

# Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

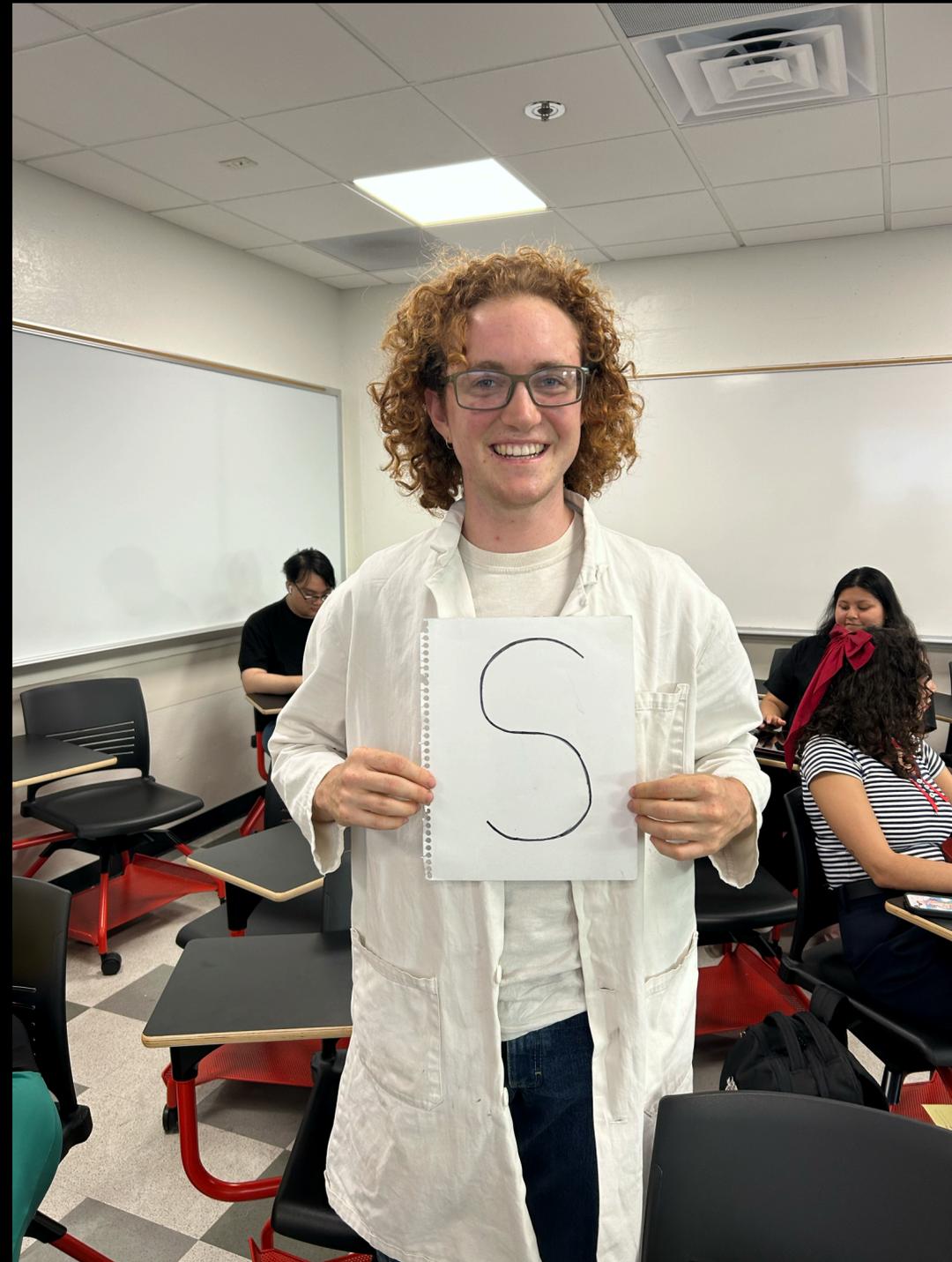
Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 19: Emilija Škarnulytė, *Sirenomelia* (2012)

# Halloween!



# Halloween!



Undergrad in an ECL class?  
Drop in for free tutoring from  
ECL's Writing Fellow!

# DROP-IN WRITING TUTORING

Raine Porath  
Office AL 232

Wed. 11:00pm – 2:00pm  
Thurs. 2:00pm – 4:00pm

No appointment needed!



# ADMIN

- Revision deadline 11/9
- Essay 2 deadline 11/16
- Thesis statement peer review on Thursday

# Essay 2 Pre-Writing

- WHAT object/text do you want to close read?
- WHY that object/text? What do you want to say about it? How does it operate?

# Midterm Evaluations responses

# 1) Reading order

- Yes. I like how we talked about Blue Humanities in the beginning of the semester and then revisited it with a new perspective.
- Yes. I feel that each creating builds into the next one in a way that feels cohesive and makes sense.

## 2) do the class meetings seem well structured?

- Yes, every class I leave is so much new information from the teacher and other students
- Yes. I really like the breakout groups and how discussion goes where we want to go
- I like that the class determines what we discuss
- Every class meeting is a lively conversation that offers a variety of perspectives on the readings
- Inspiring, yes!

# 3) do blogs facilitate learning?

- Yes! They give me an opportunity to think critically about our readings and learn from my peers
- Yes. They forced me to be prepared and I love that.
- Yes. The blogs help with writing more than content. I feel like the more I practice the more my writing improves.
- They forced me to think critically about the text and get my ideas out
- They allow each student to write and share what they think and feel about the readings
- It's very helpful to have a found foundation for what to talk about in class as well as an essay

## 4) what do you think you are learning?

- This class is helping me, understand the relationship with literally everything on earth
- Honing my literary analysis skills
- I think I'm learning about the ways in which humans have experienced the environment, specifically the ocean, through both fiction and non-fiction literature
- Learning so much. Close reading and writing analytical essays
- I'm having my eyes open to different perspectives

## 5) How does the class connect to other classes?

- I see a correlation between US ethnic literature, in terms of racial structures and environments
- I've been able to bring the writing aspect to other classes
- Intersectionality

## 6) What is your overall sense of the course?

- Inspiring. It gets my creative juices flowing.
- It's very fun and engaging- one of the most fulfilling classes ever
- Rigorous and unique- not just learning information about building a community
- I think it's incredibly engaging and relatively easy to keep up with
- The class is a really good job of making you think harder and deeper
- This course is so informative and bridges science, myth, and literature
- This course is a breath of fresh air, one that has taught me to embrace, different perspectives and look at the world in the new way

## 7) What is your overall sense of the professor?

- Amazing. I never feel scared to say the wrong thing.
- Very easy to reach in super helpful with feedback
- Your digital footprint is accurate! I understand your cult following
- The professor is very passionate about everything we talk about in class someone who is not just eager to teach, but to listen and learn from the students just as much as we learned from her
- She really cares about what her student students are taking from the class

# 8) Suggestions?

- More drafting collaboration days for the assignments
- More small group discussion like we did with the little mermaid
- Maybe more direct talking points for group discussions



# Emilija Škarnulytė “Sirenomelia”

Introduced by Nadim Samman

HD video, sound, 12 minutes

Year: 2017

Emilija Škarnulytė (b. Vilnius, Lithuania 1987) is an artist and filmmaker.

Working between documentary and the imaginary, Škarnulytė makes films and immersive installations exploring deep time and invisible structures, from the cosmic and geologic to the ecological and political. Her blind grandmother gently touches the weathered statue of a Soviet dictator. Neutrino detectors and particle colliders measure the cosmos with otherworldly architecture. Post-human species swim through submarine tunnels above the Arctic Circle and crawl through tectonic fault lines in the Middle Eastern desert.

Winner of the 2019 Future Generation Art Prize, Škarnulytė represented Lithuania at the XXII Triennale di Milano and was included in the Baltic Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Biennale of Architecture. With solo exhibitions at Tate Modern (2021), Kunsthaus Pasquart (2021), Den Frie (2021), National Gallery of Art in Vilnius (2021), CAC (2015) and Kunstlerhaus Bethanien (2017), she has participated in group shows at Ballroom Marfa, Seoul Museum of Art, Kadist Foundation, and the First Riga Biennial. In 2022, Škarnulytė participated in the group exhibition Penumbra organized by Fondazione In Between Art Film on the occasion of the 59th Venice Biennale. Her numerous prizes include the Kino der Kunst Project Award, Munich (2017); Spare Bank Foundation DNB Artist Award (2017), and the National Lithuanian Art Prize for Young Artists (2016)), and she was nominated as the candidate for the Ars Fennica art award

# Discussion

- What did you think?
- What do you want to discuss?
-

# From your blogs- sonic/audio

- JACKIE: The beginning of the video states the sound is “white noise” but I noticed that when the mermaid was in frame it sounded like a disruption in audio. Exemplifying a disruption in reasoning and belief of the reality that mermaids could exist.

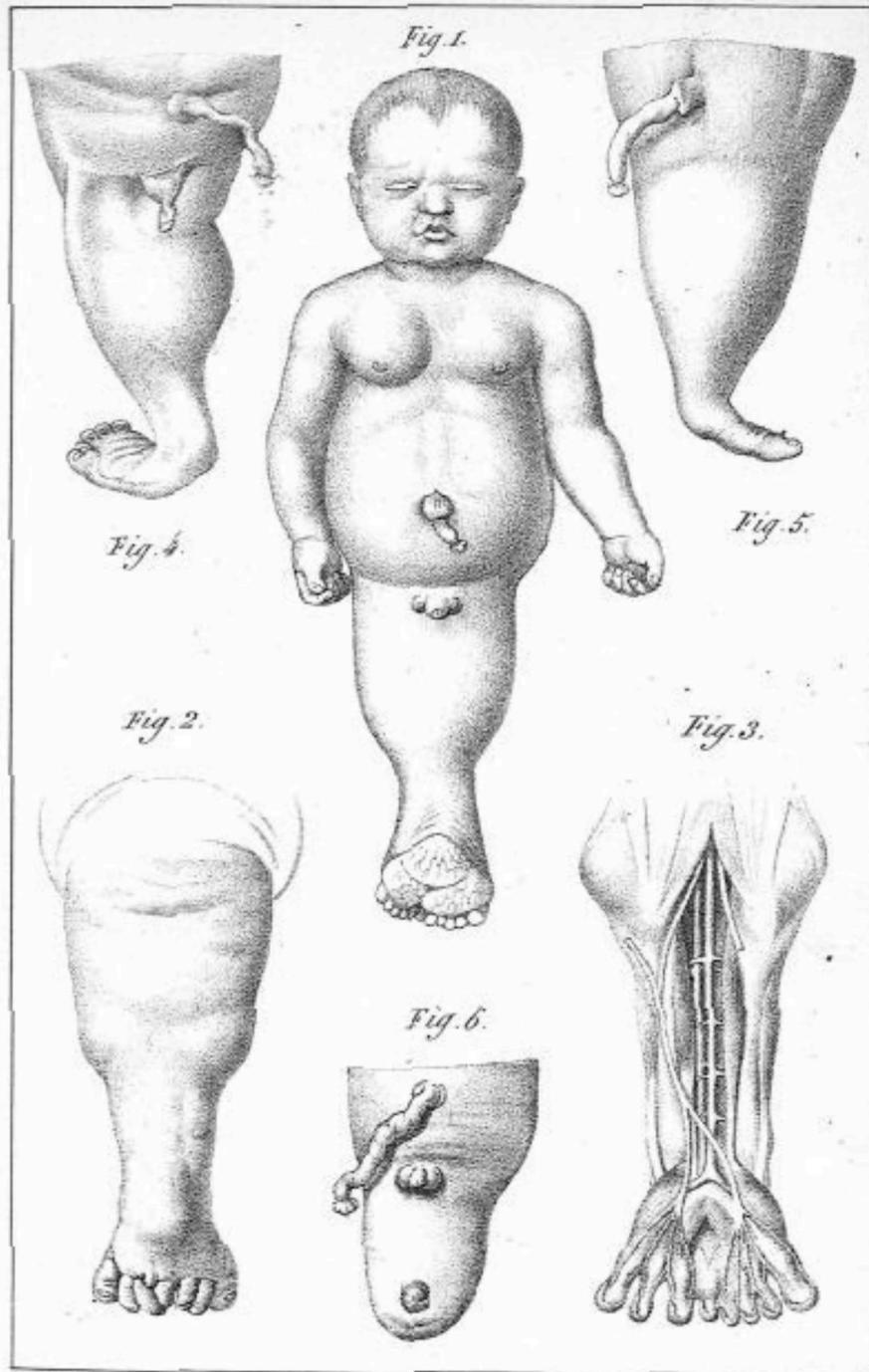
# From your blogs- mermaid as focal point

- KELLY: The militarization of the aquatic environment doesn't just affect humans, but also the beings that exist in that environment, who now have to deal with the aftermath of these deteriorating structures. It is the mermaid that is in control of what the audience sees as we flow through the different settings with her. Humans become the spectators as we watch the mermaid swim through the decommissioned base, making the mermaid and the environment that surrounds her the main characters of the film.

# Discussion

- Importance of the title?
-

*Monstruosité PL.V.*



*A. Chard.*

*Lith. de Bonard et Frey.*

*Fig. 1, 2 et 3. Symèle. Fig. 4 et 5. Uromèle. Fig. 6. Sirenomèle.*

# Maine girl born with 'mermaid syndrome' dies at 10

Oct 24, 2009



2009

# From your blogs- abnormal

- GALE: In any case, individuals with physical abnormalities are *monsterified*. They take on that role; non-human emblems, culturally imbued, figures which demonstrate something, make us aware of something, make us uncomfortable, demand our attention...Her mermaid is not disabled, she is not a medical miracle, and she is not a [guest on Oprah](#). But– she is also a monster. She operates to show us our world from a different angle– in fact, through this mermaid’s eyes, our “normal” world becomes as strange and fascinating as abnormal physiology. This defamiliarization (or distortion! 1:11) of things like satellite dishes (1:51), roads (2:43), and bridges (3:32) has a powerful effect; it allows us to bring everything to a level playing field– the human and nonhuman, the terrestrial and aquatic. Icebergs are as strange as ice-cutting ships.
- ADRIAN: As for the title, *Sirenomelia* refers to a real congenital condition in which a baby is born with fused legs and is often commonly referred to as “mermaid syndrome.” Naming the film after this condition sets the tone and encourages us to focus on the bodies that society may label as “abnormal”.

# From your blogs- abnormal

- JENNA: This made me realize that although human civilization may look strong and permanent from our own viewpoint, from nature's perspective it is fragile and temporary. This change in perspective shows how unstable the human order built upon nature really is.

# From your blogs- absence of humans

- ANNIE: We talked about borders with coastlines in Eric Paul Roorda's *The Ocean Reader* and in Helen Rodzwadoski's "Introduction: in *Vast Expanses: A History of the Oceans*. Both of these readings emphasize the relationships humans have cultivated with the oceans. Dismissive, but also aggressive. What I notice in *Sironomelia* is the absence of humans—and with it, the absence of destruction and greed. We see a mermaid traversing this abandoned base, and I speculate that the intention of the film was that it takes place in the near future, devoid of humans....*Sironomelia* tells the story of what kind of life prevails: humans are but a speck in comparison to the geological history of the Earth. But what does prevail is nature. What will prevail is the oceans

# Discussion

- Why ruins, why waste?
- Why military site?
-

# From your blogs- military ruins

- JESMOND: By using a decommissioned NATO base, it shows us that humans are responsible for maintaining the transgressions against nature that we call machinery/ industrialization, which we use to explore and learn about the ocean
- ANGIE: Emilija Škarnulytė's film Sirenomelia explores a distant imprint of humanity on the world's surface. In siren form, her exploration of the decommissioned NATO base in the Arctic circle, is as beautiful as it is haunting. This human construction is an abandoned effort by northern powers to position itself, and control movements between the northern nations. But it appears to us as remnants of an alien world, accompanied by quasar sounds, or noises of distant objects...The mermaid is perhaps our future selves, wading through our past and trying to decode our creations; **our legacy**. A
- GAVIN: Škarnulytė makes use of the mermaid—a reference to both the rare congenital condition of sirenomelia and also myth—as a symbol of transformation and survival that extends beyond notions of the human

“The siren is symbol and a counter-myth. She/they is like water in different states of matter, with molecules changing and expanding. She/they is mutilated. She/they is a cyborg, still linked to a human just merged with the fish, submarine, machine, and torpedo. The siren posits possible post-human mythologies.”

- Emilija Škarnulytė in an interview with Nadim Samman at *Vdrome*

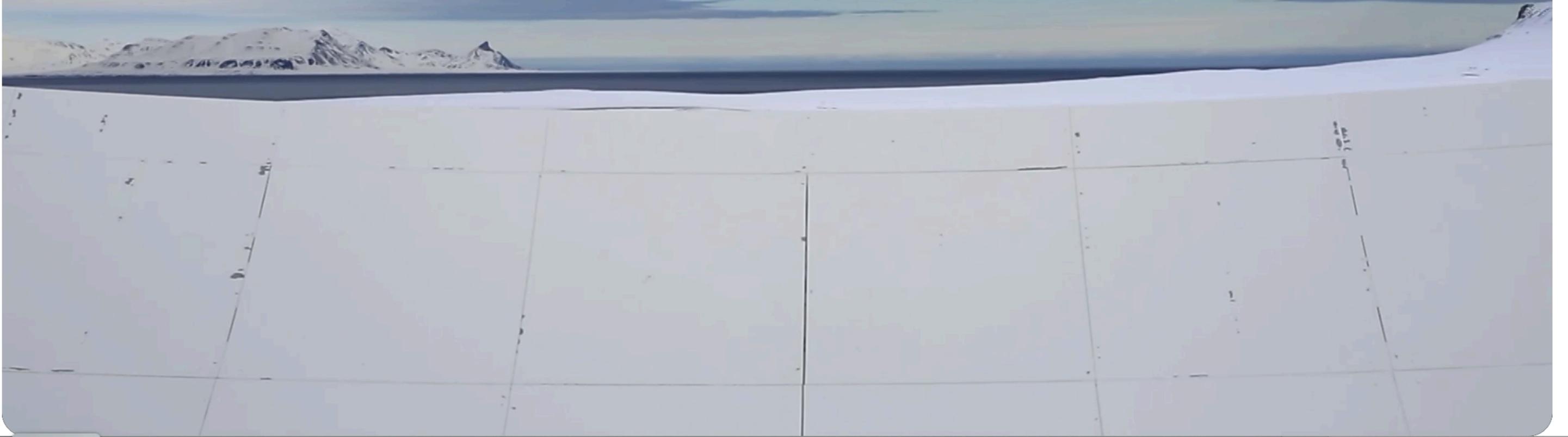


**LOCATION** / classified, 25,000m<sup>2</sup> decommissioned NATO submarine base above the Arctic Circle.

**LONGITUDE - LATITUDE** / 77.8750°N, 20.9752°E

**WATER TEMPERATURE** / 2 °C

**WHITE NOISE SOUND** / quasars sound recorded at Norwegian Mapping Authority Geodetic Observatory, Spitsbergen.







# The mermaid



Video Art Visions: Sirenomelia



Watch later



Share



4:25 / 6:11



YouTube



# Orientation



Video Art Visions: Sirenomelia



Watch later



Share



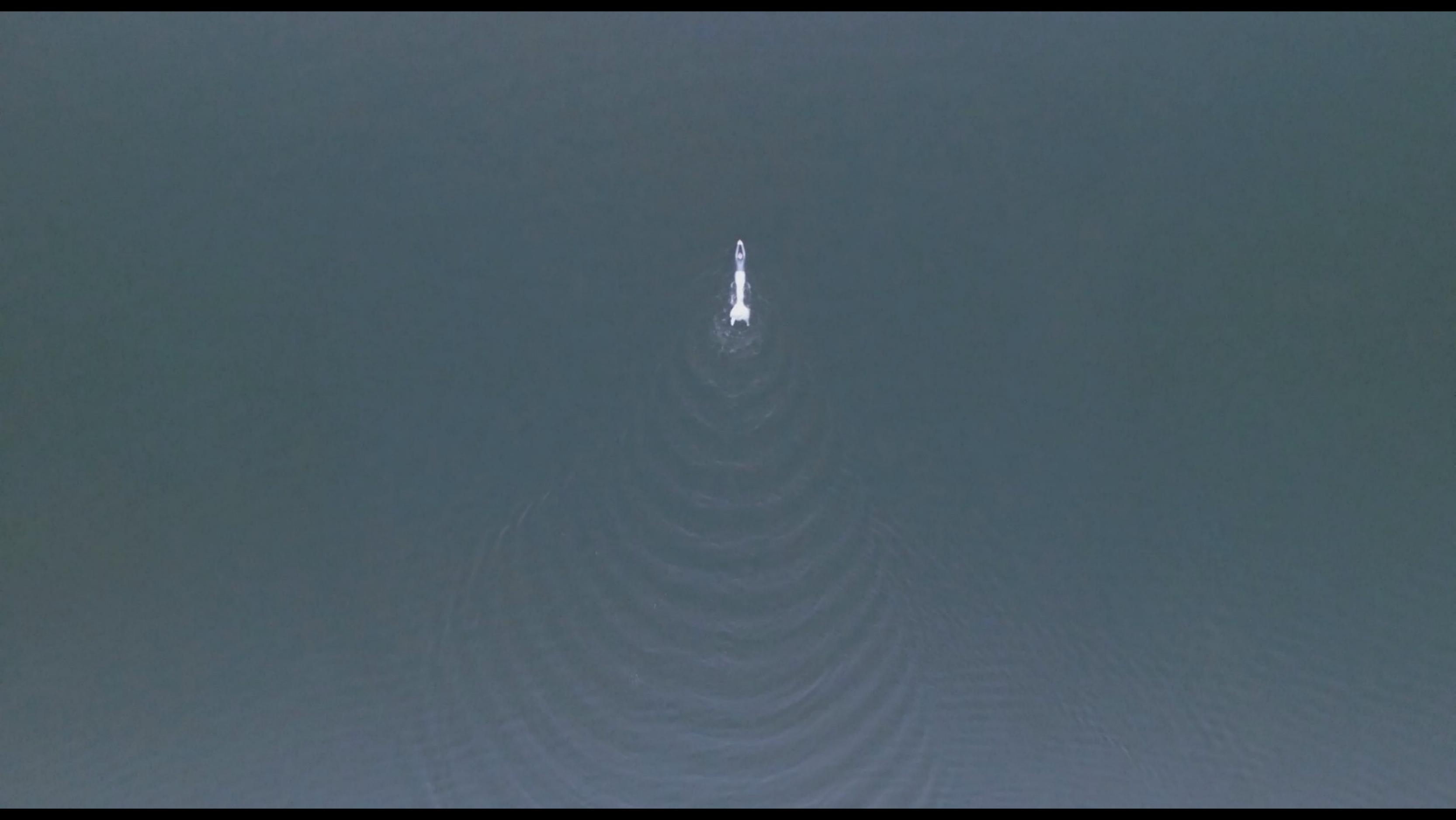
3:14 / 6:11



YouTube













# Take aways?

- What does this film add to our learning, discussion, process?