

## On touching

A moving image story of a collaboration with a total eclipse of the sun

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### Abstract

This visual essay comprises three works of video that I recorded during a total eclipse of the sun in the USA in 2017 that challenge the underlying habit to think about the world as a static entity. Following Donna Haraway, and recognizing the incapacity to control an immeasurable world that exceeds our representations, I propose this essay, which combines moving images with text, to 'think with' the world through a total eclipse of the sun, an event that is greater than the movement of the planets that cause it: It is a cultural, scientific, affective and economical phenomenon. I rehearse three ways to come close to the world by 'touching', as an alternative to representations, and as a form of entanglement with the world, in the context of Karen Barad thinking.

This visual essay is divided in three main parts containing each a video sequence recorded during the eclipse that is accompanied by text. It is recommended to both see and read these materials entirely.



## Preface

This is a story that follows my effort to produce a video work in collaboration with a total eclipse of the sun that I witnessed in the USA in 2017, which resulted in a series of moving images that according to my first assessment, did not come to fruition as artworks. It can be said that I failed. However, the resulting videos are presented here as tools (or ‘flawed’ devices) to think through the eclipse, diffractively (Barad, 2007), about matter, movement and its representations.

Keeping in mind the specificities of the total eclipse, this text, along with its accompanying videos, inquires how to attune to ecologies of vibrant matter and movement, where agency moves distributed across networks (Bennett, 2010). I do this by means of diffraction, which is an approach for “reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference” (Barad, 2007, p. 30). Accordingly, I use the videos presented here, and the text that accompanies them, to think the world with —and through— the total eclipse of the sun, and its various material, affective and agential manifestations.

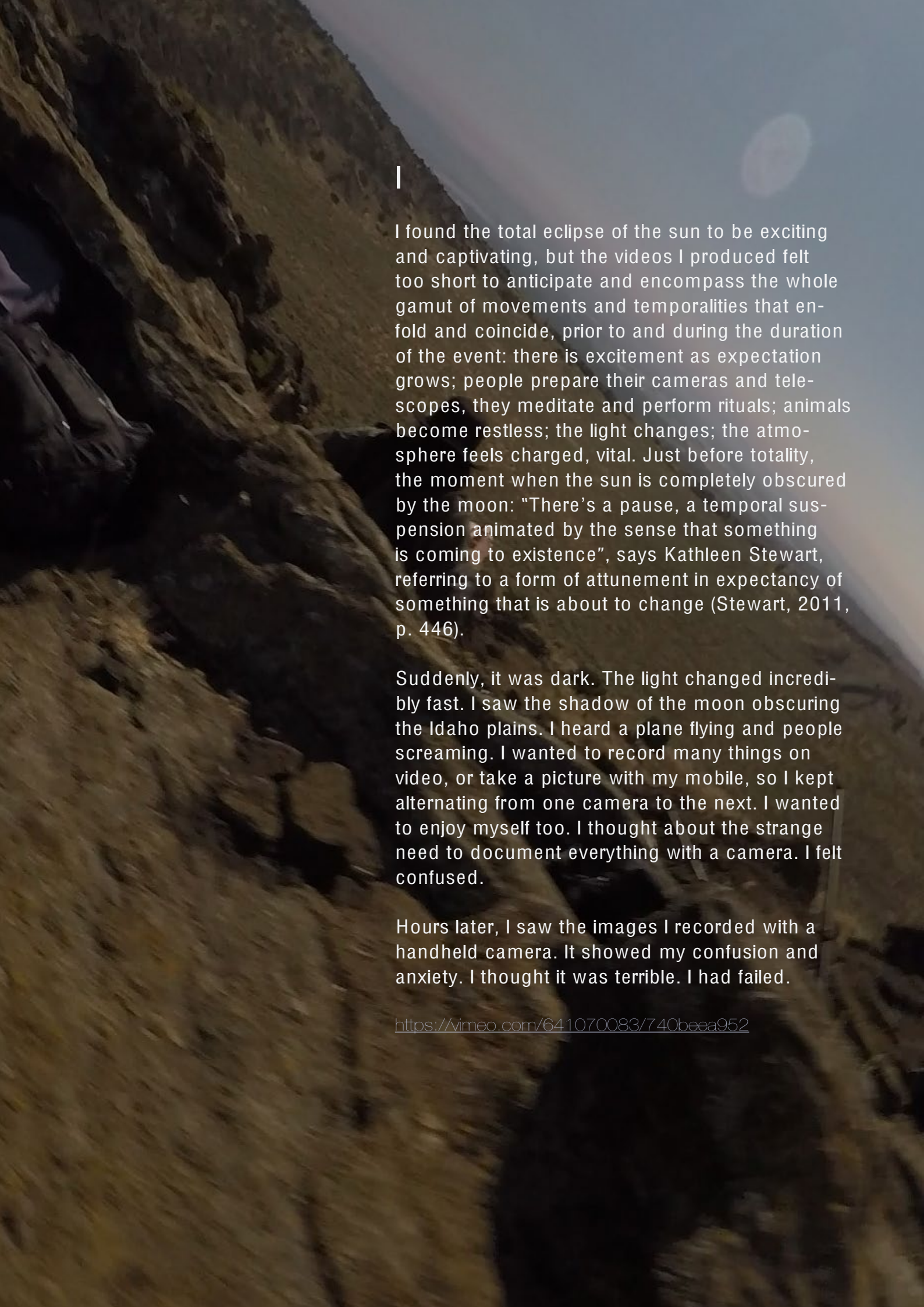
<https://vimeo.com/641074384/a359c92cf6>



I turned my camera towards the eclipse.



but hesitated

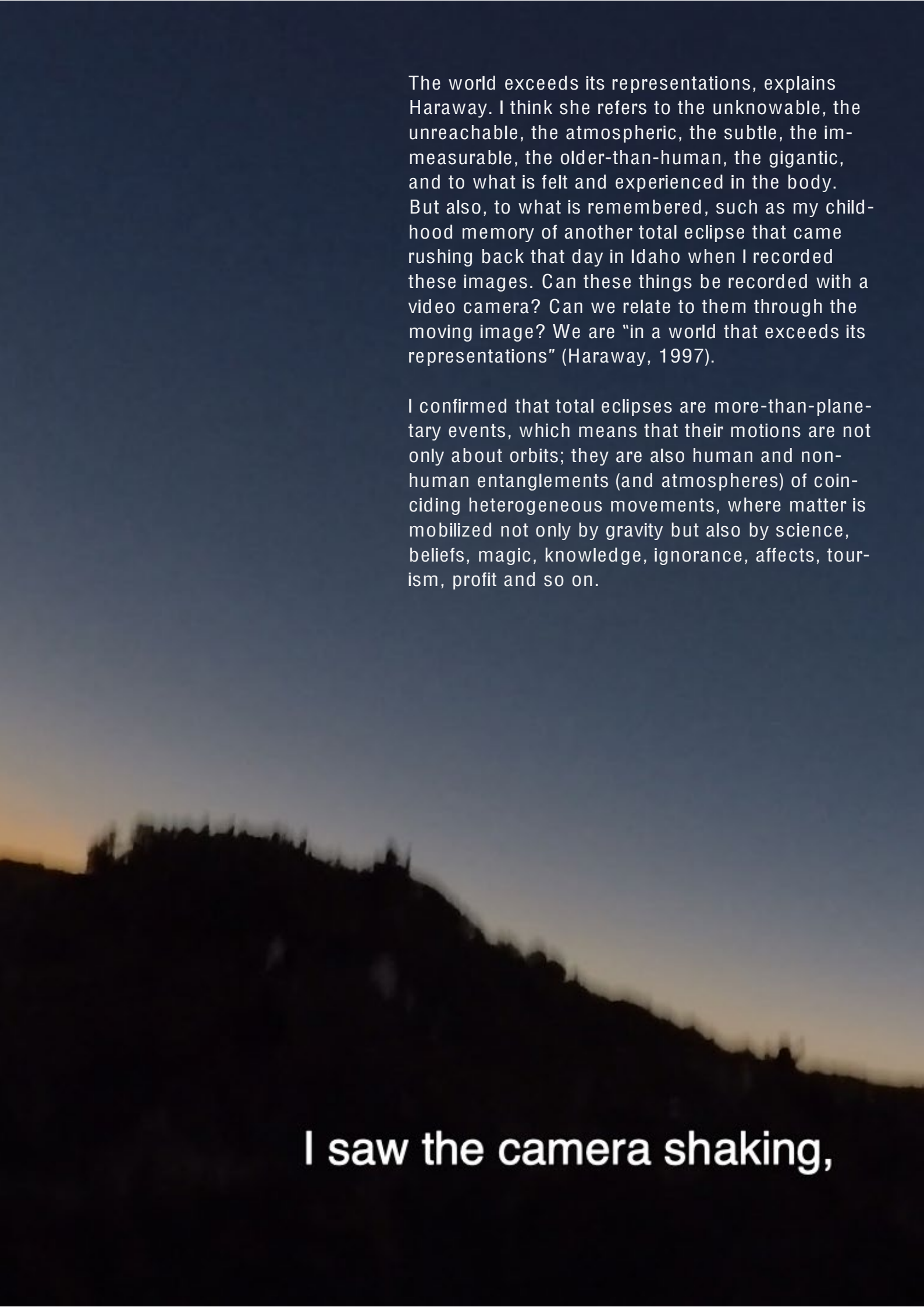


I found the total eclipse of the sun to be exciting and captivating, but the videos I produced felt too short to anticipate and encompass the whole gamut of movements and temporalities that enfold and coincide, prior to and during the duration of the event: there is excitement as expectation grows; people prepare their cameras and telescopes, they meditate and perform rituals; animals become restless; the light changes; the atmosphere feels charged, vital. Just before totality, the moment when the sun is completely obscured by the moon: "There's a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the sense that something is coming to existence", says Kathleen Stewart, referring to a form of attunement in expectancy of something that is about to change (Stewart, 2011, p. 446).

Suddenly, it was dark. The light changed incredibly fast. I saw the shadow of the moon obscuring the Idaho plains. I heard a plane flying and people screaming. I wanted to record many things on video, or take a picture with my mobile, so I kept alternating from one camera to the next. I wanted to enjoy myself too. I thought about the strange need to document everything with a camera. I felt confused.

Hours later, I saw the images I recorded with a handheld camera. It showed my confusion and anxiety. I thought it was terrible. I had failed.

<https://vimeo.com/641070083/740b6ea952>



The world exceeds its representations, explains Haraway. I think she refers to the unknowable, the unreachable, the atmospheric, the subtle, the immeasurable, the older-than-human, the gigantic, and to what is felt and experienced in the body. But also, to what is remembered, such as my childhood memory of another total eclipse that came rushing back that day in Idaho when I recorded these images. Can these things be recorded with a video camera? Can we relate to them through the moving image? We are "in a world that exceeds its representations" (Haraway, 1997).

I confirmed that total eclipses are more-than-planetary events, which means that their motions are not only about orbits; they are also human and non-human entanglements (and atmospheres) of coinciding heterogeneous movements, where matter is mobilized not only by gravity but also by science, beliefs, magic, knowledge, ignorance, affects, tourism, profit and so on.

**I saw the camera shaking,**



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We were told that there were rattlesnakes in the mountain, and that we had to be careful. I thought about the disorientation that an eclipse might cause in them, but more importantly, of the impact of hundreds of people coming to their habitat. We did not see or hear any snakes. I think they were hidden, and terrified.


A close-up, low-angle shot from inside a dark hole. A person's hand is visible on the right, holding a camera. The camera is pointed towards a bright, overexposed sky. The foreground is dark and textured, likely soil or rock. The lighting is dramatic, with the bright sky creating a strong contrast with the dark interior of the hole.

<https://vimeo.com/641071657/6727ea7e3c>

I came up with the idea of putting a camera inside a hole aiming at the sky as if a snake was looking out to witness the eclipse, but later, back in my studio, I did not find the video interesting. I realized that it was because I was aiming to produce an illusion or a representation that presupposed things I do not know about snakes, like the way they see or move. By representing, we create distance. That is what representations do, explains Haraway (1997). In opposition, it would have been quite different to strap a camera to a snake, if one could only bypass the danger and the ethical implications of doing that.

In the context of more-than-human geographies and moving images, Jamie Lorimer (2010) invites us to turn away from representations that objectify by illustrating behaviours or depicting things from afar. Instead, he looks at the potential of moving images to focus on evoking interactions, encounters and affective entanglements.

era inside a hole



However, there was something interesting about the image recorded by the camera hidden in the volcanic rocks: it was possible to see the blinking red light that indicates that the camera is recording, as it illuminated the little volcanic chamber.

The shot became interesting to me only after recognizing the camera as an active entity 'noticing' itself in relation to other things, instead of a passive apparatus taking part in an illusion in the likeness of a snake.

In this regard, the filmmaker Elke Marhöfer describes the camera as "enthusiastic and endowed with an agential capacity of its own." (Marhöfer, 2016).



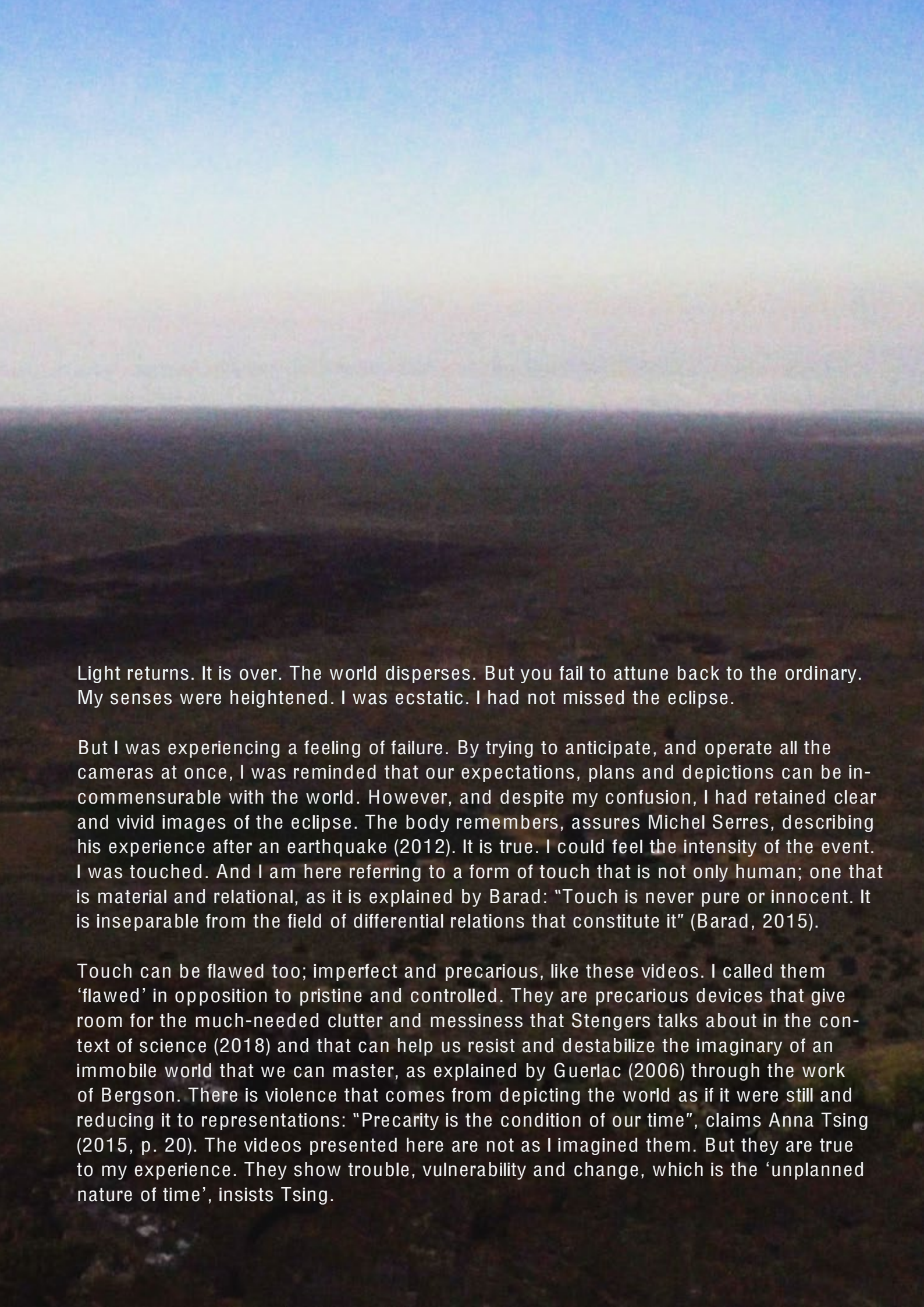


I knew the exact duration of the total eclipse, which amounted to 2:18 minutes. But Henri Bergson sees time as a force, not as a reference of time that can be understood, compared, and discretely separated: whereas we can “map out the successive positions of the trajectory — the mobility itself is felt as intensity” (Guerlac, 2006, p. 68), referencing the example of the shooting star accounted by Bergson (1910)).

<https://vimeo.com/641072736/c653a1e596>

*"Think of what you experience on suddenly perceiving a shooting star: in this extremely rapid motion there is a natural and instinctive separation between the space traversed, which appears to you under the form of a line of fire, and the absolutely indivisible sensation of motion or mobility" (Bergson, 1910, p. 65)*

I believe that is also the case with the eclipse. For Bergson time cannot be discretely separated, and needs to be experienced, and not measured in minutes, seconds, or hours (Bergson, 1911). Bergson argues that representations convey no movement. However "through the collision of affective images", explains Amy Herzog (2000, p. 7), it is possible to look past the perception of movement (the things that move inside the frame) and experience what emerges from movement.



Light returns. It is over. The world disperses. But you fail to attune back to the ordinary. My senses were heightened. I was ecstatic. I had not missed the eclipse.

But I was experiencing a feeling of failure. By trying to anticipate, and operate all the cameras at once, I was reminded that our expectations, plans and depictions can be incommensurable with the world. However, and despite my confusion, I had retained clear and vivid images of the eclipse. The body remembers, assures Michel Serres, describing his experience after an earthquake (2012). It is true. I could feel the intensity of the event. I was touched. And I am here referring to a form of touch that is not only human; one that is material and relational, as it is explained by Barad: "Touch is never pure or innocent. It is inseparable from the field of differential relations that constitute it" (Barad, 2015).

Touch can be flawed too; imperfect and precarious, like these videos. I called them 'flawed' in opposition to pristine and controlled. They are precarious devices that give room for the much-needed clutter and messiness that Stengers talks about in the context of science (2018) and that can help us resist and destabilize the imaginary of an immobile world that we can master, as explained by Guerlac (2006) through the work of Bergson. There is violence that comes from depicting the world as if it were still and reducing it to representations: "Precarity is the condition of our time", claims Anna Tsing (2015, p. 20). The videos presented here are not as I imagined them. But they are true to my experience. They show trouble, vulnerability and change, which is the 'unplanned nature of time', insists Tsing.



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