

## Topology of Sirens by Michael Glover Smith

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*Topology of Sirens* is a tantalizing mystery film in the vein of early Jacques Rivette that imagines contemporary Los Angeles as a kind of giant game-board. Much like how *Paris Belongs to Us* features the search for a missing tape of “revolutionary guitar music” as a narrative jumping-off point, so too does Jonathan Davies’ first movie use the discovery of mysterious micro-cassette tapes inside of an antique hurdy gurdy as a catalyst for an existential detective story. I love the way *Topology of Sirens* imbues physical objects—and the physical media that is rapidly disappearing from the world in the 21st century in particular—with a totemic significance that makes it feel incredibly modern. A lot of critics are going to liken this to the work of other filmmakers (a couple of mesmerizing scenes on a baseball field recall the ending of Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* in particular) but the best point of comparison I can make is with Thomas Pynchon’s 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*, which has a similarly haunting quality in how it “makes strange” the recent past by treating it as if it were ancient history. Featuring elegant cinematography that thankfully eschews the gritty, handheld aesthetic so prevalent in modern independent American cinema, and a minimalist drone score that blurs the line between music and atmospheric sound effects, this is an astonishingly confident debut feature. ♦

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## ABOUT THE FILM

Cas, an academic assistant and amateur musician, moves into her aunt's old home. In the bedroom closet, she finds a cache of mysteriously labeled microcassette tapes, containing cryptic recordings of sounds ranging from everyday objects to abstract soundscapes. Cas's curiosity to discover the origin of these tapes leads her on a meditative journey through unknown verdant Californian landscapes, encountering experimental music performances, eccentric shop owners, and early music treasures along the way. As her adventure progresses, the mystery unravels in equally enigmatic and enlightening ways, reflecting Cas's own evolving relation with time and sound.

Featuring an eclectic cast comprising figures from Los Angeles' burgeoning film, art, and music scenes—including Courtney Stephens, Sarah Davachi, Samatha Robinson, Mark Toscano, and Langley Fox Hemingway—*Topology of Sirens* is a slippery work of existential fiction, as well as a illuminating document of an underseen side of the city. *Co-presented by MUBL.*

In person: Jonathan Davies (director), Courtney Stephens (actress), Sarah Davachi (actress/musician), Mark Toscano (actor), Tyler Taormina (producer), Carson Lund (cinematographer), Dustin Guy Defa (moderator)

106 min. | U.S. | 2021

### Topology of Sirens by Neil Young

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An exquisite little puzzle-box of a picture, *Topology of Sirens* represents a confident debut from independent American writer-director Jonathan Davies. Unfolding in unfamiliar corners of the Greater Los Angeles region and drawing as much from old-school “graphic adventure” computer games as from any obvious cinematic antecedents, it's an offbeat combination of erudite esoterica and sensory pleasures (many of them music-related) that patient viewers may find beguiling.

World premiering in the International Competition at France's FIDMarseille makes sense for a work whose sensibilities and forerunners (Rivette, Rohmer) are rather more European than North American. A subsequent festival and distribution career along the lines of Tyler Taormina's 2019 coming-of-age *Ham On Rye* seems likely.

The two projects hail from the same small LA-based production-company, Omnes Films, and there are significant overlaps in terms of behind-the-scenes personnel: Davies was music supervisor and associate producer for *Ham On Rye*; Taormina is the

main producer here; Carson Lund shot both films and edited *Topology of Sirens*. Having the same individual working as cinematographer and editor on a film is unusual and potentially hazardous, especially when that individual doesn't also direct. But here, Lund's refined, calm sensibilities prove a fine fit for the screenplay's offbeat premise and enigmatic, subtle convolutions.

After a low-key prologue in a verdant, unpopulated backwater amid the buzzing of insects, the action proper begins with Cas (Courtney Stephens) arriving at her deceased aunt's house in a forest-fringed neighbourhood which has the air of a discreetly affluent artist's colony cut adrift in time (even the local cafe/market dates from 1922.) A chance discovery of a medieval hurdy-gurdy—a bygone stringed instrument of haunting plangency—leads to further finds and “clues” relating to the aunt's sonic experimentations, which have much in common with, and prove stimulating to, Cas's own creative outpourings.

As she pieces together further elements of what might be a riddle, or perhaps an elaborate game of some kind, Cas encounters various strange locations and people—usually women (female performers occupy the cast's top six billings.) The importance of warm mutual support among women is a recurring theme in a film which walks a tricky line between endearing eccentricity and potentially cloying tweezeness.

As mundane surfaces repeatedly yield hidden depths, an atmosphere of magical realism is gradually spun—chance and serendipity are this gossamer universe's guiding principles. Unpredictable shifts keep the viewer off-balance, especially in the second half.

Later dissolves shift the focus from Cas to two strangely-garbed young women. Seeming to “materialise” from another dimension or era, this silent duo inquisitively make their way to more built-up parts of Los Angeles. The credits identify them as “Tracker Siren” and “Scribe Siren,” implying close connection with the figures represented in Frederick Stuart Church's painting *The Sirens*—which Cas had inspected in antique-instrument shop (this unlikely emporium presided over by a haughty English lady of a certain age, who trills pointedly about one stock-item having “unspeakably unusual features.”)

But Davies is obviously uninterested in concrete answers and explanations, instead teasingly strewing images, sounds and phrases in our path in ways that might only be fully appreciated on a second pass. While his screenplay resists conventional narrative structures, his directorial style is resolutely non-experimental; the only notable stylistic flourish being a preference for extended sound-bridges between scenes. And while occasional longueurs betray Davies' inexperience, *Topology of Sirens'* beatifically poetic finale—as Cas observes a baseball game—provides ample reward for those willing to wander his dreamy trail. ♦