

# Islands in the stream

Lucy Reynolds explores the imaginary archipelago of Ben Rivers's 'Slow Action'

A fascination with worlds that exist beyond the accepted boundaries of civilisation pervades the films of Ben Rivers. "I've always been interested in remote places," he says, "places where you feel you are in a very isolated world, whether deep in a forest or on an island." This is not to suggest that the artist's engagement with the enigmatic outsiders and elemental wildernesses that populate his films is grounded in a nostalgia for pre-industrial ways of living, or expresses an escapist tendency on the part of his subjects. For Jake, the hermit woodsman in *This Is My Land* (2006), and the other seers of the forest depicted in Rivers's films, the seclusion of nature is not a refuge but a model for – and intimation of – the potentials of a post-technological age.

Although Rivers's sympathetic portraits of outsiders reflect an anthropological curiosity, and while the observational nature of his camera may place his work in the category of documentary cinema, his films are as much visions of some possible future as they are records of the present. Both sci-fi writing and anthropological studies have informed the ambiguous slip between fact and fiction in his films, revealing Rivers's awareness of cinema's unique ability to harness images of photographic realism to imaginative worlds. Indeed, the narration that runs through his most recent film *Slow Action* is based on a collaboration with the critic and sci-fi

author Mark von Schlegell, whose fantastical stories of interplanetary travel Rivers admires and feels have an affinity with the suggestive spaces he wants to conjure on screen.

A travelogue narrative recurs throughout Rivers's films, particularly in his journey across the snowbound regions of Scotland in *I Know Where I'm Going* (2009). In *Slow Action*, his singular acts of exploration take on more ambitious dimensions, seeking those distant forms of isolation embodied by the sea-bound form of the island. Rivers has been travelling among remote islands and exotic archipelagos in his imagination for many years, informed by books such as J.G. Ballard's futuristic novel *The Drowned World* (1962), alongside the imaginary voyages of Melville, Jules Verne and Samuel Butler, and the cinematic seafaring of Powell and Pressburger. A commission from Animate Projects and Picture This, the Bristol-based agency for artists' moving-image work, allowed him to realise his "dreams of islands", whittling his list down to the ten locations that were accessible enough for him to have some chance of filming there. Of those ten, *Slow Action* depicts just four, which appear as separate chapters in an island odyssey, equally allusive of Odysseus's fantastic voyage and of the field study, perhaps, of an ethnographic explorer treading uncharted regions.

In the gallery space at Picture This, the islands of *Slow Action* were presented as four simultaneous high-definition projections, their grouped but discreet screens mapping an archipelago of image and sound

navigated by visitors as they traversed the audio and spatial boundaries between screens. For its London premiere at Matt's Gallery, the film is a single 16mm projection, its sequential form calling for a different mode of onscreen voyaging. Viewers are carried on their journey by a linking voiceover from two narrators, female and male, recounting a mysterious curator's descriptions of each island's flora, fauna and political and social structures.

As we pass from the so-called Eleven to Hiva, Kanzenashima and finally Somerset, it seems the objective is to decide whether any of these islands can be considered a Utopia. The blasted lava landscapes of Eleven, for example, support an unseen society of nocturnal beings; the detritus-strewn beaches of Hiva harbour rich plant life and fractious natives; the desolate island city of Kanzenashima lies deserted; the wooded kingdom of Somerset shelters a primitive tribal society.

By setting these futuristic narratives to images of the contemporary world, *Slow Action* provokes an imaginative leap of perception on the part of the viewer, inviting them to read futuristic patterns into images that are clearly earthbound and contemporary, however remote. Thus the extraterrestrial can be glimpsed in the concrete shells of half-built houses on Lanzarote, the model for Eleven, or when a Polynesian family peacefully afloat on a fragment of polystyrene in Tuvalu is mistaken for a sub-species of Hivan society. Suspended between fact and fiction, Rivers's island exploration uncovers strange shapes in familiar landscapes, reading the present through the future.

■ *'Slow Action'* shows until 20 March at Matt's Gallery, London and can be viewed online at [animateprojects.org](http://animateprojects.org)



● **Orson Welles's** unfinished film *'The Other Side of the Wind'*, shot in 1972 and portraying the last hours of a dying film director (played by John Huston), is reportedly finally going to make it to the screen. The film has been locked in legal wrangles ever since it was shot, but negotiations have apparently finally broken the deadlock. Questions remain, however, over whether the raw footage should be edited. Welles (above) gave extensive editing notes to Peter Bogdanovich, but some feel the footage should be left in its raw state.

● **Nuri Bilge Ceylan**, the Turkish director of *'Climates'* and *'Three Monkeys'*, is finishing work on *'Once upon a Time in Anatolia'*. Details of the film are being kept under wraps, but it is reportedly Ceylan's biggest film to date, and has been shot on the Anatolian steppe in Turkey.

● **Guillermo Del Toro** is to direct a 3D adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's story *'At the Mountain of Madness'*, about a geology professor who leads an expedition to the Arctic in the 1930s and uncovers something otherworldly. James Cameron is set to produce, with Tom Cruise or James McAvoy rumoured to be in the running for the lead role.

● **John Sayles** is adapting *'Girls Like Us'*, Sheila Weller's book about the early careers of Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell and Carole King, who all embodied the freewheeling early 1970s Laurel Canyon singer-songwriter scene.

● **Meryl Streep** is set to give her famed facility with accents a test as she is reportedly set to star as Margaret Thatcher in director Phyllida Lloyd's *'The Iron Lady'*, from a screenplay by Abi Morgan. The film also stars Jim Broadbent as Dennis Thatcher, Richard E. Grant as Michael Heseltine and Anthony Head as Geoffrey Howe.

● **Alain Resnais** is shooting his next film *'Vous n'avez encore rien vu'*. Based on a script by Resnais and Laurent Herbiet, it stars Mathieu Amalric, Lambert Wilson, Michel Piccoli and Resnais stalwarts André Dussollier and Sabine Azéma.

Science-fiction and anthropological studies inform the ambiguous slip between fact and fiction in Rivers's films

