Mermaid with A Movie Camera: Performing the Cold War Past Eco-Critically

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> *To presume a given distinction between humans and nonhumans is to cement and recirculate the nature culture dualism into the foundations of feminist theory, foreclosing a genealogy of how nature and culture, human and nonhuman, are formed. Hence any performative account worth its salt would be ill advised to incorporate such anthropocentric values in its foundations.*
>
> — Karen Barad

I. Eco-Cinema of Hyperobjects

Given the recent proliferation of films focusing on environmental issues and nonhuman worlds, in this paper I explore some eco-feminist glimpses into recent history engendered in *Sirenomelia/No Place Rising* (2015--2018), a twin pair of works by the Lithuanian artist and filmmaker Emilija Škarnulytė. Throughout the last ten years, Škarnulytė's body of work investigates pressing cases of ecological and social problems through a series of audio-visions of various environments and infrastructures. Poetic, yet scientifically informed, her films engage non-human temporalities, invisible architectures and systems of power, as well as processes of geoengineering.

Sirenomelia, screened as a one-channel film as well as a multi-screen installation version exhibited under the title *No Place Rising,* was shot in Olavsvern, Norway within a twenty-five

thousand square meter NATO submarine base that ceased to function after the end of the Cold War era and was permanently closed in 2002.[1] As news reports illustrate, NATO gave a permission to the Norwegian government to decommission the military base as neither of them had a need for it.[2] *Sirenomelia / No Place Rising* portrays an underwater journey of a mermaid within an area of the submarine base in its current state, performed by the Lithuanian artist herself. In accord of body art actions that are considered highly important in the context of East European art of the 1970s and 1980s, Škarnulytė places her body in a wider context of non-human environment. According to the artist herself, it took a half of a year for her to learn how to swim and dive in a mermaid's costume.[3] The mermaid character, incarnated by the artist, encounters colorful sea beds, drowned vessels and industrial ruins. However, the mermaid's journey does not have a clear beginning or a definitive ending, which works perfectly when the film is installed as a looping three-screen installation in the gallery space. Roughly, the film is comprised of two kinds of shots: the panorama shots recorded by a drone that portray the mermaid swimming on the water, and mid- and close-up shots recorded underwater. As a result, the spectator of the film is introduced to a gigantic infrastructure of the military base and is entangled into a subaquatic world of underwater tunnels full of military constructions and radars, now populated with various kinds of sea organisms.

Figure 1. *No Place Rising*, Emilija Škarnulytė, 2015.

Given its performative attempt to immerse into the subaquatic world previously usurped by humans and bring it to the screen, *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* can be associated with what Paula Willoquet-Maricondi calls "ecocinema." Looking at the diversity of film forms, genres and intentions by filmmakers, Willoquet-Maricondi draws a distinction between "environmentalist films" and "ecocinema," the former belonging to the wider spectrum of films that use environmental topics just as background for a story of human interest, and the latter being the more avant-garde films that due to their form and style express "consciousness-raising and activist intentions, as well as responsibility to heighten awareness about contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health."[4] The first category usually encompasses more conventional narrative films that try to engross the audience with a story that's easy to identify with. The environmental awareness might be a theme of these films, but it is not meant primarily to make the spectator more eco-conscious through perceiving the environment anew. Whereas ecocinema, in the scholar's understanding, makes the environmental topic its primary concern in all the stages of production without conforming to conventional expectations. By trying to avoid the style and form of the mainstream cinema, ecocinema often refrains from traditional narrative structures with an aim to go beyond the anthropocentric focus and biased representational conventions. As Willoquet-Maricondi writes, while so-called "environmentalist films tend to offer a pro-environment, pro-conservation and pro-sustainability perspective which affirms, rather than challenges, the culture's fundamental anthropocentric ethos," the ecocinema refers to a broader range of films that may "exercise perceptions" of ecological and environmental issues through decentralization of human subjectivity, altering spectators' perspective "from a narrow anthropocentric worldview to an earth-centered, or ecocentric view…".[5]

Willoquet-Maricondi's thinking about eco-cinema beyond the constraints of human character-centered narratives also resonates with Scott Macdonald's argument that "ecocinema does a

fundamental job in a retraining of perception."[6] In Macdonald's view, ecocinema should not be equated either with pro-environmental Hollywood narratives, or with expository nature documentaries.[7] As he asserts, the purpose of ecocinema is rather "to provide new kinds of film experience that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset."[8] This expanded approach to the connection between ecocritical issues and film aesthetics puts an emphasis on ecocentric, biocentric, and generally, non-anthropocentric attitudes of films. Understood in this way, Škarnulytė's work can be viewed as an affective audiovision that helps to develop better awareness towards a presence of non-human elements of the subaquatic environment that humans previously militarized.

And yet, how we can fathom ways in which *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* "retrains" spectators' perceptions? The lack of a human-centered story and non-diegetic use of the soundtrack are among the stylistic elements that help to provide an experience of the defunct military base in the ocean that transcends common representations of the Cold War usually shaped by the dominant memory. As many articles and books illustrate, fiction and documentary films dealing with Cold War history focus on national and anthropocentric narratives of the past in the first place. They organize subject positions that help the spectator to identify with the national stories that are supported by antagonistic ideologies and based on imperial ambitions. Škarnulytė' work, however, does not create a fixed subject position. No human characters appear on the screen throughout the entire film. The film does not provide a clear character-centered view of the past. Sometimes the spectator is made to believe they are seeing through the eyes of the mermaid, sometimes one is given a viewpoint from a seemingly unknown outside. The sound is not explanatory either: recordings of submarine sounds and other resonances of the undersea environment have been included into a minimal electro-acoustic soundtrack that by no means illustrates or explains the mermaid's actions.

Hence, instead of securing identifications in the world of anthropocentric story about the functioning of the Cold War military base, *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* sets up positions from which the spectator can imagine how that world could be viewed and heard beyond a subjectively constructed point of view. As film theorist Daniel Morgan has recently pointed out, "the way we see the filmic world largely has to do with the way the image as a whole expresses a viewpoint from within that world, as an 'affective and emotional contribution.'"[9] Referring to a number of film examples, Morgan writes that the spectator's position within the world of the film is not always determined by the logic of the camera's point of view, but can also be an expressive effect of the shot and its formal construction.[10] Therefore, from the theoretical standpoint, what matters in regard to the spectator's immersion in Škarnulytė's film is not the fact of the spectator being told something, or the position from which this telling takes place, but rather, in Morgan's words, that the manner of showing can trigger the spectator's affective responses and activate an eco-critical imagination, helping to surpass limits of habituated perception.[11] Therefore, to locate Škarnulytė's film's function and its implications, one should think about the intersection of expression and imagination: the film shows the material remnants of the human activities shaped by the undersea world and the spectator grasps that act of showing. In other words, due to perceptually alien image and sound combinations, the spectator in Škarnulytė's film simultaneously inhabits unusual spectatorial positions—seeing and hearing from more than a subjective viewpoint. *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* therefore brings the spectator to the imaginary situation in which images of historical residua have been transmuted through the shift of perspective, retraining a usual perception of the Cold War.

Furthermore, through troubling the subject's positioning, Škarnulytė's film comes close to expressing a non-human scale entity called "hyperobject" by eco-philosopher Timothy Morton. In his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton defines hyperobjects as

things that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to human scales."[12] Examples provided include biosphere, nuclear waste, radiation and global warming. Morton delineates five key characteristics—"viscosity," "nonlocality," "phasing," "temporal undulation, and "interobjectivity"—that all together render hyperobjects out of humans' reach.[13] Despite the impossibility of experiencing hyperobjects directly and in full after the failure of modernity, we cannot—Morton stresses—allow ourselves to stay unaware of them while facing the global ecological crisis. As recent critical scholarship on the geological epoch of Anthropocene illustrates, either scientific knowledge or aesthetic experience could be of help here. Without denying the former, Morton is in favor of the latter. According to him, our preexisting thinking frames are so unsuited to the modern hyper-entities that, until they could be upgraded, humans must rely on other ways of knowing, such as sensing and feeling, which he also calls "attuning." Therefore, to quote the eco-philosopher: "…We need art that does not make people think (we have quite enough environmental art that does that), but rather that walks them through an inner space that is hard to traverse."[14]

Škarnulytė's performative audiovision, in Morton's words, shifts cognition to attuning and therefore can be treated as an artistic expression of the remnants of the Cold War that still impact the environment despite the fact that they are cognitively inaccessible in their fullness. *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* thus provides an opportunity for an affective experience of a multiplicity of commonly invisible manifestations of the Cold War residue that the sea and nature envelop. This experience, as I further show, echoes Rosi Braidotti's and other eco-feminists' statements that the monstrous aesthetics can provide agency to those with "no adequate scheme of representation."[15] Hence, we can talk not only about the Škarnulytė film's eco-feminist poetics, but also about its eco-feminist politics that are rooted in a posthumanist understanding of performativity.

II.   Posthumanist Performativity and Eco-Politics

Politics in the age of Anthropocene—in which humans have become a palpable "force of nature"—needs something of monstrous aesthetics. It cannot be reduced to restoring speech to humans but rather involves developing an ethnographic attunement to the voices that haunt our world, write Eduardo Kohn and Lisa Stevenson.[16] "What if the political generativity [of films] actually lies in learning to listen to the myriad voices of the world in which we find ourselves—today, now— voices from which we can no longer (if we want to continue to survive on this planet) claim to separate ourselves based on the facile assertion that we have language, or speech, and they do not?" they ask.[17]

Kohn's and Stevenson's ideas can easily be applied to define "Sirena," the Latin word for mermaid, as a quintessential symbol articulating the unclear border between human and nonhuman. The figure of a quasi-human creature has persisted as a feature of popular myths and cultural expressions—both entertaining and moralizing—for centuries. A post-modern interest in mermaids is, however, less often imagined in regard to ancient mythical stories, and more often in regard to sociopolitical and identity issues. Contemporary feminist theory reconsiders the mermaid as a figure of empowerment, reconsidering its function from the mysterious and magical to the monstrous, emphasizing its ability to blur gender and social dichotomies. Braidotti, to mention one from many eco-feminists, has theorized that the otherness of the mermaid as the "organic monster" positions itself in the liminal zone invoked in discourses of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other exclusionary schemes that seek to segregate the abnormal from the human. As Braidotti has observed, the monster functions as both the Other to the normalized self and a hybrid entity that disrupts subject positions understood in terms of hierarchical binary dualisms. The mermaid as a monster thus "occupies potentially contradictory discourses" and "signifies potentially contradictory meanings."[18] In other words, in a system of binary dualisms—as Braidotti writes—the monster denotes something contradictory to the established norm. That is, "[t]he freak, not unlike the feminine and ethnic 'others,'

signifies devalued difference."[19] Ambiguity is characteristic of the figure of the monster/mermaid, eliciting perturbations concerning the frame and borders of the body and subjectivity. Braidotti further explains the monster's/mermaid's ability to simultaneously secure and destabilize our perceptions of selfhood: "[t]he peculiarity of the organic monster is that s/he is both same and Other." The monster/mermaid, in Braidotti's words, "is neither a total stranger nor completely familiar; s/he exists in an in-between zone [and] helps us understand the paradox of 'difference'..."[20]

Škarnulytė describes the mermaid of her film in surprisingly similar way,

> "She is not a stereotypical Mermaid. She is hairless, a woman-torpedo, or perhaps not necessarily a woman, perhaps transgender, but more a new species that have adapted to live in different conditions when there are possibly no people left. She is lonely and sensitive. The space around her is gigantic, aggressive and masculine, the same as in most projects: CERN, mines, underwater stations, and the world of astronomy. This mermaid reclaims the ocean in a nonviolent way or rather shows a dimension of the ocean that cannot be appropriated by war."[21]

"She/they is a cyborg," the artist says in another interview, "linked to a human just merged with the fish, submarine, machine..."[22] As these excerpts from Škarnulytė's interviews illustrate, the character of the mermaid helps the artist question traditional binary social norms and power structures. Škarnulyte's film is—I suggest—inseparably related to the post-humanist performativity that helps overcome the system of binary dualisms.

Traditionally, performativity has been considered a representational apparatus generated through language that, in the moment of utterance, enacts and confirms a social order. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler famously introduces the term through an analysis of the ways in which gender is socially performed. Butler, speaking to the lack of the phallus upon which heterosexuality is built and supported, claims that power locates meanings in structural appearances—performances, in Butler's words—rather than in a real state of being. As Butler writes, in this process femininity is always masked because it promises "an eventual disruption and

displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy."[23] Her analysis thus demonstrates that through language, performativity is restricted by the obligatory regimes of power that have already determined which actions and divisions have to be confirmed as normative ones. All in all, Butler's theory tells us that characteristics of gender are discursive and, therefore, to-be-performed.

However, with the recent wave of materialist and eco-feminist thinking, re-considerations of Butler's notion of performativity come into being. Questioned for their over-investment in the linguistic-discursive framework, Butler's ideas have been conceding to Karen Barad's quantum physics-influenced theory of "posthumanist performativity," to mention just one of a few recent theories. For Barad, performativity is not only linked to the gendered materialization of human bodies, but it is about the processes of the materialization of "all bodies" and all the "material-discursive" practices that engender differences between humans and non-humans.[24] In other words, for Barad and her critical attempt to reclaim a non-binary vision of the world, non-human worlds are much less passive than Butler has argued they are.

Questioning the primacy of the linguistic-discursive approach employed by Butler, Barad rethinks a series of oppositions—including nature/culture, subject/object, and realism/social constructivism to propose a so-called agential realist framework in order to rethink the world anew. This framework abandons the Cartesian mind/body separation characteristic of the tendency to objectify. It is instead based on a relationalist understanding of what Barad terms a constant "intra-action" between human and non-human subjects. In such a framework, everything is already interconnected before it is agentially separated.[25] Seen through such a perspective, gender, among other identity categories, is not just discursively performed, but all the bodies themselves "come to matter through the world's performativity."[26] This kind of thinking pushes us towards a fresh reading of the reflective and critical potential of Škarnulytė's film.

If matter is capable of performing its own meanings, every material configuration is "telling,"

and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aimed at discovering its stories, write Diane Coole and Samantha Frost in a Baradian manner.[27] It is this material agency that manifests in the images of the mermaid and sea organisms and highlights the porous boundaries between marine and human worlds. In *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia*, the ocean populated with Cold War remnants performs itself as vital hyper-entity—hyperobject—independent from and nonetheless interlaced with the history of the human. All in all, Škarnulytė's film echoes Braidotti's and Barad's writings by presenting the body, which does not always solely exist in the dimension of discourse. "Body," as the film expresses vis-a-vis Barad, refers not to the gendered human body, but to the concrete entanglements of plural "natures" in the non-human realms. The film thus connects the material and the discursive—supporting a non-dualistic system of eco-feminist thought and presenting the desire to imagine the Cold War history beyond the anthropocentric vision of it.

But not only that. Going beyond the domain of the "biological" and "natural," *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* queers the gender dichotomy, relocating it in broader natural-cultural environments. If embodiment is the site where a "vibrant matter" (the phrase coined by Jane Bennett) performs its narratives, a performative embodiment of the quasi-human entangled in a non-human environment is the core of material ecocriticism inherent in Škarnulytė's film. As the eco-feminist theories highlight, the material self lives in "a world sustained by queer confederacies" in which the human is always intermingled with alien presences that have nothing to do with phallocentric modes of being.[28] Such aliens absorb into the self the connotations that the human cannot offer. This is what so clearly played out by the artist embodying a swimming mermaid in front of camera in *Place No Rising/Sirenomelia*. As Donna Haraway reminds us, "[q]ueering has the job of undoing "normal" categories."[29] The figure of mermaid in Škarnulytė's film is thus an utterly liminal creature that confounds the hegemonic boundaries of gender and species and subverts normativity in a variety of ways, from challenging traditional masculine and militarist perceptions of the Cold War to expanding how one understands

and communicates her being in the world vis-a-vis non-human creatures.

Figure 1. *No Place Rising*, Emilija Škarnulytė, 2015.

Against the common criticism of eco-cinematic films and visual art as contemporary versions of Immanuel Kant's understanding of nature exceeding human comprehension, I thus want to point out that if modern discourse took nature as an aesthetic object, Škarnulytė's film confronts us with audio-visions of hyperobjects that, paraphrasing Morton, can only be imaged and imagined *without* nature. In other words, even if we see and hear ocean rocks, sea organisms, fishes and medusae, they no longer exist as aesthetically pleasing images of nature untouched by human activities. Instead of representing the oceanic beauty for the objectifying gaze (as still often happens in conventional nature documentaries), *No Place Rising/Sirenomelia* transforms the ideological image of the Cold War into an affect of the monstrous entanglement of nature and culture. In doing so, the film responds to the eco-conscious call for an affective engagement with the traces of human activities by moving beyond the romantic and modernist vision of nature as an isolated category separated from human culture and providing the sensible audio-visions of invisible, ignored or mistreated subjectivities in its place. Eco-poetics and eco-politics of Škarnulytė's film are thus

motivated by the concern of how to develop the artistic resources to envision the Cold War from the perspective where human and nonhuman futures are inseparably entangled and share the drive to break the striated and masculine image of the past through disruptions of both anthropocentric modes of storytelling and asymmetric allocations of agency on screen. It therefore also exposes an image of the past liberated from the human-centered military and economic systems of meaning and attunes us to an alternative image of the past, suggesting that, in the words of Morton, "[w]e are all mermaids, we just do not know it yet."[30]

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Notes

[1] For the first time *No Place Rising* was installed at Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius in 2015. It was also exhibited as a part of the show entitled *The Future is Certain; It's the Past Which is Unpredictable* that took place at Calvert 22 Foundation, London (curator: Monika Lipšic) in 2018. *Sirenomelia* was screened in many film venues, including Berwick Film Festival and Busan Film Festival. It was also showcased on Vdrome, an online platform that offers regular, high quality screenings of films and videos directed by visual artists and filmmakers, whose production lies in-between contemporary art and cinema.

[2] Pettersen, Trude. "Arctic submarine base for sale". *Barents Observer.* (May 30, 2012): http://wayback.archive-it.org/10184/20180313082607/http://barentsobserver.com/en.

[3] Works by Czech artist Petr Štembera, who regularly included the surrounding elements of the natural world in his performances could be one of many examples. More in: Fowkes, Maja *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Ecology Under Socialism.* (CEU Press, 2015).

[4] Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World. Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (The University of Virginia Press, 2010): 45.

[5] Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World. Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (The University of Virginia Press,

2010): 45-47.

[6] Scott MacDonald, "Toward an Eco-Cinema," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11 (Summer, 2004): 109.

[7] Scott MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience," in *Ecocinema Experience and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

[8] Scott MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience," 20.

[9] Daniel Morgan, "Where are We? Camera Movements and Problem of Point of View," *New Review of Film and Television Studies,* 14/2, (2016): 228.

[10] Daniel Morgan, 228.

[11] Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn in their article on *Leviathan* (2012)*,* the film by Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaign-Taylor, in like manner stress the importance of the connection between image with no humans and the spectator's imagination. "As we follow these many cameras and what they see, our singular integrity as a spectator dissolves", they write about *Leviathan*, "[t]he affective and imaginary attachment makes us listen to voices of the world". More:|Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, "Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream," *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, no. 1 (2015).

[12] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* (Minnesota University Press, 2013), 47.

[13] "Viscosity," the first characteristic, refers to the honey-like character of a hyperobject. According to Morton, a hyperobject sticks to us, but when people interact with it, a hyperobject can change its shape and form (Morton, 2013, 27). "Nonlocality" and "Phasing," the other two characteristics, mean that hyperobjects are distributed across such vast areas that they cannot be perceived in their entirety, disabling humans ability to perceive causes and effects behind the functioning of them, as a result of what humans cannot know what part of the hyperobject they are witnessing (Morton, 2013, 38, 70). "Temporal undulation," the fourth characteristic, stands for planetary timeframes across which hyperobjects operate, a feature that, as Morton puts it, overwhelms human cognitive abilities (Morton, 2013, 57-58). Finally, the fifth characteristic, "Interobjectivity" describes that hyperobjects are not experienced directly, but rather through a mediator. For instance, it is the effects of tsunami, such as stormy sea, damaged trees and houses, broken power lines, which are seen and heard, but not the tsunami itself (Morton, 2013, 83-84). In Morton's words, various kinds of hyper entities affect all human activities including politics, economy, and ecology.

[14] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minnesota University Press, 2013), 184.

[15] Rosi Braidotti, "Teratologies," in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000), 172.

[16] Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, "Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream," *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, no. 1 (2015): 52.

[17] Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, "Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream," *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, no. 1 (2015): 51.

[18] Rosi Braidotti, "Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences". In *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs* (Zed Books, London, 1996): 135.

[19] Rosi Braidotti, "Teratologies". In *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000): 164.

[20] Rosi Braidotti, "Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences". In *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs* (Zed Books, London, 1996): 141.

[21] Agnė Sadauskaitė, "Invisible Structures. The cut of a stratosphere as a reflection of human values. An interview with the filmmaker Emilija Škarnulytė", *Echo Gone Wrong* (June 11, 2018): http://echogonewrong.com/invisible-structures-cut-stratosphere-reflection-human-values-interview-filmmaker-emilija-skarnulyte/

[22] Nadim Samman. "Sirenomelia. An interview with the filmmaker Emilija Škarnulytė. *Vdrome* (December 2, 2018): http://www.vdrome.org/emilija-skarnulyte/

[23] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006): 60.

[24] Karen Barad. "Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs,* 28/3, (2003): 810.

[25] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.": 815.

[26] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.": 824.

[27] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 10.

[28] Donna J. Haraway, "Foreword: Companion Species, Mis-recognition, and Queer Worlding." In *Queering the Non/Human.* (Ashgate, Burlington, 2008): xxiv.

[29] Donna J. Haraway, "Otherworldly Conversations, Terrain Topics, Local Terms." In *Material Feminisms.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008): 161.

[30] Timothy Morton, "We Are All Mermaids: QSO Lens, The Video," In

http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2016/10/we-are-all-mermaids-qso-lens-video-with.html