

This essay accompanies the exhibition Ben Rivers: *Slow Action*, curated by Andréa Picard  
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**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## Another World is Plausible: Ben Rivers' *Slow Action* by Michael Sicinski

How can we begin to consider a possible connection between landscape and utopia? And what role, if any, can cinema play in forging this relationship? While there are many questions we could ask of a film as rich and multifaceted as Ben Rivers' featurette *Slow Action* (2010), these are particularly pertinent. *Slow Action*, Rivers' collaboration with science fiction author Mark von Schlegell, is an imaginary and a materialist inquiry into the status of four distinct landscapes. Despite the vast differences between the four lands, in terms of both their visually evident geography (human as well as terrain-based) and in von Schlegell's narrative characterization of them, all of the spaces are linked conceptually by their potential—lost, realized or fallow—for the development of a radically different, future-tense mode of existence. The irony is that these utopias are erected on futures that, to eyes inculcated by the visual language of 21st century landscape, can only resemble ruins, the primitive or the post-apocalyptic.

There are very specific ways in which Rivers

communicates this paradox in *Slow Action*. Each of the film's four sections is 11 minutes long. This democratic-structuralist segmentation, together with the one-minute introductory montage of black-and-white photographs of faces of unknown individuals, across unknown times, results in a full 45 minute running time. The four segments are as follows: "Eleven" (Lanzarote, Spain); "Hiva (The Society Islands)" (Tuvalu); "Kanzennashima" (Gunkanjima, Japan); and "Somerset" (Rivers's home county in England). The film as a whole operates as an argument about utopian thinking, and the current human imagination (or its dearth) with respect to re-envisioning our place upon the earth.

Rivers' cinema may be a utopian project, but it is one that evinces a healthy skepticism about the centrality of human existence within any utopia worthy of the name. Or more optimistically, Rivers looks ahead to some new, as yet unrealized form of human existence (and human being). The title *Slow Action*, while not



Ben Rivers, still from *Slow Action*, 16mm anamorphic film, 2010.

explicitly referred to within the film, speaks directly to a recurring concern in Rivers' cinema, one that the current film fictionalizes. This slow action is the movement of history on the scale of the geological, the tectonic, measured in the thousands and tens of thousands of years. It is the timeline of shifting glaciers and worn-away rock, of mass migration and continental drift.

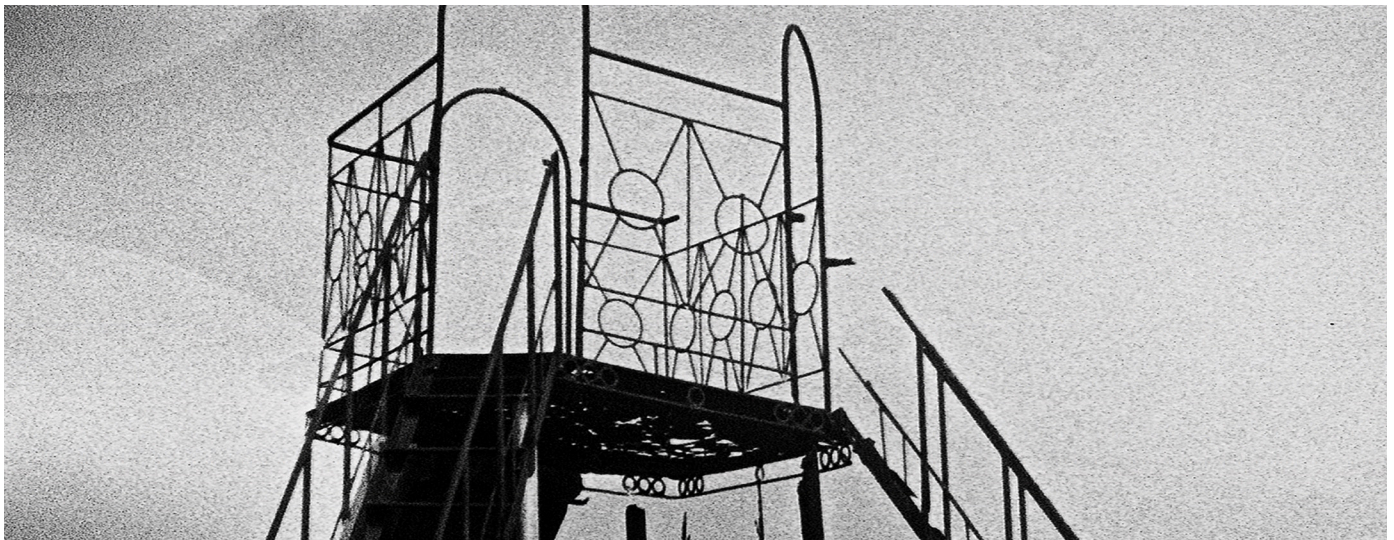
Humanity, however, need not be lost in the shuffle. *Slow Action* addresses itself to us, where we are, gesturing toward our movements into a new utopian mind- and body-space, and deepening our imaginations of what we can be in an unforeseen future. Cinema has always been an art that has to be felt to activate its radical potential; felt in order to help shape the hypothetical new being of the future. Cinema is popular art in the sense that it can help shape the people history needs. That is to say, if we understand that expressions of the popular are not necessarily defined by success within the dominant economic regime, artworks may well articulate desires and interests as yet undefined, pointing towards a futurity, even a utopian aspiration.

In the past, Rivers has located this radical new space within the margins of already-existing society. Films such as *This Is My Land* (2006), *Origin of the Species* (2008), *Ah, Liberty!* (2008) and *I Know Where I'm Going* (2009) have been largely composed of documentary footage, wherein Rivers traveled through back roads and wooded glens to discover individuals making their way with the barest of means. More often than not, this has meant transforming their surroundings—their homes, their landscapes,

the portion of the earth over which they exercise basic dominion—into a proto-apocalyptic bulwark, complete with rusted-out autos, hoarded machine parts, maniacal junk-derived folk art and recreational gravel pits. In his journeys, Rivers continually finds those who have formed their own utopias alongside the normative and seemingly inevitable expanse of late-late capitalism. Yet, to those of us whose imaginations have been squelched by that circumscribed set of possibilities, these junk piles can only look like the end of the world. (And, of course, if you equate the end of the world with the end of capitalism, that's exactly what they are. When the last world market finally collapses, we will all be fretting over rusty bicycle pumps and stray cinderblocks.)

*Slow Action's* imagined utopias are more fanciful, but at the same time more overt in their exhibition of deep-seated anxieties. That is to say, this is Rivers' most literary film to date, which is understandable given von Schlegell's participation. This work, more than anything else Rivers has done so far, inches toward narrative filmmaking. And, given the subject matter, it comes as no surprise that Rivers cites a host of 19th and 20th century travel writing and treatises on utopianism as influential. Nevertheless, *Slow Action* employs a unique paradox that one would not readily expect, given the shifts in emphasis that it represents in Rivers' general working method. As his filmmaking gravitates more explicitly toward the fictional, Rivers increasingly takes on the formal trappings of documentary.

Whereas many of his earlier portrait films possessed the tenor of one man speaking directly to the audience, *Slow Action* adopts the omniscient, third-person



Ben Rivers, still from *Slow Action*, 16mm anamorphic film, 2010.

voiceover associated with the science-film or the ethnographic mode. Presented at Gallery TPW in an installation format that emphasizes complete one-to-one intimacy, you sit on a beanbag chair, take in the audio through private headphones, and watch the film unspool as if you were reading your own story in a preschool story-nook of the mind. What impact does this have? Forty or so years ago, film theorists held out the hope that the collective disruption of the scene of cinematic consumption might yield some sort of utopian potential for a more direct, active engagement with screen images, or at least retard the inevitable transmission of ideology. (If these movie-utopias never came to pass, it was no doubt due to the ineluctable strain of cinephobia that partially gave rise to them in the first place. By and large, these theorists regarded cinema like a comfort-woman, a temptation they needed removed through harsh stricture.)

*Slow Action*, by contrast, makes small adjustments in the apparatus so as to both open up filmgoing's social dimension and redouble its fundamental privacy, its inside-the-skull immediacy. Here, Rivers asks us to take in stories about imaginary people of the future, as we watch one another listen to common audio, sounds that we all hear but cannot hear each other hearing. Rivers proposes an architecture that makes our shared experience visible, while emphasizing its address to us as individuals. In other installation contexts, Rivers has presented *Slow Action* on four separate screens, breaking apart sequential narrativity into a spatial dispersal, while at the same time retaining a basic linear movement. In such cases, narrativity becomes a physical movement actualized in the exhibition space and is

experienced alongside other viewers, although the movements of others are never entirely apprehensible to any given person. This appears to be a model for a perfect social(ist) dialectic—individuals form affiliations through desire, subsuming yet retaining their basic selves. And, of course, it is temporary. As von Schlegell writes in the “Somerset” section, “It is one of the paradoxes wound into the idea of utopia that it must fulfill simultaneously the ideal of both the state and the individual. Usually, the former necessity proves its undoing.”

What are these hypothetical utopias, not yet found but probably destined to be lost? On the dry, craggy expanse of Lanzarote, Rivers conjures Eleven, home of the Elevantians. They are a race defined by mathematics and astronomy, nocturnal in nature due to the punishing temperatures on Eleven during the day. As the narrator (Ilona Halberstadt) informs us, the stark clarity of the night sky, combined with their lives having been relegated to the nighttime hours, has predisposed the Elevantians to devote an inordinate amount of attention to the heavens. Their eyes and physiology have evolved so as to peer into the skies with far greater acuity than other human beings. (In fact, most Elevantians die by wandering into ravines or off cliffs, so defiantly have they fixed their eyes upward.) Likewise, mating and courtship are negotiated through an exchange of algebraic equations. Rivers visualizes the utopia of Eleven as a series of mountainous landscapes dappled with mist, or oceanscapes punctuated with vaguely alien geometric structures: concentric metal diamonds rotating on a signpost or bulbous light fixtures without apparent function. The skies (through



Ben Rivers, still from *Slow Action*, 16mm anamorphic film, 2010.

Rivers's animation of them) also gleam with laser-like cubes and rectangular solids whirling in space. Strange as they seem, these conjunctures of the natural and the hard-edged geometrical call to mind the utopian aspirations of modernist architecture and design, as well as their more vernacular expressions in World's Fairs and International Expos.

The second part focuses on Hiva (the Society Islands), which is based on footage shot on Tuvalu. What we see are bits and pieces of a scrapped out, mostly abandoned village with the occasional human or wild pig inhabitant. The narrator (John Wynne) notes that the Society Islands are just a few meters above sea level, and this is true of Tuvalu as well. Likely to be the first true casualty of global warming and rising ocean levels, the island nation of Tuvalu is gradually being claimed by the Pacific. Aside from the tropical setting, it is this segment of *Slow Action* that most resembles Rivers' previous work in that it observes a somewhat impoverished, marginal mode of living from a handheld, peripatetic perspective. However, von Schlegell's narrative points toward a futurity which complicates the images we see, scenes that would otherwise be quite consonant with post-disaster footage from the developing world. The voiceover describes the extreme fecundity of the Society Islands, with plentiful fish, coconuts and a self-replicating (apparently alive or para-organic) base of plastic. We see garbage piles around homes and are led to understand them as part of the living landscape, not a blight upon it. In this new utopia, the ecosystem has made peace with pollution and incorporated it into the natural order. No wonder, then, that among the islands in the imaginary chain,

the last is identified as "Anus Isle, a stink swamp islet 70 miles east of its nearest neighbor, rich in natural gas and dingleberries."

Tuvalu itself displays a significant degree of life and activity despite its dire straits, and so it's understandable that Rivers and von Schlegell feel comfortable adopting a lighthearted tone in relation. By extreme contrast, the "Kanzennashima" section on the uninhabited island of Gunkanjima, Japan, is characterized by a deeply elegiac mood. The narration (Ilona Halberstadt again), which von Schlegell has written like a long poem, recalls Marguerite Duras' incantatory song of conjured and faded memory from Hiroshima, Mon Amour (Alain Resnais, 1959). This section begins in an expository mode, speaking of Harai, the sole inhabitant of this island of collapsed buildings, heaps of rubble, and palimpsestic evidence of multiple now-absent generations of coal miners and immigrant Koreans. The curator (she who is presumably articulating the project before us) insists that this ghostly no-place is indeed a utopia, "because of, not in spite of, its being entangled with what other disciplines have labeled mental illness." In short, the landscape, with its sickly saturation as evidence of a traumatic past, renders Kanzennashima post-human, a space so encrusted with the thick residue of misdeeds that only a new form of existence, even a new human organism, could one day thrive there.

Rivers concludes with "Somerset" (John Wynne again), which is simultaneously the most real (i.e., non utopic or atopic) space in *Slow Action* and the most fantastical, given that it's the most familiar to him. It is the least exotic (certainly not an island in any way, shape or



Ben Rivers, still from *Slow Action*, 16mm anamorphic film, 2010.

form) and is transformed most blatantly through cinematic alchemy into a fictive lark. The Somerset we see is vaguely medieval, populated by roving hoards of sexually and racially ambiguous figures wearing intricate yet minimalistic handcrafted masks. We are told that Somerset is a culture defined by an unstable political scene, hovering in a state of near permanent revolution. As described and depicted in “Somerset,” the scenario is akin to a frantic state of agitation and randomly directed aggression, poised somewhere between Western characterizations of the fierce Yanomamö tribe and the hippy-bourgeois renegades of the 1960s. The society is ruled by rash machismo and the knee-jerk vicissitudes of post-adolescent sex drives. “Political strife keeps the population containable,” von Schlegell writes. “At the age of 42, all men and women are expected to run into battle, axe in hand, and sacrifice their lives for a dream.” While this hardly sounds utopian, it is not coincidental that this tragicomic world of unfettered one-upmanship and raging testosterone is named for Rivers’ hometown. Nostalgia, after all, is the most seductive utopia there is, and by far the most dangerous. Naturally, we can never really move forward into the past. But this is a fundamental part of the human dream, from the deepest recesses of the unconscious, the desire to revert to the safety of the womb and an amorphous oneness

with the Mother. In this no-place, we can attain complete transparency of social relations, because the social is (to borrow a term from the U.S. health care system) a pre-existing condition—the always already understood state of self, comfortably reflected in all things. Even when engaged in philosophical reflection, we have too often remained committed to shopworn humanist thinking, which tends to see landscape, air, water and space as inert matter to be laboured upon, not as entities unto themselves.

And so, *Slow Action* ends having taken us through a startling trajectory, moving the concept of utopia from the most overly rational (math-as-sex) to the most overtly irrational (sex-as-war), and in so doing leaves us very close to the real world—in fact, Rivers’ own backyard. These are deeply unstable times. We face global catastrophe, heavy weather and economic collapse. The one thing that seems to be common among every political demagogue who promises to deliver us from these end times is a promise to move us forward by taking us back. Behind the sly humour and the intellectual gamesmanship, Rivers and von Schlegell offer a warning. It’s always too late when utopia shows its other face. The island is sinking. The axes are sharp.

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*This essay is dedicated to the memory of the Hon. Jack Layton (1950-2011).*

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**Ben Rivers** lives and works in London, UK. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including being shortlisted for the Jarman Award 2010. He is recipient of the Paul Hamlyn Award for Artists 2010 and the Baloise Art Prize 2011. Recent exhibition venues include: Art Basel, Hayward Gallery (London), Changing Room (Stirling), Matt’s Gallery (London), Kate MacGarry (London), ICA (London). Artist-spotlight screenings include the Courtisane Festival, Pesaro International Film Festival, London Film Festival, Tirana Film Festival, Punto de Vista, Pamplona, and a retrospective at IndieLisboa Film Festival. Rivers is represented by Kate MacGarry Gallery, London.

**Michael Sicinski** is a writer and teacher who has published numerous articles on experimental film and video. He is currently a Visiting Artist in the Fine Arts Department of the University of Houston.

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