

**The Truth of the Matter: a Letter to Emilija Škarnulytė regarding her film *Mirror Matter***  
(unpublished essay commissioned for a book by Emilija Škarnulytė and Andrew Berardini, ed.)

By Patrick J. Reed

Emilija, I did something terrible. Emilija, I followed a whim. I strayed from the path set by your directive, the one that said “reflect on the aspect of sound *specifically*.” I profaned your work, perverting your intentions. I confess: I muted your videos and watched them sound synched to *James Bond* theme songs à la the Dark Side of the Rainbow, à la a stoner’s game.

I silenced the gentle, albeit chthonic, soundtracks that you crafted with precision from cosmic noise, and replaced them with the dulcet tones of, for example, “Nobody Does It Better” because the Internet made my blasphemy possible and because, to a greater degree, your digital representation of the Super-Kamiokande Neutrino Observatory in *Mirror Matter* (2017) reminded me of a Bond villain’s hideout. Think Ernst Stavro Blofeld’s volcano lair in *You Only Live Twice* (1967) or Tiago “Raoul Silva” Rodriguez’s effortless occupation of Hashima Island in *Skyfall* (2012). I admit that my heart ached when Carly Simon sang “the way that you hold me, whenever you hold me, there’s some kind of magic inside you...” as your LIDAR scans of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, also in *Mirror Matter*, glided across the screen, and that I fully submitted to the pareidolic thrill of watching a factory building collapse in time with Radiohead’s (rejected) titled song for *Spectre* (2015).<sup>1</sup> “I’m lost, I’m a ghost,” crooned Thom Yorke as the I-beams fell.

I suppose, in part and against my better judgment, I’m talking about my youth in the American heartland, rife with Blofelds, Xenia Onatopps, and microstate casinos tumbling from the television into the Christmas living room. No inkling of true Soviet spectres crossed my dreams; no notion of a post-Soviet experience, just camp malfeasance out to kill a sexy man.

Watching these films now, I appreciate them, counterintuitively, for their melancholia. 007 slides across time, never aging, only slightly morphing throughout the canon, per the logic of a decades-old franchise. His dear ones pass, but he lives on in a state of perpetual reiteration. His enemies modernize, proliferate, sometimes reincarnate in tuned-up form like he himself does. For this perennial spy, there really is no time to die; he is exempt from the linearity of mortal time. His trials never end.

Afflicted with eternal life, Bond has no recourse but to perform the role assigned him. Kill. Fornicate. Repeat. He is beholden to cinematic laws that decree he will always play the man called “Bond.” He can be nothing else. If I had had my druthers, I would have concluded the franchise with *Spectre*, and peaceably recut the film to solely consist of the dreamy train sequence, *sans* fight scene, that occurs midway. I would have looped the sequence to keep Bond (played by Daniel Craig) and Dr. Madeleine Swann (played by Léa Seydoux) in love and dining and making love, on a train racing across the low-sun desert, forever.

Your films, with their commingled footage of sites both ancient and of our own time, bear the mark of similar melancholy. Through their intentionally remote gaze, all architecture—from an Etruscan cemetery to a Lithuanian nuclear power plant to hyperborean villages nested among snowy foothills—becomes a mythical ruin, which is to say, an eternal space attuned to deep time. Deep time: deep absence ten thousand years from now without

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<sup>1</sup> Carly Simon, “Nobody Does It Better,” YouTube video, 3:32, May 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWWwKDtHnM>.

anyone alive to appreciate it. I dissociated once and had a vision of the future, about as far forward as thousand years. I perceived menhirs in a field of long yellow grasses bent by gusting wind. Maybe those stones are the remains of one of your favored locales, of CERN.

Not normally am I so forthright about personal matters, but our mutual quarantine scenario wrought by COVID-19 has loosed something in me. My hounds of mind wander free in the realm of your ideas; still, Bond films and Pink Floyd? Ridiculous. I would have never... But what is the dark side of the moon anyway?<sup>2</sup> The netherworld, another world, a cistern beneath a mountain.

In *Mirror Matter*, your basanite work exploring what you call “contemporary science from a retro-futurist perspective,” a canal tunnel opens into the water tank of a defunct Super-Kamiokande, a cylindrical cavern studded with tens of thousands of hemispherical photomultiplier tubes, which resemble cabochons rather than high-tech light sensors. Through animation technology you have drained the devices of their topaz glow and substituted obsidian hues, indicating prolonged dormancy and perhaps an underlying skepticism about the eventual benefits of their wondrous function. From a retro-futurist perspective, one is compelled to ask: was the epic human ingenuity all for naught? I first saw *Mirror Matter* in 2017 at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. I thought then, as I do now, that its depiction of Super-K recalls a grand sepulchre, like that of Arnold Böcklin’s *Die Toteninsel* (Isle of the Dead). Therefore, the answer to my question seems to be *yes*. Deep time doesn’t give a shit about human neutrino play.

In *Die Toteninsel*, two figures (and a possible third concealed within a bier) approach a sea-stack tomb through dark waters. Metaphorically speaking, their boat correlates to Charon’s ferry, the transport to Hades. Metaphorically speaking, so too does the raft that floats upon the black pool in *your* Super-K. That Böcklin produced five versions of his Symbolist painting during the 1880s and permitted countless more during the ensuing years by distribution of fine print reproductions only enriches the cache of populist images reiterating doom ad infinitum. I wonder if your frequent reuse of the Super-K footage in other films contributes to that custom as well—a custom that employs repetition as a palliative for existential angst, i.e. the custom of prayer and song and myth.

Böcklin’s isle, though fictive, is likely modeled on a synthesis of examples that evoke the ancient world. Romantic sources for a painter swayed by Romanticism. Etruscan necropolises, like those featured in your film about radioactive half-life *T 1/2* (2019), comprise one possible source. Strombolicchio, the volcanic plug off the coast of Stromboli, comprises another. Local lore claims that it constitutes one half of the legendary “Wandering Rocks” (the other half being Stromboli) that crush all but the most blessed nautical vessels. I was also told that the sea stack is inhabited by sirens and somewhere in the lineage of sea monsters, sirens and mermaids are one and the same.

You transformed into a mermaid on several occasions as a means of calling attention to the shipwreck that might soon be, possibly now is, planet Earth. I have seen the metamorphosis documented in *T 1/2* and in the video installation *No Place Rising* (2015), wherein a mutant mermaid (played by you) examines Cold War labyrinths in Arctic waters and symbolically reclaims the ocean from ideological conflict simply by being there to witness it with indifferent eyes. The former ends with an oft cited moment when your hybrid body swims out to sea. The

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<sup>2</sup> See you there!

scene illustrates, in the geometrical sense, the principle of a ray: your trajectory crosses limitless waters, never to return. Mermaid-you is time incarnate.

I saw Strombolicchio once, from a tour boat. We passed it en route to a volcano. For the longest time I have been unable to accurately describe the experience. Words eluded me, but I know them finally, thanks to you. My encounter with the two hundred thousand year-old crag was like that of a being who can only wonder at what lies before it. Faced with something so very old that is garnished with something so representative of human fragility as a lighthouse, I felt profound estrangement akin to the posthuman scrutiny so central to your own work. I had assumed (without knowing it) an “alien archaeological perspective.”



Included here are stills from a video I took at Strombolicchio. They function as a buffer to a second confession, in which I admit to muting the audio of my own video and watching the footage in tandem with the soundtrack of *Mirror Matter*. I wanted to relive the otherness I found in the Tyrrhenian Sea. I sought evidence of truth in the memory matter, that it was not just the Mediterranean sun confusing my sensitivities. I suspected your soundscapes would catalyze its return.

A drip aborted the experiment almost immediately. A drip not seen but heard fifty-one seconds into *Mirror Matter*, and again seven second later, and again not long after that. An imagined drip in an imagined cistern shunted me out of one (self-indulgent) reverie and into another, where the patient staccato of water falling into water signals a melting glacier and a thaw before the equinox. Ripples to infinity. The truth of another matter.

Your sounds are fused to your images, a fact I should have acknowledged before I indulged in remixing diversions. One cannot separate from the other; the relationship between the two is like that between two sides of a paper sheet, like perfume in the air. Inextricable. If only the same could be said of most moving image works or even twenty-first-century life in general, what with the ubiquitous earbud superimposing arbitrary synchronicity on daily routine. Not everyone is so careful with their sensations. Alas, nobody does it *t/2* as good as you.

Baby, you're the best.

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March 2020