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VERDICT: The nature and potential of non-human evolution are explored to disquieting effect in Deborah Stratman's essayistic blend of science fact and science fiction.

Ben Nicholson

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The nascent science fiction of J.-H. Rosny (the amalgamated pseudonym of Belgian brothers Joseph and Seraphin Boex) and the real-world observations and speculations of Dr Marcia Bjornerud form the hybrid backbone of Deborah Stratman's strange and slippery new film *Last Things*. Initially appearing to be a post-apocalyptic tale about what transpires after the decline of humanity, not least due to passages from Rosny's 1910 novella *The Death of the Earth*, it instead becomes far more enigmatic as it muses on the very nature of non-human evolution and requires us to step some way outside of our anthropocentric perspective. This is speculative documentary at its most bracingly geological.

The use of the more fantastical elements allows Stratman to place us in a potentially post-human mindset, particularly in imagining the earth after all life has been eradicated, only for a new form to emerge amidst the desolation. "To human eyes," intones Valérie Massadian's narration, "Earth was dead. Yet another life was evolving for whom this was the time of genesis." Through its accompanying philosophical and scientific reflections – which encompass the work of Roger Caillois, Lynn Margulis, and Clarice Lispector, amongst others – *Last Things* places its ostensibly fictional elements in concert with more objective discussions of deep time, the formation of the universe, and extinction events that sit outside of regular definitions. In Stratman's hands, the primitive rock formations of chondrites sparkle mesmerizingly as pre- and post-history unnervingly intermingle. They were there when it all began, but don't remember a thing. ^

The visual make-up of the film uses a similar hybrid approach, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Partly, this is in using what would appear to be documentary footage to represent fabulous narrative moments. Crystalline formations creeping across the screen are both the post-human inhabitants of a now-dead Earth and, presumably, something being observed by human eyes through a microscope. Stratman's essayistic approach, evident throughout much of her work, pulls together a variety of different archival and newly filmed material that in different ways expresses something about the pasts and futures being postulated. Drone footage hovers over alien-looking landscapes, man-made dwellings create bizarre rock formations, and the forces of nature create even more bizarre rock formations. Through all of this, *Last Things* manages to maintain an askance perspective that makes for an utterly thought-provoking experience.

Director, screenwriter, cinematography, editing, sound design: Deborah Stratman

Cast: Valérie Massadian, Marcia Bjornerud

Producers: Deborah Stratman, Anže Peržin, Gaëlle Boucand

Cinematography: Manuel Vlastelica

Sound: Simon Apostolou

Production company: Pythagoras Film (USA), Stenar Projects (Portugal), Elinka Films (France)

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Forum Expanded)

In French, English

50 minutes