But the game is up! We must all die; nor leave survivor nor heir to the wide inheritance of earth. We must all die! The species of man must perish; his frame of exquisite workmanship; the wondrous mechanism of his senses; the noble proportion of his godlike limbs; his mind, the throned king of these; must perish. Will the earth still keep her place among the planets; will she still journey with unmarked regularity round the sun; will the seasons change, the trees adorn themselves with leaves, and flowers shed their fragrance, in solitude? Will the mountains remain unmoved, and streams still keep a downward course towards the vast abyss; will the tides rise and fall, will beast pasture, birds fly, and fishes swim, and the winds fan universal nature; when man, the lord, possessor, perceiver, and recorder of all these things, has passed away, as though he had never been? O, what mockery is this! — Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*

Ben Rivers's most recent film, *Urth*—commissioned by the Renaissance Society for his exhibition of the same name—opens with this passage from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, the first major fictional account of the destruction of humankind.

*Urth* takes its title from the Old Norse word suggesting the twisted threads of fate, as cited by philosopher Timothy Morton in his recent book, *Dark Ecology*. Filmed on location in Arizona's Biosphere 2, this new work imagines a scientist living alone inside an experimental ecosystem after the world outside is ruined. A voice-over written by author Mark von Schlegell traces the anonymous figure as she records her final days and hours in the hermetic structure. The resulting film is a cinematic mediation on ambitious experiments, artificial environments, and visions of the future.

The artist’s newest work shares with his previous films an interest in utopias: the desire to make the world anew tinged with the realization of its impossibility. His projects frequently draw on elements of apocalyptic literature, science fiction, and adventure tales to explore the opening up of possibilities to which these visions can give rise. In a 2013 interview, Rivers notes, “It’s all about freedom, an idea I come back to quite often in my films: what the idea of freedom means. There is a sort of hope in the films I’m making, from looking at possible ways of being, further down the line.”
Two previous films by Rivers similarly explore the relationship between humans and the natural and constructed world. Slow Action (2010) offers an imagined study of island biogeography across four locations, considering how these self-contained sites have and might continue to evolve. Its quasi-ethnographic narrative, also written by von Schlegell, imagines future societies grappling with rising seas and soon-to-be-lost ecologies. Things (2014) is a film collage divided into four “seasons,” juxtaposing found imagery, objects, and sounds with domestic and nature scenes that are at once intimate and unsettling. It is presented alongside a series of drawings and photographs.

For Rivers, film offers a crucial means for reimagining how and where we might live, and he deftly employs elements of documentary, fictional, and experimental filmmaking to create works that are both familiar and unsettling. In the interview, he goes on to describe being driven by “a desire to make cinema into something that isn’t the world, it’s another. I brought in Mark von Schlegell to write the narration, because his command of hyperbolic sci-fi language was far superior to mine, after reading his novel Venusia. We had an exciting back and forth correspondence, talking about Victorian utopian novels and the different ingredients for the four island utopias described in the film, and unreliable observers and narrators. While I travelled to the Atlantic and Pacific, Mark wrote, not knowing exactly where I was going, and hence free from the shackles of any documentary facts. The result is ethnographic science fiction.