



# LAST AND FIRST MEN

A FILM BY JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON

Iceland - 2020 - 70 min - 16mm - English

**Festival Screenings:**

Tuesday, February 25th - 15h00 - H. d. Berliner Festspiele - Premiere

Wednesday, February 26th - 15h00 - Cubix 6 - Repetition

**[ INTERNATIONAL SALES ]**

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## [ LOGLINE ]

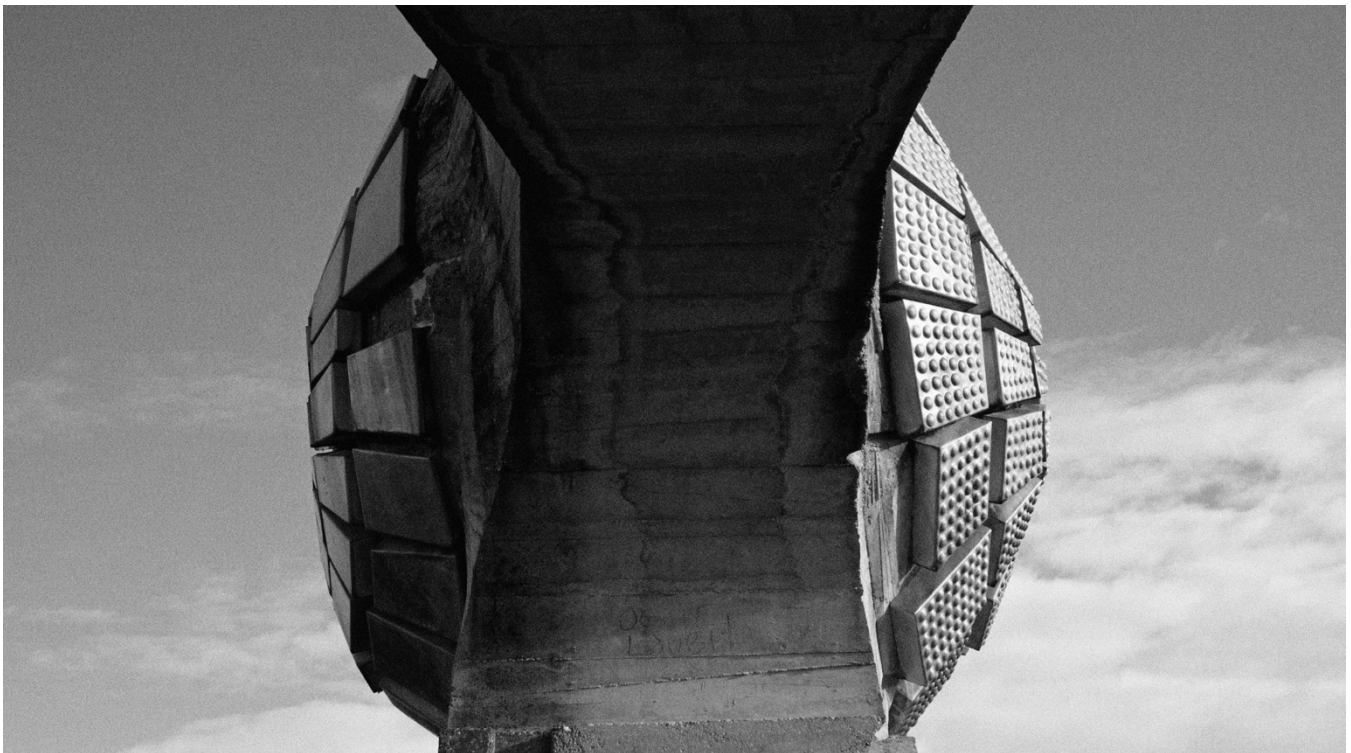
Two billion years ahead of us, a future race of humans finds itself on the verge of extinction. Almost all that is left in the world are lone and surreal monuments, beaming their message into the wilderness.

## [ SYNOPSIS ]

What can we learn from the voice speaking to us from two billion years away? *LAST AND FIRST MEN* juxtaposes the seminal speculative science fiction story by Olaf Stapledon, a haunting musical score by the late composer and musician Jóhan Jóhannson (*The Theory of Everything*, *Sicario*, *Arrival*) and filmed images of futuristic, brutalist, otherworldly stone monuments erected during the communist era in the former Yugoslav republics, shot in 16mm black and white by renowned cinematographer Sturla Brandth Grøvlen (*Victoria*, *Rams*).

Narrated by Tilda Swinton, the film beckons us into a world of surreal and phantasmagorical monuments where a future race of humans finds themselves on the verge of extinction, and where the monuments – once intended as symbols of Unity and Brotherhood – remain as lone, abandoned beacons beaming their message into the wilderness. While the story of crumbling future civilizations is told, the spectral presence of an entity attempting to communicate with us emerges.

Poetic, tragic and hopeful, *LAST AND FIRST MEN* represents Jóhann Jóhannson's final and most personal work – an allegory of remembrance, ideals and the death of utopia.



## [ DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT - JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON ]

*Last and First Men* is a film that straddles the border of fiction and documentary. It is a meditation on memory and failed Utopia, contextualized through the literary mode of science fiction.

The film has three principal layers. The first layer is a visual exploration of the "Spomenik": futuristic, abstract stone monuments erected during the communist era in the former Yugoslavian republics. Built to commemorate some of the great tragedies of the Balkan's history - WWII battle sites, concentration camps and genocides - they are charged with symbolic meaning, reflecting the enormously complex ethnic and political dynamics of the region. They were intended as symbols of the ideals of the Yugoslavian Federation, whose aim was to unify the historically divided ethnic groups of the Balkans.



Today, they stand in the wilderness of the now disunited Balkan republics, sometimes overgrown with vegetation, sometimes covered in graffiti, often neglected and abandoned. Yet they are still there, as lone beacons reaching out, still beaming their message of unity, even though it falls on mostly deaf ears these days - or it is only heard in distorted form, as one of Nationalism and Separatism.

## [ DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT - JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON ]

Echoing Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and Herzog's *Lesson in Darkness*, the film juxtaposes these extremely charged images with a text that at first seems to have little relation to the visuals, but whose relevance to them slowly becomes apparent.

The text - the second layer - draws on a novel by Olaf Stapledon, written in 1930, which describes the history of humanity from the author's present time across two billion years and eighteen distinct human species. The film focuses on the book's last two chapters, which tell the story of the Last Men - man's final civilization - describing their society, philosophy, mores and ultimate extinction.

The narrator, who is only heard and never seen, is a being living two billion years from now, who addresses the audience directly. The text is formal and academic and sometimes reads more like a historical treatise or an anthropological study than as a science fiction novel, but it also has a poetic and elegiac tone in places and sometimes it seems like we're listening to an oracle.

The last part of the narrative describes the Last Men's current predicament: the realization that their part of the universe is nearing the end of its life cycle and that their existence is threatened by the extinction of the sun. The narrator details the ways in which the Last Men react to this momentous fact and the two tasks they set themselves as a consequence: one, their plan to disseminate "among the stars the seeds of a new humanity" and the other, to "enter into past minds and participate in their experience" – to conjure up and communicate with the ghosts of their past.

The third layer is music. It is an important layer and there are long sections where the images and music stand alone. The music is elegiac and somber, giving the film some aspects of a requiem - a requiem for the Last Men and for the ideals of a failed socialist Utopia.

The three main layers flow apparently independently of each other, but sometimes they meet and intersect and create sudden, startling consonances. The film focuses on the abstract, otherworldly power and alien beauty of the monuments and the way their current decaying and neglected state infuses them with a new essence - now that the political and social context in which they were created has been thrown out of joint.

The film explores zones of decay and ruin where great tragedies have occurred - places charged with symbolism. We sense a spectral presence, an entity that is attempting to communicate with us.

## [ DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT - JÓHANN JÓHANSSON ]

*Last and First Men* creates a dialogue between the images and Stapledon's text, a poetic relationship between these decaying concrete structures and Stapledon's story of a crumbling future civilization.

Shot on 16 millimeter anamorphic, with a nostalgic and elegiac tone and a slow, measured pace, the images bring out the inherent rawness of analog film, pushing the grain and contrast. There is a constant sense of movement throughout the film and the camera is like a perpetually moving observer.



## [ PRODUCER'S NOTE - THOR SIGURJONSSON ]

Jóhann Jóhannsson first discussed this project with me back in 2012 when he was about to embark on the first shooting of the brutalist monuments in former Yugoslavia. His idea was to use these images as the base for a film based on a science fiction book “Last and First Men” by Olaf Stapledon. I was immediately very intrigued by the idea and Jóhann’s process. It has been quite a long journey.

With Jóhann’s continued success as a film composer, we kept working on it between his other projects. Fine-tuning the visual editing, bringing in great people to the team. Just before his passing, we were about to start on the final music for the film. Sometimes the longer you work on things the more relevant to the times they actually become. It really does feel that “Last and First Men” is more relevant to our time than ever. With the rise of right-wing populism, the lean toward totalitarianism, and the climate change challenges the planet is now facing – the “message from the future” seems very relevant now.

With Jóhann’s passing two years ago we faced some tough challenges in finalizing his vision. The whole team was adamant about seeing the film through to completion and it was of utmost importance to the team that his first and last feature be completed with his vision guiding us through to the end.



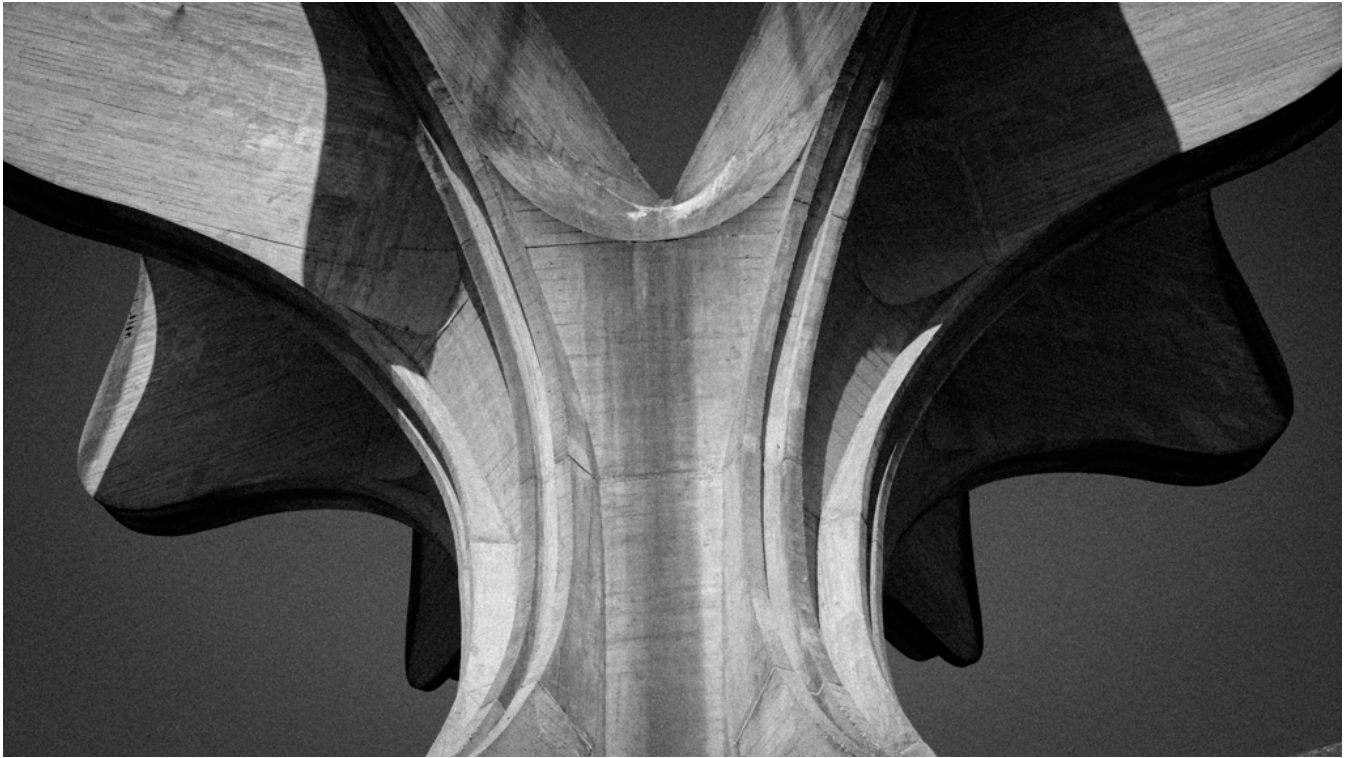
[ CINEMATOGRAPHER & PRODUCER'S NOTE -  
**STURLA BRANDTH GRØVLEN** ]

The first time I met Jóhann was at a café in Berlin. We had both worked on the film I AM HERE by Anders Morgenthaler, which was my first feature, but we had never met in person before. We sat and talked about film, music and life. And about LAST AND FIRST MEN. He told me about his vision for a feature length film focused on the old Yugoslavian monuments and the book by Olaf Stapledon. I was fascinated, absolutely hooked by the idea, and six months later we were traveling around the Balkans for three weeks together in a small van. We were shooting in the most beautiful locations, always looking for more abstract images of steel and concrete. There was an aura of the surreal around this tour. During our journey Jóhann was nominated for a Golden Globe and his career started to reach its peak. We drank blueberry wine in the mountains of Montenegro, between two tunnels, to celebrate his nomination.

From the moment we met, my image of Jóhann was the image of a director. I never knew him solely as a composer, from our first meeting I knew him as a visionary filmmaker. We would often share our thoughts on projects we were involved in, sometimes hoping that our paths might cross again and we could work together once more. He was always my director and I cherished our collaboration. And while we were on the road in the Balkans, Jóhann became a close friend.

The years went by and LAST AND FIRST MEN fittingly, organically became a long labor of love. "Oceans of time" passed from when we shot the film until today, when we are able to present Jóhann's very personal and unique film. A project that took him on a decade long journey, during the same period of his life when he was being celebrated around the world for his work as a composer. A project that is Jóhann's first and last film as a director.

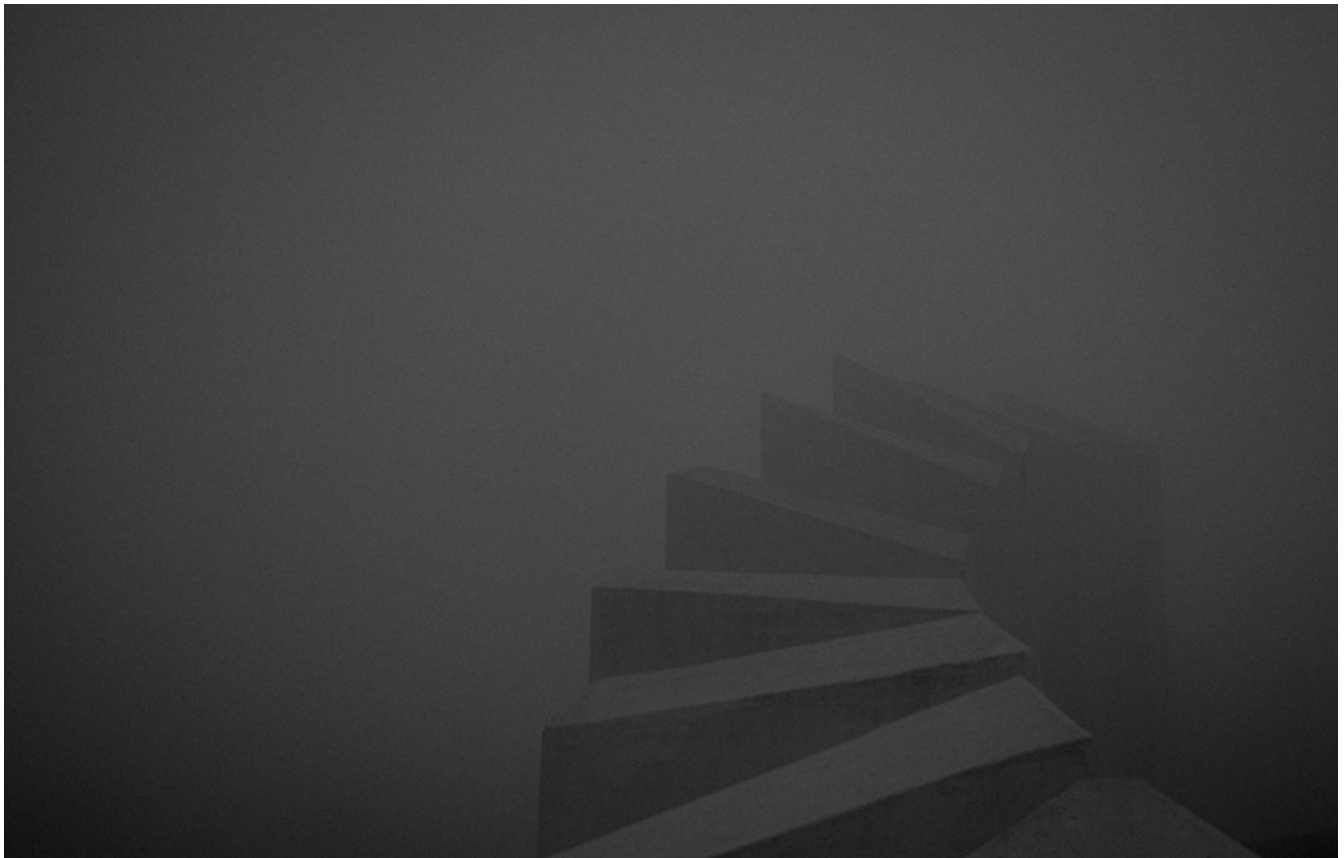
I am humble and thankful to have been invited along for the journey. And I am sad because I miss my friend. But I am strengthened by this film, and find comfort in this quote by Olaf Stapledon, taken from the book that inspired Jóhann to make this film: *"And so we may go forward together with laughter in our hearts, and peace, thankful for the past, and for our own courage. For we shall make after all a fair conclusion to this brief music that is man."*



## [ BIOGRAPHY - JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON ]

Jóhann Jóhannsson (1969–2018) was a prolific composer, who wrote music for a wide array of media including theatre, dance, television and films. His work is stylised by its blending of classical instrumentation with electronic elements. His first solo album, *Englabörn* (2002, Touch), drew from a broad set of influences, ranging from Erik Satie, Bernard Herrmann, Purcell and Moondog to electronic music issued by labels such as Mille Plateaux and Mego. Another album would follow on Touch, before Jóhannsson released two orchestral albums on **4AD**: *Fordlândia* and *IBM 1401 – A User's Manual*. In 2016, Jóhann signed with **Deutsche Grammophon** and released his last solo record, *Orphée*. A great deal of Jóhannsson's work in his last years had been closely entwined with film: in 2010 he paired up with American avant-garde filmmaker Bill Morrison on the critically acclaimed *The Miners' Hymns*. He has also scored a number of major cinematic hits, including **Denis Villeneuve's** *Prisoners* (2013), *Sicario* (2015), the score of which was nominated for all major awards, and *Arrival* (2016), which earned him **Golden Globe** and **BAFTA** nominations. His other notable film credits include **James Marsh's** Stephen Hawking biopic *The Theory of Everything* (2014), for which he won a **Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score**. Beyond scoring films, Jóhannsson directed them as well: his debut short, *End of Summer*, arrived in 2015 and was followed up by a multimedia piece titled *Last and First Men*, which premiered as a live performance at the Manchester International Festival in 2017. Narrated by **Tilda Swinton**, the project combines film and music to create a poetic meditation on memory, loss and the idea of Utopia. The film premiere of *Last and First Men* will take place at the 2020 Berlinale.





[ **SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY - JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON** ]

- 2020 **LAST AND FIRST MEN** Jóhann Jóhannsson
- 2018 **MARY MAGDALENE** Garth Davis
- 2018 **THE MERCY** James Marsh
- 2018 **MANDY** Panos Cosmatos
- 2016 **ARRIVAL** Denis Villeneuve
- 2015 **SICARIO** Denis Villeneuve
- 2014 **THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING** James Marsh
- 2013 **PRISONERS** Denis Villeneuve
- 2010 **THE MINERS' HYMNS** Bill Morrison

## [ CREDITS ]

A Film by	Jóhann Jóhannsson
Narrated by	Tilda Swinton
Produced by	Jóhann Jóhannsson Thor S. Sigurjonsson Sturla Brandth Grøvlen
Company	Zik Zak Filmworks
Associate Producer	Louise Højgaard Johansen
Executive Producers	Tim Husom Karólína Jóhannsdóttir
Based on the book <i>Last and First Men</i> by	Olaf Stapledon
Adapted by	Jóhann Jóhannsson José Enrique Macián
Cinematography by	Sturla Brandth Grøvlen, DFF
Edited by	Mark Bukdahl
Production Manager	Rosalie Vos
Post Production Supervisor	Rebekka Garrido
Music by	Jóhann Jóhannsson Yair Elazar Glotman
Sound Re-Recording Mixer	Peter Albrechtsen
Sound Design by	Jana Irmert