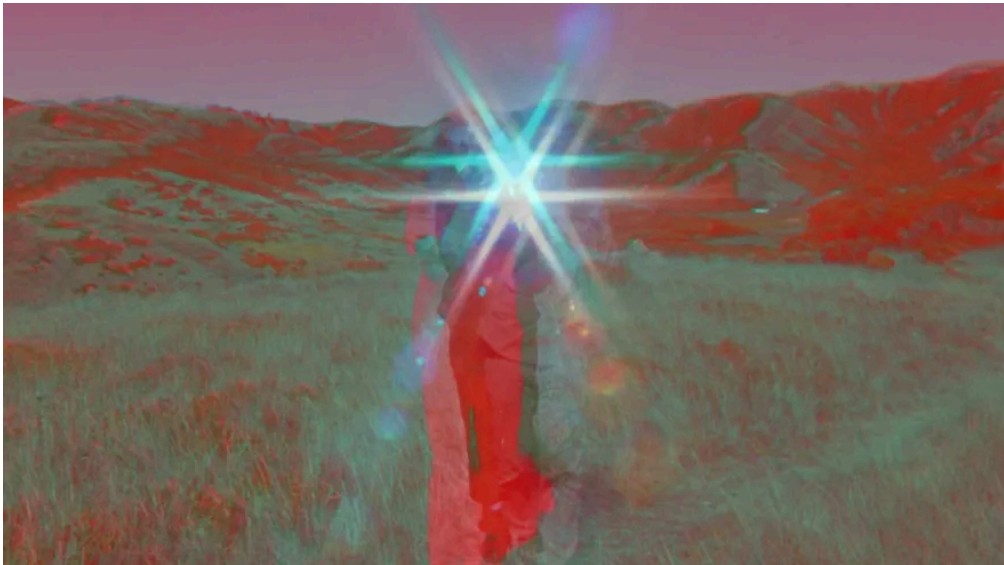


# Chicago Tribune

## Review: 'Last Things,' from a true Chicago poet of experimentalism, now at the Film Center



Deborah Stratman

Deborah Stratman's experimental film "Last Things" looks at the history of Earth through rocks, minerals and more.

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By **MICHAEL PHILLIPS** | [mjphillips@chicagotribune.com](mailto:mjphillips@chicagotribune.com) | Chicago Tribune

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Fifty minutes: so many ways you can spend that amount of time. Reading. Running. Cooking. Talking with a therapist about your place in this world.

Or this: Watching Chicago-based filmmaker Deborah Stratman's latest work of entrancement, "Last Things," continuing for three more screenings this week at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

It's a dreamlike account of Earth beginning with "the prehistory of prehistory," and how our planet became a planet. I've seen it twice now, first at the True/False documentary festival in Columbia, Missouri (terrific nonfiction film festival, by the way), and again the other night at the Film Center. Nobody else makes movies like Stratman's, with their densely packed but magically fluid mixture of historical fact, global curiosity, philosophy, scientific speculation, stuff she makes up — science fiction, sort of, though peppered with actual geology — and images and ideas both lucid and mysterious.

This one's about rocks. And yes, you should see it, no matter how that sounds to you.

A cine-essayist as well as a synthesizer, Stratman teaches in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Last Things" deals with Earth's "mineral kingdom," and clouds of space dust from the solar system's early days that formed Earth. One real-life expert, heard in voice-over, talks about our origin story, told by "the guts of old stars." Humankind came much later. It is part of the story, but not necessarily deserving of the usual top billing, since geology will outlast us.

Around dozens of text samples — speculative science fiction by J.-H. Rosny, Clarice Lispector's novella "The Hour of the Star," so much more — Stratman constructs a few droll theories of her own. Did human beings get a literal jolt from the stars? Is humanity, "the prodigious destroyer of life," a worthy steward of an increasingly endangered planet?

We hear theories of time, relayed by Lawrence University structural geologist Marcia Bjornerud, as we see footage shot by director/cinematographer/editor/sound designer Stratman that's drably realistic one minute (the inside of a research lab, for example), playfully fantastical the next (glimpses of a humanoid race of Star People, appearing like the distant, just-folks cousins of the Star Child in "2001: A Space Odyssey").

If all this sounds difficult to track, well, sort of. But not really. It's a flow, not a plod, and Stratman isn't after conventional linear storytelling. I love the avenues of exploration going on in "Last Things," and how this filmmaker finds as much to see in break dancers on a city street, beautifully edited, as she sees in lo-fi visual notions of star guts looking for action, and a new home.

Earth's geological history serves as the protagonist here. "Last Things" qualifies as a new and hypnotic kind of stoner's movie — with real stone. The filmmaker's finest work [includes "The Illinois Parables"](#) and, now, this latest experiment in wonderment.

**"Last Things" — 4 stars (out of 4)**

No MPA rating.

Running time: 50 minutes

How to watch: At the [Gene Siskel Film Center](#), 6:30 p.m. Jan. 22-23 and 8:30 p.m. Jan. 25

*Michael Phillips is a Tribune critic.*