

## CRITICAL OPTIMISM ABOUT THE RELATION BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

# TOGETHER AT A DISTANCE WITH SIRENA

TOGETHER AT A DISTANCE WITH SIRENA (2020) is an artistic design fiction film made by design researcher and artist Anna Brynskov. The film explores contradictory feelings in intimate contexts and imagines alternative power relations in gender in mediated intimacy at a distance. The relation between technology and the female sexual body is presented from a perspective Brynskov calls CRITICAL OPTIMISM. Firstly, it challenges sexuality and gender norms in the contemporary mainstream landscape of intimate technologies and, secondly, it challenges tech pessimism in the critical literature written by technofeminists who allude to the sex-negativity of second wave feminism.

### Touching with Digital Lotion and Smart Dust

The film allows the viewer to experience a fictional piece of digital design in use called SIRENA. SIRENA is a digital lotion with which the characters experience being intimate with each other (strangers) at a distance. The lotion is based on SMART DUST, which is a network of sensors the size of dust. When the two lotions are synchronized, and the characters start applying the lotion to their bodies, the data collected from the sensors translate into a vivid, stimulating and carefully crafted soundscape, experienced through headphones. This is how the classical figure of a sexually luring female creature, the siren, reappears in the realm of modern interaction technologies as a digital lotion. She speaks with a gentle, whispering ASMR voice

and pushes the camera's attention away from herself. Instead, she directs the attention to the bodies of the two humans that rub her into their skin in a playful manner.

### Queer Intimate Power Relations, Contradictory feelings

With home video aesthetics and subtly queer characters, the film poses the question relevant in our ultra digital era: How might SIRENA shape the power relationship between two persons in an intimate scenario like this? May it be safer to meet strangers at a distance, and what are the losses of intimacy? Does it satisfy loneliness and skin hunger, or does it make the longing even harder to stand?

The film oscillates between 1) An unashamed desire for touching and being touched by other bodies with technology as a mediator, and 2) Feelings of awkwardness and melancholy, reflected in the fact that SIRENA doesn't fulfill normative sexual desires and promises of connection through eye contact, human touch and reproductive, ejaculative orgasms.

### Critical Optimism

On a different level, the film has its own climax where feminine desire (in all its diversity) as well as critical technological alternatives are celebrated—neither naïvely nor commercially but with an attention to nuances in intimacy, lust, and boundaries. In other words, the film reflects CRITICAL OPTIMISM about intimate technologies.

### Behind the Scenes

The film was created as part of Brynskov's master's thesis from the Digital Design program at Aarhus University, Denmark. When making the film, Brynskov drew inspiration from other female artists exploring the sexual body and female empowerment such as Maja Malou Lyse, Tomasa del Real and Mati Diop. As a design concept, SIRENA was developed by Brynskov prior to the filmmaking process.



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