



S L O W

Filmmaker Ben Rivers discusses his latest project, which has taken him to Lanzarote, Japan, New Zealand and Tuvalu

A C T I O N

This will have to be a bit rushed. I've just left Japan and I'm on my way to Tuvalu – a place that is disappearing into the Pacific Ocean never to be seen again (well, in 20–30 years or so). I'd just like to see it before it disappears. I read about it when I was young. It has the lure of the Arctic. But I had to wait for a commission opportunity so that I could argue my case to go there and do a project. It's a good location for the project I'm currently working on – a four-part post-apocalyptic sci-fi. After 30 years of watching films like *Glen and Randa*, *A Boy and his Dog*, *The Quiet Earth*, *Zardoz*, it seemed about time I made one myself.

It all started when the art organisation Picture This asked if I'd like to make something relating to Darwin's anniversary. I really took my time deciding what to do, and now we've missed it. No one will care about Darwin this year, it seems. Darwin was a catalyst for this project and somehow got left behind in the process, but not before I discovered that he began writing an island biogeography (though it wasn't named as an area of study for another 100

or so years). This is the study of how species and eco-systems evolve differently when isolated and surrounded by unsuitable habitat. What initially excited me about this area was the image of a scientist studying small pools of oil in a big machine room, in an attempt to see how different bacteria evolved from the same type (due to variations in the room and in the pools, like heat, food stuff, human contact, dust, other bacteria friends). So I thought I'd apply this idea to a conception of the Earth in a few hundred years; the sea level rising to absurd heights, like in *The Drowned World*, and leaving lots of new archipelagos cut off from one another – a world where nobody wants to travel anymore.

I decided to film four different islands around the world, ones which I'd always wanted to visit, starting with Lanzarote. Yes, I really had wanted to go there, since I saw Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana*, which was partly shot there. My new work is made in the shadow of this film. Lanzarote is a beautiful strange island that is known, unfairly, chiefly for its English- and German-infested beach resorts.



Actually it's one of the driest places on the planet, and therefore much of it resembles Venus, or perhaps the Venus of my mind.

The plan was to make up four hyperbolic Utopias that seemed like possible future mini-societies. I tried to cobble together accounts from existing pieces of Utopian fictions from days gone by, books I have consistently wanted to make work about, for example, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, Herbert Read's *The Green Child*, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Alfred Kubin's *The Other Side* and many other books about (usually Victorian) explorers looking for some kind of Shangri-La. By chance I read *Venusia* by Mark von Schlegell and asked if he'd be interested in collaborating. After a series of correspondences he began to write accounts of four future islands, evolved differently depending upon their geographic, geologic, climate, flora and fauna influences. These will most likely be narrated while the images play out in glorious Cinemascope (like any self-respecting dusty dead ruined world

sci-fi). This kind of collaboration is a first for me and it feels good relinquishing some of the controlling megalomaniacal toil.

But it's still up in the air whether it'll work or not. The images and texts are deliberately being made without each other in mind – to see what happens when they're finally put together. This is how I like to work: having an adventure while making something, and being surprised. This is useful when things don't quite work out the way you might have planned – and that's what I try to remind myself if I miss something while shooting, or if I forget to pack my sound recorder.

This takes me back to Japan, and all the soaking I did in onsens (Japanese spas) while I was waiting for the go ahead to travel on to Gunkanjima, an island off the coast of Nagasaki. The island is a deserted city, on a rock that once had rich coal reserves beneath it. They built the city so that the miners could live there with their families, but it was shut down in the 1970s and left to the ravages of typhoons. Now it

Previous page, above and below: Footage from Gunkanjima

Right: Footage from Tuvalu



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looks like a ghost city after war. In December the sea becomes erratic and rough, so I could only manage to stay there for one day – every other day we would call Baba-san, our boat captain, in the morning and he would say 'I've been sailing to that island for 40 years and today is not safe, there's one percent chance we can go tomorrow'. So I would go to the onsen, and sit in the hot volcanic water in the bath outside and watch the clouds go by. I would see the storm come in over the sea, and sit and feel my face pelted with rain, until it turned to hail. Then I would be forced inside and sit next to an old naked Japanese man who looked at me as if I was nuts. I hope I got what I needed from Gunkanjima. One of the joys of using film is that I don't get to see the footage until I get home, which can be simultaneously joyous and devastating, and which eventually governs what the work will become.

Now I'm waiting to go to Tuvalu, one of the smallest and remotest countries in the world. My interest in the country mainly stems from the dreams I had about the place as a child. I'm a bit terrified because I don't like flying. A tiny plane goes from Fiji to Tuvalu twice a week, flying over a thousand miles of ocean. I don't think there is much in the country: a bunch of semi-submerged desert islands, some leftover second world war machinery, and a society that can't afford to get rid of its rubbish, and so the detritus floats around the feet of the houses (no help from Britain who tossed it aside after being its colonial usurper). High tides often flood Tuvalu's one road and its houses, and the sea waits to cover the five-metre peak of the archipelago. Tuvalu's airstrip seems to be the place to hang out: people wait to see who is on the twice-weekly plane, they play some strange two-ball game, or they sleep there at night because of the cool breeze that wafts over the tarmac, and then return to their homes at dawn. I will be skulking around there with my camera in the early light.

Just before I left my friend gave me 'The Man Who Loved Islands', a short story by DH Lawrence. Here is an extract:



'Strangely, from your little island in space, you were gone forth into the dark, great realms of time, where all the souls that never die veer and swoop on their vast, strange errands. The little earthly island has dwindled, like a jumping-off place, into nothingness, for you have jumped off, you know not how, into the dark wide mystery of time, where the past is vastly alive, and the future is not separated off.'

That sounds appropriate to where I'm going. Will let you know.

Best wishes, Ben Rivers

Ben Rivers, Kate MacGarry, London, 11 March-2 May
The resulting work from these trips, entitled 'Slow Action', will be shown at Picture This, Bristol in early summer 2010