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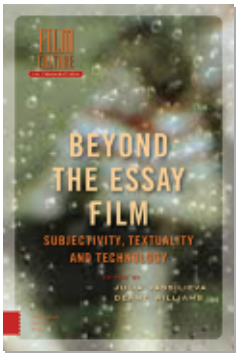

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6. Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* (2016): Intellectual Vagabond and Vagabond Matter

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Abstract

This chapter analyses how geographic modes of telling in Deborah Stratman's film *The Illinois Parables* (2016) unmoor the essay film from its anthropocentric bearings. Rather than reading the essay as a form of subjective expression, as is often the case, I argue that Stratman's film embraces a mode of telling that includes human and non-human voices alike, thus shifting the focus from individual subjectivity to a distributed form of agency. Looking at the film through a new materialist lens allows me to show how *The Illinois Parables* moves the essay's alleged humanism toward an understanding of a posthumanist essay.

Keywords: subjectivity, agency, new materialism, non-human, posthumanism

The camera quivers as it slowly lifts up over the Illinois landscape. Soon, we look down on a familiar pattern of chequered land, rectangular fields in a pallet of browns and greens and ochres of all shades, shaped by industrial agriculture's need for efficiency. The geometric pattern is cut through by streets and broken up by patches of forest and lakes. A bit further, grids of residential areas are framed by industrial parks. The suburban structure of single-family home subdivisions is laid out in roads leading through parcels of land. Straight lines with branches ending in circles, that, at least from above, look not unlike geoglyphs or ancient ground drawings, prehistoric inscriptions onto the land, especially in those places where roads lie waiting for homes that have yet to be built. The sound of cello music sets in,

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half-foreboding and half-melancholic. Image and sound are severed. While the natural movement of the camera draws us into the image, the music shuts us out. Up above the land – not quite disconnected but not integrated either – we are floating in between earthly and spiritual spheres. Dusted in mist, the horizon is slightly curved. The view conjures an image of the discrete object that, in English, is referred to as Earth.

The flight seems to set the tone and to reveal the premise. Landscape appears as 'a "social hieroglyph"', as W. J. T. Mitchell has put it elsewhere, channelling Marx, 'an emblem of the social relations it conceals'.[1] The film, the opening shots suggest, will take us on a journey across landscapes waiting to be deciphered and read like a book. But, while the scene evokes the sovereign gaze associated with Western landscape traditions, it also undermines the subject position identified with this perspective.[2] The subtle movement of the camera, placed on unsteady ground in a hot-air balloon, envelops the viewer in the air's motion through the atmosphere. Rather than prompting us to see the earth below as a disconnected other in an exercise of visual control, the film promises an embodied, dialogic experience.

Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* visits eleven sites connected to communities or events on the land that, today, is called Illinois. Historically charged places kick off an interlocking suite of 'regional vignettes' that question the ideological forces crystalizing in the guise of morality.[3] Though concerned with human struggles and convictions, the parables are anchored in particular places, attentive to encounters between human and non-human beings that often span long stretches of time. Vignette II, set in Alton, for instance, involves a dragon-like creature painted on a cavernous bluff. Signs on a closed forest path warn of the deer that may have inspired it some 350 years ago. It is not clear whether the bird creature and the deer are guarding or haunting the territory, or both. Inside the cave, we can hear the sound of water and feet touching rocks. Rays of light illuminate the scene. A montage of old etchings cut like a film is accompanied by a voice-over narration reading a missionary's encounter with the original painting. Judging from Father Jacques Marquette's detailed description from

1 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), p. 5.

2 For a comprehensive summary of the notion of landscape as ideology, see Alan Wallach, 'Between Subject and Object', in *Landscape Theory*, ed. by James Elkins and Rachel DeLue (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 315-312 (p. 317).

3 Deborah Stratman, 'The Illinois Parables, 2016, 60 min, 16mm: Synopsis' [http://www.pythagorasfilm.com/the-illinois-parables.html].

1673, the creature has since lost its companion and acquired wings. It also moved, I learn later, to another bluff about 100 yards upstream.

The Illinois Parables does not orientate us in these places through explanation. Historical information is distributed sparsely, in fragments. Instead, the film recounts, reimagines, or facilitates encounters. More than mere background to human drama, physical environments step to the fore; parts of the vignettes are told in long static shots of the sites and surrounding areas, while elaborate soundscapes capture the atmosphere. At once terrain and territory, the land captured in *The Illinois Parables* is both affective and deeply political; it may instil hope or amplify despair, it may be imbued with promise or violence. Exodus, the mass movement of peoples or religious and social communities, emerges as a central theme of the film. Whether it is motivated by religion, utopia, or the struggle for survival, faith too becomes a theme. Forcibly removed from their homeland in the south-eastern United States, the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears cross the Ohio River at Golconda, where the dead of winter took its toll. Mormons fleeing religious discrimination in neighbouring Missouri founded the city of Nauvoo; faced with more violence, they passed it on to the Icarians, French emigrants who sought to build a utopian commune. Another vibrant community that populated Nauvoo more recently is not composed of people but of insects – 'Nauvoofun' a billboard promises. Thousands of mayflies have followed the invitation and have temporarily taken over an otherwise deserted go-cart ring. They gather around a floodlight, a huge swarm buzzing with an energy that borders desperation. Like the Mormons and Icarians before them, they'll soon disband, in this case, facing collective death. The go-cart ring perished too, a quick Internet search shows. Sitting at my desk about a thousand miles away, I wonder who inhabits the land now.

Shifting registers from the triumph and tribulations of community to the belief in technology and its corresponding military climate, Vignette VII begins with a re-enactment showing a nuclear physicist – no less than the Nobel Prize-winning 'architect of the Atomic Bomb' Enrico Fermi – writing a mathematical equation on critical mass and nuclear fission. The equation presented a scientific breakthrough that led to the construction and testing of the first nuclear reactor in 1942.[4] Moving from the manicured lawns and stately buildings at the University of Chicago, where the reactor was first conceived, the vignette takes us to the former test site, an overgrown park reached on a trampled path where its remains lie buried underground.

4 *The New York Times*, 'Enrico Fermi Dead at 53; Architect of the Atom Bomb', *The New York Times*, 29 November 1954 [https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0929.html].

Over the course of the sequence, abstract thought materializes in white chalk marks on a blackboard and then takes on new life in animations and technical drawings. The actual reactor itself – an underground structure built from stacked uranium-fitted and dead-uranium graphite bricks – remains unseen.[5] All that is left to the human eye is a formation of stone markers indicating its location. The reactor's by-product, deposited in the earth, is invisible as well. Though the presence of radioactive material, far from reaching its half-life, is literally written in stone. An inscription on one of the boulders cautions the public not to dig.

In relinquishing part of the narration to places, critters, and climates, *The Illinois Parables* makes temporal landscapes and political temperatures palpable, inviting us to partake in encounters with places, and the ideas, animals, and people that populate them. Yet, beyond the call emanating from landscapes and things, viewers are confronted with layered images that combine multiple modes of representation. Viewers are constantly made aware of the filmic construction as they process a dense mix composed of records of actual spaces; voice-over narration; historical and contemporary sound recordings; reproductions of paintings, maps, graphs, official documents, and newspaper clippings; chance encounters and re-enactments. As in the opening sequence, we are simultaneously drawn into the image and kept at bay.

The Illinois Parables can be situated at the junction of documentary and experimental film, and it has been referred to as an essay film. Stratman herself is wary about the question of distinct genres. 'I wish we could just say "film"', she answered when asked about the different designations.[6] Her film employs strategies frequently associated with the essay film, such as textual layering and the combination of different forms of representation. But it also makes moves the essay film is said to avoid, for instance, following a chronological order.[7] Already judging by its title, *The Illinois Parables* seems fundamentally at odds with the idea of the essay, as parables usually tell rather than probe, instruct rather than attempt. Indeed, the parable's function to simply illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson contradicts the essay's tendency to ask questions that are left unanswered. And yet, no lessons are told in the film. Inquisitive in nature, Stratman's parables are

5 Dead uranium bricks are extracted from depleted uranium mines.

6 Erika Balsom, '*The Illinois Parables*: Deborah Stratman on her Histories of the Land', *Sight & Sound*, 10 October 2016 [https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/deborah-stratman-illinois-parables].

7 Arthur Paul, 'Essay Questions' in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 161-171 (p. 163).

The Illinois Parables (Deborah Stratman, USA, 2016). Film still courtesy of Deborah Stratman.

not expressions of spiritual or moral values. The chronology of moments in the state's history merely presents a 'structural ruse,' as she puts it, for an investigation of how communities shape and are shaped by underlying systems of belief.[8] Manoeuvring in the space that opens up between local specificity and allegorical reach, the film's dominant mode, then, is one of enquiry. And, just as the essay film relies on the spectator to make meaning, the film's parables ultimately leave it for the viewer to decide what lessons there are to take away. In this, the film takes up the essay's dialogic quality. Authorship is partially transferred to the audience, which assumes the role of co-creator.

Beyond camouflaging its inquisitive spirit and dialogic commitment as morals drawn from history, *The Illinois Parables* also complicates another characteristic of the essay film, its particular manifestation of subjectivity. In the vein of Michel de Montaigne's famous self-assessment that his essays are more about himself than any other topic, the essay film is often conceptualized as a form of subjective expression that reflects on its own mode of utterance. Christa Blümlinger, for instance, has described the

8 Stratman, 'The Illinois Parable Synopsis'.

essay as an 'intellectual vagabond' venturing across unknown paths.[9] Along the way, the essay film reflects on its own journey, inviting the viewer to participate in thinking through the social realities they encounter. Within this exchange, the division of thinking between the 'self' and the 'other' dissolves. Two influential contributions on subjectivity in the essay film come from Laura Rascaroli and Timothy Corrigan. With a focus on spectatorial address and self-conscious meditation respectively, both look at how the essay film stages a dialogic encounter between the interior self and the world outside. As a reflection on the human condition and a shared human experience, both authors situate the essay film within the project of humanism.[10]

Rascaroli, in *The Personal Camera*, discusses the essay film as a form of dialogue in which an enunciator who represents the director directly addresses an embodied spectator. The essay's authorial voice, though it might be articulated through multiple personas, represents an individual voice rather than a collective. 'The "I" of the essay film always clearly and strongly implies a "you"', Rascaroli argues, 'called upon to participate and share the enunciator's reflections'.[11] In *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Corrigan describes the essay film as an encounter between the self and the public sphere.[12] Rather than an expression of the autonomous Cartesian subject, the figure of self-performance in the essay is one that is fragmented and unstable, while the essay itself straddles different forms and genres. Placed on unsteady ground, the viewer is invited to partake in thinking through worlds and ideas.[13]

9 Christa Blümlinger, 'Zwischen den Bildern/Lesen', in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum Essayistischen Film*, ed. by Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulf (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), pp. 11-31 (p. 17), (my translation).

10 Laura Rascaroli, 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments', *Framework* 49.2 (2008), pp. 24-47 (p. 37); Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 199.

11 *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 35.

12 Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, p. 17.

13 While the subjective dimension of the essay film as theorized by Rascaroli and Corrigan is still an important touchstone, I would be remiss not to point out that both authors have since conceptualized the essay from vantage points less concerned with the subjective expression of an enunciator. In *How the Essay Film Thinks*, Rascaroli shifts her focus on how the essay film's formal construction enables expressivity in modes of perception and affect, including non-vococentric modes of telling. In a different approach, Corrigan has explored how 'essayism' as a form of intellectual, digressive inflection can emerge within the constraints of conventional narrative film. See Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Corrigan, 'Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative', in *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics,*

While enunciation in *The Illinois Parables* is equally shifting and unstable, probing and inviting, the essay's narrating 'I' is absent from Stratman's film. Neither expressive nor self-reflective, subjectivity in the film is not individually located. Instead, subjectivity always refers to a collective. This is not unlike Bill Nichols's idea of the 'social subjectivity' performed in documentary, which goes beyond that of the individual.[14] Here, we can see Stratman's affinity with documentary traditions. What *The Illinois Parables* takes from the essay is its dialogic structure and mode of spectatorial address. However, what makes thinking about the film as an essay particularly productive is its treatment – or, rather, dissolution – of subjectivity. While the fixed gaze of the camera, often at eye level, suggests a universal subject, forms of knowing are distributed among a multiplicity of voices on- and off-screen – ranging from missionaries to nuclear physicists, from FBI agents to a girl endowed with supernatural powers – but also among human and non-human actors – from prehistoric mounds to riverbanks, from the ice floating in the Ohio River to the northern cardinal, the bird chosen to symbolize the state of Illinois. Social subjectivity, *The Illinois Parables* suggests, is not limited to a human collective; the voices speaking through the film are more than human.

The Illinois Parables visits places charged with history, where the living might sense the historical weight residing in these sites. Stratman calls them 'thin places', although not in the Jesuit sense, which describes places where the border that separates the living from the divine as malleable.[15] Seen from a secular perspective, thin places such as the Cahokia mounds or the Trail of Tears are animated by civilizations long gone or peoples dispersed. Stratman's film can be read in the lineage of the political landscape film, which is characterized by its attention to socio-historical inscriptions that mark the physical environment. Indeed, as Leo Goldsmith has pointed out, landscape in Stratman's film wears history on its sleeve.[16] How, then, does materiality figure in a film concerned with how expressions of ideology, morality, and faith shape the history of a state, its land and inhabitants? As we shall see, *The Illinois Parables* does more than laying bare man-made

Utopia, ed. by Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2016), pp. 15-27.

14 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 179.

15 Nick Pinkerton, 'Interview: Deborah Stratman', *Film Comment*, 17 November 2016 [https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-deborah-stratman/].

16 Leo Goldsmith, 'The Face of the Earth: Surface and Image in Landscape Documentary', *Documentary Surfaces* panel, SCMS conference, Toronto, 14-19 March 2018.

traces inscribed in the land. Instead, the film is attuned to agency of the natural environment, which takes on the role of an interlocutor and storyteller. If the historical weight of the past is particularly palpable in the places visited in the film, as Stratman says, so is their hybridity. The border between present and past is as porous as that between nature and culture.

This questioning of the nature of subjectivity positions *The Illinois Parables* in conversation with recent new-materialist thought on agency, or, more specifically, the question of who or what expresses agency and – by extension – counts as a subject. Contesting the modern notion of nature as passive, new materialisms are concerned with the entanglements of living and non-living matter and the collaborative actions of human and non-human beings. Jane Bennett's notion of a 'distributive agency' is particularly useful here. In her proposal for a vital materialism, Bennett urges us to divert attention from human subjectivity to the agential force of things. 'Another way to cultivate this new discernment', she writes, 'might be to elide the question of the human. Postpone for a while the topics of subjectivity or the nature of human interiority'.[17] Stratman's essay film concurs with this assertion. In listening to the land rather than giving it a voice, *The Illinois Parables* sidelines subjectivity and reflection in favour of a more encompassing understanding of agency and knowledge.

Admittedly, looking at the essay through a new-materialist lens may seem misguided, given its much commented-on discursive and logocentric traits. Based on the essay's commitment to language and intellectual discourse, Arthur Paul, for instance, has framed his thoughts on essayistic expression blatantly under the heading 'Mind over Matter'.[18] In *The Illinois Parables*, however, the material and the discursive are intertwined. In speaking about the film, Stratman frequently describes its cinematic language as connected to the earth's physical features and substance. Indeed, Stratman seems to share new materialisms' scepticism about the centrality of language in post-structuralist thought. 'But its telling doesn't have to involve language', she says about her film, 'the mounds, the scouring of the tornado or the Trail of Tears are geographical or physical modes of telling'.[19]

The Illinois Parables' trust in the expressive capacity of things and natural forces may allow us to regard, for a change, the essay less as an intellectual

17 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 120.

18 Arthur Paul, 'Essay Questions', in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 161-171 (p. 162).

19 Balsom, *The Illinois Parables*.

vagabond and more as 'vagabond matter', to evoke another materialist concept used by Bennett.[20] Focussing on the terrain of the human body, Bennett refers to the transient quality of matter in her discussion of the metabolization of food. She describes the process of digestion as an intimate encounter of human, organic, and inorganic substances, thus defying the hierarchical understanding of the human body's power to shape edible matter. Bennett takes the idea of a vagabond materiality from Gilles Deleuze. In a meditation on brass music and metallurgy, Deleuze describes matter as 'a bearer of active traits of expression', capable of handling information rather than being given form.[21] Leaving musical performance and digestive processes behind, the present encounter with vagabond matter occurs in the realm of essayistic enunciation. More specifically, the following discussion of essayistic expression shifts the focus from individual subjectivity to a distributed form or agency. Looking at the film through a materialist lens allows us to see how *The Illinois Parables* unmoors the essay film from its anthropocentric bearings.

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From the slight swaying movement in the opening sequence that had smoothed the borders of the frame, we are thrown behind the camera at the edge of a field of combed earth that is arrested in a static shot. The music has stopped, wind and insects are now responsible for the sound. The small mound in the centre of the image touches the horizon. The grey plane of a cloud holds it in place between earth and sky. It's a relic left from another time, holding its ground. The mound, which seemingly has no purpose, is juxtaposed with the uniform furrows of the ploughed field. Altogether, four mounds in varying sizes are shown, captured centre frame. Two are covered under thick blankets of grass, embedded in their surroundings. The fourth one reveals the magnitude of the complex. Like a tall building, the majestic structure overlooks the land. A parking lot in the foreground confirms it as a destination. While the panoramic view from the top of the mountain is withheld, the mound is clearly presented as a vista itself. And yet, the mounds appear to withhold something, something in their material being – just as their historical function – escapes the camera's grasp. 'Landscape', as Jennifer Jane Marshall points out, 'invites the projections of cultural

20 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 49.

21 Gilles Deleuze, 'Metal, Metallurgy, Music, Husserl, Simondon', *Les Cours des Gilles Deleuze*, Cours Vincennes (1979), trans. by Timothy S. Murphy [https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/186].

fantasies, while never fully capitulating to their ideological imperatives'.[22] While the mounds provoke speculation about their purpose in an ancient civilization long since passed, they also withdraw and remain inaccessible. Where, then, does land – as the solid matter of the earth's surface – end, in these images, and where does landscape – as a specific type of scenery or, in a less textual and more materialist sense, temporality – begin? It's not history that is speaking to us, but something else. The mounds are man-made artefacts and objects of representation, but they belong to a more-than-human world. In a place that is, at the same time, ruinous and alive, their material being speaks of more than the civilization that created them or the meanings we assign to them.

Moving back and forth between the material and the discursive, *The Illinois Parables* constantly changes its alliances. On the one hand, it foregrounds the agency of the land, merely recording how the natural environment inserts itself into a cultural product that is not of its own making. On the other hand, the film is concerned with systems of representation and carefully puts in place its own framing devices. Well into the first vignette, for instance, a black frame, cut in half by a white bar, interrupts the sequence. It's only when we arrive at the second graphic insertion that the abstract shape becomes legible as a Roman numeral that announces, belatedly, the film's second vignette.[23] The ordering gesture is delayed in more than one way. Though organized chronologically, the film withholds periodization, as the geographic location and dates of all sites and historic events are revealed only at the very end of the film. The earthen mounds are remains of an urban complex of the prehistoric Mississippian culture (600-1400 CE) in what is today the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site and a UNESCO-designated World Heritage site. But, for the time being, the explanation is left to the mounds themselves. *The Illinois Parables* doesn't rely on linguistic or graphic representation alone to provide historical data. In its sketching of distinct events in the state's history, the film is just as attentive to material, physical forms of telling. In these instances, the landscape looks back, directly addressing us. This challenges common

22 Jennifer Jane Marshall, 'Toward Phenomenology: A Material Culture Studies Approach to Landscape Theory', in *Landscape Theory*, ed. by James Elkins and Rachel DeLue (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 195-203 (p. 196).

23 Throughout the film, vignettes are identified as such only after they begin. The soundscape associated with a particular vignette sets in over the last images of the previous one. While the numerals piercing the screen clearly distinguish each section, the way they flow into each other suggests historical continuity. Beyond keeping viewers on their toes, the film's formal structure contradicts the idea of neatly packaged 'historical lessons'.

understandings of landscape as a form of representation that assigns the spectator a privileged position in a fixed, binary relationship: '"me – it", self and other, viewer and viewed, spectator and spectacle'.[24] The mounds' epistemological function, then, is not dependent on the spectator. Instead, they are shown as active participants in the production of knowledge. Distributed among human and non-human beings, knowledge – and, by extension, subjectivity – is co-created in an encounter where the material and the discursive meet.

However, highlighting the agency expressed through the mounds' material properties does not diminish their historical import or cultural significance. Beyond their plain materiality, the mounds carry a record of social organization and the interconnection of place and power, a central concern of Stratman's practice. Her film echoes media theorist Jussi Parikka's contention that geology can't be thought of apart from morality and the world of thought.[25] With a focus on the geological foundations of media, Parikka joins writers such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett in rethinking the modern division between natural and social realms. As an academic discipline, geology is part of the sciences, while the critical analysis of social values and morals is relegated to the already assailed humanities. Not only are these disciplinary boundaries constantly – and necessarily – overstepped, Parikka notes, they also hold on to a separation that is not tenable in view of the current environmental crises affecting the Earth. In vignettes such as the ones on the Piasa Bird, the mounds in Cahokia, the Manhattan Project, or the Trail of Tears, *The Illinois Parables* makes palpable the inseparability of geophysical and geopolitical space and the cultural practices that help forge these connections: cavernous cliffs and missionary ambitions, earthen mounds and outstanding universal values, dead uranium graphite bricks and military climates, hazardous terrains and legal documents are all shown as deeply intertwined.

While the first part of Vignette I invites the viewer to engage with both the material and discursive potentialities of the site, the second part listens to those inhabiting the space and emphasizes the ethical dimension of this encounter. Preceded by the sound of his song and his drum, a man appears in the frame and walks past the mound, reclaiming the space. His song and his initial words, the first spoken in the film, are in a language I – and presumably the majority of viewers – can't understand. He introduces himself

24 Alan Wallach, 'Between Subject and Object', in *Landscape Theory*, ed. by James Elkins and Rachel DeLue (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 315-312 (p. 317).

25 Jussi Parikka, *Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015), p. vii.

as Ravenwolf. Looking straight into the camera, at us, he throws back the ordering gaze that takes stock of the landscape. It's a corrective that leaves its mark on the film and helps guide the viewer as well. For Ravenwolf is not here to claim, he is here to receive. 'I come here to Monks Mound to gain strength and energy', he states, 'to gain their acceptance, and their guidance. The song that I play is to receive, to receive their honour, to receive their gifts, and to receive their strength and wisdom'. It's left open who the 'their' is that he refers to here: the ancestors or the ancestral lands. Ravenwolf's voice comes from off-screen, he is speaking at his own image. Yet, his performance – or re-enactment, as Stratman calls it – carries on. While his space as a Shaman may be invaded, his aura stays intact. Looking at us, silently, he illuminates his ritualistic practice, addressing us from a different space. In the background, barely visible, visitors explore the top of Monks Mound.

By employing geographical modes of telling, the first vignette relies on material forms of knowing in pro-filmic space. In Vignette V, which is dedicated to the 1925 Tri-State Tornado, material potentialities issue from the layering of different soundtracks in the post-production process. Here, sound emerges as a manner of thinking. In general, sound plays a crucial role in for Stratman, who does the sound design for most of her films herself. In *The Illinois Parables*, densely packed layers of voice and music, location and abstract sounds take on a material quality. Vignette V is ushered in by off-screen voices speaking over the shots of the buzzing swarm of mayflies in Nauvoo. Speaking with a strong dialect, they recount the first-hand experience of a devastating natural disaster that erased their homes: the tornado that crossed Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri in 1925. Moving at an average speed of 60 miles per hour, the storm cut a swath through the landscape that was up to a mile wide, erasing whole neighbourhoods in its path.

At first sight, the vignette mostly uses conventional documentary strategies: a montage of testimonials of survivors, headlines and newspaper articles pulled from the archives, and aerial views of the aftermath in pixilated black-and-white footage of old newsreels salvaged from YouTube. Yet, more than reconstructing the aftermath of a major natural disaster through archival documents, *The Illinois Parables* attends to the storm by creating a soundscape from a variety of sources and shifting intensities. As in other sequences, the event is brought to life acoustically, in a process Stratman describes as the 'geological layering' of different soundtracks.[26] The story of a parrot singing *Sweet Hour of Prayer* amidst the rubble prompts a rendition

26 Pinkerton, 'Interview: Deborah Stratman'.

of the song. The evocation is interrupted by sirens and talked over by the official emergency response. The main actor is the one to appear last. The vignette reaches its end with the growling of a tornado that is interjected by the desperate shouts and cries of two people caught in the midst of a storm. One enunciator among others, the tornado joins a cacophony of human and non-human voices.

A driving force of the film, the soundscape in *The Illinois Parables* not only participates in world-building but also carries part of the narration.[27] In his critique of the essay film's vococentric tendency, David Oscar Harvey contends that, one can not only 'essay via images' but also through a 'cinematic voice cultivated outside the linguistic register'.[28] *The Illinois Parables* certainly doesn't relinquish the essay's verbose inclinations completely; throughout the film, the intellectual vagabond makes her voice heard in testimonials and voice-over narration. Even so, Stratman's film strongly supports Harvey's assertion that the 'subjective expressive (sic) needn't solely be addressed linguistically'.[29] For instance, the transition from the first to the second vignette, to use another example, also happens acoustically: as Ravenwolf's voice melds into the surrounding sounds – wind, maybe, or cars passing by on a nearby road – a woodwind sets in with a restrained melody, slowly moving back and forth between two bars. There are other sounds supplementing the instrument woven into a sonic carpet that transports us to a new place, a new imaginary.

As occurs often in the film, sounds are indistinguishable, and the information they share is unstable. There's something that resembles the creaking of wood, maybe caused by steps on squeaking floorboards or the slow opening of a door. Yet the sound is severed from the scene unfolding on-screen, which shows the series of etchings that open the story of the missionaries' encounter with the Piasa bird in Alton. Deprived of referentiality, the sound takes on an eerie quality. Once we enter a stone cave in Alton, sound approximates the image again and becomes concrete: small pebbles roll over

27 The analysis of the film's musical score is beyond the scope of the present chapter.

28 David Oscar Harvey, 'The Limits of Vococentrism: Chris Marker, Hans Richter and the Essay Film', *SubStance* 41.2, Issue 128 (2012), pp. 6-23. I am thankful here to Laura Rascaroli for her reference to Harvey's text in *How the Essay Film Thinks,* which introduced me to his writing. Rascaroli explores how complex sound environments in films by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Santiago Alvarez allow us to move beyond the logocentric conception of the essay. In contrast to my attempt to rethink instances of subjective expression in the essay film, Rascaroli focusses on how sound activates meaning and mobilizes affect in the viewer, rather than embodying a non-human form of expression and practising meaning-making itself.

29 Harvey, 'The Limits of Vococentrism', p. 19.

rocks and the dripping of water sculpts the domed, reverberating space. An intricate non-vococentric narration precedes the voice-over of Father Marquette. Sounds acquire agency and assume a subjective dimension.

While Vignette V exemplifies the geological layering of sound at play in *The Illinois Parables*, the opening sequence of Vignette III, focussing on the Trail of Tears, allows us think about the materiality of media more broadly. The images that transition into the third vignette are among the most haunting in the film. A fluoroscopy, or real-time radiograph, of a living bird is juxtaposed with a fabricated Northern Cardinal that accessorizes a serene diorama of Cherokee Indians. Scientific and cultural representations clash in a gesture that is incommensurate with the erasure of life on the Trail of Tears. Fluoroscopic imaging of animals is typically performed for biotechnological research or for diagnostic reasons. No matter the purpose, the act that produces the image is incredibly violent: a living, moving creature is penetrated by X-rays that are converted into visible light. The camera not only reveals the bone structure of the bird but also records its movements and pumping heart as the bird flutters back and forth in a constricted space. The circular mask evokes the technical apparatus producing the image; the numbers inscribed on the frame show the scientific categorization that is retrospectively assigned to the action. Watching the bird's efforts to thwart the machinic gaze that turns living things into facts is excruciating. Its hectic movements tell of its struggle to resist the eye of the machine that inscribes the bird into a social order, that strips it of its autonomy. The piercing electronic sound heightens the intensity of the image seen. A synthesizer wails over what sounds like a collage of human and non-human vocal expressions: I register the shrieking of a bird, the muffled breathing of a mammal, and the mutter of a human voice. But actually, I'm not sure what I am hearing at all. In their obscurity, the sounds are even more disturbing than the image.

The contrast to the diorama is extreme. The sound stops abruptly. The cardinal, stuck on a branch, is immobile. Before the scenes of domestic Indian life are presented in their entirety, mannequins and props are shown in fragments. Each shot is heralded by the sound of a bell, which accentuates the funereal nature of a museum space that renders culture dead rather than bringing it to life. Body parts and tools hover in space: a branch, a pot, a foot, hands holding a basket with a fish whose hard, plastic body reflects the artificial light. The torso of a mannequin is turned gracefully as if in a dance pose, thick black shiny hair covers the side of the head. Drops of paint have dried on its chest, and now look like beads of sweat, or tears. Time is frozen, arrested in the colonial fantasy

of a past that never existed. The soft gradation of the celluloid film stock brings out the nostalgic charm of the colour scheme: warm shades of reds and brown with subdued blues and greens. After the sensory shock of the X-ray vision, I find myself relieved to be on stable ground again. Soothed into a false sense of harmony, I also find myself complicit in the continuing erasure of Native American history. This visitor space in front of the brightly lit diorama is dim. The lighting produces a cinematic effect and establishes a hierarchal relationship between those who are viewing and those who are seen. Watching from the safe space of their privileged viewing position, spectators are forced to assume the paternalizing gaze with which the colonizers of this land othered Native bodies. In contrasting two technologies of seeing, the diorama and the fluoroscopy, the vignette's opening sequence records the fallacies of historic and filmic representation and brilliantly plays on the viewer's susceptibility to media manipulation.

The gesture brings to the fore media's capacity to act as a framing device embedded within the technoscientific and cultural regimes of dominant society. It also provides a striking example of the film's engagement with the materiality of non-human agency. We are presented with technologies of seeing that are employed to represent animate and inanimate bodies, a living animal as in the case of the fluoroscopy and mannequins depicting humans and animals in the diorama. A paradoxical tension ensues, as the containment is both successful and forever bound to fail: while the bird is trapped and the image of the Indians arrested, the bird actively escapes the static gaze and the plastic material of the mannequins silently exposes the failure to visualize a fantasy. The fluoroscopy, but also the diorama, call to mind Parikka's concept of medianatures. Parikka proposes a geological media model that is twofold: on the one hand, the earth is mediated through technology – Parikka lists mapping, for instance, or sonification, but we might as well add here fluoroscopic imaging and dioramas. On the other hand, media technologies are dependent on material resources – say, minerals, rocks, or physical structures. The sphere of medianatures thus exists in a double bind, creating a permanent tension between 'the materiality of the uncontained' and the 'operations of framing'.[30] While media technologies have an ordering function, they are enabled first by the very material substances they help to frame.

Part of Parikka's argument is that media itself is manipulated matter. Scholars such as Nadja Bozak and Sean Cubitt have also pointed out the

30 Parikka, *Geology of Media*, p. 13.

different ways in which film and media depend on geology and the earth's natural resources.[31] This, of course, is true for film in general, not just Stratman's. But the materiality of media, whether analogue or digital, visual or acoustic, carries particular weight in *The Illinois Parables*. We can see this from the textual and 'geological' layering of the individual vignettes down to the choice of the film's material base. The assemblage of plastic, gelatine, and silver crystals that constitutes the film stock, for instance, was chosen for its particular sensitivity to light. Stratman, who works with both film and video, selected 16mm for this project, because of 'the way celluloid acts as a witness. It's the light from that place, at that time, physically hitting and altering the film'. Her word choice to describe film's sensory faculty seems pertinent here: witness derives from wit, which denotes 'the faculty of thinking and reasoning in general; mental capacity, understanding, intellect'.[32] More than a medium or an aesthetic choice, celluloid is a sensing actor, which speaks about place with and through light. As a technology, film exists in the sphere of medianature. It simultaneously relies on and frames geophysical substances that sustain and inspire us. *The Illinois Parables* consciously operates in this collective material-discursive space.

Furthermore, Parikka's medianature is based on Donna Haraway's influential concept of natureculture, which emphasizes the inherent interconnection and inseparability of nature and culture.[33] Natureculture thus contests the Cartesian framework that uses binary structures, such as nature versus culture and mind versus matter, as its ordering principle. Natureculture (as well as medianature) considers the material non-human realm as inextricably linked to sociopolitical and economic power structures. Importantly, natureculture is also an effort to decentre the human subject. It's a gesture that calls into question the privileged space of the human in favour of a broader understanding of who and what belongs to the social collective. In Stratman's case, the film elides questions of human subjectivity in favour of a form of agency that is distributed among people, animals, and the earth as well as the beliefs, moral values, and creative practices that connect and sustain them.

31 Nadja Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

32 Oxford English Dictionary, 'witness, *n.*'.

33 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 9.

The Illinois Parables thus moves the essay's alleged humanism toward an understanding of a posthumanist essay. Building on the literary essay's foundation in Enlightenment traditions, which presumes an autonomous, self-determined human subject, the essay has generally been situated – whether explicitly or implicitly – within a humanist tradition. As a recent feature in *Sight & Sound* put it, the essay film exemplifies 'the spirit of humanistic inquiry', a statement that echoes Rascaroli's and Corrigan's earlier pronouncements.[34] As is often noted, the term essay derives from 'assay', which connotes a trial or attempt. Nora M. Alter has pointed to the etymological lineage of this term to *agens*, which anchors the essay within the 'problem of human agency'.[35] The agency performed in the essay film is commonly validated and historicized through both representatives and critics of humanism, ranging from Michel de Montaigne, Giacomo Leopardi, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, to Marquis de Sade, Georg Lukacs, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Roland Barthes, to borrow Alter's list – a gendered directory that any history of the film essay could easily help extend.[36] Even though the essay's alliance with humanist thought may be an uneasy one, the essay's anthropocentric bearings remain largely intact.

In contrast, *The Illinois Parables* can be seen in light of recent posthumanist thought that questions the universal subject implicit in humanism. Rosi Braidotti, a major proponent of this emerging approach, describes life as something that surpasses the individual and presents a non-personal force of creativity Building on critics of humanism's anthropological dogma, a posthuman theory of subjectivity postulates a continuum of human and non-human nature. This interconnection is a crucial feature of *The Illinois Parables*, where agency is distributed among natural and social realms. Going beyond the essay film's dissolution of the border between self and the other where the implied other is human, the subject position put forth in the film is more than human. As I have argued here, Stratman's film embraces a material-discursive mode of telling that includes human and non-human voices alike. In its essayistic journey through sites and events in the state's history, *The Illinois Parables* joins the intellectual vagabond with vagabond matter.

34 Andrew Tracy, Ginette Vincendeau, Katy McGahan, Chris Darke, Geoff Andrew, Olaf Möller, Sergio Wolf, Nina Power, and Nick Bradshaw, 'The Essay Film', *Sight & Sound*, 2015 [https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/essay-film].

35 Nora M. Alter, 'Translating the Essay into Film and Installation', *Journal of Visual Culture* 6.1 (2007), pp. 44-57 (p. 45).

36 Alter, 'Translating the Essay', p. 45.

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