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## Utopian Curatorial Praxis: On *Slow Action* by Ben Rivers

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Utopus ... designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them. (Thomas More)

Thomas More's utopian construction required, firstly and famously, a conceptual space. Thus King Utopus made the conditions of possibility for his utopia by cleaving an island from the mainland. The island is fertile ground for the utopian imagination. Following Deleuze, dreaming of islands is dreaming of pulling away, of being separate, and of beginning afresh. Islands are separated from continents, but islands are also that which we employ to separate ourselves from what exists; islands originate in the ocean, but they are also sites of an origin. It is their boundedness and isolation that is important.

From polis to island to nation to globe, the size and constitution of the bounded space in which utopia could be thought has shifted with the conditions of the age. Along with this spatial transformation came a temporal one: from a plausible non-place in which to enact better policies, utopia shifted into the future, becoming a horizon for transformative action in the here-and-now. These latter teleological utopias, patterned after the *mentalité* of progress, and increasingly embroiled in capitalist discourses of globalisation, technocracy and endless growth, themselves then collapsed as a scaffold of belief. First in the 1960s and 1970s, pointed up most clearly by New Wave sf visions of entropic decline; briefly resurrected with the birth of the internet and the rapid spread of information technology; only to fall again in light of the brutality of post 9/11 neo-colonial policy, and again with the crash of 2008. While time continues to pass, notions of exerting realistic agency in altering the course of history, and with them any strong sense of an alternative future, wither away. Agency shifts from human hands to extra-human forces: Capital and Nature, synthesised as a World-Ecology; Capitalocene. Apart from a pie-in-the-sky techno-utopianism that even its proponents cannot take seriously, apocalypse reigns again; the future flattens into a chronic present whose only linear resolution is ecological collapse, now invested with a perverse utopian desire: the slate wipes itself clean.

Beginning with the premise of catastrophically risen sea-levels, Ben Rivers's *Slow Action* (UK 2011)<sup>1</sup> aims to present a series of potential utopias that arise in the aftermath. The most contemporary chronological structuring – ecological collapse – here provides the opportunity to return to the origins of utopian thinking – bounded and isolated islands. Far from blank, however, these islands are inhabited by the ruins of our age.

The four sections of the film mark out a range of potential thought about utopia. The first island, 'Eleven', is founded on the valorisation of pure rational, mathematical thought. But unlike a dystopian Fordist nightmare, here such valorisation has led to a bare simplicity of life, the inhabitants devoting their time to stargazing at night, when the universe is revealed in all its truth. The second utopia, 'Society Islands', is a string of islands, each with a different social structure. The inhabitants are always aware of other possible utopias, and are free to explore them at will. The uniqueness of these islands lies in the dominance of narrative as a social principle – to the extent that suicide is the normal mode of death, as the choice of how to seal your own narrative is considered a crucial one, with ramifications on how your life as a whole is understood. The third island, 'Kanzennashima', holds only one inhabitant, a self-professed madman, whose utopia manifests a complex temporality. For him, utopia can only be approached, never reached, and it lies in the past – not as a golden age, but as the ruins of its own ruins, whose recreation can only come about through constant efforts of rearticulation.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVruPaRsWRs>.

These efforts themselves are the utopia, we understand. This complex but beautiful idea – the doubling of a ruin – suggests a mode of agency able to engage with the remnants of the past and to expose within their ruins another – the ruins of a potential past, a Benjaminian redeeming of the past in the present. Finally, the fourth island, ‘Somerset’, is in permanent, semi-ritualised revolution; utopia through a refusal to entrench. The old people fight and die in battle, while the young, un-jaded by experience, govern. The principle here is the constant effort to reproduce and maintain that moment of perfect accord that marks the founding of a utopia – that moment of *coming together* of more than one individual and their desires and dreams (founded initially no doubt in a *rejection* of the present), symbiotic with the *destruction* of the old, and the *promise* or *potential* of an open future not yet corrupted by its own limited realisation.

To create its utopias, the film uses footage of real places presented as future ruins. But they are present realities, which makes a ruin of the present, and catapults us into a position of seeing the present as past, as ruins of a now-past age. The temporality is further complicated by the narrative present of the film being set even further into the future, looking back at these island utopias as curios, entries in a Great Encyclopaedia of Utopias, diligently collected by a lineage of Curators. These future islands are thus present perfect: they will have been. The ecological catastrophe, and the socio-diversity that arises in aftermath, are certainties. But they are comprised of a collage of the present, with images of real ruined or otherworldly locations estranged through the camera’s lingering eye, through clever juxtaposition and framing, through splicing with an alienating soundtrack salvaged from 1970s sf films (past representations of the future). All of which is presented under a guiding narrative written by Mark von Schlegell with no knowledge of the kind of footage Rivers’ was going to take, and which often opens up a rift between narrative and visual content that the viewer cannot reconcile. One can only guess what the narrative present of the film is like, but I would suggest that it be inferred as the organising principle of the conflicting elements of the film: a post-utopian, curatorial perspective that manages to suspend within itself the formal and temporal tensions of ruin and futurity, apocalypse and utopia, submission and agency.

The presence of so many competing and contradictory temporalities in the film, from past futures to present pasts, points to a dominant temporality that is comprised precisely of the variegated ruination of temporalities in the present. In turn, the organising principle of the film as a series of future perfect Encyclopaedia entries points to curatorial practise as a potential ground for reasserting agency in the present. Fredric Jameson has recently asserted that our era suffers from a ‘collective loss of historicity’ (120), and pinpoints the rise of curatorial practise and form from art to financial derivatives as the definitive symptom. Such practise produces for Jameson a series of singularity-events, objects that cannot be universalised, generalised or totalised, and which speak of the effort and failure to map the postmodern experience of individuals and of communities, and of the relation between the two. The perfection of such an effort has surely long been the paradox at the heart of utopias. If Jameson is correct, and present conditions make this impossible effort the key political dilemma of our age’s ruined temporality, then perhaps *Slow Action*, with its conscious effort to curate a series of resonant, yet pointedly *singular* (non-total, non-universal) utopian figures, is the appropriate mode in which to orient ourselves in the wasteland, with a view to effective future praxis.

## Works Cited

Jameson, Fredric. ‘The Aesthetics of Singularity’. *New Left Review* 92 (2015) . 101–32.