

The Immersive Experience of the Era of Nuclear Energy in Emilija Škarnulytė's Ecodocumentary *Burial* (2022)

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The article examines Emilija Škarnulytė's essay documentary *Burial* (*Kapinytas*, 2022) and its unique approach to engaging the audience with the themes of nature, atomic energy, and the nuclear era. It discusses how immersive techniques of aural and visual narrative, consisting of visual and acoustic material from diverse sources, such as images of former uranium mines in Kowary, the decommissioned Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, The Industrial Centre for Geological Disposal in France, fragments of paintings by Lithuanian symbolist M. K. Čiurlionis, Cold War-era television and radio footage, computer-generated 3D images of atoms and uranium ore, and ambient music, can stimulate emotional and intellectual responses to its subject, even though there are no characters to identify with and no clear plot or strong rhetorical devices to direct the viewer. The use of immersive technologies in Škarnulytė's film creates the sense of a "living" environment experienced in "real time," drawing on terms introduced by Oliver Grau (2003). The article's conclusions are based on a close examination of the film's style and narrative, as well as theoretical work on immersive films and media by Oliver Grau (2003) and Kerric Harvey (2012). The concepts of ecocinema (Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010), eco-cosmopolitan cinema (Ursula K. Heise, 2008), and the essay film (Laura Rascaroli, 2017) are chosen as the theoretical framework for analysing *Burial*.

Keywords: Emilija Škarnulytė, Lithuanian cinema, ecocinema, nonfiction film, essay documentary, immersive narrative.

Prologue

The last decade of Lithuanian cinema has seen a rise in films exploring the relationship between humans, nature, and the posthuman world,¹ which is a general trend in global cinema and an indicator of, as Paula Willoquet-Maricondi puts it, “the emerging genre of ecocinema,” which challenges and expands “audiences’ perception and understanding of the complex world that surrounds us.”² These films circulate successfully in national and international film markets and are exhibited in art galleries and museums, prompting reflection and debate on various environmental issues. Emilija Škarnulytė, a Lithuanian-born, internationally renowned visual artist and filmmaker whose works have been featured at major venues worldwide, including the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Busan International Short Film Festival, Venice Biennale of Architecture, The Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Tate Modern, the Centre Pompidou, among others, consistently explores various earth and environment-related themes such as ecology, geology, Cold War military and nuclear energy legacy, deep time, cultural strata, and outer space. Škarnulytė’s visually and sonically stunning essayistic films seamlessly blend poetics, aesthetics, scientific knowledge, and immersive technologies in their narratives, aiming “to show the scars we have done to our planet”³ and reveal “invisible structures” (the term she uses for objects of interest, such as mines, military infrastructure, atoms, energy, and the like)⁴ of our industrial

- 1 For instance, the documentaries: *Šaltos ausys* [*Dead Ears*] (dir. Linas Mikuta, 2016), *Sen-girė* [*The Ancient Woods*] (dir. Mindaugas Survila, 2017), *Animus Animalis (Istorija apie žmones, žvėris ir daiktus)* [*Animus Animalis (A Story About People, Animals and Things)*] (dir. Aistė Žegulytė, 2018), *Rūgštus miškas* [*Acid Forest*] (dir. Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, 2018), *Sirenomelia* (dir. Emilija Škarnulytė, 2018), *t ½*, (dir. Emilija Škarnulytė, 2019), *Pasienio paukščiai* [*Before They Meet*] (dir. Vytautas Puidokas, 2021), *Kapinynas* [*Burial*] (dir. Emilija Škarnulytė, 2022).
- 2 Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, “Shifting Paradigms: From Environmentalist Films to Ecocinema,” in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 45.
- 3 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by Virginija Majorovienė, “Videomenininkė Emilija Škarnulytė ne kartą rizikavo asmeniniu saugumu: man patiktų būti karo žurnaliste,” *Moteris*, <https://www.moteris.lt/lt/veidai/g-49866-videomenininke-emilija-skarnulyte-ne-karta-rizikavo-asmeniniu-saugumu-man-patiktu-buti-karo-zurnaliste>.
- 4 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by Rosana Lukauskaitė, “Every Pixel Is Like Clay That Can Be Used to Create Space”, January 22, <https://vilniusbiennial.com/en/artist-emilija-skar-nulyte-every-pixel-is-like-clay-that-can-be-used-to-create-space/>.

and scientific revolution. In her artistic research, Škarnulytė adopts the perspective of a future archaeologist to navigate between the aforementioned thematic clusters, examining geological layers of earth and water and the “scars on the earth” left behind by humans, and ultimately concludes that the world is “becoming like one big graveyard.”⁵ Posthumanism and environmentalism are central to her work, with these themes particularly vividly explored in *Aphotic Zone* (2022), *Burial* (2022), *t ½*, (2019), *Sirenomelia* (2018), *Energy Island* (2016), and *Aldona* (2012).

Škarnulytė’s works engage audiences emotionally and intellectually, despite the absence of identifiable characters, clear plots, or overt rhetorical devices to guide the viewer’s opinion. This deliberate artistic strategy aligns with her posthumanist, future archaeologist perspective: “the archaeologist of the future does not judge, but only tries to understand, see and feel.”⁶ According to the artist, “evaluation and judgement imply humanity”; therefore, her goal is to ask questions, offering the viewer alternative perspectives.⁷

Lithuanian film scholars consider Škarnulytė’s artistic style and her approach to environmental and related problems unique. Lukas Brašiškis, for example, notes that Škarnulytė’s films are “poetic, yet scientifically informed”; they “engage non-human temporalities, invisible architectures and systems of power, as well as processes of geoengineering” and even contain some characteristics of eco-feminist art, as the artist puts on the costume of a mermaid and immerses herself in the non-human environment in the case of *Sirenomelia*.⁸ Meanwhile, Mantė Valiūnaitė describes her artistic approach in *Burial* and other works as fostering a new sensitivity to ecological problems, albeit without relying on factual arguments or apportioning blame. According to Valiūnaitė, this sensitivity is cultivated through

5 “Emilija Škarnulytė, Main Prize winner of the Future Generation Art Prize 2019,” *Future Generation Art Prize 2019*, YouTube video, 2:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyJdVpiIS-8>.

6 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by Rosana Lukauskaitė.

7 Ibid.

8 Lukas Brašiškis, “Ekofeministinis žvilgsnis į Šaltąjį karą, arba Undinė su kino kamera,” in *Fokuse: moterys Lietuvos kine*, ed. Natalija Arlauskaitė and Lina Kaminskaitė (Vilnius: Lapas, 2021), 301; Lukas Brasiskis, “Mermaid With A Movie Camera: Performing The Cold War Past Eco-Critically,” *The Cine-Files*, no. 14 (Spring 2019), <https://www.the-cine-files.com/brasiskis/>.

a journey involving visual and sound material, compelling the viewer to seek answers to the questions posed by the artist. She also points out that Škarnulytė's films are not activist in nature; rather, they prioritize creating a compelling narrative and speaking from a human perspective.⁹ Art historian Linara Dovydaitytė examines Škarnulytė's film *Energy Island* (2017) in the context of other works created on the site of the decommissioned Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in Visaginas, Lithuania. She argues that artworks from "the so-called second atomic era" primarily address "the invisible effects of the nuclear industry on human lives and the local and planetary environment."¹⁰ According to Dovydaitytė, Škarnulytė's work explores "the very materiality of industrial systems and contaminated spaces as leftovers of human activity that will eventually become part of the planet's geological structure." She emphasizes the importance of "the poetic visual narrative" in Škarnulytė's film, allowing the audience to perceive industrial materials through the lens of a future archaeologist. Meanwhile, Eglė Rindzevičiūtė argues that Škarnulytė employs existentialist creative strategies by engaging with technological complexities, physically immersing herself in a technological context, and constructing an emotionally resonant visual register (as seen in *Sirenomelia*), or uses emotions to draw society's attention to pressing issues such as nuclear energy and radioactive waste (as exemplified by *Burial*). She believes that "Škarnulytė's works do not define a specific point of interpretation – they are performative, pluralistic stagings of experience."¹¹

This article, in contrast, examines Škarnulytė's immersive nonfiction film *Burial* and its aesthetic and emotional engagement with the realms of nature, atoms, and the era of nuclear energy, thus addressing critical environmental issues currently discussed in science, art, and media, including the pressure from human activity on the environment, global warming, the need to reduce fossil fuel consumption, and the search for alternative

- 9 Mantė Valiūnaitė, *Hibridiškumas kine: teorinė samprata, kino festivaliai ir Lietuvos dokumentinių filmų atvejai* [Hybridity in Cinema: Theoretical Concept, Film Festivals and Lithuanian Documentary Film Cases], PhD diss. (Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, 2024), 98.
- 10 Linara Dovydaitytė, "(Re)Imagining the Nuclear in Lithuania Following the Shutdown of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 53, no. 3 (2022): 410, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2022.2072919>.
- 11 Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, "Atliepant ateities žvilgsnį: pliuralistinės patirčių orkestruotės Emilijos Škarnulytės kūryboje," *Lietuvos nacionalinio dailės muziejaus metraštis*, 24 (2023): 82–83.

energy sources, even a potential return to nuclear energy. The article also analyses how ecocentric and earth-centred (as opposed to anthropocentric) perspectives on these issues are conveyed in the film. Unlike the aforementioned Lithuanian scholars who have studied Škarnulytė's work, this article approaches *Burial* not only within the theoretical framework of ecocinema but also within the framework of personal, essayistic, and immersive cinema. The author aligns with Paula Willoquet-Maricondi's ideas that every text – “whether linguistic or imagistic” – represents the perceptions of its author, suggesting that studying these texts can reveal human “values and culturally constructed beliefs about the nonhuman world.”¹²

The theoretical framework of ecocinema

Ecomedia and ecocinema studies are relatively recent but rapidly expanding fields of research that have developed a foundational body of works¹³ defining key concepts and directions for further academic debate. The term “ecocinema” has emerged to describe films that focus on environmental themes and explicitly address a wide range of ecological issues, either by examining the relationship between humans and non-humans, man-made ecological problems, pollution, toxic industries, and environmental disasters, or by focusing on environmental ethics and aesthetics, animal studies, sustainability, post-humanism, and similar themes. As a

12 Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, “Introduction: From Literary to Cinematic Ecocriticism,” in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 5.

13 Scott Macdonald, “Toward an Eco-Cinema,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 11, no. 2 (2004): 107–32; David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004); Sean Cubitt, *EcoMedia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005); Pat Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in American Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005); Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä, *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013); Helen Hughes, *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014); Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, *Ecomedia: Key Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* (New York: Routledge, 2023), among other works.

media category, ecocinema cuts across genres and modes of production, encompassing full-length and short fiction, documentary, and experimental films/videos. Due to the lack of a uniform definition for ecocinema – also referred to as “green cinema” or “ecocritical cinema” – this section aims to outline prevailing perspectives to avoid standardising this relatively new film category. Especially when, as Stephen Rust and Salma Monani rightly pointed out, scholars who study ecocritical environmental issues in films, hold “diverse, perhaps even conflicting, opinions about what ecocinema is exactly.”¹⁴

A scholarly consensus identifies the volume *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, edited by Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, as one of the first comprehensive, interdisciplinary works on ecocinema. Willoquet-Maricondi’s chapter, “Shifting Paradigms: From Environmentalist Films to Ecocinema,”¹⁵ is still frequently quoted and discussed because it aims to define ecocinema and to differentiate it from environmentalist films. She provides a rather broad definition of the term “ecocinema,” suggesting that ecocinema can be distinguished from environmentalist films by examining the differences in values reflected in the films and an anthropocentric and an ecocentric worldview. “The ecocentric values,” she claims, “to be found in ecocinema constitute a paradigm shift, that is, a shift in the way we regard the place and function of humans on the planet and the way we value ecosystems.”¹⁶ This shift signifies the move from “an anthropocentric worldview to an earth-centered, or ecocentric, view in which the ecosphere, rather than merely the human sphere, is taken as the central value (...).”¹⁷ In her view, environmentalist films contain a specific environmental or political agenda (which is quite common in certain Hollywood films) that tends to adopt a pro-environmental, pro-conservation and pro-sustainability stance, but they “affirm” rather than “challenge” the “anthropocentric ethos” that is central to our culture.¹⁸ This definition aligns with David

14 Stephen Rust and Salma Monani, “Introduction: Cuts to Dissolves—Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies,” in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

15 Willoquet-Maricondi, “Shifting Paradigms: From Environmentalist Films to Ecocinema,” 43–61.

16 Ibid, 45.

17 Ibid, 46.

18 Ibid, 47.

Ingram's perspective in *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood*, where he refers to an environmentalist film as "a work in which an environmental issue is raised explicitly and is central to the narrative. Such a film is at one end of a continuum that includes, at the other, the vast majority of films in which representations of the environment serve merely as a background to the central human drama."¹⁹

Willoquet-Maricondi claims that ecocinema, unlike environmentalist films, encompasses a broader spectrum of cinematic works, including feature films, short fiction films, documentaries, experimental films and videos, which can "cultivate our perception of ecological and environmental issues through different approaches." These films range from lyrical and contemplative narratives that foster the viewer's appreciation of nature's components to those with explicit activist intentions that "inspire our care, inform, educate, and motivate us to act on the knowledge they provide," often without imposing a one-sided environmental or political agenda on the audience.²⁰ She points out that the category of ecocinema also includes "those films that in a broader, more philosophical way compel us to reflect upon what it means to inhabit this planet: that is, to be a member of the planetary ecosystem or 'ecosphere' (...)"²¹ Scott MacDonald articulates similar ideas in his renowned text "Toward an Eco-Cinema"²² and its revised version, "The Ecocinema Experience,"²³ in which he discusses the potential of experimental, avant-garde, and slow art-house films based on the key study of selected films,²⁴ to stimulate the audience's ecological awareness through reflexivity:

I see these, and other related works, as instances of an "ecocinema," primarily because each offers audiences a depiction of the natural world within a

19 Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood*, vii.

20 Ibid, 45.

21 Willoquet-Maricondi, "Introduction: From Literary to Cinematic Ecocriticism," 10.

22 Scott MacDonald, "Toward an Eco-Cinema," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2004), 107–132.

23 Scott MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience," in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, edited by Stephen Rust et al., (New York: Routledge, 2013), 17–41.

24 For instance, Andrej Zdravic, *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons* (1997), Peter Hutton's *Study of a River* (1996) and *Time and Tide* (2000), James Benning's *Deseret* (1995), *Sogobi* (2001), and *13 Lakes* (2004), J. P. Sniadecki's *Songhua* (2007), and Sharon Lockhart's *Double Tide* (2010).

cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness – qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment. These films and videos are the inverse of the fundamentally hysterical approach of commercial media, and advertising in particular, where consumption of the maximum number of images per minute models unbridled consumption of products and the unrestrained industrial exploitation of the environment within which these.²⁵

In this way, MacDonald, like Willoquet-Maricondi, assigns value and aesthetic criteria to ecocinema. In particular, he favours long takes, the absence of music, a slow, fragmented narrative structure, and a reduction of the human point of view to create an ecocinema experience that differs from audiovisual works intended for commercial distribution. He claims that watching such ecocinematic films helps to educate the viewer's perception and "foster a more environmentally progressive mindset."²⁶ Pat Brereton and David Ingram, who have conducted extensive research on the green/ecological direction in Hollywood films since the 1950s, which flourished in the 1990s,²⁷ question the distinction between different types of films and their styles in relation to ecocinema and its impact on the audience. For Brereton, "it is much more beneficial to broadly accept that all types of film, from the excesses of a commercial Hollywood blockbuster, alongside the most rarefied and explicitly ecological art-house film, can consciously or unconsciously foreground ecological issues and help situate these concerns within the general public consciousness."²⁸ He sees Hollywood films as an effective educational and promotional tool for a wide audience, working through a "loosely educational and ethical agenda, particularly through the use of ecological/mythic expression, evidenced in a range of narrative closures."²⁹ These opinions on the new categories of ecocinema and environmentalist films, as well as various audiovisual works associated with them,

25 MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience," 19.

26 Ibid, 20.

27 Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood*; Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in American Cinema*.

28 Brereton, "Cinema, Ecology and Environment," in *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication*, ed. Anders Hansen and Robert Cox (New York: Routledge, 2015), 258.

29 Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in American Cinema*, 11.

illustrate the intensity of debates taking place in film studies during the first and second decades of the 21st century.

When addressing ecocentric and environmental issues in film, there is a growing emphasis on expanding the perspective from local to global, even planetary. Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä, in their volume *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation*, argue for a holistic, inclusive, and transnational ecocinema criticism that emphasizes the need for “analytical frameworks beyond nations,” “critical interventions,” and “the ability to navigate between a range of different cinematic paradigms” regardless of formal qualities.³⁰ Transnational ecofilms should focus on “the world at large” as “it concerns us all,” rather than confining themselves to specific national or local phenomena.³¹ The scholars point out that this transnational perspective requires broadening the understanding beyond simplistic concepts of a nation, and cultural and economic processes. However, to reach a point where “transnational ecocinema emerges as a useful interrogative synergy,” one must remain aware of the contradictory and multidirectional forms of rhetoric that shape contemporary film culture.³² Ecocinema has undoubtedly become an international and transnational phenomenon, offering a deterritorialized and cosmopolitan planetary perspective, which Ursula K. Heise discusses in her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. She argues that contemporary communities are dynamic and “deterritorialized” and no longer defined by geographical location, so the situation of “rapidly increasing connections around the globe” is favourable for cosmopolitan ecological awareness and environmental ethics.³³ Based on these arguments, Heise introduces a new conceptual framework of “eco-cosmopolitanism” for simultaneously studying local environmental and ecological issues in the broader context of the planetary ecosystem.

Cosmopolitan perspectives in ecocinema enhance awareness of the global risks associated with technological, scientific, and industrial development – ranging from local to planetary levels – which have a toxic impact

30 Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä, *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation*, 4–5.]

31 Ibid., 7.

32 Ibid., 10.

33 Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 55.

on the planet and contribute to global crises and environmental disasters. The advent of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons exemplifies such developments that have led to the Anthropocene and an increased awareness of global risks. Heise aptly dedicates a chapter in her book to the Chernobyl disaster and its global consequences, arguing that Chernobyl “turned into a truly transnational risk scenario” not only because “the radioactive fallout crisscrossed national borders,” but also due to “information flows about the event.”³⁴ All major national and regional environmental and industrial disasters – such as the Bhopal chemical accident (1984) and the nuclear accidents at Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011) – have long-lasting effects on populations “that are geographically, politically, and socially distant from the places where these risks originate.”³⁵ Consequently, nuclear energy has emerged as one of the central themes and concerns of many recent feature films and documentaries.³⁶ Proponents of nuclear energy point to its low-carbon nature, which could help to reduce CO2 emissions, while opponents cite safety concerns and environmental risks associated with technology and nuclear waste. Nuclear energy also carries the negative legacy of the Cold War, fears of global nuclear conflict, and accidents at nuclear power plants. Cinema and other mass media influence these perceptions by framing the subject in ways that highlight its global impact. Framing involves identifying or representing problems, making moral judgements, and suggesting solutions. Frames emerge in social interactions and are part of the shared memories, stories, beliefs, and values familiar to a large group.

34 Ibid., 179.

35 Ibid., 53.

36 For instance, nuclear energy is depicted as both a stunning and terrifying scientific discovery in biographical dramas about American scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer and his role in the development of the atomic bomb, notably in *Radioactive* (dir. Marjane Satrapi, 2019) and *Oppenheimer* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2023), as well as in documentaries such as *Oppenheimer: The Real Story* (dir. Robin Bextor, 2023), *To End All War: Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb* (dir. Christopher Cassel, 2023). Another significant theme is the impact of nuclear energy on global climate change and its effects on human health and lives, as seen in the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* (dir. Johan Renck, 2019) and the TV miniseries *The Days* depicting the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident of 2011 (dir. Masaki Nishiura and Hideo Nakata 2023). *Chernobyl Heart* (dir. Maryann DeLeo, 2023), an Academy Award-winning documentary, focuses on children born after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster who suffer from a deteriorated heart condition. Meanwhile, documentaries such as *Nuclear Now* (dir. Oliver Stone, 2022) and *Planet of the Humans* (dir. Jeff Gibbs, prod. Michael Moore, 2019) advocate for nuclear energy.

The conceptualization of ecocinema and eco-cosmopolitanism in this section establishes a theoretical framework for the analysis of Škarnulytė's experimental ecodocumentary *Burial*, which explicitly transcends local ecological and environmental issues and delves into the haunting history of the nuclear industry in Lithuania and worldwide. This film falls into the sub-category of ecofilms, which Willoquet-Maricondi describes as contemplative and philosophical, encouraging reflection on what it means to be part of the planetary ecosystem.

Burial: an immersive, eco-cosmopolitan documentary essay

Škarnulytė's *Burial* invites the viewer to reflect on prehistoric times and the future of the planet in the context of scientific and industrial progress, which since modern times has steadily increased the speed and consumption of energy resources for various industries and other needs, irrevocably changing the planet's ecosystem and reducing biodiversity. However, this film is not an "energo-critical" or "ecocritical" documentary produced in an "expository" or "authoritative"³⁷ style with persuasive arguments and rhetorical devices aimed to convince the viewer of its truth, as was the case with the commercially successful film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, directed by Davis Guggenheim). *Burial* chooses a poetic-reflexive approach. As Ib Bondebjerg notes, this style encompasses characteristics such as "reality seen through aesthetic form," "symbolic montage, metalevels, expressive, subjective form," "form driven reality experience, the poetics of reality, framing reality," and "challenging reality concepts and traditional doc-forms,"³⁸ all of which can be found in Škarnulytė's film. This prototype of the documentary film also shares common features with the essay film, which Timothy Corrigan concisely characterizes as "a short documentary subject," "the lack of a dominant narrative organization," and "the interaction of a

37 These terms, as defined by Bill Nichols and Ib Bondebjerg, characterize a type of documentary that employs a linear narrative, epistemic authority, and compelling arguments (statistical data, expert opinion, testimonies, archival material, verbal commentaries, etc.) to persuade the audience to adopt the filmmakers' proposed point of view. For further reading, see Ib Bondebjerg, *Engaging with Reality. Documentary and Globalization* (Bristol/Chicago: Intellect, 2014) and Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

38 Ib Bondebjerg, *Engaging with Reality*, 16.

personal voice or vision.”³⁹ In fact, all of these features can be found in *Burial*, including the artist’s personal connection to the story and a special interest in nuclear energy, linked to her grandmother’s experience of losing her sight shortly after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, which deeply affected public health in Lithuania.

Laura Rascaroli highlights that the essay film does not offer a “closed argument” about its subject but rather works on its “scattered parts” and engages the viewer in the mode of reflection through “its nonverbal thinking.”⁴⁰ Interestingly, *Burial* communicates primarily through images and sounds, including ambient sounds, sound effects, and music, while verbal communication is used exclusively in radio and film archival footage. Throughout the film, the human presence is minimal and instrumental, which justifies the exclusion of a direct human voice from the narrative. In an interview with the curator of MoMa, Sophie Cavoulacos, Škarnulytė explains that she uses the camera in a similar way as described by Rascaroli – she employs the camera and moving images as specific tools to explore different strata such as a galaxy, the earth, the underwater world, cultural-historical layers, and deep time (geological time).⁴¹ In her creative process, the artist adopts the stance of a future archaeologist and “digs” into various layers of deep time to reveal the structures of different geological eras, which are represented in the film by images of “buried” cultural layers of past civilizations, such as the Etruscan Necropolis of Cerveteri, The Underwater Archaeological Park of Baia, and Piscina Mirabilis in Italy, alongside sites from the nuclear era, including the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in Lithuania, the uranium mine of Kowary in Poland, and The Industrial Centre for Geological Disposal in France, some of which are hidden from public view. In this way, the film invites the viewer to reflect on the Anthropocene and its impact on the planet’s geology, landscape, limnology, ecosystems, and climate, presenting a vision of the future as a burial ground for the legacy of this era.

Rascaroli aptly points out that the essayistic film form “gives voice to the need for independent critical expression,” which is generally “against

39 Timothy Corrigan, “The Cinematic Essay: Genre on the Margins,” *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound*, 19 (Spring 1995): 87.

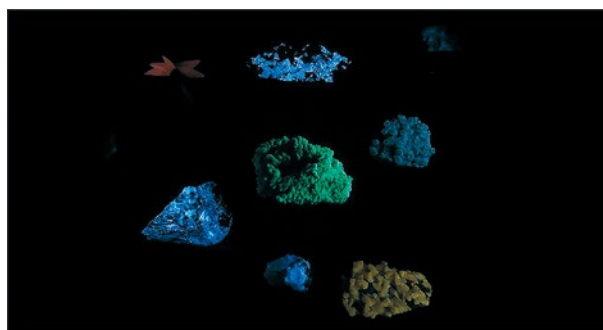
40 Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

41 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by Sophie Cavoulacos, *BURIAL Film Talk*, YouTube video, NY Baltic Film Festival Channel, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxk-PVWHXIk>, 1:38–1:59.

our times,” and “the anachronism of the essay, its untimeliness, accounts for its political value.”⁴² *Burial* can also be seen as a politically engaged essay film, as it offers the viewer the opportunity to reflect on human agency in the context of the current state and future of the planet. The film ends with a black frame bearing the explicit political statement: “We stand with Ukraine.” In the final stages of the film’s production, Russia launched a full-scale war in Ukraine, and the news that the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and, later, the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant had been controlled and disrupted by Russian troops heightened concerns of Lithuanian and European citizens. Škarnulytė also expressed her political and civic commitment in an interview conducted by Rosana Lukauskaitė:

In this geopolitical climate, we don’t have the luxury of being apolitical anymore, especially in the shadow of an ongoing war. Each step of every person, each choice they make and every position taken matters. Instead of presenting my work, the empty space left in the gallery questions problematic choices—both individual and societal. It is incredibly painful to think about what is happening, so I try to do what I can in my position.⁴³

The film opens with 3D images of coloured uranium ore of different configurations, slowly moving towards the viewer. The impression of a non-human environment is reinforced by electronic stereoscopic sound, which creates a three-dimensional space for the movement of atomic figures in black space.



1. Still from the prologue of *Burial*, 3D image of atoms / uranium ore (00:53)

Kadras iš filmo *Kapinynas* prologo, 3D atomų / urano rūdos vaizdas

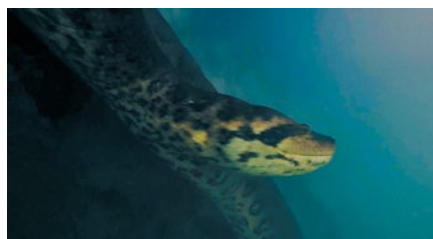
42 Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 5.

43 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by Rosana Lukauskaitė.

Next, a short text appears on the screen on the background of a close-up of the uranium structure: “Uranium was created in supernova explosions about 6.6 billion years ago. It was part of the swirling gas and space dust out of which the Earth was formed.” The subsequent visuals include X-ray-like images of vases and other household items, whose colour is reminiscent of the typical colour of uranium-containing glass, which fluoresces green under UV light.⁴⁴ After a brief introduction to the element of uranium, the viewer is confronted with a uranium mining location shown from a bird’s eye view and 3D images of dark mine tunnels underwater. These images are linked by the stereoscopic sound, which creates the effect of descending into and diving through the tunnel beneath the site, evoking a sense of discomfort and even fear. A brief textual information explains: “The Soviet Union extracted uranium ore from mines in Kowary, Poland, from 1951 to 1963. Sworn to secrecy and heavily guarded, many miners died from exposure to the radioactive pitchblende.” Suddenly, a huge python appears in the water and glides to the bottom, leading to another gigantic nuclear energy site – the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in Lithuania, located on Lake Drūkšiai. Commissioned in the 1980s, it was one of the world’s most powerful plants of its kind at the time. The writhing python also appears later in the film – inside the power station, in the disused control room (23:36–26:40), and in several episodes at the end of the film (45:59–46:18). In the final episode of the film, the python sheds its skin to start a new life cycle (56:26–57:16).

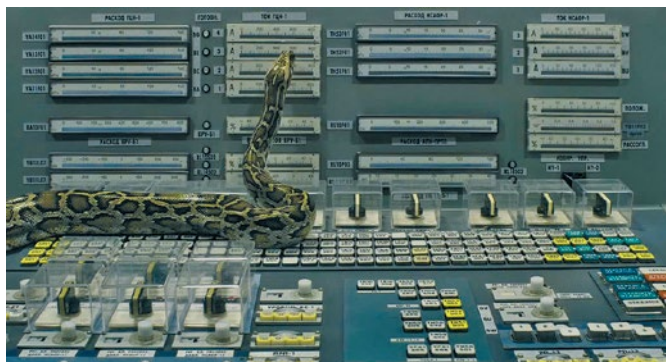


2 A, B. Two stills from the prologue of *Burial*: a huge python appears in the water and floats to the bottom, leading the story to the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (06:57 and 07:09)



2 A, B. Du kadrai iš filmo *Kapinynas* prologo: vandenyje pasirodo didžiulis pitonas ir neria į gelmę, pradėdamas pasakojimą apie Ignalinos atominę elektrinę

44 These images likely originate from the Cold War-era uranium mine in Kowary, Poland, which has since been dismantled and transformed into a museum that introduces visitors to the history of the site and even allows them to dive through a mine tunnel.



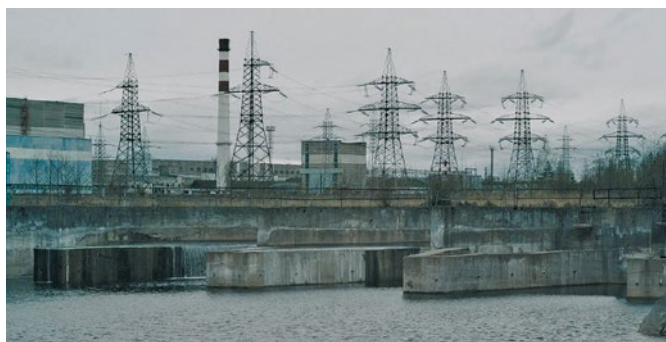
3. Still from *Burial*, a python inside the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in the disused control room (24:54)

Kadras iš filmo *Kapiny-nas*, pitonas Ignalinos atominės elektrinės nebenaudojamoje valdymo patalpoje



4. Still from *Burial*, the final episode of the film, a python crawls out of his own skin (56:37)

Kadras iš filmo *Kapiny-nas*, paskutinis filmo epizodas: pitonas išsineria iš odos

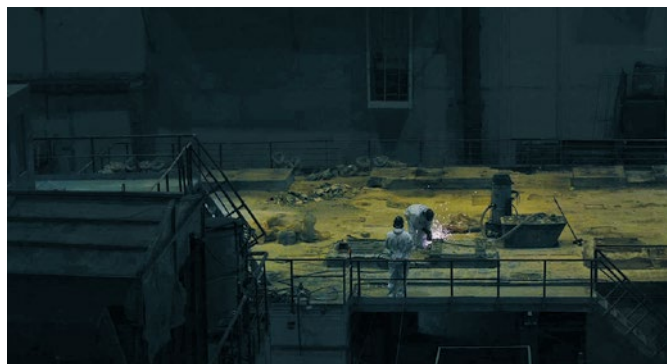


5. Still from *Burial*, the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, located in Lithuania on Lake Drūkšiai (08:13)

Kadras iš filmo *Kapiny-nas*, Ignalinos atominė elektrinė Lietuvoje prie Drūkšių ežero

The viewer sees images of both the exterior and interior of the plant, which was decommissioned in 2009 as part of Lithuania's EU accession process and is currently being dismantled. Textual overlays state: "Almost 64,000 tons of equipment and concrete waste have been produced," "by 2030, a total of 3,544,000 cubic meters of reinforced concrete structures

must be demolished,” and “by the end of decommissioning in 2038, a further 108,000 tons of equipment will need to be dismantled.” Intense sequences of dismantling work, the equipment used on the construction site, and the noises it makes are meticulously showcased. The workers are closely observed at work, but their faces and identities remain hidden, their voices are absent, and they are transformed into mere instruments of dismantling.



6. Still from *Burial*, a moment of dismantling the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (18:13)

Kadras iš filmo *Kapiny-
nas*, Ignalinos atominės
elektrinės išmontavimo
akimirka



7. Still from *Burial*, a moment of dismantling the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (20:10)

Kadras iš filmo *Kapiny-
nas*, Ignalinos atominės
elektrinės išmontavimo
akimirka

As already mentioned, the film lacks a human-centred story. The fragmentary narrative, consisting of loosely connected images and sequences, and the non-diegetic use of the soundtrack are among the stylistic elements that create an experience of the dysfunctionality inherent in former nuclear industrial sites, which serve as relics of the atomic age during the Cold War era. *Burial* addresses critical issues of the nuclear industry and

nuclear policy, such as the decommissioning and dismantling of nuclear power plants, and the storage of radioactive waste, which are of great concern to Lithuania. Other European countries (such as Germany), which had the phase-out of nuclear energy on their political agenda, will face the same problems shortly after the shutdown of nuclear power plants. It is estimated that uranium extraction will continue for another 80–90 years, so all nuclear power plants will have to be decommissioned. Huge waste disposal infrastructures will be needed.

Škarnulytė's decision to foreground non-human characters, industrial sites and objects, animals, water and vegetation, and to use mythical creatures like the python (a dreadful monster) and the mermaid (a hybrid aquatic dweller) instead of human experts to guide the viewer through the film's images, narrative, and different geological periods is, therefore, a value-based and conceptually sound decision. Reduced human subjectivity, as Paula Willoquet-Maricondi contends, shifts the observer's perspective "from a narrow anthropocentric worldview to an earth-centred, or eco-centric view," in which the ecosphere is seen as the centre of value for humanity.⁴⁵ In this way, Škarnulytė's ecodocumentary decentralizes human subjectivity and challenges the anthropocentric perspective. Through its artistic form and style, *Burial* expresses (to use Willoquet-Maricondi's terms) "consciousness-raising" about "contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health."⁴⁶

In *Burial*, Škarnulytė uses an artistic strategy that aligns with Ursula K. Heise's concept of "eco-cosmopolitanism," defined as "implicitly or explicitly" highlighting the overlapping of local places, ecologies, and social practices in a global nexus that reshape them according to a logic of "deterritorialization" to convey the global scale of the impact of human activities on the planet and its future. As Heise suggests, "eco-cosmopolitan" works offer stories and images that "might be able effectively to engage with steadily increasing patterns of global connectivity, including those created by broadening risk scenarios."⁴⁷ She argues that "ecological and technological risk scenarios" are an integral part of globalization processes and that the

45 Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, 45–46.

46 Ibid., 45.

47 Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, 210.

investigation of “risk perceptions and their sociocultural framing” could contribute to an “ecocritical understanding of culture.” At the same time, cultural analysis can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of risk “by foregrounding how new risk perceptions are shaped by existing cultural tropes and narrative templates.”⁴⁸ Škarnulytė adopts a similar approach in her interdisciplinary art practice – encompassing themes, methods of artistic research, aesthetics, and narratives – while also reflecting her lifestyle. She studied at the Vilnius Academy of Arts and the Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art in Norway, and lived for several years “in a triangle between Lithuania, Berlin, and Norway.” For over a decade, she has worked in different countries and continents, as she puts it, “nomadically,” where her “locality dictates scenarios and mythologies.”⁴⁹ This has allowed her to develop a cosmopolitan perspective in her work. Cosmopolitanism in filmmaking is based on the exploration of “different national or subnational locations to which the cosmopolitan auteur has a certain privileged access” due to his “multiple belonging” and “various trajectories of migration.”⁵⁰

Škarnulytė views these industrial sites across the globe as integral components of a new geological layer and a potential research object for future geologists and archaeologists. In her film, she reveals the cyclical nature of the atom, extracted from the ground in the mines and buried in the ground as radioactive waste after its use in the nuclear industry. The soundscape in the film plays a crucial role in prompting reflections on the relationships between human and non-human beings. Together with the meticulous framing of industrial sites, aquatic life, landscapes, vegetation, and slow time, the soundscape enhances the sense that we are approaching post-human geological time. Carter Soles and Kiu-Wai Chu argue that “framing and time are of particular concern to ecocritics due to the need to consider non-human modes of reckoning chronology, i.e., geological time, ‘deep’ time, slow cinema, etc. Thus framing plays a key role not only in demarcating physical and visual space, but creates the basic units – shots, panels – by

48 Ibid., 13.

49 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by 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.

50 Mette Hjort, “On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Durovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 20.

which time is rendered legible.”⁵¹ They also note the framing effects of the soundscape, which “in film,” as they argue, “often plays a crucial role in reflecting the relationships between human and nonhuman beings.”⁵² Nature sounds remind the viewer of the close relationship between humans and nature and have a positive effect on the viewer, while explicitly non-natural (digitally generated) sound effects, used either to “illustrate” the landscape, aquatic life and the like, or in parallel with the “natural” sounds, create tension and even a negative feeling that underlines the film-maker’s ecocentric and even ecocritical approach.

Škarnulytė’s work employs immersive techniques of aural and visual narrative to stimulate emotional and intellectual engagement with the subject, which is quite abstract and may be unfamiliar to a broad audience. Immersive technologies in Škarnulytė’s film create a strong impression of a “living” environment in “real time,” effectively allowing the viewers to feel as if “being at the location where the images are.”⁵³ According to Kerric Harvey, immersive documentary “employs virtual reality technology to literally surround the audience member in the ‘reality’ of the narrative.”⁵⁴ The term “immersive documentary” covers a broad spectrum of visual techniques, including 360-degree cameras, 3D imaging, and Lidar scanning technology for producing 3D models, which the filmmaker used to create an impression of spatial travel and to design trajectories with a camera. In conversation with Agnė Sadauskaitė, Škarnulytė argues: “Lidar technology helps me to create a sense of the future and perspective, just like you could travel through architecture, flying particles. I like to work with this ‘language,’ because if we try to define the future, I imagine all these industries overgrown, forming new kinds of symbiosis and species.”⁵⁵

Škarnulytė’s “immersive documentary” can be well explained with the insights of Oliver Grau, who argues:

51 Carter Soles and Kiu-Wai Chu, “Overview: Framing Visual Texts for Ecomedia Studies,” in *Ecomedia: Key Issues*, ed. Stephen Rust, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 21.

52 Ibid, 22.

53 Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 7–15.

54 Kerric Harvey, “‘Walk-In Documentary’: New Paradigms for Game-Based Interactive Storytelling and Experiential Conflict Mediation,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 6, no. 2 (2012): 192.

55 Emilija Škarnulytė, interview by Agnė Sadauskaitė.

the quality of apparently being present in the images is achieved through maximization of realism and is increased still further through illusionism in the service of an immersive effect. The image and simulation technique of virtual reality attempts to weld traditional media together in a synthetic medium that is experienced polysensorily.⁵⁶

Škarnulytė typically presents her works as large-scale, immersive installations that allow the viewers/visitors to “enter” the universe she creates, allowing them to explore and experience sensory stimuli. Although *Burial* is structured as a single-channel documentary, it is clearly designed for a large screen, with a focus on visual and acoustic effects to enhance the viewer’s experience.

Epilogue

This article argues that Emilija Škarnulytė adopts an earth-centred, ecocentric perspective in her essay film, offering no characters for viewers to identify with, nor a clear plot, structure, or strong rhetorical devices to guide perception. The python guiding the viewer to and through the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, and the mermaid (played by Škarnulytė) leading through other sites related to the energy industry and the “buried” underwater cities of the Etruscan civilization, serve as fragile links between the episodes of the film’s narrative. The viewer is invited to explore these mysterious and uncanny places by following their movements and immersing themselves in 3D images of atoms, aquatic life, industrial landscapes, and soundscapes. The filmmaker subtly arranges this diverse visual and acoustic material to make political statements about humanity’s impact on the planet, particularly through the energy industry. Škarnulytė provokes viewers to imagine themselves as future geologists or archaeologists, reflecting on the fate of decommissioned nuclear power plants worldwide over the next 100 or even 10,000 years.

In the film, the parallels drawn between decommissioned nuclear industry objects and the sunken Etruscan cities draw the viewer’s attention to the material and immaterial heritage of nuclear energy, suggesting that

the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant could resemble an Etruscan necropolis near Rome in 30 years. Škarnulytė creatively employs new digital technologies to enrich the visual language of her audiovisual essay, which, as Laura Rascaroli describes, embodies “a fully personal cinécriture” that facilitates “personal, unorthodox, idiosyncratic forms of audiovisual expression.”⁵⁷ The collage of images of nuclear industry sites, the python, wild nature, 3D-modelled objects, paintings by Lithuanian symbolist M. K. Čiurlionis, television and radio footage from the Cold War era, black and white and colour images are interwoven in a circular narrative structure, suggesting a potential revival of both the ecosystem or the nuclear industry in response to the world’s increasing energy needs.

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Santrauka

Įtraukianti branduolinės energetikos eros patirtis Emilijos Škarnulytės ekodokumentiniame filme *Kapinynas* (2022)

Renata Šukaitytė

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Emilija Škarnulytė, Lietuvos kinas, ekokinas, nevaidybinis kinas, eseistinė dokumentika, imersinis naratyvas.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas Emilijos Škarnulytės eseistinis dokumentinis filmas *Kapinynas* (2022) ir tai, kaip jis įtraukia žiūrovus į gamtos, atomų ir branduolinės energetikos epochos pasaulį. Aptariama, kaip pasitelkiamos įtraukios garsinio ir vaizdinio pasakojimo technikos (jungiančios įvairios kilmės vaizdinę ir akustinę medžiagą, t. y. urano kasyklų Lenkijoje, uždarytos atominės elektrinės Lietuvoje, požeminės branduolinių atliekų saugyklos Prancūzijoje vaizdų, lietuvių simbolisto M. K. Čiurlionio paveikslų, Šaltojo karo laikų televizijos ir radijo įrašų, kompiuteriu sukurtų 3D atomų vaizdų, foninius garsus, liaudies muziką į laisvos struktūros pasakojimą) šiame kūrinyje stimuliuoja emocinį ir intelektualinį įsitraukimą į dokumentinio filmo temą, nors filme nėra personažų, su kuriais būtų galima susitapatinti, aiškaus siužeto ar stiprių retorinių priemonių. Škarnulytės filme naudojamos įtraukios vizualinės ir garsinės technologijos bei naratyvinės priemonės sukuria gyvos (angl. *living*) aplinkos realiojo laiko (angl. *real time*) įspūdį (Oliverio Grau (2003) pasiūlytos sąvokos). Teorinį tyrimo pagrindą sudaro Paulos Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) pasiūlyta ekokino samprata ir Ursulos K. Heisės (2008) ekologinio-kosmopolitinio kino bei Lauros Rascaroli eseistinio kino (2017) teorinės sampratos, taip pat Oliverio Grau (2003), Kerrico Harvey'aus (2012) įžvalgos apie imersinį meną ir medijas. Filmo analizėje išryškinama ekocentriška, subtiliai asmeninė eseistinio pasakojimo apie energetinių industrijų istoriją, paveldą ir poveikį ekosistemai perspektyva bei sumanus imersinių elementų į filmo pasakojimą integravimas.