

# Aether/Ore

## Post-Humanism in Deborah Stratman's *Last Things*

BY MICHAEL SICINSKI



*Last Things*, the latest work from Deborah Stratman, participates in a small but growing trend in experimental filmmaking. Following certain tendencies in contemporary philosophy, *Last Things* attempts to communicate a radically non-anthropocentric view of existence. But, unlike many popular approaches to this problem—envisioning a world without “us”—*Last Things* avoids the fashionable fetish for apocalypse. While Stratman’s film does suggest the possibility, even the inevitability, of a world without the human race and all other known fauna, it works to place this development into an equally non-anthropocentric time frame. For geological formations—rocks, sediment, magnetic forces—there is not a “before” and “after” in the way we conceive it. As one of the film’s narrators expresses it, minerals can display elements of the past, signs of what they once were. But they do not *remember* this past—or, more properly speaking, their past becomes an integral

part of their present state. Rocks “remember” without the burden of consciousness.

There are two primary narrators throughout *Last Things*. The first is Dr. Marcia Bjornerud, a structural geologist at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. As she explains, the Earth was an active, evolving entity billions of years before the emergence of what we tend to call “life.” Chondrites, for instance, helped form the Earth from the elements of the universe—they are “older meteorites than the planets themselves,” or “raw solar system material.” As Bjornerud continues, she notes that the ongoing development of the mineral-centred planet, with its ferrous oceans and thick, static atmosphere, was impacted by the eventual presence of photosynthesizing entities. Those proto-plants propagated, furnishing the atmosphere with oxygen and, in doing so, disrupted the trajectory of mineral evolution. While Bjornerud stops well short of suggesting that the development of organic life was an unfortunate accident, Stratman’s intensive visual analysis of chondrites, crystals, and geometrical rock formations makes it quite clear that there was an undeniable beauty and order in our world before the arrival of the mouth-breathers.

Bjornerud adopts a tone of conversational erudition, but Stratman’s other narrator is a bit more cosmic in her outlook. This is filmmaker Valérie Massadian, who covers much of the same terrain as Bjornerud but from a standpoint we might call asymptotic narrative. As Massadian weaves a poetic reverie regarding the autochthonous anti-consciousness of the world of rocks and gems, it is difficult to discern whether she is describing the universe prior to or after the existence of animal life. Her story (formed from textual passages by Roger Caillois, Clarice Lispector, J.-H. Rosny, and others) frequently refers to the “last” people, those who have momentarily survived radiation and atmospheric cataclysm, in order to glimpse the re-emergence of a geological lifeworld. However, Massadian’s tale also seems to look back at the billions of centuries before carbon-based life on Earth. As she describes a future that echoes Bjornerud’s descriptions of the past, Stratman implies something much more disconcerting than the circle of life or the return to dust: it is the eradication of temporality itself, replaced by the attenuated non-time of geology. That is, not only are we a blip in cosmic history, but history itself was a blip in the universal organization of matter.

This is an idea that is difficult for us humans to wrap our heads around. We can envision our demise with ever more flourishes, whether in the form of zombie apocalypse (seen most recently in HBO’s *The Last of Us*) or hostile alien invasion, à la *Annihilation* (2018) or *Color Out of Space* (2019). But how can we unthink our own existence, a state beyond mere death? In one of the most recent examples of our sad failure of imagination, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) tried to offer a look at a “multiverse” in which the conditions for life on Earth never coalesced. Instead of depicting lifelessness, an apparently unthinkable prospect within filmed entertainment, *EAAO* gave us a dialogue between two boulders: the mother (Michelle Yeoh) and daughter (Stephanie Hsu) appear on the edge of a cliff, communicating in subtitles about this static form of “life.” Then, as if to cement the Daniels’ inability to countenance a universe without us, the boulders begin scooting around and chasing

each other. The threat of lifelessness is domesticated like a Wile E. Coyote cartoon.

A somewhat more poignant, if equally wrongheaded, attempt to concile geological and historical time can be found in the animated series *Steven Universe*. It tells the story of the Crystal Gems, a group of mineral-based alien life forms that have existed within the Earth long before the development of organic life, and whose mission is to reclaim the Earth for their own rock-based race. But a wrinkle occurs in that one of the colonizers, Rose Quartz, falls in love with a human being, mates with him, and gives birth to Steven, a human/rock hybrid whose existence suggests the possibility of a utopian future in which organic and mineral life can coexist. In fact, Steven’s gem-friends, Garnet, Pearl, and Amethyst, develop individual subjectivities and adapt themselves to human temporality. It is a charming fable in which humanism and materialism are reconciled through mutual understanding, even though the story’s linear narrative implies that geological time is subsumed within human history. The rocks become like us; the end of life on Earth is averted.

*Steven Universe* is an interesting example of a limit-text, one that demonstrates an awareness of a non-humanist conception of existence but cannot actually imagine a cosmos that isn’t governed by human perception and emotion. (So much for the Rock Era.) An altogether more counter-humanist consideration of “rock time” can be found in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, by filmmaker-turned-philosopher Manuel De Landa. Read as a historical account of human activity, De Landa’s book is a bit like a speed-round version of Fernand Braudel. Centuries of lived experience are dispatched in a few pages; the Industrial Revolution entails about a paragraph. This is because, following Deleuze and Guattari, De Landa examines time as a series of dynamic forces, matter and energy undergoing periods of stasis and evolution. More specifically, he distinguishes between meshwork systems and hierarchies. Meshwork, much like the Deleuzian concept of “assemblage,” describes a weave of complementary and contradictory forces, some impacting each other while others maintain a semblance of identity. De Landa describes this as geological history, in the sense that vertical layers as well as lateral connections come to form, following the internal morphological imperatives of matter itself. By contrast, hierarchies are (mostly) human impositions on various forms of matter in order to subject natural processes to wholly foreign categories, such as “power,” “accumulation,” or “meaning.” De Landa’s book is a foundational text in what has been called the New Materialism in philosophy and theory, an attempt to reconceive history as a set of countervailing forces and pulsions. Inasmuch as these forces engage with organic life at all, we and other fauna could be said to hover in their periphery, of little or no consequence.

*Last Things* moves in multiple directions, not only in terms of past and future. As mentioned, Stratman’s film contains two distinct but complementary narrators. Whether employing scientific language (Bjornerud) or a disembodied cosmic testimony (Massadian), these quasi-narratives are attempts to communicate with (human) viewers, to articulate this New Materialist worldview, or, as much as possible, shift our perspective from the linear to the geological or sedimentary. On a visual level, however, *Last Things* is hard to watch. I don’t mean to say that it is boring or aesthetically off-

putting—rather, Stratman asks us to observe morphological processes that spurn the usual modes of cinematic identification. Can we really imagine what it feels like to be a crystalline structure or a stalactite? Such a state of non-being is even more absolute than death, which can at least serve as a period at the end of a given sentence of humanistic time.

In addition to these passages of filmed geological processes, *Last Things* includes footage taken from NASA probes, showing the surface of Mars. These sequences are in anaglyph, with gray forms outlined in red and blue. I happened to have anaglyph 3D glasses on my desk as I was watching these segments, so I slipped them on. Immediately, I noticed that the registration of the contour lines was slightly off: some forms jutted forward, while others remained jumbled. There is nothing in *Last Things* to indicate that viewers should put on 3D glasses during these scenes, and I think this may be the point. Using anaglyph as a kind of geological “language,” Stratman tells us that we are seeing an object (Mars) that cannot be rendered or perceived using our usual, human-centred modes of representation.

But instead of using anaglyph as a counter-language to approximate this geological vision, *Last Things* gestures toward anaglyph without actually employing it. Here, 3D video, with its limited capacity for suggesting topographies on a flat surface, is used as a signal for our own incapacity for understanding. (You are seeing yourself *not see*.) And, if you happen to slip the glasses on, you attain only a somewhat different form of misunderstanding. In this way, Stratman uses the limitations of cinema (itself already a meagre approximation of human vision) as a material metaphor for the limitations of human comprehension.

The gesture of using cinema to articulate a set of forces that are essentially non-temporal is a way of simultaneously addressing the limits of the medium and of the human imagination. Stratman has favoured geographical and spatial organization for quite some time, although her work has never departed so dramatically from a consciousness-based sense of time. In some of her earlier features, she applies an assemblage-like form of organization to convey the connections between forces without demanding a linear model of cause and effect. For example, in *In Order Not to Be Here* (2002), Stratman combines footage taken from various modes of surveillance with moments that at first appear to gesture toward the private sphere. Over time, an overall impression emerges, such that the notion of security under capitalism is coextensive with the militarization of private space. For example, for your safety, McDonald’s does not serve walk-up customers at the drive-thru. If you are on foot in a zone that is designated for private automobiles—the carapaces with which we extend our domestic sphere into the public—then you are in violation of the implicit contract of spatialized capital. You do not belong in the landscape of private property, and you are a feature of that landscape that must be removed.

By moving across various spaces without overtly articulating their hierarchies, *In Order Not to Be Here* extends laterally, generating a network of distance and proximity. Stratman accomplishes something similar in *O'er the Land* (2009), a consideration of a bounded geographic space (the U.S.A.) through cinematic assemblage. She organizes the film through a primary trope, masculinity, which of

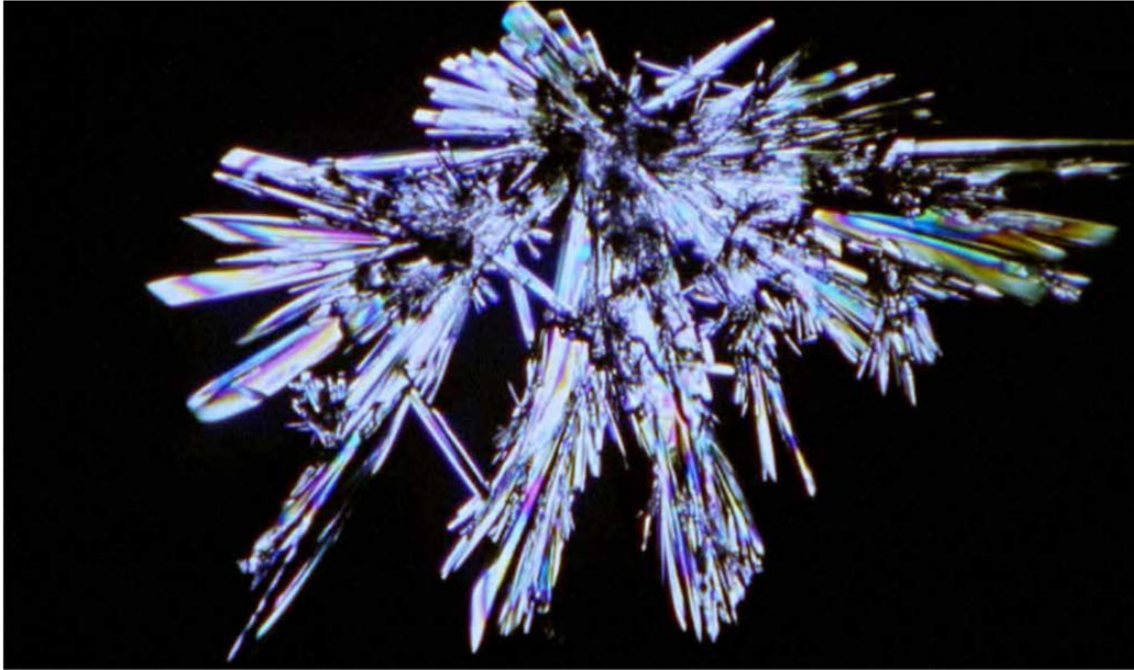
course is a uniquely human trait. But rather than using the concept of macho bravado or jingoism to deconstruct the imagined community of “America,” *O'er the Land* reads the landscape, or a series of landscapes, to demonstrate that the American mythos is instantiated through our engagement with North American geography. That is to say, masculinized metaphors like “frontier” and “wilderness” serve as cognitive maps that rewrite the land in accordance with hierarchy.

This approach reaches something of a pinnacle in *The Illinois Parables* (2016), in which Stratman narrows her focus to explore the accretion of historical layers within the space of a single state. In moving across a millennium and a half of geological strata, *The Illinois Parables* accomplishes several things. For one, it reveals the artifice of borders, the control of the landscape through territorialization. But more than this, the film observes the shifting relationships between human beings and the land, and the many ways that relationship is conceptualized—survival, ideology, religion, technological control.

In certain respects, Stratman has been developing a particular mode of inquiry that uses the landscape—a mostly stable referent—as the means for tracing the *longue durée* of human organization. In this way, her films often examine ideology in order to dislodge hegemony—that is to say, ideologies, as structures of thought with which to order the world, can and must compete. But hegemony represents the end of ideology, the foreclosing of all historical imagination (“It has always been this way, and always shall be”). Geology, with its obdurate, often inhospitable relationship with humankind, is itself subject to various ideologies, as *In Order Not to Be Here*, *O'er the Land*, and *The Illinois Parables* make clear. But geology is utterly inimitable to hegemony. Try as we might, we cannot corral the shifting sands, and while we may be able to retard erosion through engineering, we can never actually stop it.

As I suggested above, this New Materialist effort to approximate a non-humanistic, geological vision has taken many forms in recent years. Fern Silva’s *Rock Bottom Riser* (2021), for example, considers Hawaii not so much as a political or cultural formation but as a living landmass, undergoing volcanic evolution and offering an alternate point of origin for oceanographic and celestial understanding. Ben Rivers has been making films about rocks, caves, and islands for years now, from the utopian landscape revision of *Slow Action* (2010) to more recent efforts to abjure a strictly human history in favour of geophysical inquiry, such as *Ghost Strata* and *Look Then Below* (both 2019). Likewise, Jodie Mack’s latest films, especially the *Wasteland* series (2017–2022), explore the capabilities of cinema as a useful, if unreliable, technology for charting natural and geological change.

But if we wanted to go further back, we could perhaps identify some films that go a bit further in the direction of non-narrative counter-humanism. Lest we forget, celluloid itself is a process of chemical metamorphosis—the interaction of light, film, and developer produces a material residue, a solid formation of crystals whose rapid solidification was meant to mimic the biological processes of the human eye, but without the need for human presence. Jacqueline Mills’ *Geographies of Solitude* (2022), for example, supplements its documentary portrait of Nova Scotia–based scientist Zoe Lucas with



passages of raw filmic records of environmental activity: film stock buried in different locales and developed, an attempt to allow the landscape to inscribe itself on celluloid through the movement of its own matter.

Other such projects have explored the geological substrate of film without the need for a humanist frame. David Gatten's *What the Water Said* films (1998, 2006) register the effects of saltwater and undersea light on unexposed stock. The "paranaturalist" Super 8 collective SILT subjected their works to a variety of natural processes, such as erosion, magnetism, and bacterial decay. An early film by Nathaniel Dorsky, *Pneuma* (1983), consists of rolls of outdated film stocks, processed without being exposed to light so as to reveal their own internal chemical processes. And perhaps most relevant under the circumstances is Ernie Gehr's 1970 film of footage underexposed by replacing the camera lens with black cheesecloth, allowing stray bits of light to "reveal" the filmstrip's own grain. (The title of this axiomatically materialist film? *History*.)

Such so-called "structural" filmworks were both praised and excoriated for their non-humanist objectivity, often in equal measure. Stratman, meanwhile, has arrived at a distinct but related endpoint of materialist ontology. In fact, works like those described above (and many others) could be said to hover alongside *Last Things* in an assemblage of their own—a set of related gestures that reject both blinkered optimism regarding human survival, and those sensationalistic death-drive fantasies (zombies, aliens, meteorites, and other disasters) that promise to deliver our destruction as global entertainment. In Massadian's temporally ambiguous narration, rocks and minerals, metals and radiation belts, lay claim to an Earth free of the distractions and depredations of human life. There is no judgment to be rendered, no "good" or "bad." It will sim-

ply be a new epoch, with the planet and the atmosphere following their own molecular trajectories.

One last note about the title of Stratman's film: *Last Things*. It seems self-evident enough that humankind is staring down its own demise, and, perhaps in the final moments, catching a quick look at what will replace us. Boiling seas, vast deserts, geometrical rock formations, a vision of the sublime with no one to behold it. It is "things"—inert matter, and its epochal state of being—that will be last, that *will last*. But I also thought about Heidegger, a philosopher whose work often approached an anti-human materialism but retreated from it, perhaps out of horror at contemplating the evaporation of his own *Dasein*. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger theorizes about "the thing" (*das Ding*), and what constitutes its thingness. He gives the example of a block of granite, an object with certain inherent characteristics. In order to perceive the thingness of the thing, he writes, we must create a "clearing" wherein its unique character may manifest itself. We must grant the thing "a free field to display its thingly character. Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must first be set aside."

Of course, Heidegger contends that by subjecting the thing to human activity, we discover its thingness. Only a Michelangelo can release the essence of the granite; like the Russian Formalists insisted, it is up to the artist to "make the stone stony." However, *Last Things* offers a very different solution: the material world only assumes a thingness when confronted, or even manipulated, by a human subject. The "things" of the world will cease to be things when there are no more humans, no more consciousness to persist in "thinging" them. After life on Earth, the Earth may come into its own, a network of geological forces that outlast the literal end of time.