to be understood as the problem of capitalism.

A Canterbury Tale: The Vicissitudes of Conservative Romanticism

At the time of *A Canterbury Tale's* production it had become clear that a form of social democratic state was being negotiated and designed in response both to the sacrifices of the war and the bitter memories of the inter-war period. Powell and Pressburger's film responds to that process but does so largely from the perspective of conservative romanticism. Although Powell and Pressburger have had their critical reputations revived since the late 1970s, the strange attraction of the 'bizarreness' of their work, as Ian Christie puts it, remains puzzling and perhaps insufficiently explored (Christie, 1994, p6). Certainly, the distinctiveness of their films can be established in terms of their distance from traditions of British realism and in their European affiliations. Indeed this sense of them as

'outsiders', displaced in a variety of ways from the national culture they nevertheless were fascinated by, has been used to give their oeuvre a consistent thematic (Ellis, 2005; Moor, 2005). However, despite the many interesting insights provided by such work, there remains a tendency to use a restricted historical framework of interpretation. What happens when Powell and Pressburger's films are examined within the context of the *longue durée* of British history? Certainly, their choice of subject and scenario often seems to demand as much. For instance, the prologue to *A Canterbury Tale* sets the contemporary wartime story within a time span of six hundred years.

The film was released towards the end of the war and is a propaganda effort that converges with one of the key objectives of the government's Ministry of Information: to provide a re-statement of the national values and traditions being fought for. As Christie points out, however, it is possible to be more precise in the assessment of the film's engagement with its propaganda objectives (Christie, 2005, pp.75-82). It works on a number of levels, addressing difficult relations between American troops and civilian populations; the need to recruit more labour for the Women's Land Army; a concern with the education of the troops; and finally, a desire to explore but not necessarily fully endorse a Baldwinite Tory ideology of rural Englishness (Christie, 2005, p.87).

This article focuses on the formal peculiarities of the film, including the generic dissonance created by the mixing of the pastoral and the gothic that leads to different narrative tempos and an apparent abruptness in the plot transitions. In considering these formal issues I will be drawn into moving beyond the reconstruction of the contemporary war time context, particularly when analyzing the gothic element which carries with it repressed histories that emerge to trouble both the narrative structure and the film's conservative romanticism. The latter is embodied in the character Thomas Colpeper who seeks to absorb the pressure of wartime modernity (the general 'mobilisation' that destabilized the co-ordinates of social class, gender, nation and region) and re-work its disruptiveness back into some sense of ongoing 'tradition'. For Colpeper, as a romantic conservative, this process needs to conform to an idea of natural social evolution (Löwy and Sayre, 2001, p. 63).

The Problem of Colpeper

But before moving on to discuss the relationship between Colpeper and romantic conservatism it is important to note that Lowy and Sayre's account of the latter is a pan-European one. It is therefore helpful to supplement their discussion with a consideration of specific national historical developments. In this respect Michael Gardiner's work on Edmund Burke, a key figure in the romantic conservative tradition is invaluable (Gardiner, 2012 and 2013; Gardiner and Westall, 2013).

Gardiner analyses the peculiar foreclosure of the 'national' within the British 'state-nation', giving particular emphasis to the relationship between Burke's counter-revolutionary formulation of the 'informal' British constitution and the moment of revolutionary apostasy in the romantic movement (Coleridge and Wordsworth). Burke's attack on the French Revolution, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), helped to ground a conservative reaction which after British imperial expansion in 1810 'established as universal an assumption of an ancient natural democracy and civility, which from late Romanticism onwards was typically presented as natural, instinctual [and], anti-systematic' (Gardiner, 2012, p. 4). For Gardiner then, Burke's achievement in the political struggles of the 1790s was to establish an opposition between on the one hand the British un-codified constitution and the cultural values based on it which became associated with 'pure precedent', on an always already defined form of legitimacy, and on the other hand the violent, revolutionary (French/foreign) breaking of such 'eternal structures' (Gardiner, 2011). This made change in Britain synonymous with restoration and led to a series of fateful alienations in British national culture that struck at the very conceivability of political action itself. Burkean Britishness displaced any possibility of a modern, popular form of national sovereignty, with its civically enabling conditions of present tense, active political experience. Instead, a British state ideology formed that has ruthlessly exploited an abstract, idealized, and marketable 'traditional' Englishness. The latter manifests itself in 'pasted historical icons' (for instance

monarchs); the canonical figures of English literature (for instance Austen, Shakespeare) and arrogant assumptions of world significance based on a particularly virulent form of empire nostalgia and hubris, running alongside a belief in the civilisational superiority of British political institutions. (Gardiner, 2013, p.2). All 'heritage' Englishness operates in a Burkean time of 'tradition', which paradoxically can never be shared in a historical present, and therefore challenged and changed (Gardiner, 2011). Instead it passes down to us, in hallowed form, as an inheritance whose rightness and naturalness we instinctually confirm. Indeed, this 'tradition' is not really tradition at all as its 'pastness' is a special effect of Englishness, to be understood as residing outside history in the realm of 'pure precedent' and not in any 'real' sequence of past events we might assume to constitute history (Gardiner, 2012, p. 3).

This then is *Burkean non-time* in which 'to be British is to experience nothing' and to accept (in a spirit of superior political 'realism') that nothing can be done to change things (Gardiner, 2011). The usefulness of Burke's arguments, as ideology, was that they 'codified the needs of ancient capital', in other words, that they protected the established and ongoing transmission of capitalist property and hid the 'locked-in' violence of the history which had accompanied the establishment of the British state (Gardiner, 2011). The opposition then between Burkean non-time and history--between 'locked-in' (British) and 'apparent' (French) political violence, between continuity (British) and rupture (French)--is central to the peculiar experience and ideologies of that 'nationless state' which is the United Kingdom (Gardiner, 2011). Following David Punter, Gardiner suggests that the British state-nation's 'continuous and massive' repression of its own history leads to a gothic-inflected cultural challenge to the naturalization of value found in Burkean romanticism (Gardiner, 2012, p.9; Punter, 1996, p.201). In what follows I will consider this relationship between the gothic and the repressive powers of Burkean non-time through an analysis of the peculiar actions and character of Thomas Colpeper.

As the problem of the film's narrative, and Colpeper's relationship to it, has preoccupied the film's critics since the 1940s, it seems appropriate to start with

a brief plot synopsis, Three displaced wartime travelers, an American soldier, a 'land girl' and a British soldier on deployment accidentally meet in Chillingbourne, a Kent village on the old pilgrim route just outside Canterbury, the cathedral city and destination of Chaucer's medieval pilgrims. The land girl, Alison, a shop worker from London, is assaulted in the blackout by a mysterious figure who pours glue on her hair. The American, Bob, and British soldier, Peter, attempt to track down and unmask this 'phantom glueman', whom, it appears, is the local JP and squire, Thomas Colpeper. Colpeper has been attacking local girls in order to dissuade them from dating soldiers stationed nearby. His intention is to grasp the extraordinary circumstances of the war to lecture the area's transitory population on the glories of the English past as a living tradition, made manifest in the landscape and culture. Unmasked by Peter, Bob and Alison, Colpeper appears to escape punishment when the three modern day pilgrims travel with him to Canterbury, where they receive miraculous 'blessings': Bob the delayed letters from his American sweetheart; Peter the chance to play the organ in the cathedral before being sent to the Normandy beaches; and Alison the news that her fiancé, missing presumed dead, is alive. Colpeper, although willing to implicitly admit his guilty identity as the Glueman, and although accepting that his actions were unfortunate, is last seen in the cathedral, and remains at large, unapprehended and unreported to the police by Peter who had previously been set on such a course of action.

The key points of difficulty in the film concern the nature of Colpeper's character and actions, the relatively swift solution to the mystery of the identity of the Glueman, and the subsequent abandonment of the narrative centred on his actions. Given the unpleasantness of the Glueman plot and the intense impression it makes at the start of the film, its apparent irrelevance at the end of the film is disconcerting. Such features drew sharp comment from contemporary critics. A sense of bafflement with the plot and distaste for the character of the Glueman is clear, especially when these aspects of the film are contrasted, as they were, with the picturesque pastoral landscapes whose cinematographic skill was as celebrated as much as the narrative obscurities were deplored (Christie, 2005, p.89).

But narrative needs to be saved here in more than one sense. Recently critics have identified narrative analysis itself as a problematic approach to Powell and Pressburger's films. This is part of a general paradigm shift in film studies away from political readings of films in which the interpretative focus on narrative is deemed to have repressed an essential, aesthetic dimension to the cinematic experience (Hockenhull, 2008, pp. 12-13). Stella Hockenhull has sought to redress this perceived imbalance by offering 'aesthetic' readings of Powell and Pressburger's films from the war and immediate post-war period. By contrast, the objective here is to offer an interpretation of *A Canterbury Tale* which combines the aesthetic and the political in a way which relates to the historical *longue durée* of the capitalist mode of production. So, whilst there is no question that there is a desire to generate a range of intense aesthetic affects in Powell and Pressburger's work generally, the questions addressed here are how might such affects be historicized and how might they be understood to be working politically?

One place we might start is with Gardiner's account of Burkean 'non-time'. The latter allows us to enter a key aspect of the aporia that Colpeper/Glueman faces in his essentially romantic-conservative mission to blend and blur the discontinuities of modernity into an evolving, continuous tradition. Burkean non-time is a militant form of political *non-action*. Thus, the British state-nation sees itself as a state of nature restored, and not as a nation founded through a political act. Paradoxically then, Burkean British cultural values, for Gardiner, always precede political action. Given this any action taken in the name of the values of the conservative romantic tradition can threaten that same tradition. But as Colpeper's dilemma makes plain, the idea that a tradition can endure and function without constant vigilance and remedial adjustments and reactions is a fiction. Conservative romanticism, then, is inherently wracked, especially in periods of upheaval such as those evoked in *A Canterbury Tale*, with the uncertainty of how far to proceed in the service of tradition. A Burkean 'call for inaction', even if it is only meant to apply to one's class subordinates, has repercussions for one's room to manoeuvre (Gardiner, 2012, p. 26). Indeed, in

effect anything Colpeper decides to do, by definition, he should not do...and yet he has to. The Glueman, who strikes in the dark, is Colpeper's far from effective solution to this dilemma.

Colpeper's actions are designed largely to make time stand still. Towards the end of the film as the modern pilgrims (Bob, Alison and Peter) are waiting for their train to leave Chillingbourne station, the station master holds it up so that Colpeper, who is late, can catch it. As the narrator's prologue has it, modernity may have arrived in the form of 'steel roads' yet the modern clock time that came with the locomotive is suspended by Colpeper. But it is not just his social pre-eminence that holds things up. In his role of local ideologue-gentleman, Colpeper gives lantern lectures (talks accompanied by projected slides) which seek to achieve a specific aesthetic effect—the enchanted perception of the past in the present. In actual fact, the scene in which we see him attempt to re-create this enchanted perception is disrupted and disorganized. There is a suggestion, conveyed by Powell and Pressburger's habitual strategies of cinematic self-reflexivity, of the early cinema here, and its class dynamics. The lantern lecture carries associations of the project of class discipline, including the middle class moralizing of the culture of the 'unrespectable' working class through early temperance films that adapted lantern lecture formats (Burch: 1990). Colpeper is offering something more soothing, although perhaps it is not co-incidental that the lights fail during Colpeper's show and that there is a resistant, rowdy atmosphere amongst the audience, also suggestive of early working class audience participation with cinematographic showmen. The ghosted early cinema called up by the lantern show struggles under the restrictions Colpeper's class based lecture programme. Nevertheless, Colpeper persists. Through the numinous use of haloed lighting and modulation of voice, he achieves his intended effect, although ironically it is Alison, an uninvited female to this all-male gathering, whose inner ear and eye he captures with his evocation of the sounds and sights of the past passing effortlessly into the present. Specifically, his appeal is for his audience to consider the topographic details of the local landscape as constituting a space saturated with the still perceptible presence of the lives of past generations.

This charismatic performance of the pastoral, with its reassuring continuities, allows for an imaginary resolution to the problem that non-organic or disruptive change potentially represents for conservative romanticism. It seeks to give an aesthetic apprehension of the past's adherence in the present, and the only response it requires is one of passive receptivity, a reverent attentiveness. One listens and one is persuaded. But in the gothic mode perception and subjective response are often disordered, seeing and understanding can be disjunct. The Glueman moves in the blackout where the problem of change, and the narrative clarity of the drama of action and counter-action is obscured. However, this solution to the problem of action is dysfunctional. That is to say, whilst the anonymity of the blackout is an enabling condition for the Glueman, it nevertheless allows monsters to multiply. Thus the gothic dark generates narrative, which from Colpeper's perspective only risks further entanglement in unwanted actions. Bob only enters the story because of the confusion that the blackout causes at Chillingbourne station. When he asks 'what kind of place is this', the station-master's reply is – 'a place where people sleep'. But this is to state what is merely the ideal effect of a darkness in which actions can take place which are inscrutable in their origins and pacifying in their effects on those they are intended to impress. It is the same station-master who later holds the train up for Colpeper (thus suggesting Colpeper's charisma has at least made an impression on him).

Sadly for Colpeper, however, hegemony does not come in the form of a community of sleepwalkers. Crucially, the darkened space of the gothic is where the effects of actions cannot be controlled, where intended and unintended effects remain disproportionate, and where acts call up counter acts, and thus the appearance of other, possibly previously repressed, agents. With the expressionist lighting of these opening scenes, along with the 'noir' feel that the American soldier's presence brings, a sequence of consequences he cannot control are implicit and enfolded within Colpeper's rash move to action. It is interesting to note, given this multivalence of the figure of the blackout, that Colpeper is rebuked by his own constable for breaking it. That is to say, disguised

as Glueman, Colpeper exits from and returns to his chambers (the court house itself), but in so doing he neglects to pull tight the curtains, thus allowing a light to show. The relation between intended and unintended effect is clear here.

As Gardiner points out, Burkean conservative romanticism sought to distance itself from gothic culture which it associated with the existence of an 'unruly temperament challenging a natural franchise' (Gardiner, 2012, p.110). That is to say, on an affective level, the gothic was considered to be un-British in its disturbance of harmony and its association with disordered, excitable passions. In this way, a link between the gothic and the danger of the 'mob' was forged (Gardiner, 2012, p.111). But as Punter also argues, the gothic is a form of history, and thus it attracts the 'continuous and massive' repression that Burkean non-time/tradition applies to those 'other times' that challenge the carefully crafted ahistorical blurrings of conservative romanticism (Punter, 1996, p.201). This gothic conjuration of time is one in which actions and agents ultimately threaten to be reconnected in alarming, contorted narrative patterns, and in which the effects of enigmatic actions continue to reverberate, even if in complex, distorted and displaced ways.

It is here then that the origins of the peculiar formal difficulties of the film lie – both narrative stuttering/*non sequiturs* and generic dissonance. Colpeper's predicament, his necessarily 'delicate' position vis-à-vis active intervention, leads to a contorted and also regretted line of action, as his confession on the final train journey to Canterbury makes clear. In attracting the repressed content, the 'locked-in violence' of Burkean non-time, Colpeper's actions jeopardize the comforting continuities of pastoral romantic conservatism. Gardiner's account of the violence at the core of the blurred history of this tradition needs, however, to be extended. The investment in the idea of change as a process of natural evolution attempts to heal not just the political scarring of the period of bourgeois revolution (from 1649 to 1688), but also the earlier dislocations endured through the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It is important to remember that in managing this transition conservative romanticism is greatly assisted by the historical balance of class forces.

Relatively speaking, in England's case the transition into a capitalist mode of production occurred early and took the form, initially, of an agrarian capitalism under the supervision of a landed class of gentlemen. This of course helped in sustaining the idea of historical continuity and organic evolution. The new wine was carefully cellared in old bottles (Wood, 1991).

In view of this, it is interesting to consider the opening Chaucerian voice-over prologue of the film as an expression of the conservative romantic pacification of change which is nevertheless ghosted by other stories:

Today the hills and valleys are the same:
Gone are the forests since the enclosures came,
Hedgerows have sprung, the land is under plow,
And orchards bloom with blossom on the bough,
Sussex and Kent are like a garden fair.
But sheep still graze upon the ridges there,
The Pilgrims' Way still winds about the Weald,
Through wood and brake and many a fertile field.
But though so little's changed since Chaucer's day,
Another kind of pilgrim walks the way

The critical transition to capitalist agriculture ('enclosure'—it is even named) produces an absence (the forests have 'gone'—but that simple disappearance occludes class agency), which is then transformed into the precondition for pastoral plenty, which in turn works to efface all suggestion of any sinister aspect to that change ('hedgerows have sprung'), thereby transforming the meaning of that bitter symbol of the loss of the commons (hedges). Thus, whilst admitting the 'gone' of the forests (historically associated with the class freedoms of the commons and wastes), the repetitions direct us to continuity (still graze...still winds), and change is softened to an imperceptible 'so little' (Linebaugh, 2008). The violent imposition of capitalist agriculture may have come but the viewer remains reassured about a continuity rooted in the land and spanning six hundred years.

In terms of this ideal of continuity, Kitty Hauser emphasizes the film's overlap with wartime British neo-Romanticism in the visual arts (Hauser, 2007). She identifies what she calls an 'archaeological imagination' or 'mystic materialism' in which these artists sought to reconcile modernity and tradition through an attention to landscape considered as a repository of the past (Hauser, 2007). For the archaeological imagination, in attending to the remains of the past found in the landscape—ruins, *tumuli*, rock art, the patterns of agriculture scored into the fields—the perception that 'nothing is lost' comforts those otherwise dismayed by modernity. But just as importantly, these artists recognise that modernity might be reconciled with tradition through the very mediation of contemporary and future technologies (Hauser, 2007, p.281). For instance, aerial photography alongside the techniques of modern field archaeology, might make the apparently lost past present again. A significant form of Löwy and Sayre's romantic conservatism is at work here, and it is clearly shared by Powell and Pressburger. Simon Featherstone's reading of the film converges with Hauser's (Featherstone, 2009). He is struck by the characteristic way it displays its self-reflexivity, drawing the viewer's attention to the way cinema itself (Peter is a cinema organist, for instance), and by extension modernity, brings us into contact with the past. To that extent, Colpeper's warnings about the cinema only help to confirm the distance between Powell and Pressburger's relaxed Englishness and the magistrate's peculiar, defensive and insular variety. The hazards of war and film actually reveal 'English cultural continuities' (Featherstone, 2009, p. 80).

Featherstone sees the film as a culminating example of an important interwar cultural tradition – the English travel narrative associated with figures such as Petre Mais, H.J. Masingham, J.B. Priestley, C.E. Montague, C.E.M.Joad, V. Morton and Jack Hilton. He argues that this form structured some of the complex political currents that struggled to re-define Englishness after World War One. These narratives were often open-ended journeys of discovery, seeking out a lost or secret England. For Gardiner, looking at the same material, as empire began to show its strains in the interwar period, so the English nation and the British state

began pulling in different directions and the issue of the nature of 'national experience in a state which had eclipsed it' became pressing (Gardiner, 2012, p. 17-18). He argues then that these narratives are marked by present tense, chance encounters, dialogue, and the movement of people through and over the land. Both Featherstone and Gardiner refer to a spirit of anti-enclosure rambling, an explicit political influence if one takes into account radical working-class movements such as the Ramblers Association (Featherstone, 2009, p.77). Furthermore, for Gardiner this writing's depiction of the wanderer 'sharing a historical present' with those they meet and the emphasis on unpredicted encounters as a means of making 'a 'civic community' are significant precisely because they implicitly challenge Burkean Britishness with its active repression of such a culture (Gardiner, 2012, p. 22). He talks of such travelogues in terms of a 'retaking of the commons', a practice of trespass and a 're-politicisation of the moment of Romanticism which codified the Burkean call to inaction' (Gardiner, 2012, p. 25-26).

In light of this, and given the explicit reference in *A Canterbury Tale* to the genre of English travel literature—Hilaire Belloc's 1904 text, *The Old Road*, an invocation of medieval Catholic English racial identity appears to be one of the narrative's sources—the perceived threat to Colpeper's world represented by those who in war-time conditions are at large in the English countryside becomes clearer (Featherstone, 2009, pp.79-80). After all, 'mob', a term of class abuse, has its origins in the Latin *mobile vulgus*, with its literal meaning, 'the moving commoners'. Alison, the victim of the Glueman's attack, is of course a 'land girl'—in the circumstances it is possible to imagine the threat she poses to Colpeper and the like as an unsupervised female moving about the land. Such wartime 'invasions' on the home front were in many ways unwelcome and after pouring glue in her hair Colpeper wastes no time in dismissing her; he wants her back on the train in the morning. At the same time, the very fortuitousness of the social connections and discoveries made by the band of modern pilgrims (Bob, and the village wheelwright discover they share a disapproval of haste which the latter then relates to the attitude of 'capitalists') is also suggestive of the desire expressed in the English journey narrative to open up horizons of experience.

Journeys. Chance meetings. Stories. Those that are recounted (Bob, Peter and Alison's previous lives), and those that develop out of such encounters and friendships. The genre of English travelogue was often dangerously open. To pose England as 'unknown', as such narratives frequently did, was to suggest a project whose end was equally unclear. How was one to know where such permissive rambling might lead? Colpeper's mission is to intercept such wandering and re-direct it to pre-existing channels or paths; to re-direct it back to the Old Road whose Chaucerian narrative is already part of an established tradition and whose destination therefore is already known. It is interesting in this respect that the conclusion of the journey of the three modern pilgrims take places with Colpeper accompanying them all the way to Canterbury. As if it were they who were under arrest and being 'returned' to a track they have strayed from. Of course this is all the more confusing given that it is the young pilgrims who believe they are delivering Colpeper to the appropriate authorities in Canterbury!

Out of all Powell and Pressburger's magus figures, Colpeper seems the most bizarre (Murphy, 2005). But despite Featherstone's plausible account of Powell and Pressburger's internal critique of the figure within the film, Colpeper retains an apparent resistance to interpretation, recognized by Featherstone amongst others, which needs addressing (Featherstone, 2009, p.78). One way of doing so is to consider the overlapping couplets of older man/ younger woman and English past/ English present. This is a recurrent structure in Powell and Pressburger's wartime films, found not just in *A Canterbury Tale* but also *I Know Where I am Going* (1945), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943). As Featherstone argues, Colpeper stands out as the one figure who seems to stymie rather than facilitate the 'flexible negotiation' within these two complementary pairs (Featherstone, 2009, p.80).

This anomaly is perhaps one that enables us to pursue further our interpretation of Colpeper's bizarre qualities, especially if we consider him less in terms of character plausibility, and more as a particularly compressed and distorted

figuration of the history of the British ruling class's performance of authority. The crucial point of reference here is, once again, Burke. It has been increasingly noted in accounts of Burke's work that the political and the aesthetic writings demand to be read together (Wood, 1964; Phillips, 2008). *A Canterbury Tale* is exemplary in this respect, combining as it does both characteristically strong aesthetic affects with a conservative-romantic political project. Others have recently sought to apply Burke's aesthetic theories to Powell and Pressburger films precisely in terms of their exploitation of the aesthetics of the sublime. Thus Hockenhull's approach seeks to correct the 'cosmopolitanist' reading of Powell and Pressburger by locating their use of the sublime aesthetics in the framework of native wartime Neo-Romanticism (Hockenhull, 2008). Following Burke, she argues that the sublime generates affects of astonishment, terror and fear, and she shows how Burke's inventory of a complex range of triggers for these affects touches on some of the key cinematographic conventions at work in Powell and Pressburger's films, including light effects and the depiction of landscape (Hockenhull, 2008, p. 15).

As Burke describes it, the sublime's powers of astonishment and horror can arrest the reasoning faculty of the mind, leaving it frozen with the force of the impression made on it (Burke, 2008, 53). Generally Hockenhull makes a good case for the presence of such a distinctive sublime aesthetic in Powell and Pressburger films, considering closely their expressionistic and gothic qualities, and relating the effects generated to the traumas endured by their war time audiences. She is also undoubtedly right about the stylistic overlap with Neo-Romantic visual arts of the period. However, other than a reference to the sublime iconography of the Industrial Revolution, she does not tie this aesthetic into the longer class history out of which it emerged. In other words, the aesthetics of class rule—something that clearly pre-occupied Burke—may well be at work in *A Canterbury Tale*. It might also be noted here that Hockenhull's analysis is explicitly aligned with the contemporary swing away from the analysis of narrative/meaning/ideology towards a concern with image/aesthetic experience, and that this division actually leaves Powell and Pressburger's peculiar intensities less rather than more clearly explained.

So, how can we extend this reading of Burke's sublime in such a way as to address the problem of Colpeper? Featherstone's argument about how the split between the past and the present is managed in terms of a negotiation between male and female characters which fails in the case of *A Canterbury Tale* offers an opportunity as Burke's preoccupation with the economy of the ruling class authority of the gentleman is couched in a discourse of gender. But to clarify this will involve shuttling between Burke's aesthetic and political concerns in order to build up a picture of his conception of the ideal functioning of ruling class authority.

Burke's explanation of the 'social passions' is that they create consensus and are the psychological source of the 'beautiful' (Burke, 2008, p. 39). There is a pleasurable, sympathetic and mimetic charge at work in these social passions out of which manners emerge (Burke, 2008, p.45). Thus, for Burke, the manners of the gentleman form the basis for the propagation of social harmony and order. Furthermore, the fitness of this ruling class style becomes experienced as beautiful. 'Beauty', as Terry Eagleton argues in his insightful discussion of Burke's aesthetics and eighteenth century British moral sense philosophy, becomes the sign of the achievement of ruling class hegemony (Eagleton, 1990, p. 42). Ethics and aesthetics are collapsed, the good and the beautiful mutually confirming one another. In such circumstances, any challenge to the status quo—any breach of its deeply naturalized decorum—is likely to be experienced not just as bad or unethical but also unfit or ugly. Novel or unfamiliar actions step out of the pleasant illumination of securely held good manners and become awkward, suspect, threatening.

The scenes in the film in which Colpeper is able to establish himself as a point of empathy/sympathy, and make people (specifically Alison) feel as he does are important in this respect. During his charged reverie on the continuities of English history in his interrupted lantern lecture, Alison is seen in close-up. She appears to be drifting, through the process of mimetic attraction, into Colpeper's orbit. In a related scene set on a hill overlooking Canterbury in the distance also

works to merge the figures; here the framing suggests a physical intimacy and attraction. The transmission of the values of the past, for which Colpeper offers himself, in ruling class style, as a conduit, becomes a pleasurable and spiritually uplifting experience. In this respect Colpeper becomes lovable – Burke sees love at the base of the social passions and by extension the aesthetics of the beautiful (Burke, 2008, p.47). Alison is clearly affected by his intensity here. However, Colpeper mediates the experience of Old England not just as a sensitivity to the pastoral beauties of the landscape but also in the presentation of the institutions of class power and privilege. Alison's first encounter with Colpeper's home, an elegant country residence, is a key scene. A sign of the mimetic effectiveness of the *Colpeper-effect*, she involuntarily exclaims that it is 'a perfect place!' and represents a life fulfilled when she adds, 'What I wouldn't give to grow old in a place like that'. This combination of pastoral picturesque and property will become a signal feature of what is in later decades referred to as the 'heritage film' (Higson, 1993).

The deeply ideological sphere of 'beautiful community' based on consensus, love and the lovely customs bred by good (ruling class) manners tells only part of Colpeper's (and Burke's) story (Wood, 1964, p.64). In a striking transition between the front and back of the house, she suddenly comes across Colpeper himself working with a scythe in his garden. This cryptic condensation of both the pastoral (and the mythic dissolution of class boundaries it signifies) and the gothic (the scythe as an ominous and here strangely located gothic-allegorical emblem of death) refers us to a structural problem in the aestheticisation of power. Eagleton makes the point that the aestheticisation of ruling class power described by Burke, whilst representing a significant advance in the eighteenth century over the internecine ruling class struggles of the seventeenth century, was nevertheless insufficient, and perceived to be so by Burke himself, because it did not address the split between values and capitalist activity (Eagleton, 1990). The monsters of class struggle thrived in that split. Capitalist agrarian landlords, in the 'improving' tradition to which Colpeper belongs, were more than willing to take on not just new agricultural technologies, but also to oversee and superintend altered social relations on the land, vigorously defending property

and propriety (Wood, 2002). Thus, in Burke's terms, the beautiful, which he saw as feminine, was by itself radically incomplete (Eagleton, 1990, p.55). Coercive authority or the masculine virtue, was also required if the ruling class was to secure and perpetuate its rightful position. As Neal Wood puts it, for Burke, Locke (who saw the social in terms of 'pleasure, love and trust') needed to be supplemented by Hobbes (who saw it in terms of 'pain, fear and power') (Wood, 1964, p.64). Or as Eagleton puts it, for Burke, authority could not ground itself unless some 'lawless force violates yet renews the feminine enclosure.' (Eagleton, 1990, p. 54).

The name that Burke gives to this masculine force is the sublime. As Wood argues, there is then in Burke's work an attention to the economy of 'government' which expresses itself in his aesthetic as well as explicitly political writing (Wood, 1964, p.64). For Burke community could not hold unless it was supported by the 'sublimity of government' (Wood, 1964, p.64). So while he argues on the one hand that mimesis/custom/manners are more important than law, on the other he maintains that law has to shatter this pleasurable and passive realm, asserting the pre-eminence of the spectre, if not the full bloody reality, of the coercive over the consensual. In this manner the sublime amounts to an aesthetically controlled mediation of ruling class coercion, striking awe and respect into its class subordinates. It is, concludes Eagleton, the 'anti-social condition of all sociality' (Eagleton, 1990, p. 54).

In order to better appreciate this strange conjunction of the lawful and the lawless it is important to have some sense of the historical relationship of the law to ruling class authority. Douglas Hay's work is useful here as he shows how the law functioned as a carefully calibrated exercising of class rule in which both ideology and coercion were joined (Hay, 2011). In other words, for the purposes of our argument, the law is a key area in which Burke's sublime was ideologically active, visible for instance in its careful acting out of a particular conception of *majesty, justice and mercy* in the face of the threat of class struggle (Hay, 2011, pp. 26-49).

Whilst it needs to be noted here that Hay's work refers to the eighteenth century, it can be extended beyond that period in terms both of the survival of this same culture of law in popular memory and in terms of a self-consciously archaic traditionalism in ruling class ideology (Hay, 2011, p.xxxv). Hay shows how English law invested in a sublime show of power or majesty and was thus able to cast the spell of terror whilst at the same time softening its blow with the discretionary powers of mercy. As a result the notorious bloody penal code of the eighteenth century, designed to enshrine the sanctity of property, was not as bloody as its own writ might have led it to be. The sublime display of authority was tempered, and sought its desired effect in a resulting 'reverential fear' (Wood, 1964, p.58). But this fear needed to be constantly renewed.

Burke himself seemed to be perfectly able to apply these principles to criminal justice. Consider, for instance his advice to the government in the face of that massive class insurrection, the Gordon Riots, in 1780; he suggested 'firmness and delicacy' as a response, in other words, the selective use of the terror of capital punishment. (Hay, 2011, p.50). The British ruling class became masters of fear and agents of mercy. Crucially, this theatre of class authority was personalized and involved an inbuilt potential for a charismatic setting aside of 'formalistic administration of law...based on ethical or practical judgements rather than on a fixed, "rational" set of rules' (Hay, 2011, p.40). This was particularly so, at the lower levels of jurisdiction, such as the Justice of the Peace. Eighteenth English century literature in particular is full of capricious gentlemen magistrates (Punter, 1998, pp.19-42). Generally such features signaled a recognition of the weakness of the British coercive apparatuses and a concomitant reliance on a certain paternalist discretion or 'grace of the ruler' in the fulfillment of the law's remit (Hay, 2010, p.40). Indeed, the mere fact of the critical concentration of these issues of authority in the domain of the law are an indication of a structurally irreducible political dilemma. This peculiarity of the relationship between law and the performance of authority also helps us to understand the final appearances of the largely unbowed though exposed Colpeper.

As Glueman, Colpeper's bungled appropriation of the blackout for the purposes of manufacturing sublime affects of terror and menace are indicative of the political crisis that the wartime home front represented for a particular form of traditional class authority. Furthermore, lantern lectures and pots of glue are no match for the state's use of the mass media in re-negotiating the terms of modernity and tradition. Through his actions Colpeper sacrifices the ruling class's establishment of 'reverential fear' for traditional values that is clearly linked in Burke's thought with the sublime (Wood, 1964, p.58). It is significant in this respect that Peter damns him by telling him that he 'likes' him. As Wood puts it, for the Burkean: 'A man of great virtue may be feared, honored, and respected, but there is no feeling of love, tenderness or affection for him as there is for a person of subordinate virtue' (Wood, 1964, p. 47). Colpeper, however, makes a bid to reclaim his authority at the end of the film, precisely through a reassertion of a transcendent social pre-eminence. In an act of ruling class effrontery, he shrugs off Peter's threat to invoke the law. This is a complex moment in the film. On the one hand, the ideological form taken by 'justice' in the English legal system has historically lain in its operating according to the principle of 'equality before the law' (Hay, 2011, p.33). Indeed, in the counter-revolutionary struggle against Jacobinism, the central place of law in the English constitution was emphasized (Hay, 2011, p.37). Colpeper appears to place himself in the hands of this same English justice at the end of the film after being discreetly brought to account for his actions by Bob, Peter and Alison. But he refers his case to a 'higher authority' and in this manner re-activates alongside mystical religiosity a historical memory of class power that trumps the law understood in the mundane sense as a 'formalistic administration' or even understood as ideology of justice. In this way, Colpeper is covered in the glorious charismatic indifference of his class. Mercy, it seems, extends to Colpeper the Glueman, backed up by the deity himself. Is there not some recapturing of the majesty of power here in this sublime ruling class 'face'?

Ian Christie describes Colpeper as a 'troublesome radical, willing to break the law that he is supposed to uphold as a magistrate for the sake of his militant belief in an English tradition' (Christie, 2005, p. 86). Certainly this describes the

contortions of conservative romanticism with its objection to 'materialism', usually understood as working-class pleasures that stand in for 'capitalism'. In Colpeper's case, this manifests itself as a disdain for the cinema. Equally, on the strength of Christie's meticulous and persuasive scholarly research into the contents of Colpeper's library, visible in the shot of his study, it is clear that Colpeper adheres to 'the latest thinking about ecology and fertility' (Christie, 2005, p.87). Yet this account with its exclusively contemporaneous view of Colpeper misses the character's relationship to the longer historical trajectory of the British capitalist class where contradiction, troublesomeness and exceptionalism are certainly traits of belonging, not those of outsiderdom.

The attempted *coup de théâtre* is only part of the story. Despite Colpeper's bold exit, his botched and bungled earlier performances allow glimpses into the historical nature of the ruling class authority. That history is characterised not only by the strains of authority exercised, but also by class struggle. Fleeting and enigmatically referenced in the film's prologue, that struggle constitutes a gothic past which is discontinuous with a present it disconcerts, rather than existing in a relation of continuity with a comfortable present it works to confirm. It is perhaps therefore fitting that on this terrain Colpeper appears in the guise of the popular idiom of monstrosity. Indeed, the very name 'Glue-man' is a spontaneous Hollywoodism of the type this Kentish Englishman deprecates. As David McNally argues, the monster is the master trope in which the class struggles of capitalism have circulated in both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary discourses since the early modern period, including Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* whose ferocious counter-revolutionary monsterology is justly famed (McNally, 2011). But the Glue-man is not the only monster who passes under the shadow of the blackout. There are two further categories of monsterised otherness we need to take note of: the *witch* and the *village idiot*. Both, like the gentleman farmer, are figures that can be placed historically in the development of the capitalist mode of production.

The witch is summoned up by the ducking stool in Colpeper's courthouse. In the context of English history the meaning and identity of the figure of the witch

suggests the moment of primitive accumulation in which the enforced division of people from their means of subsistence in the land, often by enclosure of the commons, led to a demonization of those who resisted. As McNally puts it, the 'non-enclosed body of the common people' was gendered and animalized, being seen as wild, primitive and in need of ruling class discipline (MacNally, 2011, p.44). In the early modern period women were often associated with enclosure riots and with the defense of customary, non-capitalist social obligations that led to attacks on them in the name of patriarchal gender norms. The ducking stool was a technology that took its place in this silencing of women in the early English transition to capitalism, although Silvia Federici argues that witch hunting all over Europe during this period was related to the emergence of capitalist social relations (Federici, 2004). The Glueman's attacks on women resonate with this history while the gothic *mise en scene* of the film's opening accentuates the impression of secret, possibly cruel and violent shut in space through its architectural fragmentation seen in the focus on stairs, passages, cupboards, and shut doors. This impression of a gothic landscape is further intensified by the compositions in which vision is blocked and partial and establishing shots are withheld, especially in Colpeper's inner sanctum, the courthouse.

The meeting with the village idiot is, as Moor argues, another odd and sadistic scene (Moor, 2005, p.108). But it differs from the Glueman's appearance in that it is visible and not left to our imagination. In this way it acquires an obscene quality. The three modern pilgrims move through the blacked-out streets, in search of Alison's assailant, when they come across an individual whose severe stammer they mock, laughing as they name him 'the village idiot'. He leaves in anger. A historical sibling to the witch, the village idiot also stands as a discarded figure whose marginality is related to the reconfiguring of the bonds of non-capitalist social relations within capitalist forms of agriculture. The latter loosened older kinship bonds and communal social forms, decreased the margins of peasant autonomy and slackened the obligations of feudal paternalism. The convention of mocking rustics can also be seen in the culture of the early modern period, for instance in Shakespeare, often alongside the

disciplining of assertive women (scolds/shrews/witches). In both cases, attention to speech is a critical marker of these changes. Contrasting with the sufficiency of ruling class eloquence and the word of command, the witch spoke too much and the idiot too little. The control of speech thus became an important aspect of class culture in the period after the convulsions of the English Revolution when the loquacity of the socially inferior had been so prevalent. The mute idiot or the stupid cackling multitude haunt these early capitalist landscapes (McNally, 2011, pp.70-71). Moreover, this type of scene recurs in Powell and Pressburger's films from the period. For instance, *A Matter of Life and Death*, with its shadowing of Shakespearean romantic pastoral, makes reference to *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and the scene in which Puck bewitches/monsterises the 'rude mechanical' Bottom by giving him an ass's head.

Finally, if the witch and the village idiot take us back to the moment of the transition into agrarian capitalism, so too, in a different sense does the film's attention to the child. Here we shift generic registers again, moving from the gothic back to the pastoral. In the scenes featuring the games of local children, organized by Bob along the lines of martial adventure (a kind of Boy Scouts or Boys Own model of early twentieth century Anglo-American boyhood), there is a concealed reference to the pre-capitalist commons, except in this case the commons in question belong outside the national borders. The point of cultural transmission here is Rudyard Kipling, an acknowledged and clearly recognized influence on Powell (Christie, 1994, p.6). Peter Linebaugh argues that Kipling's *Jungle Books* transcode the 'ancient discourse of commoning and the modern discourse of communism into childhood' (Linebaugh, 2008, p.163). The Mowgli stories celebrate the unenclosed Indian jungles ('jungle' is a Hindi word in origin meaning 'waste or forest') (Linebaugh, 2008, p.162). *Moglai* the word used by the Dang people of western India, refers to 'the time before [tax collectors, land demarcation, and forest guards]...when freedom prevailed, along with hunting, fishing, gathering, shifting cultivation, and collecting mahua flowers and seeds' (Linebaugh, 2008, p.163).

As the British empire enclosed the Indian forests in the late nineteenth century, so romantics like Kipling reinvented what imperialism had repressed ('human relations of the commons'), within the 'bedroom and nursery in children's utopias', including most famously, *The Jungle Book*, itself a mode for Baden Powell's scouting movement (Linebaugh, 2008, pp.161-3). Kipling effected a gender switch as English commoning tended to be female and Indian commoning cultures were not marked by the 'subjugation of women' (Linebaugh, 2008, p. 162). By marking the communism of the commons as childish he also suggested that its ending was a civilisational necessity – jungly Mowgli has to grow up (Linebaugh, 2008 p.164). It is not just then that Kipling's work represents an 'ideological recolonisation of the English countryside to bolster empire from within', offering the downs of Sussex alongside the Northwest Frontier as cognate sites for those (masculine) rites of passage which might revive the Imperial spirit (Moor, 2005, p.103). There is an equally significant fascination in this English culture of childhood with the memory of the commons. From a conservative romantic position, such pre-capitalist nostalgia was of course tempered by a sense of the necessity of an enclosing and taking in hand of such unruly freedoms in the name of imperial civilisational progress (Mowgli, recall, grows up to work in the Indian Forestry Department, which is, as Linebaugh puts it " 'the great superstructure' of discommoning" (Linebaugh, 2008, p.163).

Lord of the Rings: Romanticism and Neoliberal Globalism.

Can *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, including *The Fellowship of The Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*, films which were financed by Hollywood and produced by a New Zealand production company, be discussed under the rubric of British cinema? Higson includes them in his study of contemporary English films on the strength of their English literary intertext and in terms of his larger argument concerning the necessarily globally/transnationally integrated dimensions of the contemporary British film industry (Higson, 2010). In the context of the arguments made here, it may well be the case that the early, pioneering British experience of capitalism, and the specific traditions of

romanticism that have mediated those experiences, offer a useful set of themes and forms that are now generally available for exploring the contemporary crises of a global capitalism. As Higson points out, Englishness is seen as 'steeped in history' in the global film marketplace (Higson, 2010, p.251). However, as he also points out, the various faces of this association range from the civilised, pastoral 'dramas' of 'modern history', all the way to a very different kind of 'pre-modern' history depicted in blockbuster forms of epic/action adventure and 'dirty realism' (Higson, 2010, p.207). The former (for instance, the many Austen adaptations of the 90s and beyond) he periodises in terms which fit Gardiner's long eighteenth century, in other words, as running roughly parallel with the heyday of the British capitalist imperial state. These films which are sometimes referred to simply as 'heritage films' remain a niche brand of art house cinema. However, the latter, with their less precise mythological/medieval periodisation focus on forces of barbarism and feature the 'violent and aggressive exercise of power' (Higson, 2010, p.205). Through their emphasis on coercion and bloody struggle films such as *Braveheart* (1995) refer us to a convergence of the past and the present in the long history of the capitalist mode of production. That is to say, they can focus attention on the moment of 'primitive accumulation', not as something restricted to the past, but as a continuing experience of dispossession under neoliberal structural adjustment with its enforced transformation of a global peasantry into a landless urban proletariat. Popular blockbusters like *Lord of the Rings*, offer a complex romanticism in which restitutionist forms lack conviction, and revolutionary ones are unavailable.

A good place to start analyzing the peculiarities of the engagement of the Jackson adaptations with traditions of romanticism is through a comparative assessment with their literary originals (*The Hobbit* 1937, and *The Lord of the Rings* 1949). Ishay Landa's Jamesonian reading of Tolkien's fantasy novels is particularly useful (Landa, 2002). For Landa *The Hobbit* appears operates within restitutionist/conservative romantic terms. The Shire remains throughout a refuge: Bag End, the comfortable 'epitome of bourgeois existence' nestles in an apparently feudal social context, and can be regained after Bilbo's adventure (Landa, 2002, p.124). Thus, as the full title of the book has it: *The Hobbit, or There*

and Back Again. The reversibility of direction in space here stands for a reversibility of time itself with the Shire securely locked in its apparently timeless order. In the *Lord of the Rings*, however, the One Ring which first appears in the previous book, is subject to a symbolic inflation and its evil, determining power becomes inexorable. For Landa, the power of the One Ring points to the problem of capitalist property relations. In the first half of the twentieth century context in which both books were written the crisis of capitalism expressed itself in the imperial conflict culminating in World War One and the Bolshevik revolution. The One Ring condenses the contradictions of capitalism ('the most uncontrollable of all historical modes of production') out of which these historic convulsions emerged (Landa, 2002, p.122). Landa argues that Tolkien's narratives offer imaginary resolutions to capitalism's inescapable structuring polarities: those of production/destruction; the power of the few/impotence of the many; luxury/poverty, and hope/betrayal (Landa, 2002, p.122).

Furthermore, *The Lord of the Rings*, in responding to the problems of capitalist private property insists on the impotence of the ethical/personal level. The voluntarism of Bilbo, his heroic renunciation of property (the Arkenstone) which is sufficient to prevent the conflict between elf and dwarf in *The Hobbit*, is insufficient to deal with the problem represented by the One Ring as it manifests itself in the later text. A radical challenge is perceived to be necessary, but the agent of that historic challenge represents a sticking point. The 'orcish proletariat' is not, for Tolkien, an option, and whilst hobbits ultimately succeed in the task of destroying the One Ring, it is revealing that the world cannot be re-made as a result (Landa, 2002, p.126). The narrative ends with an impression of loss, with partings and departures, and sad journeys into uncertain futures. The necessity of revolution becomes a retreat into an unconvincing conservative romanticism that typically seeks to blur the logic of capitalism represented by the One Ring (a logic of dispossession and accumulation, compulsion and exhaustion). This attempt to transcend the problem of revolution moves us back in time, as Sam Gamgee, a loyal Baggins vassal, inherits Bag End, itself reconceived as the 'one small garden of a free gardener' (Landa, 2002, p.129).

This revives the mythology of the small, independent landowner underpinning the pastoral idyllic form, which in a grand historical irony operates as the idealization of a far more rapacious history of English agrarian capitalism. It is precisely the early disappearance of the English peasantry, along with the enclosure of land as private property and the engrossment of the commons that is behind the take off of agrarian capitalism. As Landa sums up the dialectical twists and turns of the book: 'private property [the ring/capitalism] must be destroyed [by hobbits] so as to impede social revolution [by proletarian orcs] so as to preserve private property [in its apparently non-capitalist, feudal appearance-form]' (Landa, 2002, p.130).

But what is the viewer to make of the contemporary film adaptations? The specific form of the determining historical crisis that constitutes the repressed and energizing material of its political unconscious is neoliberalism. But this regime of capital accumulation reconfigures the balance of class fears. It is not now just the proletariat that is seen by the capitalist class as a threat. The problem for the capitalist is also *capitalism*. That is to say, in an era in which the global market system is figured as enchanted both by those it exploits (as seen in the turn to popular narratives of monsterology and sorcery documented in the work of McNally), and by those who exploit (as seen in forms of triumphalist neoliberal ideology, with its submission to irrational myths of value underpinned by the magical wealth of financialisation), then Marx's metaphors of capitalism and the occult have become supercharged (Marx, 1979, pp.163-165; McNally, 2011). The creation of wealth is increasingly associated with cultural forms that speak of sudden, magical enrichment and impoverishment, as well as of horrific forms of enslavement and violence inhering in social relations.

The problem of the relation of the capitalist to the system of capitalism is transposed by the filmic *Lord of the Rings* into the problem of power and authority. As the prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring* indicates, the narrative takes place within a context defined above all else by the insecurity of rule, the decline of kingdoms and princely powers. The source of this disturbance is tracked to the One Ring, and its 'will to dominate all life' that infects all relationships between distinct but previously allied jurisdictions, bringing

destruction and insecurity. Scattered throughout the film (and indeed throughout the trilogy as a whole) is the cinematographic iconography of the sublime: vast expanses of 'territory' covered in swooping aerial shots; immense statuary and ruins indicating fallen 'races' and civilizations. Incredible wealth and power is suggested, but its possession is constantly convulsed and fails to endure during the long history dominated by the One Ring.

An important figure who helps to develop this central problematic of the film is Saruman whose fortunes rise and spectacularly fall. Saruman is a corrupted wizard, the inverted double of Gandalf and client of Sauron. His stronghold, Isengard, is constructed as a duplication of his master's, with a destroyed hinterland, sucked clean of all life, surrounding a monolithic tower. Whole forests are consumed in his furnaces which are manned by orcs manufacturing his machines of war. The terms of the romantic critique of the industrial revolution are clear in these scenes. But whilst on an iconographic level the images of Isengard suggest a Miltonic sublime (a kind of *Pandaemonium*), there is little sense that this hell might be redeemed. To use Humphrey Jennings' Blakean metaphor that he mobilized to structure his complex, revolutionary romantic, post-war history of the English Industrial Revolution, there is little chance that this *Pandaemonium* will be transformed into Jerusalem (Jennings, 1985, p.5). Saruman's fabulous accumulation of wealth takes the form of a stockpiling of the means of destruction. The squalor of the habitat in which natural growth has disappeared and a multitudinous orc workforce is housed in vast slums is offset by Isengard's sublime, vertiginous, sheer stone tower, all of which is suggestive not just of the nineteenth century moment of industrial despoliation of the natural world, but of the contemporary activities of neoliberal capitalism, especially in the global south where urbanization has produced 'planet of slums' and the fortresses of the super-rich (Davis, 2007).

But perhaps the central aspect of this character is to be found in his peculiar relationship to his workforce of orcs. As a proletariat their originality lies in their de-dialecticisation. That is to say they have none of the magic of abjection that the dialectics of monstrousness carries in the contemporary African witchcraft tales which McNally has so ably analysed as an innovative contemporary response

to postcolonial neoliberalism (McNally, 2011). These orcs are not 'hopeful monsters' for whom grotesque collective corporeality speaks of a folkloric prolepsis of the overcoming of destructive social divisions and mutilating labour (McNally, 2011, p.251). The dialectic, particularly as it is understood in historical materialism, promises through its reversals, doublings and sublations, a process in which social positions shift and liberation is possible. In this respect the disturbingly original feature of the representation of Saruman's workforce lies in the image of orc parturition. Proletariat was a term of abuse for the working class that Marx transvalued. It originally signified those whose contribution to the social order was seen to be restricted to the mere reproduction of offspring. The working class simply made more of the working class. But this process of parturition or making was developed. Marx asserted that it was the working class that made new or surplus value in capitalist societies. Later Marxist historians like E.P. Thompson asserted that as a political presence the working class was not simply passively produced by the historical force of the Industrial Revolution, by its corralling in factories for instance (Thompson,1991). Instead they made or gave birth to themselves as much as they were made by history (Thompson, 1991, p. 213). This is crucial. Not an occult parturition, which as we will see characterizes Saruman's orcs, but a conscious one. What did Thompson mean by his formulation? Essentially that working class existence, at all times, involves an active, creative, responsive dimension. Self-making is involved, as well as the harder experience of necessity, or history's making. Without this, the working class potential for liberation, or re-making, is foreclosed and the whole dialectic of self-transformation through struggle, as envisaged by Marx, becomes an inherent improbability.

What then is this the manner of the birthing of Saruman's orcs? Firstly it needs to be noted that his Isengard horde is 'bred'. Gandalf claims that Saruman has been crossing orcs and goblins to produce a deadly fighting breed of monster: the *uruk hai*. Later, Saruman himself tells us that orcs were originally elves who were taken by the dark powers, tortured and mutilated into a ruined form of life, presumably as slaves. He adds that he has 'perfected' that process by further breeding to produce the 'fighting' *uruk hai*. What is interesting about this scene is

that this genealogy is given directly to a *uruk hai*. But there is no sense that the exercise of this abusive, deadly power over the life of these creatures might provoke a desire for liberation. The *uruk hai* have no purpose other than that given them by their master. Finally, the viewer is given glimpses of the birth of these creatures out of the earth – a form of sorcerer’s mud birth. Once again, any sense of autonomous existence is forestalled by a process of endogenous creation from within the womb of the sorcerer’s domain. While the idea of an ultimate elf origin for these creatures supplies a history of violent control and alienation, and therefore a suggested possible future struggle for liberation, this is a narrative that has become inoperative in as much as elf and orc can no longer view each other as having common ground. A ‘racialised’ genetics represents then the rupturing of any sense of a social totality. In this respect it is interesting that throughout the three films the elves are largely seen as detaching themselves from a dying world. As in the book, elves are periodically seen leaving Middle Earth, like columns of refugees. The elf judgement on the hopelessness of the state of Middle Earth is significant because it entrenches the perception of ontological racial/species difference in terms of a metaphysical dualism of good and evil (with the spiritualised woodland elves representing the good).

There are various points of contact with neoliberalism here, most notably in the films’ reproduction of the terms of neoliberal ‘dirty ontologies’ that have accompanied increasing social polarization and attitudes to class (Tyler, 2008, 18). In a regime of capital accumulation that has sought to bury any notion that labour is the source of value and has instead sought to promote the miracle of dematerialized self-generating value in circuits of exchange, the working class, often feminised and racialised in ‘underclass’ forms, is not the source of surplus value: it is simply surplus matter. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, with its broken social totality and its de-dialecticised others, is a figuration of this neoliberal broken whole. As McNally puts it, given the divisions within the working class that have been sustained through the long history of class discipline and ‘political anatomy’, the moment of class consciousness and collective action might be irrevocably missed (McNally, 2011, p.266). Clearly, this belief has

acquired a significant presence within mainstream popular culture. On a certain level, neoliberalism does not believe in the dangerousness of its own monsters. In *The Return of the King*, for instance, it is noticeable that the orcs talk and behave in a way that seems linguistically close to a comic nineteenth century cockney rabble.

Like the literary texts, the films appear to reconfigure the idea of proletarian revolution. Revolutionary agency is kept away from the multitudinous orcs and handed to a little platoon of hobbits that in turn purifies itself by splitting the bad hobbit corrupted by an uncontrollable desire for the empire of private property (Gollum and his 'precious', the One Ring) from the good hobbit (Frodo who like Bilbo heroically resists the One Ring through the strength of the pre-capitalist values of the Shire). A more collective narrative of revolutionary agency is vested in the Ents, the talking tree shepherds. The Ents' sleepiness and slowness, their sylvan, pre-capitalist rhythms, help to ensure that their revolutionary rage, directed at the Saruman, can be kept within 'traditional' social boundaries. They return to a state of somnolence at the narrative's conclusion. Injured nature itself moves to heal the breach, re-feudalising itself.

The position of the elves in the film as regards the political problem posed by the ring is complex. Some ultimately fight against Saruman and refuse to abandon Middle Earth. Arwen, daughter of Elrond, stays faithful to the future King, Aragon. However, the majority of the elves appear to flee to the 'west'. These woodland creatures, abandoning their habitats, are clearly in some sense a complex figuration of the contemporary process of migration from the land as means of production to urban slums and the so called informal economy. This strikes at the heart of the historical resources of conservative romanticism as it reveals the very logic in operation at the origins of the 'traditional' societies it idealises (Old England for instance which is the model for the Shire). This is ultimately why the elves are fleeing into an vague retreat, beyond Middle Earth entirely. There has to be somewhere to go, especially when the insight into the history of capitalism provided by contemporary neoliberal 'accumulation by dispossession' suggests that there is, and indeed often was nowhere to go

(Harvey, 2010, pp.48-49). The enclosure of the global commons is a continuation of that long historical process (Heller, 2011, p.93).

Finally, it might be argued that these reflections enable us to refine our reading of the sublime landscapes in the film. The cinematography was shot in New Zealand and is frequently characterized by aerial sequences seeking to create sublime effects. As I have already argued, in part this refers us to a rise-and-fall civilizational narrative structure, sharpened by use of the CGI colossi and ruined grand architecture. However, equally, these swooping shots in which we are taken over mountain ridges and plunge down into steep valleys and out across immense plains, are suggestive of the problem of the enclosure of the global commons. The giganticism of a space which is largely seen to be un-inhabited evokes the concentration and monopolization of land and natural resources that neoliberal structural adjustment policies enforce in the global South. That is to say, the point of view implied by these aerial shots, is not just auto-referential 'cinematic' spectacle, the blockbuster aesthetic of high production values. The perspective could just as equally be that of the state/corporate prospector or survey. The land does not bear the traces of physical enclosure, the traditional visible markers of private property. Instead it is enclosed by disembodied forces, of which the aerial cinematographic ride provides a surrogate, and echoes with the voices of wizards. These voices, it is suggested, travel great distances, magically enfolding space into their territories; just as Sauron's lidless eye shrinks the space of the entire breadth and length of Middle Earth, from Mordor to the Shire. But it is interesting to note that across the sequences in all three films in which Sauron's eye sweeps the territory of Middle Earth in search of the One Ring, the signs of this natural wealth of the landscape are reversed and emptied by both a flaring, colourless image and a grating dissonance on the sound track, as if to suggest through sensory deprivation a gargantuan force of despoliation.

Robinson, the Neoliberal Gothic and Revolutionary Romanticism

Keiller's Robinson trilogy is exemplary in its exposure of conservative romanticism to the critical and utopian scrutiny of revolutionary romanticism. As defined by Löwy and Sayre, revolutionary/utopian romanticism seeks the inspiration of a pre-capitalist past in the hope that it will help guide the project of abolishing capitalism and the grounding of an egalitarian future. They also argue that romanticism persists in the twentieth century, for instance in the historical *avant gardes*. Keiller's work is self-consciously indebted to twentieth century European modernism and nineteenth romanticism (Dave, 2006). For instance, amongst other influences, the fictional character Robinson has clearly been affected by surrealism's twin desire to transform life (Rimbaud) and the world (Marx) (Löwy and Sayre, 2002, p.214). This is the same aspiration that persisted in the cultural politics of the 1960s (Debord, Vaneigem, Lefebvre), and it is an aspiration on which the central character Robinson gambles with his sanity and security in *Robinson in Space*. Take the grand and desperate opening statement in the film which is taken from Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

Reality, as it evolves, sweeps me with it. I am struck by everything and, though not everything strikes me in the same way, I am always struck by the same contradiction: although I can always see how beautiful anything could be if only I could change it, in practically every case there is nothing I can really do. Everything is changed into something else in my imagination, then the dead weight of things changes it back into what it was in the first place. A bridge between imagination and reality must be built

However, despite these apparent points of connection with the main traditions of European modernism and romanticism, Keiller's Robinson films have not been discussed in terms of their nationally specific engagement with romanticism. Here, it is the gothic mode that provides the key form in which the romantic revolutionary desires expressed by Robinson are explored. Gardiner's work on Britishness is essential for understanding the struggle played out in the Robinson trilogy between conservative romanticism (described by Gardiner in terms of its Burkean complexion) and revolutionary romanticism (which

Gardiner argues often takes the form of a gothic counter-reaction to Burkean British state repression).

For Gardiner, counter-revolutionary Burkeanism helped to produce a strange national culture sealed off from the claims of popular sovereignty and rooted firmly in a sense of naturalised legitimation. This culture's imperial diffusion sustained it up to the early twentieth century until a protracted crisis set in following the convulsion of World War One, the accelerating process of decolonization, particularly after World War Two and the end of the post-war boom in the seventies, which brought with it de-industrialisation and increasing devolutionary disquiet. The response, in the form of Thatcherite neoliberalism, amounted to a neo-Burkean authoritarianism that armed itself against enemies within and without the state, alongside an insistence on the 'unthinkability' and danger of political change and finally, a dogmatic re-statement of the spontaneous naturalness of the free market. According to Gardiner, since the late 1970s, this neo-Burkeanism has been challenged by a variety of neo-Gothic cultural formations. Firstly, in Scottish literary culture since the 1980s where the constitutional crisis created by a clear democratic deficit (Scotland under the Tories voting against a system which was then imposed on it) encouraged a focusing on the repressed violence of the British state-nation. Gardiner refers in particular to the work of Iain Banks and Alasdair Gray (Gardiner, 2012, pp. 118-122). Secondly in 'counter-state' gothic subcultures of the same period which arose in response to the process of working class disenfranchisement and social abandonment, for instance Industrial Gothic music of the 1980s (Gardiner, 2012, p.122). And finally Gardiner explores a 'nuclear gothic' seen in the documentary television sub-genre of the nuclear disaster, for instance Barry Hines' *Threads* (1984), Troy Martin's *Edge of Darkness* (1985) and Duncan Campbell's *Secret Society* (1987). What Gardiner sees as unifying these versions of the gothic is that despite their different tactics, they were all seeking to expose the 'locked-in violence' of the power of the British state (Gardiner, 2012, p.127). In this way, they allowed repressed voices to draw attention to the tabooed violence saturating British life. At the same time these gothic irruptions were content to

take on the appearance of the ugly, excessive, uncivilized and unnatural (Gardiner, 2012, p.115).

The period covered by the Robinson films (the British election of 1992 through to the period of the financial crash of 2008), clearly coincides with a process of deepening concern with the constitutional crisis which Gardiner understands in terms of the neo-Burkean retrenchment. Thus, in *London* the executive abolition of the Greater London Council is a central issue in what Robinson calls the 'problem of London'. In *Robinson in Space* this curtailment of metropolitan popular sovereignty is further emphasized by Robinson's exploration of the neoliberal strengthening of the state, the re-arming of its secretiveness and exclusivity (Gardiner, 2012, p.116). The film attempts an extensive mapping of British state capitalism, teasing out the relationships between the financial, military and corporate sectors, and their promotion and protection by varied state and para-state agencies. A discourse of espionage is put into play as Robinson, the freelance spy, attempts to turn the tables on this secret state apparatus. Related to this, there is a re-invocation of the English journey narrative. As was the case then, these journeys seek to uncover the civic nation (once again a lost and to be discovered England that has been suppressed by the British state) through an implicit 'anti-enclosure' trespassing across private domains. In this way, Robinson's journeys help to elicit the hidden topography of power and property ownership. Towards the end of the film, he becomes increasingly volatile, resorting to direct action (sabotage) against the aerospace industry and its military-state applications.

Over the length of the three films a large amount of historical fact emerges, much of it suggestive of hidden narratives of collusion between the state, the ruling class and capitalist forces (Dave, 2000). This concern with reconfiguring the standard Whig history of British constitutional liberalism (with its associations of superiority and international pre-eminence) is an aspect of the gothic interest in revealing hidden history through narratives rooted in paranoia, conspiracy and secrecy. What builds up over the course of the trilogy then is a historically verifiable not an *uchronic* past (as seen for instance in conservative romantic

‘tradition’). However, in the process of establishing this history (in all its sinister, eerily inhibiting and threatening presence), Robinson himself becomes progressively de-substantialised. Thus, from the embodied optimism in *London*, through the wild, erratic moods of *Robinson in Space*, Robinson is gradually worn out, transformed into a ghostly presence in *Robinson in Ruins*. This ruination of the character is linked not just to the exhausting, quixotic nature of his battle against the British state (he spends the time between the end of *Robinson in Space* and the beginning of *Robinson in Ruins* in prison) but also to the increasing attenuation of his social experience (as a politically active, civically minded individual, Robinson’s isolation and ‘eccentricity’ is to be understood precisely as a social condition imposed upon him by the repression of such civic desires by a vicious neo-Burkeanism). He also loses the company of his lover, the narrator of the first two films, who operates as a part-time collaborator and journeyer. By the time of the period covered in *Robinson in Ruins* this character has died leaving Robinson more isolated than ever and only connected to the world through the largely impersonal research institute which later, after his final vanishing, takes his name for their organization. Appropriately, this institute’s expressed aims, at the prompting of Robinson, are political and social. They seek the establishment of an ‘experimental settlement: in spaces of extraordinary biomorphic architecture’ and propose to ‘devise ways to reform land ownership and democratic government...’

Land and power. The ghost of Thomas Colpeper. And for the revolutionary, Robinson, ghosting, de-substantialisation. It is strongly implied that death has caught up with Robinson too. And this emphasis on ruination and exhaustion is an important general theme in *Robinson in Ruins*. In retrospect it is possible to see a mounting sense of emergency within the national time-span represented by the three films. This stretches from the surprise Tory re-election in 1992 to the convulsions of the financial markets and their neoliberal state partners in the autumn of 2008. But the process of ruination depicted affects not just individuals like Robinson, but the ecosystem itself. Once again, a key trope of conservative romanticism is placed under intense scrutiny and pressure. Nature itself is collapsing. In *Robinson in Space* we see the comforting illusions of the pastoral

idyll of the English countryside striped away, giving the film its inimitable combination of pastoral and gothic – see for instance the shots at Charborough Park (Dave, 2000). A similar impression of a sinister but at the same time smiling countryside is sought in *Robinson in Ruins*. Into these traditionally pacified landscapes an unfamiliar history of violence and capital accumulation is related backwards to agrarian capitalism and empire and forwards to contemporary neoliberalism. What is destabilised in *Robinson in Space* is not just that ideological containment strategy of conservative romanticism whereby capitalism is believed to be confined to purely ‘industrial’ uncouth forms, but also the very alibi of a naturally sanctioned social order. However, in *Robinson in Ruins* this questioning of nature goes further when the film imagines both the possible collapse of ecosystems and the idea of an independent agency attributable to non-human nature. Nature itself becomes the steward of a ‘life’ which includes the human, but which the human can no longer pretend to rule or indeed discover its own ideal social image in. As if to rub in the anti-Burkean aspect of this move Keiller juxtaposes, in the book accompanying the Tate Britain installation based on the film, opposing statements from Burke and from Polanyi:

Burke: We, the people, ought to be made sensible, that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer, or which hangs over us (Keiller, 2012, p.34)

Polanyi: Such an institution [a self-adjusting market] could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society (Keiller, 2012, p.34)

Burke and Polanyi are referencing the 1795 decision by Berkshire magistrates at Speenhamland to devise some system of poor relief for those suffering in the wake of the development of a market society. I have discussed elsewhere the significance of Speenhamland for both classical political economy and its

neoliberal reincarnation (Dave, 2011). For Burke it was an aberration: the state should not intervene in the god given laws of nature. For Polanyi, the counter movement against *laissez-faire*, which he denatured by pointing out its planned imposition, was a 'natural' reflex of society preserving itself.

In the film, the godless non-human intelligences of nature (the lichen, *Xanthoria Parietina*) enlist Robinson as their ally in this struggle against neoliberalism. Death – human and planetary – is at stake in this struggle which emerges in the narrative through the historical problem of the control of the land and the general means of life. Robinson's reactivation of the English travel narrative traces a long and largely hidden history of dispossession, that of the proletarianisation of the peasantry through the enclosures of the commons. But this story is not restricted to the past. It is ongoing. Doreen Massey's contribution to the research project out of which *Robinson in Ruins* emerged was an exegesis of the film that in part drew out its implications for the global present (Massey, 2011). She points out how neoliberalism has been mobilizing global armies of landless free workers who are consequently vulnerable to hunger and starvation. The bread riots of 2008 in Egypt, noted in *Robinson in Ruins*, are linked not just to the problems of finance capitalism (in this case the fluctuation of the price of wheat), but also to the ongoing dispossession of the global peasantry (Massey, 2011). Indeed, Keiller himself glosses those parts of the film that reference the enclosures (not just the nineteenth century events such as those at Otmoor common, but also early modern moments of the same process, for instance at Hampton Gay), in terms of the neoliberal process of 'dispossession' whereby an engrossing 'super-rich' has emerged, taking into its control 'previously hard-won collective assets and social fabric' (Keiller, 2012, p.59).

Robinson's romanticism, however, is sensitive not just to the whisperings of a post-capitalist future suggested by the perspective of his non-human ally, *Xanthoria Parietina*. He is also clearly inspired the presence of flowers and insects, as evidenced by their appearance in the many, long held shots that drift clear of the narrative and of any immediate sense of the human presence. But

perhaps just as significant are the enduring signs of a pre-capitalist, Neolithic past which reveals itself within the same landscape whose history of agrarian capitalist dispossession he uncovers. This represents a significant departure from conservative romanticism's idealization of a hybrid feudal/capitalist mode of production. What Engels called the primitive communist mode of production (Neolithic hunter-gatherers) represents a form of existence or in the film's terms 'dwelling', that is unquestionably outside both the experience of class and capitalism – there being no permanent surplus to appropriate with which a dominant class might be sustained (Engels, 2010, p. 69). Robinson's encounter with this past is through its rock art, which is not associated with the sedentary enclosure of land under agrarian capitalism (Keiller, 2012, p.19). The nomadism of hunter-gatherers, its different way of existing in and on the land, is contrasted with the displacements of the peasantry initiated by agrarian capitalism in which poverty, exploitation and hunger are predominant. Robinson is reported to have been reading about the Removal Act of 1795 which enabled a greater mobility in the labour market. It is an Act whose date coincides with the Speenhamland decision.

Robinson's interest in primitive communism is not simply an embrace of a borderless world of nomadic mobility. As Massey puts it, the issue is not the crossing of borders ("Let there be wandering!"), but more importantly the problem of belonging, and whether it is collective and equitable or not (Massey, 2011). In some situations, therefore, the challenge is to establish borders and protect a territory, so that dwelling can at least take place. Thus, there is a suggested point of contact or contrast between the eviction and dispossession narrative in the film (the enclosures recorded at sites like Otmoor common) and the idea of Neolithic movement through the landscape (sustained as it is by a form of dwelling which is not exploitative or exclusionary). Whilst the anti-enclosure protestors at Otmoor in June 1830 did indeed destroy hedges and fences, at the same time they were enacting a ceremony of 'possessioning' (i.e. they were staking out a customary claim to subsistence in the commons). Such ceremonies sought not to declare exclusive possession, but a right to communal use that had been abrogated by the enclosure of the commons by private

interests. The boundaries of this common subsistence were marked in circuits, in a way analogous to the hypothesized nature of the activity producing Neolithic rock carvings. As Keiller puts it in his book, such rock art

was made by people who were mobile, and though they probably moved around within what we would consider a relatively small area – rock art has distinct local characteristics – it demonstrates a way of inhabiting landscape very different to that derived from long-term, essentially agricultural settlement, and the systems of landowning that have been developed from it during recent centuries (Keiller, 2012, p.19).

In the larger context of the film, the positive quality of neolithic mobility is aligned here primarily against capitalist agriculture and thus with the freedoms of the commons. Primitive communism and commoning. Historically distinct, but suggestive of freedoms lost and freedoms to be regained. If rock art with its positioning in the landscape on ‘paths, places and viewpoints’ is a utopian, symbolic resolution to the social contradiction which is explored throughout *Robinson in Ruins*, then that contradiction can be understood in terms of the problem of capitalist private property where the dwelling and belonging of some is opposed to that of the many (Keiller, 2012, p.19). Neolithic rock art might then be seen in Keiller’s Lefebvrian terms as ‘representational space’ i.e. the making of images designed to change and appropriate space (Keiller, 2012, p.16). Furthermore, such practices, can be aligned not just with the Otmoor ‘possessioning’, but also with the ‘itinerant cinematography’ of *Robinson in Ruins* itself and contrasted with the landscape aesthetic used in *The Lord of the Rings*. In the latter, sublime imagery, scattered throughout the trilogy, seems consonant with what we might call a neoliberal ‘representational space’ in which nature’s immense geographical variety and expansiveness, its profusiveness, becomes a spur for an encompassing possessiveness, a sublime grasping after control. This form of eco-globalism is entirely in tune with neoliberal practices of engrossment in and of the global commons.

Finally, we can compare Robinson's neoliberal gothic romanticism, his forensic detailing of the sinister histories and present of the state, capital and ruling class, to the nuclear gothic which Gardiner identifies as a 1980s response to Thatcherite Cold War neo-Burkeanism (Soviet bloc communists standing in for revolutionary French). The gothic documentaries of Martin and Hines used images of a dead future and a blasted, sterile nature with which to expose the 'locked in' violence of the nuclear British state. But in *Robinson in Ruins* the future, despite the disappearance of Robinson, remains open. Both the neoliberal and the nuclear gothic refuse to allow nature to act as the ground in which human values can find their ideological expression. However, in *Robinson in Ruins* the frailty and jeopardy of all life, human and non-human, is recognized. This is a romantic revolutionary vision of nature which magnifies the present planetary capitalist crisis.

Images of Commoning

This article has analysed the relationship of romanticism in British film to history conceived, as Jameson puts it, 'in the vastest sense of... the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us' (Jameson, 1982, p. 75). Jameson's enlarged sense of history seems remarkably appropriate to *Robinson in Ruins*, which reaches back to hunter-gatherers and forwards to a potential, capitalist-induced global catastrophe that endangers the 'possibility of life's survival on the planet', to reference the title of Keiller's book of the film. Yet it is also relevant to the discussion of Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* as well as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy because all these texts have been approached with the Marxist concept of the mode of production in mind, and it is that concept to which Jameson is directly referring in the above quote.

In the case of *A Canterbury Tale* the relevance can be traced to the figures of the Glue-man and the Village Idiot. These two may seem smallish portals into the film, but the approach adopted here has the advantage of explaining more fully what so far has been viewed by other critics as incongruous, and then too quickly

resolved within auteurist models of explanation. And it is in this way that this article establishes its originality within the existing field of British film studies. Thus, whilst Andrew Moor, in his perceptive account of the film, has perhaps gone further than most in addressing the interpretive challenge of the Glueman and the Village Idiot, ultimately he subsumes the nature of the 'faultline' or ideological contradiction they pose within what he calls Powell and Pressburger's characteristic 'exilic, self-conscious optic' (Moor, 2005, p. 109). That is to say, in helping to open up a distance from the utopian, sunny, pastoral Chillingbourne through references to a dark 'apparently ancient feudal' Chillingbourne, Moor sees these figures as simply part of a structure of ambivalence for England that runs throughout Powell and Pressburger's work (Moor, 2005, p. 109). In the end, the Village Idiot becomes an avatar of Powell and Pressburger who like 'wandering idiots' seek to tell 'awkward truths' (Moor, 2005, p. 15). Any symptomatic generic dissonance is thus dissipated in what appears to be a prematurely restricted horizon of intelligibility.

The point here is not to reject Moor's powerful reading, which captures an important contradiction in the film, but to locate it within a wider historical framework. This enables us to consider the origins of the formal and ideological awkwardness these characters represent more than is the case with Moor's reference to some disturbance of the past given in the vague notation of an 'ancient feudal' Chillingbourne. Jameson's historical materialist cultural hermeneutic enables a discussion of how such textual details gain in semantic richness through expansion of the historical horizon within which the text is placed. As Ian Buchanan puts, Jameson achieves this richness 'by folding more history into the mix' or by 'expanding the range and density of the connections that can be made between a single text and the discursive universe of which it is only ever but one 'utterance' among many' (Buchanan, 2006, p. 67).

In the case of *A Canterbury Tale* the direction of this methodological and analytical approach required a discussion conservative romanticism, which is preoccupied with capitalism and is haunted by what challenges most pressingly its sense of history's calm continuities – the moment of historical transition between the feudal and the capitalist mode of production. This is a moment

which conservative romanticism conceals and displaces with its restricted idea of capitalism as 'materialism' along with all those values belonging to 'modern civilisation' which do not harmonise with the agrarian-pastoral values of Colpeper. Indeed, Pressburger described the film as 'a crusade against materialism', and clearly Canterbury Cathedral's role in the film is to act as a beguiling image of a spiritualised pre-capitalist England still transmitting its communal message from Chaucer's time (Moor, 2005, p. 93). But in clinging to such pacified images of historical continuity – images that smooth out and render featureless the historical specificity of capitalism – Colpeper remains vulnerable to the return of the memory of those moments of historical discontinuity whose violence testifies not just to the savagery of capitalism but also its historicity.

What unifies the discussion of the films here then is that their different inflections of romanticism can be seen, through the historical materialist *longue durée*, to be responding to the historical problem and threat of capitalism. Again, this is explicit in the revolutionary romanticism of Keiller as such romanticism is resolutely focused on the need for indefatigable historical curiosity and clarity about the origins of capitalism, precisely its 'historical' nature, for without that clarification capitalism's end is harder to imagine. Thus the *Robinson* trilogy is full of historical speculation and the sifting of evidence, much of it concerned with the relationship between capitalism, the state and the ruling class. It is in the area of this process of historical questioning that the gothic strand roots itself in Keiller's work, as the gothic is traditionally a form much pre-occupied with the shocks and perplexities of historical origins (Punter, 1996, pp. 181-216).

In contradistinction to revolutionary romanticism, conservative romanticism, whilst anti-capitalist in the soft way suggested by Pressburger's description of *A Canterbury Tale* as 'anti-materialist', does not have it in its interests to inquire too closely into the historical nature of capitalism, precisely because such romanticism seeks to retain a comfortable status quo, one whose ruling class has benefited from the capitalist past. The problem then becomes one of the

management of the crises which capitalism necessarily inflicts on the societies in which it flourishes.

In contrast to the literary Middle Earth which concerned itself with the convulsive and ultimately revolutionary narratives attaching to capitalist private property, the contemporary film trilogy ponders the challenge of capitalism as a thoroughly mystified system for those seeking to cling onto power. Restitutive romanticism in Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* is a wizened and historically exhausted form (the aboreal world of the elves and the Ents), or a form which clings to martial images of medieval knighthood (Aragon's triumph revives a dynasty of Kings in a landscape which promises the return of immense ancestral powers). Such images, however, are undermined by a sublime landscape conveyed in contemporary blockbuster cinematographic style, whose ultimate reference is to the restless spirit of late capitalism, ranging over the natural terrain as so much fodder for its obscene appetites. The grandeur of the aerial landscape sublime thus finds its obverse in Sauron's eye, which sucks the life from the image of space itself.

Another way of capturing the relationship between the problem of capitalism and romanticism as it has emerged in these interpretations of the films is through a dynamic of dispossession/displacement and the different ways that dynamic is imagined: as civilisational turbulence in *The Lord of the Rings*; as global hunger and loss of the commons in *Robinson in Ruins*; and as the double displacement at work in *A Canterbury Tale*, which explores the social formations historically eclipsed by the same class of landowners whose authority is in turn threatened by the changes presaged in the spirit of war-time modernity.

Capitalism emerges in these texts as the most 'uncontrollable of all modes of production'. That is to say, the crises and contradictions of capitalism are constantly renewed and to that extent its turbulence which it is the objective of conservative romanticism, for instance, to ideologically defuse, cannot be contained. The key historical materialist concept of primitive accumulation which has recently undergone re-evaluation in response to the depredations of neoliberal capitalism, illuminates the films analysed here inasmuch this original

moment recurs in all of them. Capitalism, in short, depends upon and historically repeats its founding moves of bloody expropriation rather than outgrows them (Heller, 2012, pp. 92-93). This understanding of the 'primitive' aspect of capitalist accumulation – primitive in the sense of violent dispossession, or as Marx's grotesque parturition metaphor from *Capital* has it, capitalism is born 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' – is one which is increasingly coming to be seen to denote not a transitional moment or event in the passage from feudalism to capitalism, but instead a recursive, structural aspect of its established laws of motion (Marx, 1981, p. 926; Heller, 2012, pp. 92-93). Here is the background to the problem of political power seen in all these films in different guises and affecting Thomas Colpeper JP, the Burkean British state and the line of Kings in Middle Earth. All are concerned with the problem of how to establish forms of rule in a context in which control is constantly slipping.

This theme of political struggle leads to a reconsideration of the concept of mode of production. Rather than confirming the cliché that it is Marxism that depends on a teleological conception of historical progress from primitive communism onwards, Marxists like Jameson recognize that the concept of the mode of production suggests the co-existence of the great struggle of different forms of producing and reproducing human societies at any one time. This is what Jameson calls the dynamic of 'cultural revolution' (Jameson, 1982, p. 95). It is defined as 'the coexistence of various [antagonistic] modes of production... [whose] contradictions... [are always] moving to the very centre of political, social and historical life' (Jameson, 1982, p. 95). This process is plainly manifest in rare moments of revolutionary transition, when 'social formations dominated by one mode of production undergo a radical restructuring in the course of which a new [cultural] "dominant" emerges (Jameson, 1982, p. 96). However, Jameson also insists that such moments are only 'the passage to the surface of a permanent process in human societies, of a permanent struggle between the various coexisting modes of production' (Jameson, 1982, p. 97).

Cultural revolution, then, is not just punctual. It is also structural and it creates a 'field of force' within cultural life (Jameson, 1982, p. 98). Furthermore, this constitutive co-existence of modes of production, their Blochian

'nonsynchronous development', gives us an explanation of the way in which the formal features of cultural texts acquire their ultimate intelligibility (Jameson, 1982, p. 97). This level of historical materialist interpretation of cultural texts corresponds to what Jameson calls the 'ideology of form' (Jameson, 1982, p. 99). The latter approaches the cultural text as 'a host of distinct generic messages – some of them objectified survivals from older modes of cultural production, some anticipatory, but all together projecting a formal conjuncture [of] the 'conjuncture' of coexisting modes of production at a given historical moment...' (Jameson, 1982, p.99).

This helps to clarify the peculiar gothic/pastoral dissonance which marks *A Canterbury Tale*, and enables us to reconceive the film in terms of what Jameson calls a 'force field' effect in which 'the dynamics of sign systems of several different modes of production can be registered and apprehended' (Jameson, 1982, p. 98). Thus the gothic, with its disturbed explorations of the capitalist present and its connection to romanticism's interest in reaching back to cultural forms belonging to precapitalist (folk) culture, represents the generic underside of the English *cultural revolution*, whose capitalist drives were encoded in the pastoral forms that emerged out of an agrarian take-off. But as the concept of cultural revolution suggests, it is not just traces of previous modes of production which enter into consideration in terms of the ideology of form, but also anticipations of modes of production which are 'potentially inconsistent with the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own' (Jameson, 1982, p. 95).

This provides us with an insight into a film like *Robinson in Ruins*, which attempts to revive an older mode of production, primitive communism, in order to help us imagine future, post-capitalist modes of production. Central here is the idea and practice of *commoning*, which has been a motif threading its way through this analysis. Neolithic hunter-gatherers are linked in *Robinson in Ruins* to the nineteenth century commoners who walk the bounds of the commons at Otmoor. Likewise, the global commons are visible in the apprehension of their contemporary appropriation in the landscape sublime of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. A memory of commoning also emerged from behind the pastoral

romanticism of Kipling's Edwardian imperialism, transformed into a now globally recognizable form of children's culture.

Commoning is an activity that works to substantiate Jameson's argument about cultural revolution and his re-working of the concept of mode of production. It is an interstitial activity, not just in terms of a use of land that has yet to fall into the sphere of capitalist private property through enclosure, but also in the temporal sense as a manner of generating and distributing common wealth that has stubbornly subsisted within many different moments of history and modes of production. In *Robinson in Ruins* commoning acquires a formal expression in the practice of nomadic Neolithic rock art. The latter is viewed by Keiller as a symbolic reconciliation of the opposition between dwelling and mobility which is the key to the oppressive history of capitalism as evoked in the film by Speenhamland and the Removal Act of 1795. This is a history in which to be mobile was to wander, often in distress and hunger, in pursuit of wages and food that might or might not appear.

But it is not just in rock art that *Robinson in Ruins* imagines such utopian, old/new ways of producing and reproducing human life. The film establishes multiple images of the resource of commoning. Thus, as well as the references to hunter-gathering and the ambulatory 'possessioning' rituals at Otmoor the spirit of commoning is evoked in Robinson's itinerant cinematography, the English travelogue and the European Situationist practice of *la dérive* or psychogeographic walking (the last two also strongly featured in *Robinson in Space*). The bringing together of this constellation of cultural practices gives commoning a questing, revolutionary quality and adds further urgency to Robinson's romantic yearnings. It is as if Keiller's trilogy conjures a 'field of force' whose energies, whilst structured by a dominant neoliberal capitalism, nevertheless transmit other images of dwelling and belonging. In the process the revolutionary romantic desire for a post-capitalist future becomes powerfully manifest.

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