Cinematic countrysides
Inside Popular Film

General editors Mark Jancovich and Eric Schaefer

Inside Popular Film is a forum for writers who are working to develop new ways of analysing popular film. Each book offers a critical introduction to existing debates while also exploring new approaches. In general, the books give historically informed accounts of popular film, which present this area as altogether more complex than is commonly suggested by established film theories.

Developments over the past decade have led to a broader understanding of film, which moves beyond the traditional oppositions between high and low culture, popular and avant-garde. The analysis of film has also moved beyond a concentration on the textual forms of films, to include an analysis of both the social situations within which films are consumed by audiences, and the relationship between film and other popular forms. The series therefore addresses issues such as the complex intertextual systems that link film, literature, art and music, as well as the production and consumption of film through a variety of hybrid media, including video, cable and satellite.

The authors take interdisciplinary approaches, which bring together a variety of theoretical and critical debates that have developed in film, media and cultural studies. They neither embrace nor condemn popular film, but explore specific forms and genres within the contexts of their production and consumption.

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Cinematic countrysides

Edited by Robert Fish

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Idylls and othernesses: childhood and rurality in film

Owain Jones

‘What would we do? Live in a council flat? At least we have the countryside here’ (The mother, Will it Snow at Christmas?, Veyset, 1996)

Introduction: rurality, childhood and film

The initial premise of this chapter is simple. If there are discourses of rural childhood and rural childhood idyll in literature, music, art, advertisements and so forth, then it can be expected that these will have extended into the realms of television and film as they have risen to cultural pre-eminence throughout the twentieth century. The questions remain; in what ways has this occurred, and in what ways does the medium of film itself develop, intensify and/or subvert the discourses of rurality and childhood it carries?

Social construction is practised through discourses, which ‘structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity’ (Mills, 1997: 15). They not only carry meanings and values through cultures, they are bound up in the creation and maintenance of meaning and values in close relation to ideology and power. This is about the production of knowledge, meanings and value through language and social practice (Hall, 1992). Film and television now play an important part in this, and the meanings they make do not remain in the imagined, virtual realm alone. They become enacted, performed and materialised. For example, discourses of rural idyll (Rose, 1996) are played out in processes of counter-urbanisation and middle-class colonisation of the countryside (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Murdoch and Day, 1998).

There is a long tradition of studying the nature and consequences of discourses of rurality, and rurality in relation to urbanity, in
written and static visual texts of various kinds (Keith, 1975; Williams, 1985; Mingay, 1989; Bunce, 1994). By doing this, not only do we continue the work of understanding the evolution and life cycle of these discourses that are at the heart of powerful social constructions, but we also start to account for the differing articulations of discourse these media produce, particularly in terms of the articulation of imagined landscapes. Inevitably, attention is now being paid to rurality as depicted in television (MaCeachern, 1993; Phillips et al., 2001) and, now, film.

Within discourses of rurality, childhood has often been a particular focus (Williams, 1985; Bunce, 1994). Colin Ward’s (1990) book *The Child in the Country* is replete with literary references. Ward observes that constructions of ‘the country child’ have in large part been propagated through literary discourses. These discourses of country childhood are potent forces and are closely related to the wider idea of idyll (Jones, 1997; 2002). The countryside as idyll was very much a romantic creation which centred on nature. Modern notions of childhood were also romantic constructions, again with nature at their core. Inevitably, then, notions of childhood and the rural were in harmony. The specialness, purity and naturalness of childhood merited a special, pure natural space to be in – the countryside. This always worked in tandem with the notion of the vexed presence of the romantic, Apollonian child (Jenks, 2005) in the demonic cities of nineteenth-century England (Jones, 2002).

As notions of idyll have emerged in filmic expression, so too have notions of rural childhood idyll. As I will show in the first section, some films do indeed portray the rural as a (childhood) idyll. In both films for children and films about children, their harmonious relationships are depicted and developed. I will briefly look at films made for children and at filmic realisations of famous literary portrayals of children in the countryside and unashamedly idyllic depictions of rural childhood, which deliberately play upon romantic notions of the rural as an ideal childhood environment.

But I want to go beyond this initial and probably quite obvious point to explore two other aspects of childhood in the cinematic countryside. Firstly, heeding Little’s (1999) concern about the whole notion of idyll (see also Cloke et al., 1995), I consider films which go beyond obvious ideas of idyll in two ways. The first are films which show the other side of idyll, or life behind the ‘façade’
of idyll, raising issues of poverty, but also oppression through patriarchal power, and other harsher realities of children’s lives. The second way is films which explore what I have termed ‘the otherness’ of childhood (Jones, 2002; 2003).

In the penultimate section I briefly consider two films which ‘play’ with the interface between town and country, which offer a particularly telling way of looking at discourses of childhood, the countryside, nature and the city in a filmic context, as children move across boundaries between these symbolic and material spaces. And finally, I offer some thoughts on children, rurality and dwelling.

The rural childhood idyll in films

In much children’s literature the rural has featured as both setting and narrative focus (Hunt, 1995; Jones, 1997; Horton, 2003). This continues in films made for children, thus reflecting and developing adult discourses which link childhood, nature and the countryside. The rural is presented as a suitable imaginative destination for children. It also, at the same time, peddles certain discourses about the rural to children (and to parents). Bunce (1994) makes the point that adult discourses of rurality begin when images and descriptions of rurality are absorbed in childhood through exposure to children’s books. He argues that ‘given the formative experience of the early years, exposure to even small amounts of children’s literature must result in the subconscious absorption of stereotypically perceptions of rurality’ (2003: 23). This seems convincing, and Bunce (1994; 2003) and Horton (2003) do excellent jobs in delving into the vast range of children’s texts in which the countryside is embedded as either a setting and/or subject of narration in some or other way. Horton (2003) importantly begins to also consider television. Many famous children’s stories with a rural inflection, such as *Winnie the Pooh* and *Thomas the Tank Engine*, are now to be seen as powerful global brands, which occupy a broad spectrum of media, ranging from books to television, films and products. Even now, these quaint Edwardian tales with their innocent, bucolic British rural settings are consumed on a vast global scale.

Three points can be made about television and film products such as these (and others) as a medium for discourses. Firstly, children can watch films and television before they can read, and thus
can assimilate such images at a very early age. Secondly, it would seem that many children watch television/video for many more hours than they read. Thirdly, television and film can be a very intense experience for children (this is not to say reading is not, but reading is hard at first, while pictures and sounds are more accessible). Our children, and many others I have witnessed, watch TV with an attention and absorption that is utter, and are happy to watch favourite programmes and films many times over. So the question of how television and film have become the peddlers of discourses is important.

Inevitably, many of the classics of childhood literature have been turned into films. As this cannon has been reworked in moving images, and new filmic additions made to it, the rural inflection continues and is re-rendered in visualised idyllic terms (even if it is beset by oppression in one way or the other) as in Walt Disney’s *Robin Hood*. Classic rural childhood adventures such as *The Railway Children*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Wind in the Willows* now persist in film as well as print.

The geographical imaginations of the original stories (often visualised in illustrations) is inevitably visualised in a much more complete sense in film. In animated films where designers, animators and background painters can create whole worlds, it is possible to see highly distilled visions of the countryside rendered for childhood consumption. It is easy to decry Disney for its mawkishness, its sometimes dubious political complexion (on and off screen) and, latterly, its status as one of the big bad transnational corporations pushing a certain and corrosive form of cultural/economic globalisation, but its rise to prominence was, in part, built on an ability to take popular geographical imaginations and distil them into incredible, ‘high art’ renditions. For example, in *The Jungle Book* (watched until the tape wore out in our house) – which may be a rendition of colonial notions of food, nature and the ‘the other’ (Cook et al., 2004) and a natural space for male childhood where the arrival of the female means the end to the idyll (Jones, 1999) – the drawings of the jungle are quite wondrous distillations of the myth of jungle as an exotic, beautiful paradise. The same can be said of wild Africa in the *Lion King* and pre-European-colonised North America in *Pocahontas*. But these perhaps are more wilderness than countryside. In Disney’s *101 Dalmatians* the English countryside is rendered in a way that crys-
tallises the (English) rural idyll into a complete and highly seductive visual form.

The film of Raymond Briggs’s classic children’s book *The Snowman* continues this tradition of highly rarefied renditions of the English countryside. Typical of Briggs, however, there is a depth and poignancy to the story, so although the boy lives in a ravishingly beautiful rural location, he is lonely, has no one else to play with in the snow, and so he finds a new friend, and they fly off together. The opening sequence, the scenes where he and the snowman ride a motorbike around the woods and fields, and then the key scene when they take off and circle and swoop over the countryside, heading for the coast, all portray a vision of ‘perfect English rurality’. The countryside is a pattern of hedges, woods and small hamlets. Animals – owls, rabbits, a fox, a horse – all hove into view. The boy gazes around in delight. As in the animated *101 Dalmatians*, the snowfall renders this perfect countryside white rather than green, thus deepening its purity to a poignantly beautiful pitch.

Live-action film adaptation of children’s classics such as *The Railway Children* and *The Secret Garden* could be seen as doing little more than visualising the imagined landscape of their parent books. But the interesting thing is that – with a bit of location research, shot framing and prop and scenery manipulation – the countryside can be easily reconstructed to provide suitable settings for these stories. There is a kind of spiralling logic at work here in which discourses build up momentum. The books were inspired by writers’ observations/imaginations of the countryside, which are then rendered in the rarefied imaginative forms that good writers can generate. These books become classics and then are made into films, and filmmakers go to back to the countryside to find locations in which to visualise these stories. The countryside is of course an intensely visual discourse: from the paintings of Constable to the evocative covers of the Batsford guides, to acts of walking, driving or riding through the countryside, the visual is the pre-eminent sense. The ubiquitous format of the cinema screen is landscape (not portrait). Film is obviously a visual artifice where scenes of landscape and people in them are produced, ready made then to articulate landscapes of rurality and idyll.

Perhaps one of the most unashamedly idyllic view of country childhood is the home life of the children in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*...
Bang. Here they live on a hill with an eccentric father and grand-dad, free from rules and school. It is pastoral and sunny (most of the time). The only things missing are a mother – and success for the dad. The magic car delivers both in the end, of course, but only after they have all been to a bad foreign place where children are, in stark contrast, locked away, and strays are caught by the terrifying child catcher on the prowl in the town square. These filmic extensions of the canon of children’s literature have inevitably extended the discourse of the rural as an idyll, and as a childhood idyll, and in doing so, through the needs and techniques of film production, have conjured even more rarefied notions of such imagined spaces as the English countryside (and beyond).

Other films (for adult audiences) depict rural childhood as idyll. This again continues a dominant tradition in literature in the most immediate way in so far as iconic books, such as Laurie Lee’s Cider with Rosie (1962), have been turned into films. These, like the books before them, are more about adult longing and adult assumptions about what it is to be a child. These again involve taking geographical imaginations and rendering them in apparent reality, generating visual realisations of adult discourses. This idea of film constructing childhood in rural space to meet the needs of adult ideals is very well illustrated by the home movies Chislett made of family holidays (Nicholson, 2001) in which rural childhood idyll is constructed: ‘Chislett constructs scenes of idealised childhood and family life . . . [I]mages of childhood innocence in a rural setting unsullied by war. Mythic visions of an unchanging countryside and the romanticised, self-indulgent scenes of carefree play, echo earlier and enduring conventions in child representation’ (Nicholson, 2001: 132).

Nicholson points out that not only were these ‘non-fiction’ films highly contrived by shot selection, but the holidays themselves and the family itself stage-managed to generate such rarefied images. But it is a complex form of construction in which the living out of the ideal and the desire to record it are in an interdependent escalating relation. In contrast, Chislett later shot films for charity organisations, of children in urban environments where ‘the film portrays children as poignant images of urban deprivation [and] victims of the urban environment’ (Nicholson, 2001: 132).

These home and amateur movies well illustrate how film can be used to articulate and perpetuate discourses of adult expectations.
This goes for films such as *Cider with Rosie*, where, despite scenes of poverty, hardship and violence (in both book and film), the idea of childhood idyll predominates. Now we turn to films where this relationship is inverted and/or the notion of idyll is lost to other discourses.

**Beyond ideas of idyll: oppressions and the otherness of childhood**

**Behind the mask of idyll**

Some studies have focused on children’s lives beyond the facade of idyll in the countryside (for example Davis and Ridge, 1997). Some notable films have also shown children’s lives in a similar vein in different national contexts, depicting a variety of hardships, but, somehow, the notion of idyll is not always entirely eradicated.

The French Film *Will it Snow at Christmas?* by Sandrine Veyssset (1996) is a powerful story of a mother with seven children living and working in poverty in rural southern France in the early 1970s. The film portrays hard, manual horticultural work in the production of crops such as radishes, lettuces and leeks. The seasons play their full part bringing heat, torrential rain and finally snow as the life on the farm unfolds. The mother and children are ruled over, and put to work, by a lover/father who has another, legitimate, family elsewhere. His visits mean even harder work for the older children, brief moments of affection for the younger children, and sexual demands alongside small amounts of tenderness and money for the long-suffering mother. However, childhood does find time and space. The opening scene is of the children playing chase, crawling through straw/hay bales in the barn. They build model farms and houses in the dirt and disused corners of the yard; they sail home-made boats down the irrigation channels built to carry water the fields in summer. The countryside is open yet unremarkable. The children are outside a lot, in the yard in the sun, with dogs roaming amongst them, or playing chase at night. At one point they are told they are lucky to live where they do. The idea of idyll is overshadowed by the oppressions of poverty and child labour, the corrosive patriarchal power, and the predatory sexual aggression of the father, which leads to conflict. This builds to the point where the dedicated mother struggles to keep the family together. I won’t give away the ending (I recommend you see it if
you haven’t). However, despite all, the notion of rural idyll persists. As Holden (1997) says, it depicts life as ‘nasty, brutal and idyllic’. Nature is redemptive, as the mother says at one low point ‘at least we have the countryside’.

In Will it Snow at Christmas?, to an extent, and more so in the very successful pair of films Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources, which depict rural communities and (therefore children in wider family/community narratives), there seems to be an adult longing for the lost space and time of authentic rurality, where not only childhood, but community and humanity belonged, or dwelt, in landscape and locality. This is a theme to which I return later.

A chapter on childhood, film and rurality should make some reference to the films The Night of the Hunter directed by Charles Laughton, and Ivan’s Childhood. The first is a bit of an oddity; it was not initially that successful, critically or commercially, and was therefore the only film that this great English actor directed. It is now regarded as classic, and one of the great American movies. The plot, in essence, is that of two young children, – a brother, aged nine, and a sister, aged six – on the run from a profoundly disturbing character – a fire-brand preacher who is also a serial killer – who suspects the children know the whereabouts of money stolen by their now dead father. The children flee down the Mississippi encountering grotesque visions, wildlife and characters, until taken in by a kind old lady – who is handy with a shotgun. It is a kind of darker, Gothic version of the great America rural childhood books by Mark Twain – almost a rural horror film.

But it is different to the rural horror that David Bell (1997) considered through films such as Deliverance. In that film, of course, a child famously appears playing the banjo, and ‘duels’ with one of the tourists on their canoeing trip which goes so horribly wrong. This child, ‘inbred, retarded, autistic’ (Bell, 1997: 103) ‘is a product of a society at the end of its existence’, and communities which seem idyllic but which are in fact ‘malignant’. In The Night of the Hunter the children are innocent yet also worldly (by necessity). The horror follows them into and through the rural landscape. The American countryside in the post-civil-war era (as in Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, books which have been filmed and serialised on television), and in the agricultural depression (as filmed in The Grapes of Wrath) seems not only much vaster than the more pastoral, rustic British countryside, but also
wilder and unsettled, as populations of settlers, slaves, refugees and the dispossessed are on the move. This offers the children challenges, independence and adventure, in a way reflecting the American frontier spirit.

*Ivan’s Childhood* opens with a lyrical scene of child in nature as Ivan – beautiful, fresh faced, full of wonder – apparently flies through treetops, sees animals, hears a cuckoo, meets his pretty, happy mother in the woods and drinks clear clean water from her bucket, like an young animal. Then he wakes in the war-torn countryside of the Second World War Eastern Front. Further flashbacks of innocence, companionship and nature contrast with the barren, bitter landscape and life of Ivan’s present as he works (in this instance) as a child spy for the Russian forces. The connections between nature and childhood are darkly inverted as it is revealed that Ivan used berries, fir cones and differing types of leaves to record German troop positions and armour. The end scenes, as flashbacks, return Ivan to nature and happiness, although the war has had its inevitable consequence for him.

What these above films present is the idea that childhood in the countryside can be tainted and oppressed by adult geographies. The countryside as space of labour exploitation and poverty – of family conflict and gender inequalities – or as a space of war. Children are victims (with agency) in the face of such unsympathetic, indifferent or hostile adult striations of space. War seems the starkest corruption of space. The film *Turtles Can Fly* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2004) depicts the life of village children in Iraq before and during the 2003 invasion. The children seem to have established a moral (and fiscal) economy of their own, and are very much at large in the countryside. But the currency is munitions left over from previous conflicts, and much of the (possibly beautiful) countryside is laced with land mines – perhaps the ultimate adult striation of (rural) space in terms of hostility to childhood. *Ararat* by Atom Egoyan (2003) also shows a brutal inversion of any idea of the country childhood idyll in the scene where a child sits under a wooden hay cart, holding hands with his Armenian mother as she is raped by a soldier on the boards above.

The acclaimed film *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (Ermanno Olmi, 1978) bears some similarities with *Will it Snow at Christmas?* Set in Bergamo, Lombardy, Italy in the 1900s it depicts the poor, rural, working-class life of five families living in a farmstead in rich detail...
(and employed local people to play parts in the film). Here, again, there is disquieting hardship and oppression, in this instance in the form of harsh terms of tenancy and rule of overseers. The film takes its title from a scene when a father cuts down a tree to make his son a new pair of clogs, and despite their efforts to disguise the ‘theft’, harsh retributions follow for the entire family. But also like *Will it Snow at Christmas?* there is an underlying theme of rural authenticity and dwelling, and an attachment between people and nature and the land, a theme to which we will return. The children in the farmstead are often the focus of the camera, working with the family in the barns and fields, playing (sometimes), and living with nature in terms of the landscape and farm animals.

**The ‘otherness’ of childhood**

In the film *Whistle Down the Wind* (Bryan Forbes, 1962) three children living in a farmhouse in north Lancashire find a man in a barn, who, for various reasons, they consider to be Jesus Christ. It’s a secret. A series of comings and goings between the farmhouse, barn and local school take place with a slowly increasing number of children being in on the secret. All the while the audience, but not the children, realise the man is a dangerous fugitive.

From the opening scene with the three children secretly following the farm hand, to the last extraordinary shots of two other young children looking up into the camera and then turning and walking away, the whole film is premised on the apparently complete, independent spatial freedom of the children to roam in the countryside. The film visually plays with ideas of childhood, idyll and nature. Children are framed as small figures moving through large vistas, and the plot is partly driven by the children’s affinity with animals.

Most of all, though, the film is notable for the extent to which it effectively depicts the children’s other world and its emotional economy. Their world is depicted as separate from that of the adults. This separateness is achieved partly through their independence, partly through the children’s subterfuge and lies (the everyday lies all tell), and partly through adult indifference and disdain. Their otherness is shown through the solemnity and matter-of-factness with which they deal with confronting and then caring for ‘Jesus Christ’. Their own worlds of conflict, secrecy from each other, dealing with sibling jealousies, bullies at school, and
betrayals are all carefully presented by the camera. This is not so much idyll, as a space in which children’s lives unfold in becomings of fullness and otherness remote from the surveillance of adults.

_Etre et Avoir_, by Nicholas Philbert (2003), was a surprise success not only in its home country in France, but in the UK and elsewhere. Rarely does a quiet documentary film end up competing with Hollywood blockbusters on general release. This film depicts life in a small, one-class infant school in the village of Puys-de-Dome, in Auvergne, South West France. The story follows the class and its one teacher through a year of schooling. It picks up on minor (to us) dramas in the classroom and playground, and shows glimpses of some of the children’s (rural) lives beyond school. It also has the storyline that the skilful and seemingly endlessly patient teacher is heading for retirement. Nature again is articulated as a real presence, through outdoor walks, the changing seasons, and through one powerful shot where the screen fills with trees near the school billowing in a storm. The glimpses of life beyond school show a poor farming community. One child, not very capable at his lessons, is seen working at home on the farm, expertly driving a tractor. The film is notable for the un-patronising, non-judgemental depiction of the everyday lives of the children. They are not treated as beings-in-waiting (although the question of their future in the ‘big school’ in a town some distance away is raised). Again, their becoming, their joys and pains are taken seriously. Idyll is not the major theme. The viewer is a witness to a scene in the playground where a small injustice occurs because the teacher did not see what happened but the camera did.

To me these films are more centred on the children themselves than on adult discourse of what childhood is and where it should be; idyll, or anti-idyll for that matter, are not very meaningful constructs for children. What matters to them are the practices of everyday life in family, friends, community and landscape. This emotional ecology of being depends on much, and is experienced in ways we cannot fully know, but can observe.

I have argued elsewhere that there is an otherness to childhood to which adult knowledge cannot fully return. This raises questions about research aims, ethics and methodologies. The camera can be a frank and illuminating eye. Sensitive filming of children as in _Etre et Avoir_ can show the otherness of childhood at work, as, say, a sequence of fleeting expressions of concern, interest, frustration.
and anger flits across the face of a child doing some task in class. We cannot know fully what these experiences are, but we can see that these experiences are real and deep and relevant, even if the child is involved in what might be seen as a trivial and ephemeral task.

Films featuring children and childhood nicely point out the deep complexity of adulthood–childhood relations. Adult constructions of childhood by adults are in many ways more about the aspirations, desires and fears of adulthood than they are about the lived experiences of children themselves (Higonnet, 1998). In film, the image of the child, in the country, or anywhere else, becomes more ‘real’ as child actors or actresses appear on the screen. The adult construction becomes ‘flesh’ and can be framed and set in carefully selected settings and actions. Thus, while childhood on screen looks more real as it is embodied and performed by children, it can be, in fact, one of the most complete adult constructions of them all, as adult discourses – manifested through film writers, directors and cinema photographers – get to manipulate the body of the child as well as the image and idea of a child in the rendering of their discourses.

**The edge of the countryside**

If the urban has a fringe then it stands that that which it meets has a fringe too (that is, the rural fringe). This border territory offers a chance for narratives of childhood including those by filmmakers to play with, or explore, crossings of children/childhood between the town and the country. A notable example of this is the film *Kes* by Ken Loach. In the novel upon which the film is based by Barry Hines (1969), the hero, Billy, moves between his home and school in a northern town and the surrounding countryside. Home, school and town represent bullying, humiliation and often despair. When, in the novel, he first moves from the housing estate and out into the country the sense of release is palpable:

[He is running, having thrown some pebbles at a window from which he had been shooed away from by the mother of a friend]

he ran back across the estate and straight down the avenue . . . He cut down a snicket between two houses, out into the fields leaving the estate behind him.

The sun was up and the cloud band in the east had thinned to a line
on the horizon. The air was still and clean, and trilling of larks carried far over the fields of hay, which stretched away on both sides of the path. Great rashes of buttercups spread across the fields, and amongst the mingling shade of yellow and green, dog daisies showed their white faces, contrasting with the rust of sorrel. All underscored by clovers, white and pink and purple, which came into their own on the path sides where the grass was shorter, along with daisies and the ubiquitous plantains.

A cushion of mist lay over the fields. Dew drenched the grass, and the occasional sparkling of individual drops made Billy glance down as he passed. One tuft was a silver fire. He knelt down to trace the source of light. The drop had almost forced the blade of grass to the earth, and it laid in the curve of the blade like the tiny egg of a mythical bird. Billy moved his head from side to side to make it sparkle, and when it caught the sun it exploded, throwing out silver needles and crystal splinters. He lowered his head and slowly, very carefully touched it with the tip of his tongue. (Hines, 1969: 23–4)

This is a startlingly lyrical excerpt from a novel known for its dour grittiness. The sense of space opening out after passing through the last houses is more than empirical, it is a scene of the child soul opening up to beauty and to nature – the romantic discourse holding firm. The water droplet is a promise of the kestrel to come and Billy even connects with its purity by touching it with his tongue.

How, it is interesting to ask, is this pivotal moment in the book rendered in the famous film made of Kes? My overriding memory of the film is Billy out on moorland, with Kes, above the city with many of the shots showing this boy in nature with a wild creature and the grey town as a contrast and backdrop. Indeed, when I watched it again, shots which looked through the town into the country, and vice versa, are a common theme. Billy is framed in them on a number of occasions. What I didn’t remember were the other children populating the streets, in a classic vision of pre-car-dominated urban street life. When Billy enters the fields in the same point of the story the scene is very different. The pastoral, favourable mood is established by music, but Billy is not finding wonder in a drop of water refracting light, rather he is swishing at branches and stinging nettles with a stick. He throws a lump of wood into a pond. This is much more the child as other than child as natural innocent. However, the romantic sensibilities are not
entirely abandoned. The film instead makes the flight of the kestrels, hunting in and out of their nest in the ruin of the barn, the moment of lyricism. Billy, framed in black shadow, watches, and the screen is then filled with sky, as the camera follows the bird in flight, hovering then moving on. The music trills. Here is the moment of connection with nature, the redemption of Billy, a boy who, a few scenes earlier, had been seen stealing and lying as he made his way around town.

*Ratcatcher* (1996) by Lynne Ramsey is a powerful exposition of ideas of urban childhood distopia (but not straightforwardly so). It is set on a poor Glasgow housing estate in the ‘Winter of Discontent’ (1978–79). There is a strike by refuse collectors so the streets in which many children sit around, play and fight are strewn with rubbish. The film starts with a strange disturbing image of a child apparently being wrapped in some material and spinning around. This, it turns out, is James spinning himself around in his mother’s net curtains before he is shooed out to play. The urban is actually depicted as a semi-wilderness, much action taking place in an overgrown wasteland with a canal running through it. James witnesses another boy drowning in the canal and this remains a dark secret. He has built an idea that he wants to move to new houses being built on the edge of the city and there is a break in the naturalistic tenor in the film when, in a pivotal magical/fantasy sequence, he is running through the fields on the edge of the city, a reference to the rightness and hope of nature as child environment.

These films, then, rather reinforce the country childhood idyll idea. But idyll is not to be seen as some simple surfacy space/place which is fun and free for children, it is about profound, deeply embedded concern and aspiration for individual and collective life in modernity.

**Conclusions. The persistence of idyll: childhood and dwelling**

Bunce (1994; 2003) discusses in convincing detail ‘the depth and durability of the rural idyll as a cultural construction which has evolved with the rise of anti-urbanism’ (2003: 22–3; see also Lowe *et al.*, 1995). It is clear that such discourses of the country as a space for children and country childhood idyll are easily identified in filmic output. Films have become very powerful purveyors of cultural discourses. In the nature of films and television, discourses
that were once a matter of text – and isolated, static images – are realised in apparent ‘real life’ in terms of spaces, bodies and movements. But films have also, at the same time, developed, intensified and challenged this.

The notion of idyll maybe questionable in many ways, but I feel it is the discourse that haunts the films discussed. So having tried to go beyond the idyll I am forced back to it. Not only are notions of childhoods and rurality inflected with romantic sensibilities, so too are wider constructions of the condition of humanity, which sees the industrial revolution, the growth of modern capitalism, urbanism, science, liberalism and secularism as highly problematic. The rural, against all the odds and all evidence, remains a place partly outside this process (most obviously outside urbanisation), and thus a refuge not only for the romantic child, but romantic society.

Films are important in this respect in two ways. Many of the films discussed, notably *Will it Snow at Christmas?* and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* have been credited as notable artistic achievements. They are thus not to be taken lightly in terms of peddling cheap or shallow renderings of rural authenticity and, within that, country childhood discourses. The complexity, the difficulties and the otherness of children’s varying experiences are depicted with subtlety and insight. The experiences in *Will it Snow at Christmas?* and in *Tree of Wooden Clogs* are often far from idyllic. But despite this, somehow the idea of the rural as a natural, good place for childhood sustains.

These films depict – to an extent at least – what could be seen as dwelling as famously set out by Ingold (1993; see also Macnaghten and Urry, 1998). Dwelling is, in one sense, about an authentic and fulfilled pattern of collective living. It is about communities enduring over time and space and about connectiveness with landscape and nature; children are a key element in this (Bahktin, 1981). Dwelling is about trying to achieve this within the modes of social reproduction that people inevitably find themselves enmeshed.

But this is not really so much about the rural *per se*, or the rural idyll – it is about (urban) modernity as the absent other. Although this begs a number of questions, the predominantly technological and urban conditions of modernity have made any notion of dwelling as originally set out by Heidegger impossible (that’s why he set out his vision of peasant rurality when seeking out an expression of this idea). Ingold’s (1993) dwelling example is also a
traditional rural vision. As Macnaghten and Urry (1998) suggest, dwelling in a landscape becomes compromised by the speed and mobility of modern practices (for example the car); it feels as if modernity has produced the non-places that Auge (1995) discusses. These are the apotheosis of globalisation’s impact on authentic, or at least meaningful, places, and are the culmination of this eradication of dwelling by modernity. Although these films portray hardship and oppression, they still resonate with a nostalgia and longing for authentic community in touch with place, landscape and nature. The films are not simply an assertion of the countryside as context for community and childhood. They are a sort of assertion that all people, communities, families, and children within them, were better off, at some deep level, in these authentic, dwelt lives. To put it simply, to be poor and oppressed in an authentic rural landscape is better than being poor and oppressed in an urban setting. In the former, attachment of place, nature and landscape and the depth of belonging in community gives you something; in the latter, all that is swept away by the mobility and anonymity of life. This is the anti-urban/modernism which has been a driving force in Anglo-centric culture (Lowe et al., 1995). Childhood has its place in the imagined city and in the imagined country, and the (rural) idyll persists as an idea, but can be corrupted by the horrors of the world.

References


