

Part V
Millennial Bodies, Origins
and Becoming-Milieu

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Ecoerotica in Stéphane Audeguy's *La Théorie des nuages*

Abstract: In his extraordinary first novel about the men who shaped our understanding of clouds, Stéphane Audeguy proposes a provocative interpretation of 'human geography'. Richard Abercrombie, travelling around the world in the 1890s to compile an atlas of clouds in texts and photographs, abandons science for a new obsession: female genitalia. His atlas, instead of containing scientific information, becomes a collection of photos of women's sexual organs. Scribbled next to the pictures are enigmatic symbols and words like 'origin', 'similitude', and 'infinite'. Audeguy merges gynaecology, meteorology and geology to form a geography of the body. The word 'origin' repeatedly written by Abercrombie is undoubtedly a reference to Courbet's (in)famous oil painting *L'Origine du monde* [*The Origin of the World*] (1866), whose photographic quality is shockingly different from the portrayal of female nudes from the time. In his essay *Opera mundi*, Audeguy suggests that *L'Origine du monde* depicts a landscape, 'une vallée extraordinaire, dont les plis semblent des coulées de lave souples et vivantes', strikingly similar to the many paintings that Courbet made of the source of the Loue, a small river flowing from a cave near his home in Franche-Comté. Like Courbet – and Baudelaire ('La Géante'), Sade (*Justine*), and Lucretius (*De rerum natura* [*On the Nature of Things*]), Audeguy develops a micro-cult of sexuality with origins in the macrocosm of the sky and the earth, similar to 'the sexualized world' that Mircea Eliade finds in many pre-modern societies. As Audeguy states in *Opera mundi*, the analogy between the human body and nature comes down to our inability to comprehend the endlessness of both: a 'confrontation avec l'illimité du désir et l'impensable infinité de la nature'. *La Théorie des nuages* recalls Robinson Crusoe's eroticised island in Michel Tournier's *Vendredi*, and echoes the words of geographer Luc Bureau, who claims that 'c'est érotiquement que l'homme habite', and that one who studies the relationship between humans and the earth is destined to become a 'disciple d'Eros, un érotologue, un expert en érotologie'.

C'est érotiquement que l'homme habite. Le géographe qui, avec patience et modestie, étudie la relation des hommes avec la Terre serait ainsi un disciple d'Eros, un érotologue, un expert en érotologie.¹

[Man lives *erotically*. The geographer who modestly and patiently studies the relationship between humans and the Earth would thus be a disciple of Eros, an *erotologist*, an expert in *erotology*.]

1 Luc Bureau, *Terra erotica* (Montréal: Fides, 2009), 9 [unreferenced translations are mine].

Stéphane Audeguy's first novel, *La Théorie des nuages* (2005), calls for an ecocritical reading on several levels. We encounter the familiar Romantic topos of clouds early on, recalling nineteenth-century nature poets like William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822).² The first sentence evokes the melancholy of twilight, and leads into the story of the first main character (the only historical figure), Luke Howard (1772–1864). Howard, a London pharmacist, was the first to classify clouds, and his *Essay on the Modification of Clouds* (1804)³ was much admired by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Howard may even have crossed paths with the German poet at the prototypical Romantic site of the Rhine Falls in Switzerland, also visited by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797–1851), and painted by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1841). Audeguy subsequently tells the story of Carmichael, a fictional English Romantic painter of clouds, who was driven to suicide by their dangerous beauty and infinitely unfathomable structures. The author then focusses on a different kind of cloud, one that has become an ominous metaphor for the destructive power of nature and of humankind. The narrator compares the volcanic explosion on Krakatoa – and the enormous cloud that it produced – with the obliteration of Hiroshima in a blinding flash, followed by an apocalyptic cloud and black rain. The main narrator of the novel, Akira Kumo, is a survivor of the Hiroshima attack; his attempts to recall the event are part of a *fil conducteur* decrying humans' predatory nature and insane Promethean hubris.

But the genius of *La Théorie des nuages* emanates neither from Romanticism nor from stunning descriptions of the destructive power of volcanic and atomic clouds. Its audacity and originality arise from Audeguy's ability to detect an erotic presence in nature. Audeguy's clouds reveal a kind of nature that Canadian geographer Luc Bureau describes with the following formula: 'notre relation à la Terre et au monde est fondamentalement une relation de désir, de sensualité, d'amour diffus: bref, une relation érotique [our relationship to the earth and the world is fundamentally one of desire, of sensuality, of diffuse love: in short, an erotic relationship]'.⁴

On the first page of *La Théorie des nuages*, we meet Kumo, a retired couturier living in Montmartre on the Rue Lamarck. He has just hired a librarian named Virginie Latour to classify his considerable collection of materials related to

2 Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1807) is one of his best-known poems. Shelley's 'The Cloud', published with *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), meditates – like Audeguy's narrator – on the infinite nature of clouds: 'I change, but I cannot die' (76).

3 Luke Howard, *Essay on the Modification of Clouds* (London: Josiah Taylor, 1804).

4 Bureau, *Terra erotica*, 9.

clouds.⁵ Kumo loves to talk about clouds, and it is through his story-telling that Virginie learns about men who shaped our knowledge of clouds and weather. One of these men is Richard Abercrombie, a fictional Scottish meteorologist whose story dominates the final section of the novel, in which he begins a journey around the world with the intention of assembling a complete photographic cloud atlas. His odyssey ends with the compilation of the mysterious and notorious Abercrombie Protocol, the photographic contents of which are the *ecoerotica* to which I refer in my title.

Abercrombie enthusiastically departs on his voyage 'à la recherche du temps [in search of weather/time]' (N 203)⁶ – as he proudly calls it – but a traumatic event in Indonesia changes his life forever. He arrives in Borneo to continue taking photographs for his cloud atlas, heading upriver with two hunters into the jungle. He is struck by the deafening noise of the rainforest, and realises that – contrary to the animals in English forests, in close proximity to towns – these animals are completely indifferent to humans, unaware that the human being is the 'prédateur suprême [supreme predator]' (N 219), killing for recreation, not survival. Left alone to rest in a clearing for a short time, Abercrombie is elated to come across a large orangutan with her baby. They look at each other calmly and without fear: 'dans ce regard de bête qui n'a jamais croisé celui d'un homme, il n'y a absolument

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- 5 Stéphane Audeguy, *La Théorie des nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 19–20 [hereafter N]. The proper names are well chosen. Kumo means 'cloud' in Japanese, and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, the great naturalist, had an interest in clouds: he proposed a five-type classification in 1802, just before Luke Howard's more famous four-type classification (cirrus, cumulus, stratus, nimbus).
- 6 The phrase recalls Marcel Proust's masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913–27), and is a play on the two meanings of *temps* (time and weather), bringing to mind one of the major themes of Michel Tournier's *Les Météores* (1975), which Audeguy cites as an inspiration for *La Théorie des nuages*. *Temps* as weather is the major concern of Audeguy, but the first sentences of his novel remind us of its other meaning: 'vers les cinq heures du soir, tous les enfants sont tristes: ils commencent à comprendre ce qu'est le temps. Le jour décline un peu. Il va falloir rentrer pourtant, être sage, et mentir [all children become sad in the late afternoon, for they begin to comprehend the passage of time. The light starts to change. Soon they will have to head home, and to behave, and to pretend]' (N 13). Stéphane Audeguy, *The Theory of Clouds*, trans. by T. Bent (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007), 3 [hereafter C]. Michel Serres's *Le Contrat naturel* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992) regards 'les deux temps' as a central concern (51). Climate change is essentially a problem of *temps* as weather, but our inability to deal with it comes down to a refusal to consider *temps* as time in the long term. Similarly, 'pollution matérielle', exposing *temps* as weather to major risks, is a function of 'pollution culturelle', the mismanagement of the earth that began many centuries ago (57).

rien de sauvage [in the eyes of a beast that had never before come across those of a man, there was absolutely nothing the slightest bit savage]’ (N 227; C 189). Sadly, the animals pay for their lack of fear, as one of the hunters shoots the mother from several hundred feet away, then coldly snaps the neck of the baby.⁷

In a rumination entitled ‘De la nature de quelques choses’, Audeguy examines our ambiguous relationship with nature. He declares that, though we are part of nature, we are denatured animals, and this denaturation is what led to the radioactive cloud over Hiroshima, and the clouds of ashes over Auschwitz.⁸ Our bond to nature is predatory, like that of the hunter to the orangutan.⁹ Audeguy prefers

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- 7 In a personal interview, Stéphane Audeguy revealed that his character Richard Abercrombie is loosely based on Ralph Abercromby (1842–97), a well-travelled Scottish meteorologist and author of *Seas and Skies in Many Latitudes* (London: Edward Stanford, 1888). Audeguy has a copy of a lithograph featuring Ralph Abercromby proudly standing behind an orangutan that he had just shot. The fictional Abercrombie, who detests hunting, is profoundly changed by his travels and becomes closer to nature; his historical namesake remained an avid hunter.
- 8 Stéphane Audeguy, ‘De la nature de quelques choses’, in *Les Assises du roman 2009*, ed. by D. Bourgois (Paris: Bourgois, 2009), 241–8 (245). The title, ‘On the Nature of Some Things’, is a tribute to Titus Lucretius Carus’s *De rerum natura* [*On the Nature of Things*] (50 BCE). Audeguy’s remark on humans’ problematic place in nature echoes the dispute between the typical humanist position which considers humans separate from nature – as Luc Ferry argues in *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* (Paris: Grasset, 1992) – and environmental philosophers like Michel Serres and Bruno Latour who contend that humans have never been disconnected from nature. Bruno Latour, ‘Arrachement ou attachement à la nature?’, *Écologie & Politique* 5 (1993), 15–26.
- 9 In an interview, Audeguy cites the novels of Jules Verne as excellent illustrations of our predatory instinct, of the ‘fantasme occidental de la clôture, de faire le tour du monde. Verne exprime quelque chose de l’emprise capitaliste, scientifique et marchande sur le monde qui est encore vrai: la prédation [the Western fantasy of enclosing, of going around the world. Verne expresses something of the capitalistic, scientific, and commercial appropriation of the world that is still true: predation]’. Thierry Guichard, ‘Le Monde réapproprié: dossier Stéphane Audeguy’, *Le Matricule des Anges* 101 (2009), 18–27 (21). In *Le Crépuscule de Prométhée* [*The Twilight of Prometheus*], François Flahault devotes a lengthy chapter to Verne’s ‘Promethean imagination’. In Verne’s exceedingly virile ‘geographical’ novels, male protagonists embark on improbable conquests of nature, science, and technology, ‘pour dominer ce qui les domine [to dominate that which dominates them]’. François Flahault, *Le Crépuscule de Prométhée* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2008), 122. *La Théorie des nuages* critiques this western worldview in passages on military men who arrogantly ignored the science of meteorology, or attempted to enlist the weather to help defeat an enemy: Napoleon in Russia and at Waterloo (N

the terminology of *arraisonner/arraisonnement*, a nautical expression that means to board and seize a ship forcibly:

Nous avons arraisonné la nature, comme un navire: on s'en empare, on s'en croit le propriétaire. [...] L'arraisonnement est le mouvement même de notre civilisation; il détermine ses progrès, mais il abrite également un fantasme morbide, dément, qui menace l'humanité elle-même.¹⁰

[We have commandeered nature, like a ship: we seize it, we believe we own it. [...] Commandeering is the driving force of our civilisation; it determines its progress, but it also contains a morbid, insane fantasy that threatens humanity itself.]

Our desire to commandeer nature amounts to the same Promethean hubris that culminated not only in the atomic bomb, but also in the Chernobyl disaster;¹¹ we treat nature as a stockpile of energy to be used in human technology, which is ultimately uncontrollable, and leads to humanity's self-destruction.

After that day in the jungle, Richard Abercrombie never photographs another cloud. The shame and the rage felt after the murder of the orangutans alter him forever, and he ceases to be a man of science. The Abercrombie Protocol changes from being about clouds to being about women, as the once puritanical Scotsman's obsession shifts from meteorology to sexology. Over a century later, Kumo comes into possession of the Protocol, never seen by anyone outside the Abercrombie family, and is surprised that only the first few pages contain pictures of clouds:

104–7), the French navy during the Crimean War (N 86–7), and the American planners of the Hiroshima attack (N 156–7).

- 10 Audeguy, 'De la nature de quelques choses', 244. *Arraisonner* has been used by French translators of Heidegger to convey the term *Gestell*, usually translated as 'enframing'. The term captures the threatening essence of technology – reducing nature to a 'standing reserve' – that Heidegger describes in 'Die Frage nach der Technik [The Question Concerning Technology]' (1953). David Farrell Krell explains the hostile nature of *Gestell* in his introduction to Heidegger's essay: 'the question concerning the essence of technology confronts the supreme danger, which is that this one way of revealing beings may overwhelm man and beings and all other possible ways of revealing. Such danger is impacted in the essence of technology, which is an ordering of, or setting-upon, both nature and man, a defiant challenging of beings that aims at total and exclusive mastery'. David F. Krell, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From 'Being and Time' (1927) to 'The Task of Thinking' (1964)*, trans. by D. F. Krell (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 284–6 (285).
- 11 The connection between Prometheus and Chernobyl is painfully direct. In front of the ruins of the nuclear plant stands a bronze statue of the Titan, triumphantly stealing fire from the gods in order to give it to humans. Flahault, *Le Crépuscule de Prométhée*, 11–13.

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Plus bizarrement encore, il y a ces photographies spéciales qui occupent l'autre face des feuilles, des centaines de photographies de sexes féminins. [...]

[L]es clichés ne cherchent pas l'excuse de paraître ethnographiques, ou même anthropologiques. Les sujets qui ont posé sont tous entièrement nus; ils ne portent ni bijoux ni tatouages visibles. [...] Les clichés ne relèvent pas non plus du style vaporeux, supposément suggestif, de la photographie dite de charme de ces années-là, ni de la gaudriole puérile de la pornographie habituelle; simplement, frontalement, tranquillement, le professeur Abercrombie, membre de la Royal Society, a photographié des sexes féminins. Ils sont, à l'évidence, soigneusement éclairés pour que tous les détails en soient visibles [...]. Les pages de droite sont couvertes de dessins répétitifs où Kumo distingue des coquillages, des têtes d'animaux, encore des sexes féminins, des nuages aussi. Chacune des entrées est datée. (N 197–8)

[Most disturbing of all were those photographs of women's sexual organs – numbering in the hundreds – on the book's facing pages. [...]

The images could not be explained away as having ethnographic or anthropological value. The women posing in them were wearing no clothes; no folk art, jewels, or tattoos were visible. [...] The photographs weren't fuzzy or gauzy in that suggestive style that had been considered charming in photographs of the period. Nor were they as crude as typical pornography. The images were simple, unadorned. Great care had been taken to highlight every detail. [...] The recto page was covered with drawings, the same design, repeated over and over. Kumo could see they were of shells, animal heads, women's vaginas; a few clouds as well. Each entry was dated.] (C 165)

The Theory of Clouds metamorphoses at this point into a theory of bodies, as Gallimard's scarlet cover-band proclaimed,¹² and a novel about clouds of all sorts – natural and unnatural – turns into a kind of environmental erotica. While Abercrombie's photographs are solely of women – at first full-length, then limited to torsos – his drawings alternate between vaginas and non-human objects: seashells, animal heads, and clouds. Audeguy finds sexual analogies between the macrocosm of the world and the microcosm of the human body, in the tradition of ancient and medieval thinkers, such as the alchemists of the Near and Far East studied by Mircea Eliade in *Forgerons et alchimistes*. Eliade devotes a chapter to 'Le Monde sexualisé [The Sexualised World]', 'une conception générale de la *réalité cosmique* perçue en tant que *Vie*, et par conséquent sexuée, la sexualité étant un signe particulier de toute *réalité vivante* [a general conception of cosmic reality seen as *Life* and consequently endowed with sex; sexuality being a particular sign of all

12 Below the title – *La Théorie des nuages* – appeared a provocative red band: 'et des corps [and bodies]':

living reality)].¹³ Eliade recalls the gynaecological symbolism of the sacred Earth Mother in traditional societies:

L'idée que les minerais 'croissent' dans le ventre de la Terre, ni plus ni moins que les embryons. La métallurgie prend ainsi un caractère obstétrique. Le mineur et le métallurgiste [...] collaborent à l'œuvre de la Nature, l'aident à 'accoucher plus vite'. Bref, par ses techniques, l'homme se substitue peu à peu au Temps, son Travail remplace l'œuvre du Temps.¹⁴

[The notion that ores 'grow' in the belly of the earth after the manner of embryos. Metallurgy thus takes on the character of obstetrics. Miner and metalworker [...] collaborate in the work of Nature and assist it to give birth more rapidly. In a word, man, with his various techniques, gradually takes the place of Time: his labours replace the work of Time.]

In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant explains that from Antiquity through the Renaissance, the prevailing world view saw nature as a living organism with a double personality: normally a kind, 'nurturing mother', the earth at times became 'wild and uncontrollable', unleashing violent storms, floods, droughts, etc.¹⁵ This organic view encouraged respect and restraint from humans. Merchant echoes Eliade when she recounts the sacred vocation of miners who entered 'earth's vagina', and the 'awesome responsibility' of metallurgists who engaged in 'the human hastening of the birth of the living metal in the artificial womb of the furnace'.¹⁶

The Scientific Revolution, seeking to impose rationality on the world, seized upon the notion of nature's destructive side, 'nature as disorder', and determined to master and dominate the earth. Nature was no longer viewed as a living being, and was thus ripe for exploitation: 'the new images of mastery and domination functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature. Society needed these new images as it continued the processes of commercialisation and industrialisation, which depended on activities directly altering the earth.'¹⁷ This mechanistic world view did not completely destroy ecological consciousness; Merchant cites Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queene*, 1590–6), John Donne (1572–1631) and

13 Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956), 29; *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, trans. by S. Corrin (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 36].

14 Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, 7; *The Forge and the Crucible*, 8.

15 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 2.

16 Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 4.

17 Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 2.

John Milton (*Paradise Lost*, 1667–74) among several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors who condemned mining as a rape of the earth. Spenser considered mining to be a sin of avarice, comparable to lust: ‘digging into the matrices and pockets of earth for metals was like mining the female flesh for pleasure. [...] Both mining and sex represent for Spenser the return to animality and earthly slime.’¹⁸

For some years, ecofeminists have been fighting against this ancient association of women and nature. In ‘Unearthing Herstory’, the introduction to *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny describes how a protest in Berkeley, California, in 1969 called the ‘Battle for People’s Park’ revealed a deeply ingrained American fantasy, ‘a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine – that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification.’¹⁹ The conquest of the American wilderness was, in large part, a violation of this ‘land-as-woman.’²⁰ Kolodny calls for a ‘new symbolic mode’ to govern our relationship to landscapes because ‘we can no longer afford to keep turning “America the Beautiful” into *America the Raped*.’²¹ In ‘The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology’, Ynestra King writes of the shared voicelessness of women and nature (heralding Élisabeth de Fontenay’s account of the silence of animals).²² Without feminism, ecology is incomplete: ‘the special message of ecofeminism is that when women suffer through both social domination and the domination of nature, most of life on this planet suffers and is threatened as well.’²³

In Audeguy’s novel, a hint of correspondences between the macrocosm and microcosm emerges early on. He devotes several pages to Goethe, whose interest in meteorology led to admiration for Howard’s research on clouds. Goethe researched morphology as well, and Audeguy envisions the similitude Goethe may have observed between clouds and the human brain:

18 Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 39.

19 Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4 [‘Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction’].

20 Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, 155.

21 Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land*, 148.

22 Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des bêtes: la philosophie à l’épreuve de l’animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

23 Ynestra King, ‘The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology’, in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. by J. Plant (Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1989), 18–28 (25).

Même il pense parfois [...] que le cerveau des hommes a la forme des nuages, et qu'ainsi les nuages sont comme le siège de la pensée du ciel; ou alors, que le cerveau est ce nuage dans l'homme qui le rattache au ciel. (N 27)

[He even imagined that the brain of man was like a cloud, and thus that clouds represented the heavenly seats of thought, connecting the human and the divine]. (C 17)

Many of Abercrombie's sketches in the Protocol reveal the same connection – spirals of cloud-like lines shrinking into forms resembling tiny brains (N 247).

But female sexuality is obviously what most interests the author and his character. Audeguy states that the photos in the Protocol have no cultural value: no clothing or markings hint at the women's ethnicity; nor is the pubic hair 'airbrushed', as it might have been if Abercrombie had wanted to conform to his own cultural tradition (N 197).²⁴ More and more, Abercrombie excludes the women's faces from his photos, focussing on the subject's pelvic area. 'L'effet est étrange: les sexes perdent de leur humanité; et l'on voit surgir à leur place des reliefs de chair étonnants, lunaires, volcaniques [Abercrombie began focusing only on the subject's midriff, which had the effect of dehumanising the sexual organ, creating landscapes of pure flesh, lunar, as it were, or volcanic]' (N 246; C 205–6). Virginie, annotating and cataloguing the Protocol, is struck by the diversity of the large quantity of vaginas pictured, as Abercrombie must have been: 'là où, sagement sans doute, le langage commun parlait comme pour le ramener à une simplicité presque domestique, *du* sexe, ou *d'un* sexe, Richard Abercrombie, lui, n'avait vu que *des* sexes; et il n'en était jamais revenu [rather than refer to *the* female sexual organ in the singular, Abercrombie henceforth used the plural]' (N 246; C 206).²⁵ In close-up photography, the sexual organs lose

24 For earlier reflections on this subject, see Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17; Françoise Gaillard, 'Allégorie d'un fantasme fin de siècle: Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*', in *Mimesis et semiosis: littérature et représentation*, ed. by P. Hamon and J.-P. Leduc-Adine (Paris: Nathan, 1992), 427–34 (428–9).

25 The italics in the French are Audeguy's. His insistence on the plural (*des sexes*, not *un sexe*) translates as an articulation of female subjectivity. Abercrombie is hardly an ecofeminist; Virginie notes that he never quite got over the idea that all the genitalia in his photos were unique and diverse. But Audeguy underscores the dignity of these women who – like nature in René Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* (1637) – are mastered and possessed by men. This plural is a plea to save women from male violence, as with Jacques Derrida's use of *animaux* (or *animot*) in reference to another silent minority:

Je voudrais donner à entendre le pluriel d'animaux dans le singulier: il n'y a pas l'Animal au singulier général, séparé de l'homme par une seule limite indivisible. [...] [P]armi les non-humains, et séparés des non-humains, il y a une multiplicité

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their humanity, and take on the relief of rocky, mineral landscapes. Gynaecology merges with geology to form a geography of the body. Scribbled next to the photos are increasingly enigmatic words – *similitude*; *origine*; *parallélisme* (N 247) – until the last word of the Protocol: *Infini* [infinite] (N 293).

Similitude and *parallélisme* are linked to two other obsessive ideas on Abercrombie's part: *isomorphie* and *analogie*. He even dreams of the University of Cambridge creating a Chair of Analogy for him. He is clearly fascinated by the correspondences that he has discovered between nature and humans, giving 'human nature' a radical new meaning. The word 'origin', which he repeatedly writes, is undoubtedly an Audeguyan reference to Gustave Courbet's infamous oil painting *L'Origine du monde* [*The Origin of the World*] (1866), whose photographic quality inspired Peter Brooks to call it 'a decisive gesture toward hyper-realism in the representation of the nude.'²⁶ Françoise Gaillard comments on the painting's 'réalisme photographique [photographic realism],'²⁷ shockingly different from the portrayal of female nudes accepted by the Académie des Beaux-Arts [Academy of Fine Arts] at the time – paintings that, like statuary, achieved a 'déssexualisation du sexe', depicting only a marmoreal 'petit monticule qu'on croirait fait de saindoux ou d'albâtre, figurant le si bien nommé mont de Vénus [a desexualisation of the genitals, depicting only a little marmoreal mound that seemed to be made of lard or alabaster, representing the so well-named *mons Venus*]'²⁸ In his essay *Opera mundi* (2012), Audeguy suggests that *L'Origine du monde* should not be considered pornographic, because – as in most of Abercrombie's photographs – the woman's face is not pictured. According to Audeguy, what makes an image pornographic

immense d'autres vivants qui ne se laissent en aucun cas homogénéiser, sauf violence et méconnaissance intéressée, sous la catégorie de ce qu'on appelle l'animal ou l'animalité en général. Il y a tout de suite des animaux et, disons, l'animot.

[I would like to have the plural of animals heard in the singular. There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. [...] Among nonhumans and separate from nonhumans there is an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenised, except by means of violence and willful ignorance, within the category of what is called the animal or animality in general. From the outset there are animals and, let's say, *l'animot*.]

Jacques Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis*, ed. by M.-L. Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2006), 73; 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', trans. by D. Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), 369–418 (415–16).

26 Brooks, *Body Work*, 142.

27 Gaillard, 'L'Origine du monde', 429.

28 Gaillard, 'L'Origine du monde', 428.

is the concurrence between the permitted view of the face and the prohibited, transgressive view of the sexual organs.²⁹ Like Abercrombie's pictures, Courbet's painting is faceless, thus dehumanised.³⁰ It is a landscape that Audeguy describes as 'une vallée extraordinaire, dont les plis semblent des coulées de lave souples et vivantes, et d'une délicatesse infinie [an extraordinary valley, whose folds seem like supple, living lava flows, infinitely delicate]' (O 38).

Courbet may well have been sensitive to the correspondence between *L'Origine du monde* and a particular landscape – it is tempting to see a marked similarity between the painting of a vulva and the many paintings of the source of the Loue, a small river that flows out of a cave near Courbet's hometown of Ornans in Franche-Comté. Audeguy comments: 'difficile de ne pas associer la béance de la résurgence karstique, cette vallée étroite, avec la vallée de *L'Origine du monde* [difficult not to associate the opening of the karstic resurgence, this narrow valley, with the valley of *The Origin of the World*]' (O 38).³¹ Courbet scholars have long noted the resemblance between his canvases of the physiological 'origin,' and the

29 Stéphane Audeguy, *Opera mundi: une rêverie* (Paris: Créaphis, 2012), 37 [hereafter O].

30 Françoise Gaillard's reading of *L'Origine du monde* is quite similar: 'rien, en effet, de louche ni de libidineux dans cette représentation réaliste du sexe autant dépourvu d'érotisme que d'obscénité [there is, in fact, nothing sleazy or libidinous in this realist representation of genitalia lacking eroticism as much as obscenity]'. Courbet's framing of the painting only allows us to see 'la génitalité pure [...] privée de ce qui la pare de ses troublants attrait: la femme [pure genitality [...] deprived of the very object of desire: the woman]'. Gaillard, *L'Origine du monde*, 429–30.

31 In this quotation and the preceding one, Audeguy draws attention to the fluid nature of the female sexual organs with terms like 'lava flows' and 'karstic resurgence' (*karstique* refers to the limestone composition of the cave from which the spring emerges). In *La Théorie des nuages*, the descriptions of Virginie's 'jouissances océaniques [oceanic orgasms]' connect the human body to the forces of nature (N 146). In an interview, Audeguy explains:

Dans cette scène de plaisir solitaire, ce qui était important pour moi, c'est qu'on a une femme qui pleut. [...] Il y a toute une mystique sur les orgasmes de ces femmes fontaines. Mais pour moi, cette jouissance renvoie à la pluie donc aux nuages. Après, ça m'intéressait que cette bibliothécaire fasse ça, parce que la masturbation est une autonomie. Cette scène lui donne un univers.

[In this scene of solitary pleasure, what was important for me is that we have a woman who rains. [...] There is a sort of mystique about the orgasms of these fountain women. But for me, this pleasure is connected to rain and thus to clouds. Also, I found this librarian's actions interesting, because masturbation implies autonomy. This scene gives her a universe.]

Guichard, 'Le Monde réapproprié', 27.

geological 'source'.³² The similarity corroborates Eliade's recounting of gynaecological myths of the Earth Mother from the archaic 'sexualized world', such as the Zuni myth of the origin of the human race, whereby the first humans climbed up four 'cavern wombs' until they finally emerged on the surface of the earth.³³ The source of the Loue is a karstic spring that mysteriously emerges from a rocky grotto in the Jura Mountains after flowing underground for some distance. For Courbet, the stony origin of the river is a metaphor for the birth of human life, as in many mythologies. Eliade cites numerous myths of *petra genitrix*, 'stone parentage': 'l'idée que la pierre est source de Vie et de fertilité, qu'elle vit et procréé des êtres humains comme elle a été elle-même engendrée par la Terre [the notion that stone is the source of life and fertility, that it lives and procreates human creatures just as it has itself been engendered by the Earth]'.³⁴ Art historian Linda Nochlin wonders if Courbet's two paintings may be clues to the origin of art itself:

In an article entitled 'The Origins of Art', Desmond Collins and John Onians attempted to 'trace back' historically the origin of art to the engraving of crude but recognizable vulvas on the walls of caves in Southern France during the Aurignacian Period, about 33,000 to 28,000 B.C. According to this scenario, masculine desire literally led lusting but frustrated Aurignacian males to represent in stone the desired, absent object – the female sex organ – and thereby to create the very first artwork. In the light of this assumption, all other artworks ought to be considered simulacra of this originating male act, and representation must itself be considered a mere simulacrum of that desired original.³⁵

Perhaps the troubling photographs of Abercrombie's Protocol are not so out of place, not such a departure from his original scientific task.

The erotic bond between humans and landscapes is – as the preceding examples indicate – as ancient as humankind itself. In *Opera mundi*, Audeguy refers to two French writers whose work illustrates the connection: in Donatien Alphonse François de Sade's *Justine* (1791), the narrator proclaims the 'étrange désir [strange desire] (O 39)' to become Mount Etna, and the character Almani transforms into a human volcano through sex; Charles Baudelaire's 'La Géante' ('The Giantess') is about a woman and a mountain landscape simultaneously (O 34). In the last two lines of Baudelaire's sonnet, the poet – exhausted after a day of climbing – wants nothing more than to 'Dormir nonchalamment à l'ombre de ses seins, | Comme un hameau paisible au pied d'une montagne [Drowse in nonchalance below her

32 Linda Nochlin, 'Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*: The Origin without an Original', *October* 37 (1986), 76–86 (82).

33 Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, 32–3.

34 Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, 35; *The Forge and the Crucible*, 43.

35 Nochlin, 'Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*', 81–2.

breast, | Like a calm village in the mountain's shade]'.³⁶ Analogy, or isomorphism – the term that the protagonist prefers – becomes Abercrombie's new science (N 294). Although it leads nowhere, it serves to actualise the archaic belief of a necessary bond between macrocosm and microcosm: a link between nature and humans. Abercrombie stumbles upon the correspondence in his own way, linking clouds to the region 'entre les cuisses des femmes [between the thighs of women]' where he 'avait dressé l'autel de sa religion personnelle [had [...] built the altar of his private religion]' – Virginie admits that this 'n'était pas un culte plus fou qu'un autre [was no more or less crazy a cult than any other]' (N 310–11; C 259). The key to understanding Abercrombie's odd science is the last term that he scrawls in his notebook: 'infinite'. This concluding word is his best description of the limitless irregularities in natural and human geography. One could never truly measure, Abercrombie believes, 'chaque sinuosité, [...] chaque anfractuosité [each sinuosity, each anfractuosity]' (N 292) of a mountain-side, a vaginal wall, a cloud, or the coast of Cornwall – of which he says that 'la plus petite irrégularité, prise en elle-même, se compose de minuscules anfractuosités, de sorte qu'il faut aller jusqu'à dire que la côte des Cornouailles est rigoureusement infinie [the tiniest irregularity itself consists of even tinier irregularities, and so on, such that we would have to conclude that the coastline was infinite]' (N 293; C 245). Such an act would lead one to become lost in the fractal-like infinity of nature – just as Carmichael, the painter of clouds, lost his mind when he attempted to illustrate the infinite *mise en abyme* that he perceived in clouds. As Audeguy succinctly puts it in *Opera mundi*, the analogy between the human body and nature comes down to our inability to comprehend the endlessness of both: a 'confrontation avec l'illimité du désir et l'impensable infinité de la nature [confrontation between the limitlessness of desire and the unthinkable infinity of nature]' (O 39).

In *Terra erotica*, Bureau contends that Nature's very condition is desire: our relationship with nature is erotic. Nothing has changed since Plato's *Symposium* (360 BCE), in which the doctor Eryximachus declares that Love's empire extends over all of nature, human and non-human alike.³⁷ For Bureau, Eros is the greatest of the gods; he even makes an appearance in the harsh Old Testament, most notably in the Song of Solomon, a love poem infused with natural metaphors. 'L'œuvre d'Éros repose [...] sur le principe de l'indissoluble unité du monde. La sainteté et la volupté, la nature et l'homme, le bien et le mal, la force et la douceur cohabitent

36 Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by C. Pichois, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 22–3; *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by J. McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41.

37 Bureau, *Terra erotica*, 54.

sans hostilité [the work of Eros rests on the principle of the indissoluble unity of the world. Saintliness and sexuality, nature and man, good and evil, strength and gentleness live together without hostility]³⁸ One is reminded of the beautiful passages in Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967), in which Robinson Crusoe's sexuality turns toward the 'voie végétale [vegetal realm]',³⁹ and he begins a love affair with the soft earth of a valley. His erotic relationship with the island is accompanied by readings from the Song of Solomon 7.2–3 and 7.7:

Ton ventre est un monceau de froment entouré de lis.
Tes seins sont comme deux faons, jumeaux d'une gazelle.
Ta taille ressemble au palmier, et tes seins à ses grappes.⁴⁰

[Thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies.
Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins. [...]
Thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes.]

Robinson's sexuality, like Abercrombie's, possesses an inextricable bond between the human and the non-human, the microcosm and the macrocosm.

Bureau laments the fact that, for many of us, nature and Eros have nothing in common. When Eros abandons nature, the world is nothing but faded matter:

Sans le titillement voluptueux d'Éros, la nature n'est plus qu'un agrégat muet de matière, qu'un corps dénudé semblable aux débris d'un astre éteint. Sans Éros, les lieux de la Terre ne sont plus que des morceaux d'espaces réductibles à leurs seuls attributs physiques ou géométriques.⁴¹

[Without the voluptuous titillation of Eros, nature is but a silent aggregate of matter, a bare body, like the debris of a dead star. Without Eros, the places of the Earth are but pieces of space reduced to nothing but their physical or geometrical attributes.]

Desire, he writes, is an attribute not only of humans, but also of the earth:

Sans désir, l'homme n'est plus qu'une statue de sel. Sans désir, la Terre n'est qu'un grain de poussière dans l'Univers, un astre mort, tout au plus une figure géométrique difforme. C'est sous les auspices d'Éros qu'un pacte se noue entre le désir de l'homme et le désir de la Terre.⁴²

[Without desire, man is nothing more than a statue of salt. Without desire, the Earth is but a speck of dust in the Universe, a dead star, at most, a deformed geometric shape. It is under the auspices of Eros that a pact is made between man's desire and the Earth's desire.]

38 Bureau, *Terra erotica*, 63.

39 Michel Tournier, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 140.

40 Tournier, *Vendredi*, 156.

41 Bureau, *Terra erotica*, 71.

42 Bureau, *Terra erotica*, 73.

Bureau calls himself an *érotologue* [erotologist]. He writes:

J'ai fait mon choix. Parmi tous les dieux connus ou inconnus, chastes ou noceurs, bienveillants ou malveillants, il n'en est qu'un dont je voudrais m'instruire des aventures sur Terre, Éros, celui qui assure l'union des éléments primordiaux et qui suscite le désir amoureux.⁴³

[I've made my choice. Among all the gods known or unknown, chaste or unchaste, benevolent or malevolent, there is only one I would like to teach me of worldly adventures: Eros, he who ensures the union of the primordial elements and who arouses love's desire.]

Tournier's Robinson sheds his puritanical past to become an *érotologue* when his 'elemental' sexuality changes elements: his love affair with the earth is verticalised, redirected towards the heavens – sky, sun, constellations.⁴⁴ He no longer experiences the 'brutal pleasure' of genital sex, but a solar or cosmic sexuality:

Mes amours ouraniennes me gonflent au contraire d'une énergie vitale. [...] S'il fallait nécessairement traduire en termes humains ce coït solaire, c'est sous les espèces féminines, et comme l'épouse du ciel qu'il conviendrait de me définir.⁴⁵

[My sky-love floods me with a vital energy [...]. If this is to be translated into human language, I must consider myself feminine and the bride of the sky.]

His days are identical; he lives in an eternal present. He writes in his logbook: 'mes journées se sont redressées. Elles ne basculent plus les unes sur les autres. Elles se tiennent debout, verticales, et s'affirment fièrement dans leur valeur intrinsèque [it is as though, in consequence, my days had rearranged themselves. No longer do they jostle on each other's heels. Each stands separate and upright, proudly affirming its own worth].'⁴⁶ This passage inspired Gilles Deleuze's comment in the *Postface* [Afterword] to the novel that Robinson's existence becomes 'une érection généralisée [a generalised erection]'.⁴⁷

Like Robinson, Abercrombie is truly the *érotologue* that Bureau describes in the epigraph at the beginning of the present analysis. Robinson's mind is filled with erotic images and symbols from classical mythology: 'Vénus, le Cygne, Léda, les Dioscures... je tâtonne à la recherche de moi-même dans une forêt d'allégories [Venus, the Swan, Leda, the Twins... I grope in search of myself in this forest of

43 Bureau, *Terra erotica*, 59.

44 Tournier, *Vendredi*, 264.

45 Tournier, *Vendredi*, 265; *Friday*, trans. by N. Denny (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 212.

46 Tournier, *Vendredi*, 252; *Friday*, 204.

47 Gilles Deleuze, 'Postface: Michel Tournier et le monde sans autrui', in Tournier, *Vendredi*, 317 [Afterword: Michel Tournier and the World without Others].

allegory]'.⁴⁸ Similarly, Abercrombie's analogies lead him to conclude that 'tout, dans l'univers, revient au même: le monde est la résultante de la combinaison de formes toujours identiques [everything in the universe reverts to the same forms. The world consists of recurring combinations of these forms]' (N 248; C 207). Abercrombie's universe is ruled by vaginas and clouds, his two personal obsessions. They are not only analogous but infinitely complex, as the final word of the Protocol suggests.

Where did Stéphane Audeguy find inspiration for this troubling and truly original novel? I have mentioned his debt to Tournier's *Vendredi* and *Les Météores*. Tournier would probably have seen Audeguy as a kindred spirit if he had read the article in *Le Monde des livres* in which Audeguy says that 'je n'écris jamais sur la nature, mais j'espère écrire avec [I never write about nature, but I hope to write with it]'.⁴⁹ Like Tournier's two novels, *La Théorie des nuages* treats nature as a subject, rather than a lowly object lorded over by humans. Audeguy thus accomplishes an important task that ecocritics have assigned to contemporary writers. In the article 'Littérature & écologie', Nathalie Blanc, Denis Chartier and Thomas Pughe – referring to Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001)⁵⁰ – insist on a writer's capacity to evoke 'l'environnement non humain [...] comme acteur à part entière et non seulement comme cadre de l'expérience humaine [the non-human environment [...] as an independent actor and not simply as a frame around human experience]'.⁵¹ giving nature the status of subject, not object.⁵² The three critics maintain that fiction must not settle for imitating non-human nature; it must aim for 'le renouveau, voire le bouleversement, de notre façon de l'appréhender [a renewal, even a revolution, in the way we comprehend non-human nature]'.⁵³ In this regard, Audeguy has admirably succeeded. Readers of *La Théorie des nuages* will never look at clouds without being reminded of volcanic eruptions, nuclear annihilation, and the lacy veil of Eros.

48 Tournier, *Vendredi*, 268; *Friday*, 214.

49 Alain Beuve-Méry, 'Stéphane Audeguy: "Nous avons arraisonné la nature"', *Le Monde des livres* (21 May 2009), <http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2009/05/21/stephane-audeguy-nous-avons-arraisonne-la-nature_1196148_3260.html> [accessed 25 May 2016].

50 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U. S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

51 Nathalie Blanc, Denis Chartier and Thomas Pughe, 'Littérature & écologie: vers une écopoétique', *Écologie & Politique* 36 (2008), 17–28 (19).

52 Blanc, Chartier and Pughe, 'Littérature et écologie', 24.

53 Blanc, Chartier and Pughe, 'Littérature et écologie', 22.

Stéphane Audeguy is not a 'nature writer' in the American tradition initiated by Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82). 'Dans mes romans, [...] il n'y a aucune description de nature pure. Sont en revanche présents des personnages qui ne sont pas des humains [in my novels, [...] there is no description of pure nature. There are, however, characters who are not human]'.⁵⁴ There are clouds and their simulacra: volcanoes; the explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the ashes of Auschwitz. *La Théorie des nuages* bears some resemblance to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* [*The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*] (1782); like Rousseau, Audeguy wishes to 'mettre en relief des intensités liées à la perception de la nature [highlight the intensity of the experience of perceiving nature]'.⁵⁵ But one must go back to Roman antiquity to find Audeguy's most compelling influence. In 'De la nature de quelques choses', Audeguy suggests that 'rien n'a changé depuis Lucrèce. Tout est possible [nothing has changed since Lucretius. Everything is possible]'.⁵⁶ The Latin poet's *De rerum natura* [*On the Nature of Things*] is an epic poem about all things big and small, material and immaterial: the principle of atomism that structures the universe, nature and its phenomena; the creation of the world and the development of civilisation; human psychology, biology, sexology, and mortality. Scientific and philosophical, it nevertheless opens with a prayer to Venus – goddess of love, 'power of life' – who can 'hush the winds and scatter the clouds'.⁵⁷ Lucretius, celebrating the dispersal of wind and clouds in the wake of Venus's arrival, prefigures the transition in Abercrombie's life from clouds to sex. Abercrombie's Protocol represents Audeguy's belief in – as he writes in *Opera mundi* – 'l'illimité du désir [the limitlessness of desire]' (O 39). Similarly, the Roman poet prays that Venus will vanquish her bellicose lover Mars 'by the never-healing wound of love',⁵⁸ so that 'tranquil peace' may finally supplant 'barbarous war' among mortals.⁵⁹ *La Théorie des nuages* carries a similar message. Who would not prefer the work of Abercrombie – which converts cirrus, cumulus, stratus, and nimbus clouds to a 'cult' of sexuality, a *terra erotica* – to the folly of warring nations, whose technology invented the very particular kind of cloud that rose above Hiroshima, 'un nuage prolongé, jusqu'au sol, d'un pédoncule effilé, un nuage posé sur un pied comme

54 Beuve-Méry, 'Stéphane Audeguy'.

55 Beuve-Méry, 'Stéphane Audeguy'.

56 Audeguy, 'De la nature de quelques choses', 248.

57 Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by M. F. Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 5.

58 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 34.

59 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 32.

un champignon grotesque [a tall cloud, anchored to the ground by an enormously long stalk: a cloud on a pedestal, like a grotesque mushroom]' (N 270; C 226)?

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Nikolaj Lübecker

The Individual as Environment: Watching Jean-Claude Rousseau's *La Vallée close* with Lucretius and Simondon

Abstract: Over a ten-year period, the experimental filmmaker Jean-Claude Rousseau visited the Fontaine de Vaucluse, a natural spring in southern France. The result of Rousseau's encounter with these landscapes, *La Vallée close* (1995), explores three processes of becoming. The first is cosmological: the director films the valley and its spring, bringing to life the landscape with its river, vegetation and grotto. The second is meta-filmic: the film thematises its very singular production process, discreetly showing how images combine without any cuts being made. The third is (auto-)biographical: towards the end of its 143-minute running time we understand that the film is a reflection on Rousseau's childhood, and a semi-fictional chronicle of the break-up of a relationship. This chapter draws on Henri Bergson's commentary on Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (explicitly featured in the soundtrack to the film), Félix Guattari's late ecosophical writings, and the process-oriented philosophy of Gilbert Simondon, in order to analyse Rousseau's exploration of the relations between ontology, perception and subjectivity. From Simondon's work, the chapter imports the concept of the *individu-milieu* [the individual as environment]. Simondon's concept helps to explain how worldmaking and filmmaking connect in an individual, bringing it into being, pulling it apart, eventually renewing it. The chapter concludes that the *individu-milieu* is a thoroughly ecological concept with a relevance for ecocriticism that far exceeds the particular case of *La Vallée close*.

In the Vaucluse region of southern France, a peculiar natural phenomenon has fascinated locals and visitors for centuries. If you walk along the river Sorgue, all the way to the end of the valley, you arrive at the Fontaine de Vaucluse. For most of the year, a small stream runs from this grotto into the river. But every spring, a violent gush of water bursts forth, emptying millions of cubic metres into the river. The amount of water and the specific moment of its release do not correlate in any obvious way with the downpour seen throughout winter. Not surprisingly, a rich tradition of folklore has arisen around the fountain. Holy rituals have been performed, dragons and fairies have been spotted, artists and poets have painted and written (Petrarch; Frédéric Mistral), and scientists have attempted to dispel the myths – sometimes with near-fatal consequences (Jacques-Yves Cousteau and his team).

When the French experimental filmmaker Jean-Claude Rousseau visited the Vaucluse in the mid-1980s, he immediately experienced the pull of the valley, in particular the power of the mysterious fountain.¹ Over the subsequent ten years he often returned, bringing along a small Super-8 camera that his parents had given to him during his childhood. He would walk into the valley, find a spot, and try to *meet* the landscape through filming. For a long time, he had no intention of making a film; rather, it was a question of falling into *vision*. Eventually, he wanted to offer this experience – *le saisissement*, the intense emotion of being grasped – to viewers.² The result is *La Vallée close* [*The Closed Valley*] (1995), a title that brings out the Latin root of ‘Vau-cluse’.

This chapter will focus on the sharing between world and filmmaker that takes place in the *saisissement*, with attention to several key intertexts that help to conceptualise the sharing. Some of these intertexts feature explicitly in the film (Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*), while others do not (the writings of Gilbert Simondon and Félix Guattari). My argument will be that Rousseau’s film offers a particularly rich example of how art can make us realise that we are (and always have been) what Simondon calls *individus-milieus*, individuals as environments. This chapter further aims to demonstrate that the notion of the *individu-milieu* can operate as a strong eco-theoretical alternative to more dialectical analyses of the relation between man and environment. In order to establish and unpack this argument, we must begin with Rousseau’s cinematic method – his praxis.

Rousseau’s praxis

La Vallée close shows the beautiful landscape of the Vaucluse, the life of the locals, and the tourists that come to visit the fountain. These tourists walk up the valley,

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- 1 Today, La Fontaine de Vaucluse is less mysterious. Geologists have discovered that the fountain is the only exit point for a huge underground lake measuring some 1100km². It is the fourth biggest underground water reservoir in the world, and the biggest in Europe. It goes 308m into the mountainous ground, and every year about 700,000,000 m³ of water flow from the spring. It is the sheer size of this underground system that explains why measurements of the annual downpour do not straightforwardly lead to an accurate forecast about when the gush of water will emerge. Even though modern technological instruments have allowed scientists to map a substantial portion of the underground area, no human has reached the bottom of the grotto.
 - 2 On Rousseau’s method, see Cyril Neyrat and Jean-Claude Rousseau, ‘Entretien avec Jean-Claude Rousseau’, in *Lancés à travers le vide...: ‘La Vallée close’*, ed. by C. Neyrat (Nantes: Capricci, 2009), 18–38.

and stare into the mysterious black grotto. Occasionally, a man – Rousseau – appears: we mainly see him in a small hotel room, and we come to understand that he is a filmmaker based on calls that he makes to someone whom we assume to be his partner, Alain. There are images from the village: cafés, streets, an empty and decrepit building (a school?). Towards the end of the film, it transpires that *La Vallée close* might also be a film (halfway between fiction and documentary) about the end of a love affair – and, possibly, the beginning of a new adventure.

The film is discreet and enigmatic. Its tone is far from the mythic register that many of the folkloric texts about the fountain exploit. The images, beautiful and painterly, are often devoid of human figures. Slowly the various elements begin to crystallise; a world takes form. Just before the end of the film, the voice-over announces: ‘ce pourrait être l’histoire de Paul, Guy et Laure [this could be the story of Paul, Guy and Laure]’. The suggestion seems to be that now, *only now* – after 2 hours and 20 minutes – a story is possible, but then a surprise ending throws us in a new direction: clearly Rousseau’s interests lie with the forms of life that precede narrative organisation.

In many scenes, Rousseau stays in the same place for a long time, sometimes for the entire 2½ minutes of the 8mm reel. For other scenes, he shoots, turns off the camera, moves, and shoots again. Only once, towards the end of the film, does the camera move: Rousseau shoots from the interior of a car. He explains that his preference for the static shot relates to perspective: inspired by certain paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), he searches for geometrical compositions that allow the filmmaker and the spectator to travel along the various axes in the image.

Rousseau’s camera did not record sound, so he went through the recording process again with a microphone and tape recorder once he had enough images. He did not systematically revisit the locations in which he had filmed, so the sounds and images of the finished work often come from different places. On the whole, the soundtrack is more quotidian and urban than the images: it consists largely of telephone conversations, sounds from the valley, and traffic noise from Paris. These different sounds tend to de-romanticise the landscape. Rousseau describes how certain sound recordings gravitated towards certain images, while other recordings fell away. After his combining of sounds and images, the 2½-minute sequences were put together – again some reels fell away – and the whole film emerged through what could be called a process of coagulation.

Rousseau’s method justifies the detailed presentation given here because it is key to understanding the film. Occasionally, the film draws attention to its own compositional principles: the voice-over – Rousseau’s voice – speaks about the process of recording and adding sound; Rousseau lets the camera roll to the point

that we watch the film run out, with the codes at the end of the reel made visible. These different elements remind us that we are watching and hearing a filmmaker at work. The key point about Rousseau's method is that *he does not make cuts*. Quite radically, he argues that montage ruins a film. For him, filming is a question of responding to landscapes and to the world. It is not a question of making the world conform to the filmmaker's preconceived ideas (which is why he does not work with a script or a storyboard, either).³

In one of his interviews, Rousseau describes the recordings as 'bricks'. This comparison brings to mind the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon's analysis of brick-making,⁴ not least because the comparison between recordings and bricks emphasises the material and practical dimension of the filmmaking process.⁵ Simondon uses the example of bricks to demonstrate that the relation between form and matter is much more complex than we usually care to think – indeed, that any distinction between the two ultimately collapses. It is easy for Simondon to show that the process of taking form begins long before the clay is poured into the mould. The clay is extracted from an area in which it has been pre-formed by the interplay between earth, water, stones, etc.; it is subsequently purged of air pockets, plants, and other impurities. On the other hand, the mould is not just a form; it is matter. In Simondon's example, it is made of wood. This form/matter is coated in order to release the brick more easily. Simondon includes a third player in this exchange: the brick-maker. He may have assembled the form, in which case he had to take the quality of the wood into consideration (he is likely to have carefully perused the wood before cutting it). He then poured clay into the form – each brick-maker does this in his own way (depending, moreover, on whether he is beginning his day, or is tired from having worked all day). Simondon's complication

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- 3 The soundtrack, on the other hand, partly results from manipulations (such as the overlaying of two tracks). Rousseau distinguishes sharply between images and sounds: 'il n'y a pas de *saisissement* au niveau du son. C'est bizarre à dire mais ce *saisissement* est d'ordre géométrique et donc relève de la vue... le son ne se trouve justifié que par sa rencontre avec l'image [there is no *saisissement* at the level of sound. It may sound odd, but this *saisissement* is of a geometrical kind and therefore happens through vision... The sound is justified only when encountering the image]'. Neyrat and Rousseau, 'Entretien avec Jean-Claude Rousseau', 24 [unreferenced translations are mine].
- 4 Gilbert Simondon, *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, ed. by J. Garelli (Grenoble: Millon, 2013), 39–45.
- 5 Rousseau belongs to what is often called a materialist and formalist tradition of filmmaking that includes directors such as Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. *La Vallée close* is dedicated to Straub and Huillet, and the film was made possible because Straub helped to secure funding.

of this form-versus-matter dichotomy contains other details, but the conclusion is clear: rather than thinking of form versus matter, we should consider the relation between clay, wood, brick-maker, time of day, and so on, as the interplay of forces. A brick is not the result of matter going into a form; it is, rather, something like a 'theatre' of the relation between forces.⁶ This theatre begins long before the brick is shaped, and it continues long after the brick has been moulded (we could take into account the 'afterlife' of the brick: how it eventually cracks, disintegrates, etc.). A brick is an activity (in a temporary equilibrium), not a product.

Simondon is not only offering an argument about bricks; his analysis concerns what he calls human and non-human processes of individuation. We shall shortly see how this analysis connects to a conception of subjectivity and ontology. The brick-analysis (and Simondon's philosophy more generally) resonates with *La Vallée close*, insofar as Rousseau presents a form-taking theatre of relations – he gives us the joint emergence of a film, a human figure and a landscape. As with Simondon, Rousseau suggests that the performance of these forces continues long after the film ends. We thus have a kind of reciprocal moulding that affects character/filmmaker, images and environment simultaneously and to such an extent that it becomes impossible (and misguided) to separate the forces. Rousseau undoubtedly aims to present – and to engage the viewer in the co-creation of – this kind of form-taking theatre. This becomes clear if we consider some of the intertexts that the film brings into its process of becoming.

Rousseau's ecologies

Rousseau was inspired by Giorgione's famous Renaissance painting *Tempesta* [*Tempest*] (1506). A reproduction of the painting features in the film, and the footage from Vaucluse ends with a tempest. What fascinates Rousseau in this enigmatic painting is not only the mysterious subject matter (a woman quietly breastfeeding her baby as a storm approaches), but also the complex geometrical composition which – like the Vermeer paintings that he mentions – allows spectators to lose themselves along various axes in the image. In interviews, Rousseau refers to Marcelin Pleyne, who in an article for *Tel Quel* emphasised the vaginal nature of this geometry.⁷ Landscape and female body combine in a manner that fascinates Rousseau and links back to the mysterious fountain.⁸

6 Simondon, *L'Individuation*, 65.

7 Marcelin Pleyne, 'Poésie oui', *Tel Quel* 75 (1978), 73–86.

8 Rousseau and Pleyne are not the only (male) writers and artists to link vaginas and grottos: Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866) was – Rousseau explains – inspired by the

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A second intertext – more frequently cited in the film – is an old geography book for primary-school pupils: Jean Brunhes's *Leçons de géographie*.⁹ We listen to passages from this book, and thereby learn about the weather, the formation of landscapes, the passing of seasons, and time. The book also explains how to read maps, and it considers the ways in which humans construct a society. In short, the book offers a cosmology and a cartography, putting the world together step by step, and helping children to read it. Rousseau divides his film into chapters that borrow their names from the headings in the schoolbook ('Le Jour et la nuit [Day and Night]'; 'Les Saisons [The Seasons]'; 'Les Voies de communication [Transportation Routes]'), and we are shown the beautiful watercolours that illustrate the book. The director clearly shares the cosmological ambition of the school book (less so, the belief in making the world fully readable). He dedicates his film to 'ma mère qui fut institutrice [my mother who was a primary school teacher]'; thereby linking the cosmological schoolbook to the autobiographical dimension, and recalling the breastfeeding mother in Giorgione's painting. In addition, Rousseau includes two 8mm reels showing a mother and child from what appears to be a different setting and time. We are invited to think that this pair could be Rousseau and his mother (in reality, the woman is a cousin living close to the village where Rousseau's mother was born).¹⁰ In one scene, the woman is hanging out the washing, visually responding to a reading from the geography book that explains why the sun and wind can dry our clothes. In these complex and poetic ways, the cosmological, the biographical and the autofictional combine. This kind of interweaving becomes even more apparent if we turn to the richest of Rousseau's intertexts.

In 1884, 24-year-old Henri Bergson published a pedagogical book introducing and paraphrasing Lucretius's *De rerum natura*. One of Bergson's paraphrases is recited on several occasions in Rousseau's film; it functions as a *ritournelle* (Guattari) around which other elements find their place. This text is double-authored (by Lucretius and Bergson) before Rousseau embraces it:¹¹

Le mouvement des atomes est éternel. Lancés à travers le vide, soit par leur propre poids, soit par le choc des autres atomes, ils errent, jusqu'à ce que le hasard les rapproche. Il y en a qui arrivent à se cramponner fortement les uns aux autres; ils forment les corps les

artist's paintings of La Grotte de la Loue in Franche-Comté. On this point, see Jonathan Krell's contribution to the present volume.

9 Jean Brunhes, *Leçons de géographie: cours élémentaire* (Tours: Mame, 1924).

10 Jean-Claude Rousseau, personal email to the author (29 October 2016).

11 Lucretius's cosmological poem does not claim to offer an original worldview; rather, it aims for an accurate and poetic exposition of Epicurus's ontology. The quotation could thus be seen as 'triple-authored' before Rousseau becomes involved.

plus durs. D'autres, plus mobiles, laissant entre eux de plus grands intervalles, constituent les corps moins denses, l'air et la lumière. Enfin il en est qui n'ont pu se faire admettre dans aucun assemblage: ceux-là s'agitent inutilement dans l'espace, comme ces grains de poussière qu'éclaire sur sa route un rayon de soleil pénétrant dans une chambre obscure.¹²

[The movement of atoms is eternal. Thrown through the void, either by their own weight or by the impact of other atoms they wander until chance brings them together. Some of them manage to cling tightly together; they form the most solid bodies. Others, more mobile, are separated by a greater distance, they form the less dense bodies, air and light. Finally, some have not been able to gain admission to any group: they move around uselessly in space like dust motes lit up by rays of light in a dark room.]

It is a beautiful and poetic text insisting on the eternal movement of atoms (or primordia) in the unending process of world-formation. In the context of the film, the passage works on at least four levels.

First, we should read this passage *metafilmically*, in that it provides a description of Rousseau's creative method. Every image, every sound is an atom. They come to Rousseau without having been called, and he gives himself over to them. In the next phase, the recordings coagulate to form the film, and some of them are pushed towards the margins. Rousseau downplays his own role in this process, suggesting that filming and combining happen independently of him (happen *to* him). In this manner, *assembling* a film (there is no montage) is about having the courage and the discipline to partake in the experience that Simondon described as a form-taking theatre. Expanding on this metafilmic reading, Bergson-Lucretius's description also refers to the viewing experience. During the film's 2½ hours, viewers find that some scenes crystallise into bigger unities, whereas others move towards the periphery. It is true that spectators always see films differently, but the length of *La Vallée close*, the high number of still shots, and Rousseau's preference for long-takes (allowing spectators to drift more freely in the field of vision) intensify this tendency. At this metafilmic level, Rousseau must have been delighted to find a *darkroom* in Bergson-Lucretius's text.

Second, we should read the passage *anthropomorphically*. It seems to explain how *humans* come to be – and how they come together – in the film. It describes the process of individuation that brings forth our central character that becomes a point around which things begin to crystallise. This anthropomorphic reading is stimulated by Bergson's vocabulary; his verb choice, in particular, ascribes

12 Henri Bergson, *Extraits de Lucrèce, avec un commentaire, des notes et une étude sur la poésie, la philosophie, la physique, le texte et la langue de Lucrèce* (Paris: Delagrave, 1884), 27; translation transcribed from subtitles of Jean-Claude Rousseau, *La Vallée close* (Nantes: Capricci, 2009).

human intentionality and agency to the atoms. We thus feel sad for those atoms ‘qui n’ont pu se faire admettre dans aucun assemblage [who have not been able to gain admission to any group]’; and we are touched and immediately relate to those that strive to ‘se cramponner fortement les uns aux autres [manage to cling tightly together]’. Similarly, we feel sad for Rousseau’s human figure as he seems to lose his lover (this loss, we come to understand, explains the significance of the recurrent shots of the empty bed). Despite the rigorous refusal of montage, and despite the interest in nature and empty landscapes, the film does not seek to move beyond the human; rather, it presents the process of becoming-human in such a way that we understand that we are always already inseparable from the world. *La Vallée close* thus offers an alternative to conventional narrative films that generally invite us to think of the world as a stage on which human dramas play out.

Third, we should read the passage as it wishes to be read: as an *ontology* about eternal movements in infinite space, the composition and decomposition of bodies. Here, the universe is a process of formation and transformation, an infinite play between void and matter that brings about densities and textures (until – according to Lucretius – everything necessarily ends). In the context of the film, the quotation refers to everything that we see: the many ancient rock formations, the tourist bars, the beautiful trees, the abandoned building, the water springing forth from another ‘darkroom’ – the grotto of the fountain. Like many other cosmologies (such as Brunhes’s geography book and Lucretius’s poem), the film unfolds in deep time and in the present – it blends personal and geological history. We see the natural elements in shifting light; in different seasons; in grainy, dusty images. Staring into the dark grotto, we seem to move beyond the temporal as the image disappears. Towards the end, the film becomes explicitly cosmic: after the tempest, Rousseau overlays his images from the Vaucluse with the soundtrack of a televisual programme about space travel. The astronauts are sleeping, the voiceover recites the names of the places that they would have seen if awake, and a romantic orchestral piece plays underneath the solemn voice of the televisual presenter. For the first (and the only) time, the images move: Rousseau shoots from the front seat of a car as he drives through a small town at dawn. The scene links the town, the sky, and the cosmos, before culminating in a shot of the rising sun that coincides with the mention of a sunrise on the soundtrack.

It should be underlined that Rousseau’s adaptation of Bergson-Lucretius serves to blur the relation between the metafilmic, the anthropomorphic, and the ontological. *La Vallée close* explores filmmaking, lovemaking, worldmaking – and the many different ways in which these processes connect in an individual, bringing it into being, pulling it apart, possibly renewing it, and producing a film in the process. It is a melancholic film, but the spectatorial experience of being pulled

into this process of coagulation softens the melancholy: although the film never closes on itself, it comes together in beautiful, dynamic and satisfying patterns.

The individual as environment

My fourth observation about the quotation from Bergson-Lucretius relates to perception. Watching the grainy Super-8 images while listening to Bergson's poetic paraphrase, the spectator forgets that the dancing dust motes in the sunlight are a simile ('*comme ces grains de poussière [like dust motes]*'). In many shots, we almost seem to watch atoms. In this manner, the linguistic image and the grain of the Super-8 help us to 'see' (i.e. imagine) an invisible world; they produce reality for the spectator. This link between image (verbal, visual and mental) and ontology not only recalls the aforementioned metafilmic and ontological readings, but also speaks more generally about our perceptual engagement with the world *and* about how perception leads to our entanglement in this world. In a key passage from one of his interviews, Rousseau insists on this point, explaining that 'le cinéma [...] peut donner à voir (et à entendre) les éléments et nous saisir dans la perception de leurs correspondances [cinema [...] can make us see (and hear) the elements, and it can seize us as we perceive their correspondences]'.¹³ By seeing and filming – by imagining – we become entangled in the texture of this world, and thereby reinvent both ourselves and the world. Or more precisely: we discover that we were always already caught up in the texture of the world.

Rousseau's conception of the image strikingly resembles that of Simondon. In his lectures on 'Imagination et invention', Simondon emphasises that 'images' (a term that also refers to mental images) are representations and actors: they make us see the world, and they help us to realise that we are caught in the world through this perception. For Simondon and Rousseau, the image is an active player in a process of subjectification and world-production that is always ongoing.

It should be acknowledged that bringing Rousseau, Lucretius (as filtered through Bergson), and Simondon together is somewhat problematic. In some passages – most obviously at the beginning of *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*¹⁴ – Simondon associates Lucretius with precisely the kind of 'matérialisme atomistique strict [strict atomic materialism]'

13 David Yon and Jean-Claude Rousseau, 'Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Rousseau', *Dérives* 1 (2007), 23–44 (44) [my emphasis].

14 Simondon, *L'Individuation*, 23.

from which he wants to move away.¹⁵ To put it simply, Simondon argues that Lucretius begins with atoms that are subsequently animated by various processes, whereas he begins with processes that can subsequently take form as temporary assemblages. For Simondon, Lucretius is too mechanistic; his assemblages are insufficiently fluid. In a complex – but crucial – passage, Simondon presents his alternative philosophy of individuation:

Nous voudrions montrer qu'il faut opérer un retournement dans la recherche du principe d'individuation, en considérant comme primordiale l'opération d'individuation à partir de laquelle l'individu vient à exister et dont il reflète le déroulement, le régime, et enfin les modalités, dans ses caractères. L'individu serait alors saisi comme réalité relative, une certaine phase de l'être qui suppose avant elle une réalité préindividuelle, et qui, même après l'individuation, n'existe pas toute seule, car l'individuation n'épuise pas d'un seul coup les potentiels de la réalité préindividuelle, et d'autre part, ce que l'individuation fait apparaître n'est pas seulement l'individu mais le couple individu-milieu. L'individu est ainsi relatif en deux sens: parce qu'il n'est pas tout l'être, et parce qu'il résulte d'un état de l'être en lequel il n'existait ni comme individu ni comme principe d'individuation.¹⁶

[It is my intention to demonstrate the need for a complete change in the general approach to the principle governing individuation. The process of individuation must be considered primordial, for it is this process that at once brings the individual into being and determines all the distinguishing characteristics of its development, organisation and modalities. Thus, the individual is to be understood as having a relative reality, occupying only a certain phase of the whole being in question – a phase that therefore carries the implication of a preceding preindividual state, and that, even after individuation, does not exist in isolation, since individuation does not exhaust in the single act of its appearance all the potentials embedded in the preindividual state. Individuation, moreover, not only brings the individual to light but also the individual-milieu dyad. In this way, the individual possesses only a relative existence in two senses: because it does not represent the totality of the being, and because it is merely the result of a phase in the being's development during which it existed neither in the form of an individual nor as the principle of individuation.]

In Anne Sauvagnargues's terms, Simondon suggests that we must replace an ontology of being (like the one that can be found in Lucretius's *De rerum natura*) with an ontology of becoming.¹⁷ We must begin not with individuals, but with

15 Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination et invention (1965–66)*, ed. by N. Simondon (Chatou: La Transparence, 2008), 47.

16 Simondon, *L'Individuation*, 24–5; 'The Genesis of the Individual', trans. by M. Cohen and S. Kwinter, in *Incorporations*, ed. by J. Cray and S. Kwinter (New York, NY: Zone, 1992), 297–319 (300).

17 Anne Sauvagnargues, 'Crystals and Membranes: Individuation and Temporality', trans. by J. Roffé, in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, ed. by A. De Boever, A. Murray, J. Roffé and A. Woodward (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 57–70 (58).

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the ‘preindividual reality’ that can bring into existence that ‘relative reality’ that the ‘individual’ is. This leads to the introduction of the central category of the ‘individu-milieu’. This notion is commonly translated as the ‘individual-milieu’, but we can also think of it as the ‘individual *as* environment’. Simondon’s ‘individual’ is never really an individual, but always the temporary effect of multiple ongoing processes of individuation. It is worth mentioning that Simondon adds a footnote to the sentence introducing the ‘individu-milieu’, which stipulates that the latter part of this hyphenated concept should not be conceived as homogenous:

Le milieu peut d’ailleurs ne pas être simple, homogène, uniforme, mais être originellement traversé par une tension entre deux ordres extrêmes de grandeur que médiatise l’individu quand il vient à être.¹⁸

[Moreover, it is quite possible that the milieu is not to be thought of as a simple, homogeneous and uniform phenomenon, but something that, from its very inception, is characterised by a tension in force between two extreme orders of magnitude that mediatise the individual when it comes into being.]

In other words, we find a radical insistence on relationality (everything is relation) and process (everything is movement). Simondon pushes these points so far that a gap towards Lucretius and atomism is opened.

The size of this gap, however, remains debatable. Michel Serres has offered a reading that brings Lucretius closer to Simondon, insisting on the fact that we must not read *De rerum natura* as a poem about the mechanics of solid bodies, but as a poem about fluid bodies. Serres argues that this change of perspective allows us to make sense of the famous passage on the *clinamen* [unpredictable movement of atoms], and links the work more logically to ancient physics. Serres’s reading of Lucretius is thus more process-oriented than atomistic.

Another way to reduce the distance between Simondon and Lucretius is to recall Lucretius’s famous understanding of perceptual and mental images. According to this understanding, the atoms on the surface of objects quiver, and some of them are cast off, thereby forming what Lucretius (in Martin Ferguson Smith’s translation) describes as ‘extraordinarily fine films shaped like the object from which they emanate.’¹⁹ These ‘filmy images’ (in Greek, *εἰδωλα/eidola*; in Latin, *simulacra*) enter our minds through the eyes: the simulacra press on the air, and ‘this air then glides through our eyeballs, brushes through our pupils, and passes

18 Simondon, *L’Individuation*, 25; ‘The Genesis of the Individual’, 300n1.

19 Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by M. F. Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), xxvii.

on.²⁰ The im-pression formed in our minds (the image) results from the pressure that the particles of the filmy images exert on the mind.

Lucretius's universe is remarkable for its multi-layered thickness. Lucretius explains that 'from all objects emanations flow away and are discharged in all directions on every side.'²¹ These emanations are not only visual, but also olfactory and acoustic, and they manifest themselves as heat. Here we are, as in the aforementioned quotation from David Yon's interview with Rousseau, *caught up in the world through our perception of the elements*. The world appears as a thick multisensory ecosystem that constantly washes over (and through) our bodies. In his theory of communication, Michel Serres explains:

Le monde n'est plus à distance, il est à proximité, comme tangible [...]. Savoir n'est pas voir, c'est prendre contact, directement, avec les choses: et d'ailleurs elles viennent à nous.²²

[The world is no longer in the distance; it is nearby, tangible [...]. Knowledge is not seeing, it is entering into contact, directly, with things; and besides, they come to us.]

Similarly, Jane Bennett describes Lucretian perception as 'the crash-mixing of (1) bits of free-floating primordia and (2) the primordia (temporarily) congealing as our body.'²³ With such accounts of Lucretian perception, the distance to Simondon is not insurmountable.

Watching *La Vallée close* is a processual experience, rather than an atomistic one. When Rousseau refuses montage, he seeks to escape the subject-object dichotomies that make the film director an origin; instead, he attempts to adjust to the role as an 'individu-milieu'. We might say that William James, one of the key influences on Simondon's work, brings together this processual experience and the refusal of montage. He explains that 'whatever we distinguish and isolate conceptually is found perceptually to telescope and compenetrates and diffuse into its neighbours. The cuts we make are purely ideal.'²⁴ In this sense, montage – the cut (a term that James uses without reference to film) – belies the ecological nature of existence. Cuts are not only an aesthetic mistake, but also an ontological mistake, and it is this mistake that Rousseau seeks to avoid. He seems to work, instead, from

20 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 107.

21 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 106.

22 Michel Serres, *La Naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce: fleuves et turbulences* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 134; *The Birth of Physics*, trans. by J. Hawkes (Manchester: Clarendon, 2000), 107.

23 Jane Bennett, 'De Rerum Natura', *Strategies* 13.1 (2000), 9–22 (16).

24 William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, ed. by E. K. Suckiel (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 49–50.

the principle that ‘matter is a *form-taking activity*’ (as Brian Massumi writes about Simondon’s ontology),²⁵ and that the filmmaker’s role is to carry this activity to spectators until they experience the form-taking of *le saisissement*.

Beauty and mental ecology

Having presented the major strands in the film (the metafilmic, the autobiographical, the cosmological, and the perceptual), and having insisted on the ways in which these strands combine to produce an ‘individual as environment’ (bringing it together, letting it disperse, including the spectator in the process), it is clear that Rousseau’s film moves in a territory that recalls Félix Guattari’s theorisations of interconnected ecological spheres. Guattari names three of these: the mental (including artistic and technological invention), the environmental, and the sociopolitical. The various ‘ecologies’ mentioned earlier in this chapter do not need to be excluded from Guattari’s systematisations. Thinking Rousseau in relation to Guattari brings out two important points about *La Vallée close*.

The first is a point of contrast: Rousseau is much less concerned with politics than Guattari. *La Vallée close* explores intimate relations between Alain and the filmmaker, and it uses the geographical textbook to reflect laconically on the building of societies, but there is no mention of politics in the more conventional sense of the word. While it can be said that the film presents a vision of the non-separability of individuals and the world, and that such a vision necessarily has a political dimension, the political is subsumed within the ‘poetic’ in the sense of *poiesis*, creation.

The second is a point of similarity: Rousseau and Guattari share a strong attentiveness to the ways in which subjectivity is produced, and to the role that art plays in this ongoing production. In *La Vallée close*, this interest connects to the semi-autobiographical: we often see and hear the director, we see the woman whom we presume to be his mother, and we get the sense of a love story. Guattari similarly focusses on art and the production of subjectivity, describing art as ‘un foyer de production ontologique [a hub of ontological production]’.²⁶ At the end of *Chaosmose*, he explains:

25 Brian Massumi, Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, and Jon Roffe, “‘Technical Mentality’ Revisited”, in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, ed. by A. De Boever, A. Murray, J. Roffe and A. Woodward (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 19–36 (31).

26 Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie?*, ed. by S. Nadaud (Paris: Lignes, 2013), 169–70; 294.

L'œuvre d'art, pour ceux qui en ont l'usage, est une entreprise de décadage, de rupture de sens, de prolifération baroque ou d'appauvrissement extrême, qui entraîne le sujet vers une recréation et une réinvention de lui-même.²⁷

[The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subjects itself.]

But against which criteria do we measure this creative process, this production of subjectivity?

How do we ensure that the artistic process leads to a reinvention rather than a reification of subjectivity? Putting this question to Rousseau's film, two ideals emerge. The first is the commitment to what Lucretius, Bergson and Simondon present as incessant movement. This movement is intensified in the potentially misleading term *saisissement*, a moment that crystallises and *overflows* the individual human, thereby keeping the processes of subjectification open. The second ideal that governs the production of subjectivity sounds more romantic: Rousseau promotes *beauty*. Like Elaine Scarry, he suggests that beauty can help to reorganise the world in less anthropocentric ways.²⁸ He explains that 'la beauté ne se voit que dans la contemplation, jamais dans l'observation. Elle ne s'observe pas. Elle ne se détaille pas [beauty can only be contemplated, never observed. It cannot be kept in check. It cannot be broken into distinct parts]'.²⁹ This means that beauty is *non-objectifiable* insofar as it is never the *object* of a gaze – it works on us: 'la beauté [...], l'art [...], c'est plutôt quelque chose qui se subit [beauty [...], art [...], is, rather, something that is undergone]'.³⁰ The beautiful images that seize the filmmaker (and the spectator) are presented as a rupture, and 'cette rupture, c'est être transporté dans le vide [this rupture is to be transported into empty space]'.³¹ One could therefore argue that Rousseau's two ideals – process and beauty – are one and the same: beauty is propulsive, throwing us through empty space until we come together in new constellations. With this understanding of

27 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), 181; *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. by P. Bains and J. Pefanis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 131.

28 'When we come upon beautiful things [...] it is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.' Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 110–12.

29 Yon and Rousseau, 'Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Rousseau', 24.

30 Yon and Rousseau, 'Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Rousseau', 24.

31 Yon and Rousseau, 'Entretiens avec Jean-Claude Rousseau', 29.

beauty, we are invited to conclude that for Rousseau an artistic experience – an encounter with beauty – is almost by necessity an ecological experience. It is a chance to experience what it means to be an *individu-milieu*. It is a chance to sense, in a *saisissement* which is simultaneously embodied and disembodying, that we are always already *individus-milieus*.

Conclusions: art as ecology

The present discussion of Jean-Claude Rousseau's *La Vallée close* has attempted to make two general points. On the one hand, it has argued for the ecocritical potential of Simondon's concept of the *individu-milieu*. One way to present this concept is to stress how Simondon invites us to avoid the connector *and* (as in 'man *and* environment'), and to prefer the connector *as*; how the prefix *inter-* (between) is marginalised by the prefix *trans-* (through); how Simondon, through such shifts of balance, steers us away from dialectic investigations of the relationship between man and environment, suggesting that man – and other environments – might best be understood as *une certaine phase de l'être* [a certain phase of being]. Although Simondon's notion of the *individu-milieu* is part of a theory of individuation (rather than an eco-theory in a narrow sense of the term), it is obvious that – with this emphasis on the non-separability of man and environment – the *individu-milieu* anticipates forms of thinking that crystallise around the notion of the Anthropocene.

Inspired by Guattari, the present chapter furthermore sought to address the question of how art (*La Vallée close*) can be situated in relation to ideas about the *individu-milieu*. My argument was that Rousseau's art (but not only his) is a fundamentally ecological experience. As explained in the latter stages of the chapter, Rousseau's film is concerned with beauty. Beauty allows the experience of the *saisissement*, and the *saisissement* is coextensive with the realisation of being an *individu-milieu*. Beauty, then, is not about harmonious landscapes; rather, it is – as Scarry suggested – associated with the experience of being removed from the centre of our own world. But Rousseau's art is not only about the *saisissement*. It is equally important to remember that filmmaking – and art in general – is a hands-on activity. The way in which Rousseau shoots, records and assembles the images and sounds for his film – that is to say, Rousseau's *praxis* – complicates all form-versus-matter and subject-versus-object dichotomies. Putting the film together step by step – whether this happens through the process of recording and assembling the footage, or through the activity of viewing the film – allows us to experience how we are caught up in the world. This is not an argument about media specificity – filmic, linguistic

and mental images invite us to conclude (as the passages from Bergson/Lucretius, Simondon and Guattari suggested) that the world is a thick, multilayered universe from which no disentanglement is possible. Images and artworks – perception and imagination – bring us right into the hyphenation of Simondon's *individu-milieu*.

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