Civilisational Melancholy and Temporalised Space in Contemplative Science Fiction Cinema: A Phenomenological Study of Jóhan Jóhannsson's *Last and First Men*

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By Marcell Bárdos

> *Great are the stars, and man is of no account to them. But man is a fair spirit, whom a star conceived and a star kills. He is greater than those bright blind companies. For though in them there is incalculable potentiality, in him there is achievement, small, but actual. Too soon, seemingly, he comes to his end. But when he is done he will not be nothing, not as though he had never been; for he is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things.*
>
> – Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* [1]

Introduction

Our current epoch is defined by permanent crisis, decay, and disintegration. Humanity faces many interrelated existential threats – ecological collapse, economic instability, political authoritarianism – on an unprecedented, planetary scale. Societies across the globe are stuck in noxious political and economic structures that are fracturing in an increasingly spectacular fashion. If we accept the idea that every cultural artefact bears traces of its epoch, we may recognise that contemporary art, including cinema, reflects the mental and affective weight of our present condition. With a certain aesthetic sensibility, we may even identify a feeling of *civilisational melancholy* lingering in global culture: a bittersweet, reflective attunement to collective decline. [2] This omnipresent mood, sometimes striking us without warning, sometimes crystallising sharply in art, is no doubt a product of the times, brought about by the slow violence of decay shaping our psyches and environments.

My aim is to examine how civilisational melancholy is made perceptible through the aesthetic intertwinement of space and time in what I call *contemplative science fiction cinema*, a hybrid film genre merging science fiction and slow cinema. In my approach, genre is not defined primarily by iconography or linguistic categories, but by its capacity to shape experience through feelings and form, inviting attunements that are open to cultural interpretation. My case study is the film *Last and First Men* (2020) by Jóhann Jóhannsson: a deeply evocative adaptation of Olaf Stapledon's eponymous 1930 novel that transforms its source material into an audiovisual elegy for our dying civilisation.

Thus, the essay's central question is: how does *Last and First Men* make felt the unity of filmic space and time as a holistic mood, while combining elements of different genres and capturing a cultural sentiment of melancholy? I argue that the film grounds its expression in *temporalised space*: the indivisible intertwinement of time and space in the film experience, whereby space is constituted through duration and time is given shape through spatial arrangement. Through its spatiotemporal wholeness, *Last and First Men* creates a melancholic mood and instantiates the hybrid genre of contemplative science fiction cinema, which fuses the estrangement and wonder of science fiction with the durational aesthetics of slow cinema. In this fusion, the temporalised space of *Last and First Men* not only defines a distinctive genre aesthetic but also resonates with the cultural experience of the Anthropocene – the geological epoch in which humanity has become a planetary force. The film discloses this condition by attuning the viewer to a melancholy rooted in our times' temporal disorientation and heightened awareness of impermanence.

I open with a discussion of the research context, followed by a theoretical intervention and methodological reflection that reorients film phenomenology towards the spatiotemporal structure of the film experience. Then, after clarifying the key concepts, I immerse the reader in the film's mood through a detailed phenomenological description. Finally, I analyse my findings in the framework of genre theory and cultural hermeneutics, linking the melancholic world-feeling of *Last and First Men* to contemplative science fiction cinema and the Anthropocene. To articulate this multidimensional argument, my research takes an interdisciplinary approach that cuts across film phenomenology, ecocriticism, genre theory, and cultural studies of affect, with the common foundation that experience is the source of all theory.

Research Context

The field of phenomenological film theory has been witnessing a productive tension between the materialist, body-focused approach of Vivian Sobchack and her disciples, and a more idealist and aesthetics-oriented theoretical current spearheaded by Daniel Yacavone. [3] It is within this debate that I situate my project as an intervention that challenges the spatial bias in classical film phenomenology. In the field of genre theory, recent studies on science fiction are abundant, while slow cinema has also been properly theorised. [4] I draw on this research to conceptualise the hybrid mode of contemplative science fiction cinema. Finally, the concept of *mood* – referring to the affective ambience of artworks and other cultural artefacts – has long been a favoured topic in film and cultural studies. Research on its history and aesthetics allows me to ground my approach in the insight that feelings are always culturally embedded. Taken together, these strands support a holistic account of film mood that foregrounds how cinematic space is shaped by time and culture.

Intervention and Methodology: Space in Film Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition that is concerned with the essential, invariant structures of conscious experience. [5] As a methodological attitude, it entails a commitment to suspending theoretical presuppositions through a gesture of "bracketing", or "*epoché*". Following Don Ihde's practical guide, this requires attending to phenomena as and how they show themselves, describing instead of explaining, and giving equal attention to all immediate aspects of experience. [6] Phenomenological bracketing is crucial to my approach, as I prioritise direct experience over floating abstraction. Still, it is necessary to clarify my understanding of the film experience *as such*.

After a long period of ostracism, phenomenology entered film studies in the early 1990s with Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye*. [7] Sobchack famously argued that the film itself functions as a viewing subject, being both a "viewing-view" and "viewed-view", and that cinematic experience is fundamentally intersubjective, grounded in the bodily engagement between spectator and film. [8] In her words, "the power of the medium […] resides in the experience *common* to both film and spectator: the *act of viewing as experienced from within*." [9]

Sobchack's innovation was questioning all existing assumptions of film theory and demonstrating that the film experience involves an intertwinement of two subjectivities, rather than a passive reception of images. However, the elements of space, materiality, and

embodiment came to dominate her own account and the tradition of film phenomenology as a whole. Her explicitly materialist framework posits that cinematic meaning emerges primarily from our lived body's engagement with how the film spatially inhabits its world. [10] Yet Sobchack's exclusive focus on space and materiality raises questions. It is counterintuitive, given that a film's projected world is entirely immaterial; to manifest as a spatial and embodied experience, it depends on a *temporal* flow and organisation of frames, as well as the spectator's nonspatial sense of time. Consequently, Sobchack's framework offers an impoverished image of film's aesthetic capabilities and neglects how it replicates dimensions of human subjectivity that are irreducible to physical movement and behaviour (e.g. imagination, memory, and mood).

Daniel Yacavone critiqued these limitations most thoroughly in his article "Film and the Phenomenology of Art" (2016). His central issue was with Sobchack's assumption that merely by virtue of its *medial* property of presenting material reality through moving images, "cinema is *automatically* able to embody or present processes of 'lived perception'." [11]Yacavone reminds us that a substantial part of the film experience resides in how formal elements (e.g. composition, lighting, depth of field) are organised into a meaningful aesthetic whole. Crucially, this involves editing and an audiovisual "cinematic *rhythm*" that shapes the viewer's subjective experience of time. [12] As Corey P. Cribb observes, such rhythm incorporates immaterial meaning or "sensible ideas" into form, giving artworks a "cohesion without a concept". [13] Temporality is almost completely absent from Sobchack's phenomenology, given her theoretical stance that time is a retroactive construction from movement in space. [14]

Yacavone had already developed a sophisticated theory of film experience in *Film Worlds* (2014), drawing heavily on Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenological aesthetics. For Dufrenne, any "aesthetic object" is experienced by the beholder as a "quasi-subject" that invites immersion into an entire world of its own. [15] Building on this, Yacavone explores how films create a "global, *cineaesthetic* world-feeling" through aesthetic expression. He argues that films possess a holistic mood rooted in the spectator's subjective experience of time, irreducible to any single formal element. [16] Contra Sobchack, he places temporality at the heart of cinema, appealing to a significantly different model of consciousness. He locates time in the "*nonspatial interiority* of conscious mind" which interacts with the space of the outer world to produce experience. [17] According to him, this structure is mirrored in films, for they present the intertwinement of an "objective, spatial, 'represented world'" with an immaterial "'inner' time sense of consciousness". Or in Dufrenne's terms, "*time is 'spatialized'* and *space 'temporalized'* in the aesthetic object." [18] Films, therefore, present time and space as an organic unity, just as human consciousness does, which is why they acquire a quasi-subjectivity.

Crucially, Yacavone also asserts that a film's world-feeling always relates to the external world and is therefore open to cultural interpretation. Drawing on Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, he states that cinema has a "truth-telling function" because "the artistic event of film is always (also) a conveyance, in some manner and degree, of intersubjective truth about human cultural realities existing apart from and outside of its own singular perceptual and affective confines." [19] Furthermore, he asserts that the process of interpretation is not a "*postexperience* activity" of analysis, but an affectively grounded

understanding that "always and necessarily begins *during* a film experience but need not cease with the final credits". [20]

In sum, while I embrace Sobchack's foundational insights on embodiment and intersubjectivity, I align more closely with Yacavone's expanded conception of the film experience. In place of a strictly embodied and spatial view of film spectatorship, I argue for a richer understanding that foregrounds its temporal, aesthetic, and mooded dimensions. This reorientation also reframes cinematic space: rather than treating it as something directly given to the viewer, I understand it as an aesthetic structure shaped by time and culture. This theoretical outlook anchors my method: a phenomenological description attending to both first-person experience and aesthetic form to capture the overall feeling-structure that binds perceiver, film, and world together. As final step before that phenomenology, I clarify how I understand the concepts of mood and melancholy.

Clarifying Concepts: Mood and Melancholy

The concept of *Stimmung* ("attunement" or "mood") has a long history in Western philosophy, tracing back to Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Gerhard Thonhauser calls it an "absolute metaphor" evoking the musical act of attunement to describe the feeling of being in harmonious unity with the environment. [21] From Kant through Schopenhauer to Heidegger, *Stimmung* kept functioning as "a unifying principle of wholes that are more than their parts; a dynamic that is applicable to subjects and objects alike". [22] Mood is thus a diffuse and holistic affective state that is neither a subjective mental projection nor an objective property of the

environment. Instead, it arises in a unified field of experience and forms the background to all events and encounters. In cultural studies, *Stimmung* has gained traction due to its link to history and culture; Heidegger himself linked collective moods to historical periods and "epochal changes". [23] The concept also appeared in film studies thanks to scholars such as Robert Sinnerbrink. [24]

In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton famously remarked that "[t]he Tower of Babel never yielded such confusion of tongues as this Chaos of Melancholy doth variety of symptoms." [25] Melancholy is nearly as old as Western culture itself. Deriving etymologically from the Greek *melas* ("dark") and *kholē* ("bile"), the feeling was seen in premodern times as an affliction caused by an excess of "black bile" rooted in the medical theory of the four humours. [26] Throughout its long history, however, melancholy was "not only one of the four humours, but also a temperament, an illness, an affectation, a mood, a cosmological principle". [27] It is this philosophical richness that underlies Burton's expression of confusion.

In contemporary aesthetics, Hans Maes offers a compelling account of the experience of melancholy. He defines melancholy as a complex, reflective, and bittersweet "affective state," during which "[g]rasping a harsh truth about human existence may put the precarious value of something you care about in sharp relief in such a way that you come to appreciate it more deeply." [28] It involves "affectively appraised" reflections on human existence, wherein "negative feelings or emotion (for example, sadness or agony)" may "co-occur or alternate with positive feelings or emotions (for example, joy or gratitude)". [29] Indeed, the

value of the feeling lies in its delicate and bittersweet blend of sadness, gratitude, and far-reaching reflection.

Timothy Barr deepens this account by exploring melancholy's social and epistemological dimensions. Despite the enduring stereotype of the lonely and self-centred melancholic, Barr argues that melancholy "has been and may yet be made a mode of *fellow-feeling* and *communal practice*." [30] Melancholy is commonly thought to occur "without any apparent occasion" – as Burton phrased – because it is often a sign of social strife that leaves individuals feeling uncertain and out of place. [31] For Barr, melancholy holds potential precisely in this condition of doubt: it can serve as a *melancholic epistemology* of uncertainty, prompting people to deliberate on their situation together, or to *melancholise*, which "is to join one's sense of loss with another". [32]

Synthesising these accounts, I understand melancholy as a bittersweet, reflective, and objectless mood with both existential and sociohistorical significance. In the specific case of *Last and First Men*, I examine a form of cultural melancholy that stretches across our entire civilisation in response to global crises. With these concepts in place, I now turn to the film to trace how they are realised in its fabric as a total mood of civilisational melancholy, setting the stage for the genre and cultural analyses to follow.

The Phenomenology of *Last and First Men*

The Hungarian film critic György Andorka describes *Last and First Men* as "a tender ode to the fragility of existence, giving voice to the melancholy of impermanence" and making us

reflect on our tragic destruction of the planet. [33]Indeed, *Last and First Men* is a remarkable yet overlooked film from the start of the Covid-19 period. Eric Kohn from *IndieWire* even calls it "one of the most original science fiction movies in recent memory" that "tips its hat to Béla Tarr". [34] Its director, Jóhann Jóhannsson, was an Icelandic composer who became famous for composing expressive scores and soundscapes for films like *Prisoners* (2013) and *Mandy* (2018). He originally conceived *Last and First Men* as a live multimedia performance and it premiered as a feature film in 2020, two years after his death. [35]

The film is a 70-minute audiovisual poem, blending science fiction motifs with a slow, contemplative style. It consists mostly of black-and-white 16mm images of the "spomenik" monuments – brutalist memorials across former Yugoslavia commemorating anti-fascist resistance in WWII – accompanied by Jóhannsson's music and a voiceover by Tilda Swinton. Loosely adapted from Stapledon's genre-defining 1930 novel, it recounts humanity's history two billion years into the future framed as a telepathic message from the 18th race of men before their extinction. Discarding linear narrative, the film creates an immersive, melancholic mood that sustains the unity of space and time. To describe this complex attunement, I examine the film experience along five interrelated layers: (1) visuals, texture, and environment; (2) sound, music, and voice; (3) movement and time; (4) cognition and imagination; and (5) total mood.

Visuals, Texture, and Environment

The visual style of *Last and First Men* is grounded in the elemental presence of the spomenik monuments and the vast landscapes surrounding them. Nearly every shot features these

enigmatic structures, whose imposing presence has a potentially *haptic* effect. Sobchack has argued in her later work that our experiences are fundamentally synaesthetic, and film can invoke cross-sensory perception. [36] Accordingly, viewers may feel that they can literally touch or smell the stone surfaces or the damp air, despite their purely visual appearance. The long takes allow for a slow, almost tactile observation of every textural detail and foreground weather conditions, which heightens the synaesthetic potential. [37]

The camera's gaze oscillates fluidly between the spomeniks and the landscape. When both are in frame, the manmade and natural geometric patterns create a visual tension that is reconciled by balanced compositions. Meanwhile, the signs of nature creeping up on the spomeniks, like lichen and water stains, integrate them further into their organic surroundings (Figure 1).

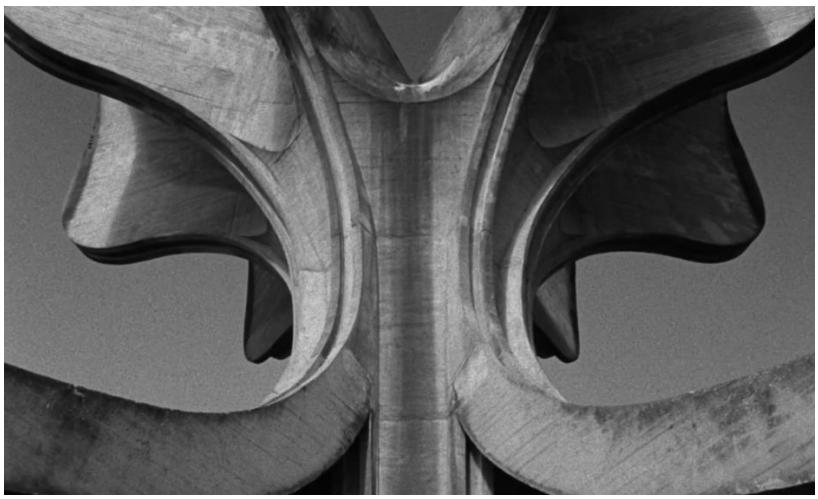

FIGURE 1—A spomenik monument shaped like a sharp, angled shard, rising from a meadow with mountains and drifting clouds in the background

FIGURE 2—Close view of a spomenik monument's concrete body, whose curved, petal-like forms meet along a central spine beneath an open sky

On a purely optical level, the black-and-white, high-contrast imagery heightens the expressivity of light and makes surface texture even more pronounced. The grain and scratches of the 16mm stock foreground the film's own materiality, making the images seem like decaying traces of a future civilisation. Overall, the visuals constitute a material base to the film's total melancholic mood. The monuments merging with nature combine endurance and erosion in the same frame. Their very surfaces offer a space saturated with traces of time; the spomeniks impress upon the viewer a sense of impermanence bound to civilisational grandeur, while their strange, ahistorical look evokes an enigmatic beauty (Figure 2).

Sound, Music, and Voice

Last and First Men presents us with a highly expressive ambient soundscape, consisting of natural sounds, Jóhannsson's music, and Swinton's voiceover. These three layers interpenetrate throughout the film experience and create an engrossing atmosphere. We hear sounds of rain, wind, and rumbling noises of distant geological movement, which increase

the perceived presence of the natural environment. Jóhannsson's music has a pulsating quality, moving back and forth between silence and thundering volume. It has a slow and fluid rhythm composed of prolonged, overlapping notes and tonalities. Combining melodic elements, such as ethereal string movements, deep drum beats, solemn female voices, and religious chants, Jóhannsson evokes beauty, grandeur, and a melancholic fusion of wonder and mourning. All the while, Swinton recites Stapledon's words with relatively long pauses and a calm, monotone intonation. Overall, the three sonic strata fuse into a hypnotic and otherworldly soundscape that does not merely accompany the visuals but creates an entire spatiotemporal aura: sound does not merely fill space but extends it in time, turning the environment into a space where duration becomes as palpable. The effect on the spectator's lived body is expansive, inviting an embodied opening onto the film-world.

Movement and Time

The subjective experience of time, or *duration*, is at the centre of film viewing. It is felt inwardly in consciousness and outwardly in the movement of things. *Last and First Men* brings forth a very distinct temporal experience through its flow and motion. The film has a general sense of stillness, with long takes averaging thirty seconds. Lacking an overarching linear narrative, each shot becomes an event in itself, characterised by what is called "temps mort" or "dead time", when nothing conventionally dramatic happens. Yet subtle motion is present throughout the whole film through shifting clouds, drifting fog, and slow camera movements (pans, tilts, zooms, rotations). Nature's gentle vitality and the camera's choreographies animate the otherwise inert spomeniks, granting them a ghostly presence. The calm movements of the cinematography and the environment create a spatiotemporal rhythm that structures the viewer's experience.

The film invokes at once the immediacy of an embodied "now" or pure, meditative presence; the cyclical temporality of the rise and fall of civilisations; and the incomprehensibly vast scale of geological deep time. The spomeniks become emblems of this layered temporality: enduringly present yet impossibly old, they inscribe time as such into space and materiality. Experiencing time in such a way defines the melancholic mood of *Last and First Men* – it makes the spectator intuitively feel the impermanence of all human endeavours in the face of nature and the cosmos, but also the indestructible presence of beauty and form, whether manmade or natural. The film thus opens onto a temporalised space where shifting skies, eroding stone, and slow camera motion render different senses of time – subjective, cyclical, geologic – palpable in the very fabric of the world (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3— Interior of a spomenik monument, showing spiralling concrete rings that form a vortex around a small circular opening

Cognition and Imagination

Despite the nonnarrative nature of *Last and First Men*, cognition plays an integral role in the film experience. The film neither presents a clear causal chain of events nor puzzles to solve, yet it offers a contemplative space where the viewer can construct meaning through association and imagination. Swinton's voiceover does not tell a story in the conventional sense, instead delivering scattered reflections from a future civilisation: fragments of cosmic history, philosophical meditations on fate, and aphoristic observations. The verbal punctuations enter into a productive tension with the images, as the fantastical content of the narration repeatedly meets the realness of the monuments and landscapes. This interplay creates a spatiotemporal paradox: a future-history narrated from the vantage point of a humanity soon to be extinct, anchored in ruinous memorials of our own past.

The spomeniks themselves resist direct symbolism: they do not point to any determinate cultural meaning that would anchor their sight. Still, their overbearing presence invites imaginative projection, making them what might be called "quasi-symbols" of a vanished civilisation (Figure 4). Furthermore, the unrecognisability, rather than diminishing their impact, makes the monuments align with what Kant terms *free beauty* – a beauty that "presupposes no concept of what the object should be," pleasing by virtue of shape and proportion alone, leaving the imagination to free play. [38] In this way, cognition in *Last and First Men* is not narrative construction but speculative reflection – on human finitude, the transience of all civilisations, and the sublime power of nature. Cognition becomes mood-like in its associative flight while being shaded by melancholy through its content. Meanwhile, it hovers in an abstract spatiotemporal field, where past, present, and speculative futures are held together by our mental operations. Thought, then, temporalises space in a very distinct

way: imagination animates the monuments as living symbols in which temporal horizons intersect, giving spatial presence to otherwise abstract scales of history and futurity.

FIGURE 4— A spomenik monument with broad, wing-like arms and a central sunburst pattern, set on a stepped base against a cloudy horizon

FIGURE 5— Axial view through the circular arches of a spomenik monument, with damp stone surfaces leading to a central round aperture opening onto fog

Total Mood

As an aesthetic whole, *Last and First Men* is defined by a sustained melancholic attunement that is more than the sum of its parts. It is held together by a total mood: an irreducible synthesis of form and experience arising from the interplay of its spatial and temporal, affective and cognitive layers. The tactile monumentality and atmospheric textures of the imagery provide a material base; the immersive soundscape anchors reflection while opening imaginative depth; the slow, deliberate movement of camera and environment folds multiple temporalities into one another; and the speculative reflections prompted by voiceover and image invite a free play of the imagination shaded by melancholy. In each case, space and time are not separate but mutually constitutive – we experience a *temporalised space* in which spatial presence is continually shaped by duration, and temporal sense takes shape as a spatial field. Together, the experiential layers produce an embodied, expansive openness onto the film-world, inducing awe while sustaining calm reflection.

The film's mood is marked by the estrangement, speculation, and wonder associated with science fiction, yet also by the meditative stillness and durational immersion of slow cinema. What emerges is civilisational melancholy: an attunement to decline, finitude, and fragile beauty as spatiotemporal presence. Echoing Maes's notion of melancholy as a bittersweet recognition of impermanence, the film makes us aware "that beauty can be tinged by pain—which has to do not least with its transient, ephemeral quality. […] [W]e know it won't last endlessly: it fades and perishes, often in no time." [39] At the same time, it resonates with Barr's insight that melancholy can be a mode of fellow-feeling, binding the viewer's contemplation to a collective sense of loss. The result is a cosmic vantage from which human achievements are seen as brief episodes within broader cosmic rhythms – a vantage opened

up by feeling time through space, and one that provides the point of departure for interpreting *Last and First Men* within broader generic and cultural frameworks.

Genre Analysis: Contemplative Science Fiction Cinema

Film genres are often defined in terms of formal, narrative, or linguistic features: recurring settings, character types, story structures, or stylistic devices that enable audiences and institutions to classify a work within a familiar category. [40]While these approaches have proved useful, they tend to overlook a crucial dimension of genre: its capacity to shape and be shaped by experience. Inspired by Barry Keith Grant, I take film genre not as a fixed taxonomy, but as a *typical film encounter* directly rooted in lived experience and reflective of the given zeitgeist. [41] Film genres, in this sense, are as much about *how* we experience a work as about *what* it depicts. Additionally, they are not static systems but fundamentally vital phenomena. They evolve like biological organisms in response to constant changes in their environment, whether cultural, economic, political, or natural. They are never entirely pure either, instead constantly cross-pollinating and manifesting in manifold hybrid forms. Film genres, then, are processual, dynamic, experiential, and always historically inflected; they are living formations that link aesthetic form, viewer, and culture – often saturated with malicious ideologies – in a single evolving system.

From this perspective, the mood of *Last and First Men* is also the basis of its generic identity. [42] Its immersive spatiotemporal experience resonates with central definitions of science fiction. Darko Suvin famously theorised that the genre operates through *cognitive estrangement* and a *novum* – a “strange newness” marking a radical difference from the

artist's empirical environment – that is usually technological in nature and prompts critical reflection on the world. [43]Closely related to this, science fiction is also held to involve "a philosophical openness described as a 'sense of wonder'". [44] We encounter imagined worlds filled with alternative possibilities and marvellous inventions, which stretch our mental capacity for fantasy and reflection. Yet science fiction is not confined to uplifting awe, equally drawing upon darker affective impulses. According to Susan Sontag, the genre reflects perennial fears of humanity, while in it also "lurk the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence". [45] Hence, science fiction's imaginative flexibility and concern with humanity's technological progress lends it a special social relevance.

Last and First Men both manifests and reconfigures these genre dynamics. It fits the science fiction tradition through its feelings of wonder and estrangement and its creation of a world markedly different from our own. Yet its novum is neither a technological invention nor a coherent future-world. Rather, it is an experiential and spatiotemporal dislocation: we hear a message from a future humanity projected onto traces of our own history. The speculative estrangement does not unfold through plot or technological spectacle but an aesthetic arrangement of time and space that invites sustained attunement. In this regard, *Last and First Men* supports Steen Ledet Christiansen's redefinition of the novum in atmospheric terms. He argues that science fiction relies not primarily on object-directed estrangement, but the creation of "an atmospheric background feeling of the world" as a worldbuilding device. [46] Atmosphere is not merely an aesthetic supplement; it is both the means of estrangement and of setting up the imagined world, however discontinuous or impossible, as a "distinctive cognitive environment". [47] In *Last and First Men*, mood is thus a genre

function that discloses an unfamiliar world while making it coherent and inhabitable through immersion.

Through its emphasis durational experience, *Last and First Men* also aligns with what has come to be called "slow cinema". In theoretical discourse, the term refers to a stylistic tendency or quasi-genre in global cinema characterised by minimalism, long takes, reduced narrativity, and contemplative engagement with time and the natural environment. [48] It is also interpreted as part of a cultural response to late capitalism, reintroducing slowness and contemplation into a world dominated by speed, fragmentation, and distraction. [49] Although slow cinema is a relatively new concept, its aesthetic strategies have long-been present in art cinema, notably during postwar neorealism and 1960s modernism. [50] Owing to this profile, the films of slow cinema often "paint a pessimistic vision of the world […] underpinned by an emotional tone characterised by anxiety, depression, desperation, loneliness, boredom, alienation, monotony, and physical and spiritual exhaustion". [51] In line with said tradition, *Last and First Men* offers a temporalised space where the viewer dwells melancholically. The long, glacial pans and still compositions do not advance a story but allow time to be experienced through space.

Bringing the two genres together, the film exemplifies a hybrid I term *contemplative science fiction cinema*. This neglected mode fuses science fiction's speculative estrangement, wonder, and reflection of civilisational anxieties with slow cinema's durational immersion and reflective stillness. Through this blend, *Last and First Men* evokes a *pessimistic wonder* sometimes felt in science fiction films when "our security in the power of being

human […] is visually undermined." [52] At the same time, it soothes that very pessimism by encouraging a melancholic appreciation of ephemeral beauty. The film's mixed generic form activates a world-feeling born of the interdependence of time and space to open new vistas for contemplation.

This hybrid is not without precedent. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979) or Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* all stretch the frame of science fiction, privileging mood, duration, and philosophical inquiry over plot resolution. [53] Yet *Last and First Men* pushes this tendency further, stripping away almost all narrative scaffolding in favour of world-feeling. In doing so, it does not merely hybridise two genres but enacts cultural and philosophical reflection: its science fiction dimension defamiliarises the temporality of our present, while its slow cinema dimension focuses our attention on the ruins of our past. The result is a mood of civilisational melancholy reflecting an age where both time and space seem irretrievably lost – an attunement that resonates with the experience of the Anthropocene and grounds my cultural analysis.

Cultural Analysis: Space and Time in the Anthropocene

If science fiction "clusters in the great whirlpool periods of history," as Suvin proclaimed, then an offshoot like contemplative science fiction cinema must be no exception. [54] The mood that *Last and First Men* stages through its fusion of genres is indeed symptomatic of our historical moment defined by malaise and disorientation. As of 2025, the Doomsday Clock was set to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest to apocalypse it has ever been. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists cites not only nuclear war and climate change, but also the rise

of destabilizing technologies and the failure of political will to change course. “Blindly continuing on the current path is a form of madness,” they write. [55]

At stake here is what recent criticism gathers under discussions of “the Anthropocene” – the phenomenon of living in a geological epoch where human activity functions as a geophysical force with disastrous consequences. Initially coined by the climate scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, the concept has been refined and contested; for example, some argue for the name “Capitalocene” instead to stress the role of fossil capital, corporate infrastructures, and uneven responsibility. [56] In this era, climate has itself become a cultural force: far more than just “weather,” it fundamentally frames how the world is imagined and made sensible. Furthermore, we are confronted by phenomena that are too vast, slow, or complex to be grasped intuitively – what Timothy Morton famously coined *hyperobjects* – like climate change and mass extinction. [57]

Therefore, the Anthropocene is not merely an external condition but a ubiquitous experiential condition with epistemic effects. It confuses scale, collapses temporal frames, and unsettles emplacement on a planetary scale. Alexa Weik von Mossner characterises its affective dimension by referencing Glenn Albrecht’s concept of “psychoterratic dis-eases”, that is, pathologies of emotional and cognitive distress triggered by our changing relationship to the Earth. These include eco-anxiety, solastalgia, and other forms of climate grief – widespread feelings that are nonetheless difficult to locate and articulate. [58] These pervasive but vague affects may crystallise in cultural moods; it is in this context that the notion of *civilisational melancholy* becomes salient: a historically specific world-feeling defined by a sense of

civilisational unravelling, a loss of existential bearings, and a mournful awareness of likely extinction. It is attuned to the erosion of modern promises – progress, mastery, futurity – and haunted by the suspicion that the future is no longer what it used to be.

Against the Anthropocene's horizon, *Last and First Men* imagines a future beyond humanity. It is a world without humans but saturated by the traces of human effort and imagination. The spomeniks – the film's primary visual subject – are not just abstract concrete forms, they are affective icons that communicate a vanished vision of the future. Built between the 1950s and 1980s across Tito's Yugoslavia, these uncanny brutalist monuments were conceived to commemorate anti-fascist resistance during WWII and to symbolise a utopian dream of collective unity. [59] According to the official Spomenik Database, "[t]hrough the creation of these hyper-forward-looking forms, Yugoslavia hoped to embody and shape a national collective vision which aimed towards an optimistic and hopeful future defined by unity and symbolic universalism." [60] Their abstract geometry was meant to transcend ethnic-nationalist divisions and articulate a utopian vision of socialist futurity.

But that utopia failed. In the wake of the Yugoslav Wars and the collapse of the socialist federation, many of the spomeniks now stand forgotten, neglected, and desecrated. "Despite their historic significance and architectural beauty," writes *The Guardian*, "the Spomeniks are crumbling: they are urinated on and scrawled with graffiti." [61] They were monuments of hope and reconciliation, but in their current state they have become ruinous symbols of lost futures. As such, they are inherently spatiotemporal: once sites of public memory and imagined destiny, they now exist as monumental ghosts suspended between past and future.

They register both deep time and political time, geological persistence and historical obsolescence. Their presence in the film is never merely visual but sensible and meaningful: they resonate as affective indices of civilisational failure.

Ultimately, *Last and First Men* invites us to dwell in a world already empty of us, but not empty of meaning. The spomeniks mark not only past battles and revolutions, but the aspirations, contradictions, and eventual dissolution of an entire civilisational project. They index a failed utopia, but in their uncanny abstraction, they open new imaginative space. The mood they generate is not only one of grief but of speculative reorientation, shaping the film's melancholy to resonate with our shared civilisational condition of living in the Anthropocene. By drawing us into contemplation through temporalised space, the film mirrors the dislocated temporal experience of our epoch and generates a melancholy rooted in a tacit recognition of shared loss, fostering solidarity with an unspoken community of witnesses. In bringing together the endurance of nature, the fragility of human aspiration, and the inexorable passage of time, the film turns mourning into an act of sustained reflection; it invites us to imagine what remains thinkable at the very end of the human story.

Conclusion

To experience *Last and First Men* is to enter a cinematic space where time becomes tangible and melancholy becomes a mode of perception. Drawing on phenomenological aesthetics, I have argued that the film produces a spatiotemporal mood – an immersive attunement to civilisational fragility. It fuses the contemplative temporality of slow cinema with the speculative scope of science fiction, forming a distinct mode I call contemplative science

fiction cinema. This hybrid does not rely on narrative progression or technological optimism; instead, it constructs a reflective aesthetic space grounded in mood and time. The film's focus on the spomenik monuments situates viewers within a complex temporal field. These decaying structures, remnants of a failed utopia, are framed as both artifacts of a lost past and symbols of an uncertain future. Through lingering camerawork, tactile textures, and Jóhannsson's enveloping soundscape, the film temporalises space, producing an experiential tension between persistence and disappearance. This tension is central to the melancholic tone that permeates the work: a recognition of human finitude and historical decline that resists both nostalgia and apocalypticism.

Last and First Men does not deliver a message; it stages an encounter. The viewer is drawn into an aesthetic mood that reflects the broader cultural context of the Anthropocene, an age marked by ecological crisis, civilisational exhaustion, temporal disorientation, and the loss of utopian horizons. The film's layering of deep time, human history, and speculative futurity not only mirrors the Anthropocene's dislocated sense of time, but turns it into a contemplative ground from which civilisational melancholy gains depth and resonance. In doing so, it makes clear what this essay has argued more broadly: that contra Sobchack's materialist film phenomenology, space, matter, and affect in themselves cannot account for the film experience, for it is time – whether cultural, cosmic, or individually felt – that configures space into a medium of thought and thereby renders any experience meaningful.

In closing, *Last and First Men* offers a cinematic meditation on the aesthetic experience of human finitude. It shows that even at the edge of extinction, there is a form of meaning

grounded not in survival or resolution, but in perception, attunement, and the quiet work of reflection. Meanwhile, the film also realises what Barr identifies as melancholy's highest potential – not withdrawal, but a form of knowing that emerges from shared loss – and invites us to recognise ourselves as part of a dispersed yet connected community of witnesses, gathered within the same awareness of an ending. As Stapledon wrote, "man is a fair spirit, whom a star conceived and a star kills. He is greater than those bright blind companies. For though in them there is incalculable potentiality, in him there is achievement, small, but actual." [62] *Last and First Men* affirms that such achievement lies in our collective capacity to feel, imagine, and reflect. It invites us not to act, but to dwell – briefly and lucidly – within the fading contours of our own civilisation.

Notes

[1] Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (1930; repr., Gollancz, 1999), 303–4

[2] Civilisational melancholy resonates across artforms: in literature, powerful distillations are found in the work of Michel Houellebecq and László Krasznahorkai, both of whom stage modernity as cosmic decline; in cinema, one can consider Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021), David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022), and Sam Esmail's *Leave the World Behind* (2023); and in the visual arts, Ólafur Eliasson's *Lifeworld* (2024) and Maya Lin's *Ghost Forest* (2021) likewise confront civilisational impermanence and environmental fragility by transforming public space.

[3] Besides the authors I discuss in the methodology and intervention section, the following works are exemplary of the two currents. On materialist phenomenological film theory, see Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University

of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley, California: University Of California Press, 2009). For the idealist-leaning strand, see Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Sarah Cooper, *The Soul of Film Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[4] For recent scholarship on science fiction cinema, see Eli Park Sorensen, *Science Fiction Film: Predicting the Impossible in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Pablo Gómez-Muñoz, *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2022); Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy, *Contemporary American Science Fiction Film* (Routledge, 2022). On slow cinema, see especially Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, eds., *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Emre Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema: Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

[5] One example of an "invariant structure of consciousness" would be the fact that remembering always takes place in the present, which makes the content of a memory have meaning in relation to one's present experience.

[6] Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology: Multistabilities*, 2nd ed. (1977; repr., Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 22.

[7] See Julian Hanich and Christian Ferencz-Flatz, "What Is Film Phenomenology?," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 16 (2016), for an overview of the entire history of film phenomenology.

[8] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 133.

[9] Ibid., 135-36, author's emphasis.

[10] Sobchack went as far as coining the concept of the *film's body*, positing that "the film can be said to genuinely have and live a body." Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 205.

[11] Daniel Yacavone, "Film and the Phenomenology of Art: Reappraising Merleau-Ponty on Cinema as Form, Medium, and Expression," *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (2016): 159–85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24772802, 172, author's emphasis.

[12] Ibid., 178.

[13] Corey P. Cribb, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Vivian Sobchack and the Materialization of Cinematic Sense," *Transformations*, no. 37 (2024), 41, 49.

[14] Sobchack stated in an interview with Marquard Smith that "I ground being and seeing and cinema as, from the first, movement – action – in space, not […] in time which I think is constituted as a reflexive reflection on that spatial movement." Marquard Smith, *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews with Key Thinkers* (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 127.

[15] Edward S. Casey, "Aesthetic Experience," in *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, ed. Hans Rainer Sepp and Lester Embree (Springer, 2010), 1–9, 4.

[16] Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 199, 207.

[17] Hence, Yacavone embraces what Dufrenne calls the "phenomenological solidarity of time and space." Ibid., 212.

[18] Ibid., 211, 212, emphasis added.

[19] Ibid., 231, 245.

[20] Ibid., 243, author's emphasis.

[21] Gerhard Thonhauser, "Beyond Mood and Atmosphere: A Conceptual History of the Term *Stimmung*," *Philosophia*49, no. 3 (November 27, 2020): 1247–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-020-00290-7, 1248-49. While the history of the concept of *Stimmung* is rooted in Western philosophy including figures whose broader views may be problematic, I hold that philosophical tools can retain their value when applied beyond their original context.

[22] Ibid., 1262.

[23] Erik Wallrup, "Music's Attunement: *Stimmung*, Mood, Atmosphere," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Phenomenology of Music*, ed. Jonathan De Souza, Benjamin Steege, and Jessica Wiskus (Oxford University Press, 2023).

[24] See Robert Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung*: exploring the aesthetics of mood," *Screen* 53, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 148–63, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjs007, where he identifies four different types of cinematic moods according to their narrative function: *disclosive*, *episodic*, *transitional*, and *autonomous* moods.

[25] Quoted in Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

[26] Hans Maes, "Aesthetic Melancholy," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 21 (2023), https://contempaesthetics.org/2023/06/20/aesthetic-melancholy/.

[27] Timothy Barr, "Without Apparent Occasion: Recent Research on Melancholy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80, no. 2 (April 2019): 313–32, https://doi.org/10.2307/26661335, 314.

[28] Maes, "Aesthetic Melancholy,".

[29] Ibid.

[30] Barr, "Without Apparent Occasion", 315, emphasis added.

[31] Ibid., 331.

[32] Ibid., 329.

[33] György Andorka, "A szférák zenéje – Jóhann Jóhannsson: Az utolsó és Az első emberek (2020)," *Filmvilág* 64, no. 11 (2021): 40–41, https://epa.oszk.hu/03000/03028/00218/pdf/EPA03028_filmvilag_2021_11_40-41.pdf, 41. My own translation of the original in Hungarian.

[34] Eric Kohn, "'Last and First Men' Review: Jóhann Jóhannsson's Posthumous Film Is a Dazzling Vision of the Apocalypse," IndieWire, February 26, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/criticism/movies/last-and-first-men-review-johann-johannsson-berlin-1202213596/.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2004), 70.

[37] This is supported by Kristi McKim's claim that weather is an overlooked but fundamental element of cinematic expression. By virtue of its universal relevance in human experience, screened weather can create "atmospheric identification […] as a means of involvement in the film world." McKim, *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28.

[38] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (1790; repr., Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 60.

[39] Julian Hanich, ". . . Striking Beauty: On Recuperating the Beautiful in Cinema," in *What Film Is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship*, ed. Julian Hanich and Martin P. Rossouw (University of California Press, 2023), 169.

[40] For an overview of formal and linguistic approaches to genre, see Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 8–24.

[41] Barry Keith Grant, "Experience and Meaning in Genre Films," in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (University of Texas Press, 2012), 133–47, 134–35.

[42] Sinnerbrink agrees: "we define certain genres […] by suggesting the moods they evoke (suspense, the thriller, the romance)." Robert Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung*", 148.

[43] Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," *College English* 34, no. 3 (December 1972): 372, https://doi.org/10.2307/375141, 373–75.

[44] Grant, "'Sensuous Elaboration': Reason and the Visible in Science Fiction Film," in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, ed. Sean Redmond (Wallflower Press, 2004), 17–23, 17.

[45] Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Liquid Metal*, 40–47, 45–46.

[46] Steen Ledet Christiansen, "Atmospheres and Science Fiction," ed. Anezka Kuzmicova, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 1686799, https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2019.1686799, 6.

[47] Ibid., 10.

[48] de Luca and Jorge, *Slow Cinema*, 4–7.

[49] Ibid., 3; Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema*" 7–8.

[50] de Luca and Jorge, *Cinema*, 9; Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema*, 9–10.

[51] Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema*, 24.

[52] Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (1980; repr., New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 109.

[53] From more recent times, potential examples include Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), Claire Denis' *High Life* (2018), and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021).

[54] Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," 375.

[55] John Mecklin, "2025 Doomsday Clock Statement," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 28, 2025, https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/2025-statement/.

[56] Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann, *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 28–33.

[57] E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 9.

[58] Alexa Weik von Mossner, "From Nostalgic Longing to Solastalgic Distress: A Cognitive Approach to *Love in the Anthropocene*," in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, ed. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 51–70, 52–3.

[59] Donald Niebyl, "What Are Spomeniks?," Spomenik Database, 2016, https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/what-are-spomeniks.

[60] Donald Niebyl, "Introduction: The Bizarre Shapes of the Spomenik," Spomenik Database, 2016, https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/bizarre-shapes.

[61] Joshua Surtees, "Spomeniks: The Second World War Memorials That Look like Alien Art," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/photography-blog/2013/jun/18/spomeniks-war-monuments-former-yugoslavia-photography.

[62] Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, 303–4.

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