



THE INHABITANT

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These fragments I have shored against my ruin

IN HIS WORKS, Martin Healy represents through photography, film and video his interest in the occult and systems of belief. His works such as *Facsimile* (2009), *Fugue* (2011) and *Last Man* (2011) choose as their starting point science fiction texts that are inter-related in their investigation into ways of being, ideologically and psychologically. His recent film works resonate with discussions surrounding projects for social change. The locus for transformation in the form of social, technological or environmental developments are all key elements in *Fugue* (2011) and *Last Man* (2011). Science fiction writing is paramount to accessing these underlying themes. Writers of science fiction use the medium as a means to propose political ideologies in which they imagine a society that breaks with the present society and project into the future; this is synonymous with the concept of Utopia. The relationship between Utopia and the political as well as the value of utopian thinking and its association with socialism continue to be unresolved and continually debated. Healy investigates this relationship through his dystopian films; they situate themselves within a present or projected time where the remnants of these ideological projects are what remain. The displacement of time and the sense of loss in these works highlight the failure of the utopian projects and the nostalgia for all things modern registers that the present is at a point of radical change.

Edward Bellamy's 'Looking backward 2000 to 1887' (1888) forms the basis for Healy's film work *Fugue*. The book was published in the late 19th century and influenced many intellectuals of the time and was associated with Marxist and socialist theory. The book's protagonist Julian West, falls into a hypnosis-induced sleep in the dystopian conditions of the 1880s and wakes up one hundred and thirteen years later to a socialist utopia. The book captures the period's radical sense of its own historical discontinuity and that change was imminent, similar to the current state of play within our own historical moment. West finds a guide, Doctor Leete, to explain to him the advances of the time; less working hours, retirement by 45, the goods of society are equally distributed, the emergence of consumer cooperatives. Bellamy's version of socialism did not involve radical revolution but social evolution and had mass appeal to the average American of that period.

The glass city described by Bellamy is reminiscent of contemporary cities and is thought to have had an influence on urban planning and the development of garden cities. The setting of *Fugue* is the garden city of Tapiola in Finland that was designed in the 1950s and 60s. It was one of the first post-war 'new town' projects of Europe. The project was conceptualised by Heikki Von Hertzen and was an ideological experiment in that it was a collaboration between the disciplines of architecture, sociology, civil engineering, landscape gardening, domestic science and youth welfare. The 1960s garden city differed from Bellamy's late 19th century vision in that it was based on micro political movements. The utopian city would

reflect a microcosm of Finnish society. The project was also heavily influenced by modernism and Le Corbusier principles of urban planning for public housing. His *Immeubles Villas* (1922) called for large blocks of cell-like individual apartments stacked one on top of the other, with plans that included a living room, bedrooms and kitchen, as well as a garden terrace. The construction of tower blocks in cities illustrates the rationalisation, functionalism and therapeutic positivism of modernist architecture that was indicative of the 1960s. In the film the lone protagonist walks through the deserted landscape of the city, the tower blocks are viewed in the distance as he stands by the side of the lake. The garden city is overgrown and there is an ominous tension in the piece as we follow the character through the landscape. It is reminiscent of the apocalyptic films such as '28 Days Later' where the city streets are uncommonly empty and all that seems to have survived are birds and nature.

This film is also a psychological portrait of an individual that has become dislocated from time. The term *Fugue* describes a specific psychological disorder that refers to 'double consciousness' or a psychogenic flight. The term was first classified in the late 19th century. A fuguer is an individual who moves between identities that are the product of competing temporalities. The primary symptom of fugue is unexpected travel away from home or work usually accompanied by confusion about personal identity or even an assumption of a new identity and the inability to recall one's past. The film depicts this sense of estrangement through the use of the deserted landscape and lack of expression by the individual, which allows the viewer little relation or empathy for the character. W.E.B. Du Bois used the terms double consciousness as a model for understanding the psycho-social divisions within the structure of American Society. In his study of racism, he was of the view that people themselves were somewhat responsible for their own mistreatment; 'it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'. *Fugue* is a metaphor for the collective psychological state, reflected through the individual.

This idea is continued in Healy's film work *Last Man*, the title of which is taken from an apocalyptic science fiction novel by Mary Shelley (1826), in which the world is decimated by a plague. This reflects Shelley's disillusionment with the French revolution and the political ideals of writers of that period such as Edmond Burke. Hugh Luke commented that "by ending her story with the picture of the Earth's solitary inhabitant, she has brought nearly the whole weight of the novel to bear upon the idea that the condition of the individual being is essentially isolated and therefore ultimately tragic". Healy's *Last Man* illustrates this idea of the tragic isolated figure. The janitor wanders around what we imagine was once a busy airport terminal now defunct, he continues his everyday task of cleaning the terminal. The futility of his actions reflects his isolation and his denial to

accept the current situation. This piece reflects our collective fear, the projection of a world where oil runs out and the society that we have become accustomed to is no longer in existence.

Both films reflect on projections of the future, which is consistent with the prognosis of the earliest science fiction novels. The narrative in both leads to the same conclusion, the utopian visions of the future have not come to pass and we have become the architects of our own destruction. We are at an interesting point in history where mass protests and demonstrations dominate our news but there is no unified thought of how a globalised transformation could materialise. Frederick Jameson saw that the formal flaw with Utopia is “how to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed into a practical-political transition – now becomes a rhetorical and political strength – in that it forces us to concentrate on the break itself; a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived”. Healy’s films *Fugue* and *Last Man* represent the rattling of the bars that Jameson refers to for both the individual and the collective. It is a projection of an alternate future.

MARY CREMIN is a curator

The title of this essay is taken from *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot

¹ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York, Avenel, NJ, Gramercy Books, 1994.

² Luke, Hugh J., Introduction. *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley. Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1965, xii.

³ Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the future: The desire called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2005, p232.





Last Man (2011)
Still from HD video



The Singular Alone: (Anti-)Utopia in the films of Martin Healy

'Melancholy and utopia are heads and tails of the same coin,'

GÜNTER GRASS

BELIEF AND ITS paradoxes have long been the subject matter of Martin Healy's photographic and film work. Recently, something has changed. A thematic shift can be noted in the three films *Facsimile* (2008), *Fugue* (2011) and *Last Man* (2011). Belief now confronts its object. When belief is realised, the believed-in place is actualised in material form, at which point a different set of concerns to those posed earlier arise. The narrator in *Facsimile* clearly exemplifies this change when deliberating on perfection as an endless drone, terrorising as much as liberating. His concern is with a believed in place defined by endless repetition. It would be easy to classify these films as Utopian, but this would likely miss the point of Healy's exercise. For Healy's three films are just as much Anti-Utopian in impulse, using science-fiction as a means of exploring the Utopian project unravelling on minute and close inspection. It is not surprising that an exploration like this appears at a time when investments of a Utopian variety in 'Ireland Inc.' (and its liberal democratic consensus) have crumbled into dust, marked by mass unemployment and bank bailouts. As an internationally-heralded model, Celtic Tiger Ireland was the believed-in Utopian island, the very limitations of which have horrified in their revelation. It is apt that the limitations of Utopian projects, the underside of believed in places, concern Healy's three films. For in Utopia the otherness of the Anti-Utopian resides. It is this considered concern which makes the films a resource for the present time. For while belief elevated to innovative heights is integral to Healy's earlier work, it is now the perfection of believed in places which takes centre stage.

Facsimile sets the ball rolling in this regard. Exotic plants appear in luscious close-up as a voice-over (spoken in French) informs us of a private island. The images we come to associate with Utopia are felt in the purifying elements of nature (as drops of water glisten), layers upon layers of unhampered growth on an island – an exotic island. However the discovery by a European of an island where everything appears perfect is, of course, a dated Utopian image – Thomas Moore's 'Utopia' (1516) being the originating text. Healy is no doubt aware of this, and he uses all the associated clichés: the snobbish grandeur of the French voice-over, its omnipotent associations, the objective close-up associated with nature documentaries. As the camera follows the contours of the plants, the subtleties of form and texture are revealed, as light penetrates the spaces between. The light arouses our suspicion, the outcome of an illusionary perfection. The private paradise we look upon, described by the voice-over in detail, appears more and more to be the fabricated man-made construction we suspect, with the film medium an ally to the illusion we have been party to. Inspired by the novella 'The Invention of

Morel' (1940) by Adolfo Bioy Casares, a text which draws on Utopian conventions to slowly deconstruct them, Healy's work gives a vital expanse to the deliberation of artifice and reality in Casares's text. The idea that we are 'powerless to escape consciousness,' as the narrator attests, is in itself a slow-burning criticism of the Utopian genre, and one which sets our conscious desires against their real-life fulfilment. It appears that to be human implies a consciousness of that which escapes us: to be human means we desire too much. Yet in the aftermath of desire, the perfect place is not what it promised to be.

As science-fiction, Facsimile has close affiliations with Andrei Tarkovsky's Soviet masterpiece *Stalker* (1979). In both films, the dream of something which can extinguish desire (as something integral to human existence) is deconstructed. *Stalker* is concerned with three men seeking to find a mythical room said to fulfil the innermost wishes of those who enter. When looking for the room the travellers begin to deliberate on what will happen when entering it. However, rather than enter the room, they eventually lose interest, convinced it will do more harm than good. It is implied that any such freedom from the gnawing clatter of desire, the attraction in seeking out the room, will end in ruin and this becomes more prominent as the quest unfolds. By the final stages the 'meaning' attributed to the room differs substantially. It is believed the faith Tarkovsky held to be the cause of life would die on entering the room, ruin its inevitable outcome. A similar message lies in the 'facs' Facsimile sends us: paradise can only ever be an 'image' of paradise. A mediated reality is itself curtailed by demonic illusion.

Facsimile evokes Tarkovsky's earlier film in the questions it raises about desire. *Fugue*, Healy's next film in his loosely sci-fi based trilogy is visually reminiscent. Shot in Tapiola on the outskirts of Helsinki, itself a modernist Utopian project, the film is based on Edward Bellamy's hugely influential novel 'Looking Backwards: 2000-1887' (1888), a book generally regarded as a classic of the Utopian genre. A man falls asleep only to awake a hundred years later, as he walks around a Utopian garden of the future. The city he looks upon has three towers looming in the background. As the unnamed protagonist wanders from a forest down into the city, a shot which echoes the end of *Stalker* as the Stalker wanders towards the docks, with the sun rising in the background, he is afforded none of the home comforts of the *Stalker* on his return. Instead, it is that other resounding theme of Healy's films which now begins to assert itself: the singular alone. Or to be more precise, the fact that each of us is ultimately alone in our singularity clashes with the homogeneity of the future. In *Fugue*, everything surrounding the protagonist, from the towers to his uniformed attire, is ambiguous. It is either the mark of a place which, in its perfection delights, or one which heightens the feeling of being alone, a place in which the protagonist is ultimately alone. The film responds to Bellamy's text in alluding to the Utopian aspects of the protagonist's dream, while hinting at its Anti-Utopian opposite: the nightmare. Hence the stoical grimace on

the protagonist's face conceals emotion on 'seeing' the Utopias of the future. In one sense he is entranced by the place and its difference from the squalor of his present. In another sense he is alone, confronting his singularity in a future in which he plays no part.

Singularity, aloneness and the Anti-Utopian are once again the focus of Healy's most recent film *Last Man*, originally commissioned for Terminal Convention in Cork Airport earlier this year. Borrowing its title (and its concern with the alone) from a novel by Mary Shelley, the film again draws on a lesser-known literary tradition for its inspiration. The man in question is a janitor tasked with looking after an airport that has fallen into dereliction. His rituals for staving off boredom are the mainstay of the 'action', captured with an impressive cinematic display: low-angle shots, slow pans, close-ups of airport architecture whose banal dereliction suddenly reveals a strange compelling beauty. Alone in an empty building, a sense of anxiousness would seem to result from some future threat, although as the film progresses it is - paradoxically - the past which serves as this threat. The janitor walking through the building (the slow drone of the soundtrack heightened when cleaning (washing away the sins of the past perhaps?)) is akin to his walking through the corridors of history. The airport, a symbol of universal communicability is now a dead sign of some former Utopian promise.

Singularly alone, while struggling with the Utopian promise of the past, the last man as well as *Last Man* is indebted, whether consciously or not, to the films of Stanley Kubrick. But the seemingly obvious reference for sci-fi inspired by Kubrick, 2001 (1968), is not what comes to mind. It is Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) which serves as a more pertinent reference for *Last Man*. Set in a temporarily disused airport terminal, not unlike the unused hotel in which Kubrick's film is set, both films concern a haunting past. The drone keenly employed by Kubrick to signify this haunting is also used by Healy, reaching fever pitch every time the janitor tries to clean the floor and remove its salient features. Obsessed with the past - embodied in his stiffness and his inability to relax, the janitor wades through debris, cataloguing the obsolete parts of machines. If not at his desk, he is wiping the stains of history. In his collection of essays 'Signatures of the Visible' (1980) Frederic Jameson emerged as one of the first intellectuals to properly champion Kubrick's *The Shining*. Jameson recognised the film as one of profound historical vitality, its generic features - it is of course a horror film - masking its utter seriousness. *The Shining* is now universally regarded as Kubrick's masterpiece, as much about Utopian promise as horrifying alienation. Tasked with overseeing the Overlook Hotel, protagonist Jack descends into madness evidenced by hallucinations of a time when social hierarchies were 'natural' and America's Utopianism complete, the past 'shining' through as perfected social dominance. In the present, by contrast, Jack is increasingly alienated from the past.

Last Man suffers from similar, if not as immediately threatening, problems. Walking through empty corridors he confronts history alone at every turn. It is not a dystopia, however, through which the last man wades. He is not the victim of a dictatorship, nor is he at the mercy of some form of future enslavement – he lives in the aftermath of our believed-in Utopia. Cheap travel wagers its claims on apocalyptic premises, environmental disaster waiting in the wings. Last Man is testimony to this. The Liberal West's Utopia has been revealed as a pipe dream; one based on Western imperialism and arrogance. As with Jack in *The Shining*, yet less agitated in his outward demeanour, last man seeks continuity with what came before him. An example of this (and its failure) occurs at the end of the film. A long take of a waiting area ends as each light is individually extinguished. No one is present. A medium shot of the janitor's office follows as the camera pans from right to left. Gradually the janitor comes into view, as he assembles a toy airplane while sitting at his desk. Healy captures his hands in extreme close-up before the screen turns to black. We are left pondering the toy as a symbol of the past; the janitor a victim of the technological progress Shelley and the Romantics predicted would lead to the depletion of the earth's resources. As toy models appear as ghostly traces of no longer functional objects, last man's harnessing of the present is burdened by a visible yet inaccessible past.

It is at this point we ask: is this the last man on earth? Has the apocalypse occurred? Sitting alone, for which the synthetic concept of the singular alone is a feature in Healy's three films, the janitor acts as a warning to us. Healy doesn't tell us what this warning is: he is not an educator. He is rather an artist dwelling on Utopia, beyond which is an examination of the limitations on finding it; the horror in its aftermath. His films therefore appear at an appropriate time, when now, more than ever, we need to visualise the future; not just considering perfection, but, perhaps more importantly, the limitations of finding it.

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CREDITS

Last Man (2011)

Single Channel HD Video (8.23 minutes)

Camera: Piers McGrail

Lighting: Pete Ray

Sound: Karl Burke

Actor: Daragh Martin

Assistants: David Connor, Liam Purcell

Edited by: Pete Ray, Martin Healy

Commissioned by the National Sculpture Factory (Cork) / Static (Liverpool) for Terminal Convention, Cork 2011

Fugue (2011)

Single Channel HD Video (8.03 minutes)

Camera: Pekka Uotila

Assisted by: Ville Rissanen

Sound: Karl Burke

Actor: Tero Nauha

Edited by: Martin Healy

Fugue was made with support from The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon

Martin Healy is represented by Rubicon Gallery, Dublin

Each year since 2007, Temple Bar Gallery + Studios (TBG+S) and Helsinki International Artist-in-residence Programme (HIAP) have collaborated in producing a residency exchange for Irish and Finnish artists.

This partnership provides artists with opportunities for exhibition, exchange and dialogue in the arts internationally. Artists awarded the residency to date are Sonia Shiel (IRE) and Ulrika Ferm (FIN) in 2007, Niamh O'Malley (IRE) and Heli Rekula (FIN) in 2008, Niamh McCann (IRE) and Antti Leppänen (FIN) in 2009, and Martin Healy (IRE) and Laura Köönikkä in 2010.

While on this residency Martin Healy produced his work *Fugue* which is featured in the solo exhibition *The Inhabitant* at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios 3 September – 8 October 2011



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