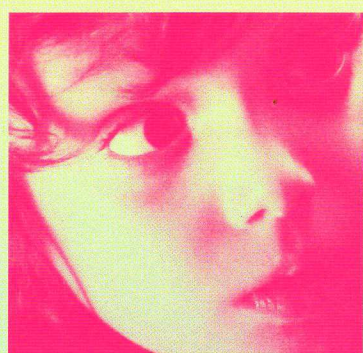


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# SIGHT AND SOUND

21ST-CENTURY CINEMA SPECIAL

# FILMS



# OF



# THE

INTERVIEWS WITH:  
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AND MORE

# CENTURY



# School of rock

Deborah Stratman's beguiling, awe-inspiring geological portrait of the Earth, *Last Things*, offers a sustained encounter with otherness, presenting a rich cast of minerals, crystals and stones in the place of people

BY SUKHDEV SANDHU

There's little place for humans in Deborah Stratman's *Last Things*, which showed at the Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival last year. It's an eerie, beautiful and necessarily unsettling essay film about the end of the world that features no plucky activists working to avert catastrophe, no embattled indigenes defending their endangered communities, no politicians declaiming the right (or wrong) thing. Inspired by two Belgian brothers, Joseph-Henri Boex (1856-1940) and Seraphin Boex (1859-1948), whose science fiction novellas (written under the pseudonym 'J.-H. Rosny') were populated by entities such as 'cones' and 'strata-like forms', it's markedly depeopled. It's also set in a time that may either be pre- or post-historic, before civilisation or after species death.

Instead of humans, what take centre stage are minerals, crystals, stones. Everything lithic. This is the return of the repressed. The stuff on top of which humans stand and like to think they have transcended. *Last Things* is a sustained encounter with otherness – the Other here being not people from different nations, not animals, not even plants, but... geology? To say that someone has

a heart of stone is to believe they are less than human. Yet, as archaeologist Jacques Hawkes once wrote, "Life has grown from the rock and still rests upon it; because men have left it far behind, they are able consciously to turn back to it. We do turn back, for it has kept some hold over us."

Stratman could have taken the *National Geographic* approach, set herself up as her audience's guide to the marvellous world of geology. In fact she presents a world – estranged and estranging – where the mineral matter has its own hermetic dynamism. Here are all manner of shapes and patterns, whorls and lattices, shifting luminescence and psychedelic colours. They induce awe, associative vertigo. They resemble sub-particles, distant planets, cruel viruses, ghosts of tomorrow. Far from being inert, these stones, if only in microscopic fashion, are charged, active, transitioning, communicating in a language we are too dense to grasp.

A rich archive underpins *Last Things*. It includes Nigel Kneale's spooked TV drama *The Stone Tape* (1972), whose title implies that geology itself is an archive; novelist Marguerite Yourcenar, who wrote about the "mysticism of matter",

***Last Things* invites audiences to do the almost impossible: to dethrone humans, to move beyond anthropocentrism, to imagine a planet both before and after us**

a notion that gives licence to anyone contemplating a non-literal, more avant-garde approach to the subject; geoscientist Marcia Bjornerud, heard in the film talking about the "polytemporal worldview" offered by rocks. These imaginative pathways are augmented by a complex, finely sculpted sound design (a feature of all Stratman's output) that encompasses composer Olivia Block, cellist Okkyung Lee and a capoeira percussion collective. What emerges is a possibility: mineral modernism, the shock of the old.

Running for less than an hour, *Last Things* is not an example of durational cinema, but it is most certainly cinema about duration. It invites audiences to do the almost impossible: to dethrone humans, to move beyond anthropocentrism, to imagine a planet both before and after us. To engage with the earth in this way requires deep listening. Do rocks have voices? Or perhaps what's needed is re-attunement of the kind theorised by the experimental American composer Pauline Oliveros (the subject of a new film by Daniel Weintraub). The ongoing climate catastrophe – when seasons are scrambled, extreme weather a daily occurrence, the ground beneath our feet increasingly unstable – demands a new kind of consciousness.

Essay filmmakers have long explored the poetics and politics of landscape. The essay film itself is a landscape, an opportunity for viewers to wander around without the signposts found in conventional documentary practice. Recently, perhaps in response to fracking and ever-more rapacious resource extraction, there has been more and more interest in 'the beneath'. *Last Things* is in implicit dialogue with *Medium Earth* (2013) by

BELOW  
Almendres Cromlech  
in Portugal, in Deborah  
Stratman's *Last Things*



The Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar), which examines California's seismic identity – its vulnerability to earthquakes, and the possibility that earthquakes are a geological speech act. And with Ben Rivers' *Look Then Below* (2019), a work of sci-fi geopoetics filmed in Somerset's Wookey Hole caves and set millions of years into the future, where a non-human investigator tries to engage with amorphous rock beings.

Both films show there's no useful distinction to be made between life below and above ground – an argument that's also fundamental to contemporary film writing about geology. Sasha Litvintseva, in *Geological Filmmaking* (2022), argues that "cinematic time" is best understood as "containing the durations of all the human and nonhuman processes that coalesce to bring the image into being". Siobhan Angus's recently published *Camera Geologica*, on the critical importance of minerals and rare earth elements to (digital) film and photography, asks us to ponder the question, "How does photography look from the perspective of the mine?"

*Last Things* confirms Chicago-based Stratman's reputation as one of America's most spry and sophisticated filmmakers. An early short, *On the Various Nature of Things* (1995), hinges on a lecture by Scottish physicist Michael Faraday in which he claimed, "We come into this world, we live, and depart from it, without our thoughts being called specifically to consider how all this takes place." Her work, over the course of more than three decades, conducts precisely that interrogation, as well as choreographing a dance of dislocation: she roams territories that are hidden in plain sight, pays exacting attention to the technologies of seeing through which they're governed, coaxes out their latent histories, rearranges sound and image to skewed, speculative ends.

*Xenoi* (2016), shot during the economic crisis in Greece, has a series of polyhedrons hover and rotate – like aerial migrants? – above the medieval island of Syros. *The Illinois Parables* (2016) is a supernatural stratiography in 16mm – featuring the forced displacement of Native Americans, the exiling of Mormons, atomic testing – that treats the midwestern state as a test centre for US violence. *Optimism* (2018) is set in Dawson City in northern Canada, where tens of thousands of would-be prospectors died during the Klondike Gold Rush (1896-99); nowadays local officials cook up outlandish plans to use mirrors to bounce sunlight from the top of a valley to those residents who live in permanent shadow in the valley below.

*Last Things* may be animated by a downbeat diagnosis – "The trauma that we inflict upon each other and the lack of listening we have among our own species: we're in the middle of an extinction" – but it's also Stratman's most visually adventurous and intellectually bracing film to date. Humanity's passing becomes a must-see.