

Recall This Book 88
Recall this Book
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Margaret Cohen

Transcript

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to *Recall this Book*, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. And I'm John Plotz solo hosting today hosting my wonderful friend and colleague Margaret Cohen. So Margaret hello.

Margaret Cohen: Hi John.

John Plotz: Hi, there's so many ways to introduce you. For example, I could say this comparative literature Professor's prize-winning books include her 2010 *The Novel in the Sea* and 1999's *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, and, not to mention *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* from 1993. Or maybe I could just call you Stanford Surfing Professor, but in any case, Margaret, friend, colleague: welcome. I've been scheming to get you on *Recall this Book* for a long time, it's great to have you.

Margaret Cohen: It's a great pleasure to be here with you, John.

John Plotz: So today we're here to talk about a book you published only this spring on Princeton University. Press the underwater. I how the movie camera opened the depths and unleashed new realms of fantasy and in a sense, I think that title. Is all we need because I can imagine our readers already flipping their mental rolodex, at least if you're old enough to have a mental. Rolodex pulling out your favorite scenes from *Titanic* or the undersea world of Jacques Cousteau, or you name it. But I think maybe one good way to start would be simply to ask you to tell future readers of this book what

they'll find there. You know. Just tell us about what the books.

Margaret Cohen: The book is about the importance of film and imagery in enabling audiences to connect to the most remote environment. The planet, and really the role played by technologies available to shape are images of that realm, so that's one important through line and I guess the second important through line, which I only discovered in 2019 when I went to the studio of a famous engineer and diver who makes water housings and shoots camera underwater named Pete Romano. Is the importance of water as a medium for creating very beautiful and evocative imagery.

John Plotz: Can you say more about that water as medium are you talking about literally that things shot through water as opposed to through air?

Margaret Cohen: Or that's exactly right. Yeah, I mean, when I started the book I was thinking about the undersea and it took me really a long time to realize that. There was a lot of undersea footage in film that was shot actually in pools, and that there were also lots of powerful underwater images that were not shot undersea, so pool scenes in films like *The Graduate* for example, or *The Big Blue*.

John Plotz: *Hollywood Boulevard*.

Margaret Cohen: Hollywood, oh, that's a great one. Yeah *Sunset Boulevard*. Yeah, that's the opening scene that that's a.

John Plotz: *Sunset Boulevard* sorry huh yeah sensible but yes the opening scene yeah.

Margaret Cohen: That's an absolutely fascinating scene. And so that got me to thinking about, yeah, the physical properties of the medium of water as extraordinarily evocative and about the long history of shooting through that medium. And I then decided I will not focus on any films that are shot what's

called dry for wet, so where you use studio to create the impression of being underwater, but you're actually shooting.

John Plotz: So Margaret I have a couple of questions that are maybe just technical, but maybe they get us into some of the conceptual differences. You're talking about one is really an ignorant question about the difference between what we see when we're underwater. If we have a scuba mask on so that there's air between us and the water. Versus what I see if I open my eyes and there's just water like? Is that a meaningful distinction? And the second one is about color?

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, yeah. So if you don't have a layer of air between your eye and the. Better first of all, it's irritating, but second of all your I can't focus because needs to refract and now you're going to make me look up the science, which I don't have my fingertips, but the refractive properties of water are not sufficient for us to be able to focus. So you need air to give you that layer. And then once you open your eyes underwater, through the layer of, there you see very differently from you from the way you see on land, because water is 800 times denser than air. So first of all, you can't see very far. You know if you go into a pool, this is, go into a pool, open your eyes, and note how distance just really fades off. And also note how color changes so the red of those you know, lane markers, for example, turns kind of brownish and starts to lose its clarity.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's amazing. One of the first conversations you and I had about this was actually about the Millais painting Ophelia, where we noticed together how the red of the water of the whatever, what blossom it is. It's lying on the water. You can see it deep, you know de-reading as it sinks down into the water, that's amazing.

Margaret Cohen: I remember that, yeah, that was like such a revelation to look at that and, well, do you remember what year that painting is?

John Plotz: It's like 1853, maybe or yeah.

Margaret Cohen: So that's super early for knowledge of those conditions. I mean, that's the year I think when Philip Henry Gosse is creating the aquarium and it's there, there is industry diving. But nobody is paying much attention to it. You know, the first scientific diver to actually have the idea to go underwater in Sicily, a Frenchman named Ali, meaning Edwards dives in 1843, and it's just a one off. So later in the century, painters start to notice. But it's really extraordinary.

John Plotz: Well, it's something. I mean we could talk about the pre-Raphaelite forever, but it is something about that elaboration of the natural world that made the pre-Raphaelite so interesting that they were attentive. I mean I think it's just something meley probably saw without necessarily even knowing the theory behind it. He just noticed things, so I guess there must have been people historically who had made this observation but didn't have the conceptual apparatus you're describing. Uhm, actually Margaret, can you just, I mean, humor me as a 19th century us to talk a little bit. You really unpack wonderfully in the book some, you know some of the paintings that went on to get at the undersea world. I mean, what it tells what's the story there for you? Do you think that is it that film arrives at a time when there's already a prepared space for it or just film changed things radically from how that sort of painting history unfolded.

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, that that was a real surprise to me. I mean, I had, like you Victorianists. I adore aquariums. You know, I was completely entranced by all the seaside naturalism and the presence of women in it. And it just didn't really cross my mind that at the same moment that the aquariums are getting started and people are so fascinated with the undersea that there exists technologies and there's industry, diving, practicing the realm of the undersea, and

that you don't have to look at them in these curated spaces which are gardens. But you could actually, if you were a salvage diver, you would be in the water, and it just never crossed my mind. And as I started to put together the pieces and realize that the leading salvage divers and marine engineers in London were just a couple of miles away from the London Zoo, you know it was all the more extraordinary. To me that that the dots hadn't been connected, but no people just were not interested in the actual undersea conditions. You know the Challenger expedition? They don't dive. I mean, of course, they're out in the deep water, but you could imagine that they would go close to the coast. I mean, it's very cumbersome. It's dangerous, but the technology was there and of course there's growing knowledge of the undersea with these pioneering oceanographic exhibition expeditions around the world, but it took it, took the movie camera to get scientists to realize that they could dive, and so you know, the first naturalist diver who writes a full account of it. Of what he sees. He's William Beebe or BB. I never knew. Do you know how to pronounce that name?

John Plotz: I have no idea, no yeah.

Margaret Cohen: Anyway, that's 1928 and that's after the invention of underwater film in 1914, which was first shown to a scientific audience, and scientists were absolutely captivated. And as I talked about in the book, they said they were discovering species they had never known. Before, with the help of the movie camera Natasha Adamowski traces a history from the aquariums too. Cousteau, essentially. Uhm, they ask, you know, she asks like why? Why were people not paying attention and she connects it to an abiding fear of the depths. I think that the underwater realm or the undersea realm is scary. I also think you know in in my previous book the novel in the sea there was a lot of collaboration. Between the practical and the scientific communities, so you know on Cook's expedition you have Joseph Banks who's writing his

account. And you have. Just a lot of written documentation, so I think another important. Element of this story is a class divide between the scientists and the divers, and that the industry divers were not in communication with. More elite scientists and that maybe is part of the story as well.

John Plotz: That's really fascinating. 'cause that? Oh wow, 'cause that makes me think about things like the relationship between Darwin and Wallace, like the people who went out in the 19th century. The people who were sort of paid to go out to hunt specimens versus the people who were theoretically meant to stay back home and. Just process and that Darwin and Wallace are sort of two of the rare crossovers, and then I guess, yeah.

Margaret Cohen: Yes, that's right. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you that yeah.

John Plotz: No, no, that's I was just thinking about having then they there's that book but doesn't even McCalmon have a book called Darwin's *Armada*, which is about the other scientists after Darwin, who basically like Huxley, who feel like it's OK to go out and go out and yeah, mingle with the hoi polloi with the professional hoi polloi yeah.

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, and I mean even McCalmon is actually was quite influential for me in in this book we went diving together or not diving. We went snorkeling together on the Barrier Reef in 2014 it was awesome, and he's very interested in these kinds of eccentric figures who do, you know, venture out of the norms of the professional community.

John Plotz: That's great, wow. Yeah, no that's great. Can I ask you? I think I told I warned you I wanted to talk about this like you. You sort of drop a couple of times. One of the ways you think about the ocean, and this really relates to my own science fictional interest with space, which I hope we'll get to also is the knowledge versus mastery that it like that. The ocean is this. Other realm here on Earth with us that. We

had neither knowledge nor mastery of, I suppose, up to a certain point, but then there is this possibility of knowledge without mastery. Yeah, how do you think about those two categories?

Margaret Cohen: You know, I guess I come out of it from a sort of Frankfurt school, you know, dialectic of enlightenment. Yeah, where which goes back to Marx, you know that. I think the Marxist paradigm for thinking about the relationship between the human and the natural world through technology is a relationship of mastery and that you know technology captures the energies and the potential of the natural world and turns it into a servant for good and for bad. But when you're contending with this vast, you know force, and yes, we could go to. Science fiction we could. Go to *Solaris*. I mean there's so much about its unruliness, uh?

John Plotz: Oh yeah, *Solaris* is such a great example because it controls the tides as a being.

Margaret Cohen: Uhm, Mastery is just not possible and so of course this is something I discussed in the novel in the sea and that that captivates me about it. You can devise all kinds of technologies and protocols which you need to devise for threading a path. Through the ocean, but you cannot subdue it, and we you know, we see that I mean climate change is the most. The most current example of our consciousness that these are forces that are radically outside human control, sea level rise, ocean acidification.

John Plotz: Wait, actually marker, can we pursue that a little bit? That maybe that brings us to people like Kim Stanley Robinson who wrote who write this sort of khleifi about that? But you say they're radically outside our control. Something like acidification. The death of the coral's, the sea level rise that you know is going to swallow up cities. But they're also the product of human activity. So I mean, that's not mastery. I agree because mastery would imply that you did something

and then you could then retain agency, but it is induced by human activity.

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, that's a brilliant point job and so, so we're getting to our own dialectic of the Anthropocene, right?

John Plotz: Kind of. I mean, I do think that the Anthropocene is like the unintended consequences. Like you know, it's like what we did as a species, but it not necessarily what we did as willing ethical beings. Is more just like. By burning stuff.

Margaret Cohen: Yes, I, I mean, and I think maybe an interesting twist to that. You know? I'm just thinking about. I hadn't thought about that before, but it's really it's. It's true and it's brilliant and scary. Is that a lot of the activities that have degraded ocean environments have occurred from industrial processes on land. So that it may we have been, uh. I'm going to go out on a limb here since the last since Mark since the late 19th century. We've been a very land focused society in terms of where we where we look to for the hubs of productivity, right? And so we just use the ocean as a garbage can. For all the detritus of.

John Plotz: Oh right, it's just a flat.

Margaret Cohen: Production on land.

John Plotz: It's just floating plastic spots. Yeah, I see. So in other words, Moby Dick at least, and Moby Dick. We were. We were out there harvesting it. Not just making it a waystation.

Margaret Cohen: That's true that they're harvesting it and hunting whales to extinction, so you know your point is also taken that we have. We have expanded sort of capitalist outreach into to interfere with species reproduction in the ocean for sure, so it's not just a land story, but. But climate change and industrialization. There's a big land component stand by that.

John Plotz: Right, but I but, but this is really helpful. Mark, 'cause I hadn't really thought about like how I, I mean, just. It's just dense on my part I had. Really, I had thought about the mastery point at a pretty local level. I hadn't really thought you were talking about the way in which just. To be out on the sea and boats, or just to be bold, I mean to be vulnerable. The changes of the sea, you know, in the way that New York City. Was you know last April or whatever it was? I mean, we're just that's. That's a pretty comprehensive process. It's not just about one, it's not just about like a *Jaws* scene or something.

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, I mean it goes from the most tumble and you know the most personal. To yeah to Hurricane Sandy and the destruction of, you know. Lower Manhattan, for example. The power grid of lower Manhattan.

John Plotz: Yeah, so can I circle that back to the point you were making about the technological forms of coping with the. UN master able see is that the way you're saying it now you're emphasizing, you know, the ultimate vulnerability of the human body, but you actually spend a lot of time in really wonderful detail unpacking. The you know not exactly fetishistic but certainly like you know highly technophilia quality of like what it means to for people to be geared up. In in, under, under, see like that's a lot of what you think the appeal of these films consistent right? It's like the gear.

Margaret Cohen: Absolutely. I mean I'm trying to remember the budget for *Thunderball*. Obviously like \$80,000 or a lot at the time. Maybe it's 800,000 you know to shoot. That that that amazing underwater fight scene, which is just a technologically. Gadget filled Wonderland. Yes, and so I'll just put in a quick plug for the novel in the sea. You know, I think this fascination with technological innovation and what it enables you to do in this unruly environment. Inviting fascination throughout. Media representations of maritime environments and marine environments. Going back to the narratives of global sail,

yes, and so the history of working. Underwater and underwater filming is a history of working in the most challenging environment for creating imagery on Earth, and it's a history of unceasing, technological innovation and creativity to make up where innovation falls short. Jacques Cousteau Said I think I'm remembering this correctly, that it was his interest in filming underwater that drove the development of scuba for him, so I guess we're what I'm working to in answering your question is that? But there are all kinds of very specific technological innovations which I'd be delighted to talk about, and they work in conjunction with the captivation of trying to both record and bring to the surface this unprecedented, unknown environment. And it's really remarkable. One of the things that I found so interesting in in writing. This book is that you have, you see a natural environment being constructed that has never before been seen and imagined. So you witness, you know imagination in process in a way that it's there very other few other environments on Earth. I mean, you can think of parallels like with the high mountains. But it's quite remarkable.

John Plotz: Well, yeah, well, that's a good point about the high mountains. I hadn't really thought about that. Like I, I don't know if David Attenborough, but even maybe those mountain movies of the 1930s or something like yeah, OK. So we've heard about you've mentioned James Bond already, but can we talk about other great examples of you? You spend some time, really. Dilating on wonderful films that have done something new, so I don't know. Do you want to go back? How far do you want to go back? Do you wanna? Talk about 20,000 leagues. Do you want to go flipper, what? Where are the amazing breakthroughs? Do you?

Margaret Cohen: Think OK, so that's that. That's how I structured my book was around breakthroughs. So I mean, I think the 19 sixteen, 20,000 leagues is really quite an extraordinary film. This was filmed with the 1st. The first technology for filming

underwater, which was an enclosed sphere where the camera operator was in air and had the instructions coming down from the surface via communications or voice communication. And this film has extended underwater sequences of a length that you won't see till Thunderball or the deep. Later and it's, it's just really remarkable.

John Plotz: Yeah, that funeral procession, for example.

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, oh in the funeral procession talk about technology. It was using a closed-circuit breathing apparatus which had been designed for the military during World War One which was very dangerous and so they were kind of early scuba even in 1916. And yeah, so I think that that just witnessing the marvels of the sea in the first sequence and then the underwater you know expedition and seeing sharks. For the first time on film, I mean sharks do not survive in aquariums and not sharks of the size that you see in that 1st 20,000 leagues. And there you have the hunters and the sharks in the same frame. So this is not.

John Plotz: Right?

Margaret Cohen: Not, you know, fake. It's not the reproach that bizarre would make to Louisiana story, but you know, flirty documentary where you have the alligator and one frame and the boy and the other. Here you have the sharks and the divers together so, so that's a. That's a revelation that's you know, amazing.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's really Mohammed coming to the mountain 'cause that's a mountain that's never going to come to Mohammed. Yeah wow. That's great, and then actually can we talk just because while we're in that period, can we talk about the notion of. The filming from the sea creature's view. I mean, I think I mentioned to you that man Ray film that you talked about, which is called Starfish, right? It's yeah, it's just which has. Like seemingly a starfish

Cam. That shows you how the people in the movie look when glimpsed by the starfish that they're looking at.

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, so I mean man Raissa, I did want to show that. That popular entertainment and high art are both fascinated with the optical and physical properties of the underwater environment, so it was a delight to me and also echoes the insight of the very brilliant photographer Allan Sekula. And filmmaker, yeah, that surrealism was the last movement to take seriously the see. That's said in 1980s or 1990s and. They, the surrealists, were fascinated with the ways in which. Underwater optics and the behavior of bodies underwater opened and intimated a domain of surreality and other ways of seeing. And so yeah, for Man Ray to look through the eyes of the starfish you know would decide. Enter anthropocentric human. You know the human perspective. Man Ray couldn't shoot underwater, he didn't have the technology, so he was extraordinarily clever with different ways of using blur on the lens and stippled glass. But he did go to the surrealist filmmaker and marine biologist. He was able to shoot underwater Jean Palavi, who's famous for his. Films about the non-normative lives of sea creatures, in particular the non-normative sex lives of sea creatures.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Margaret Cohen: So for example, he has the starfish. I'm sorry, not this trash the seahorse about seahorses is an alternative to the reproductive distribution of Labor because the male seahorses Give birth and so he actually films a male seahorse giving birth. He's got a film called The Octopus about octopus sexually. Ah, so yeah.

John Plotz: Yeah, I got to see that one. Yeah, I haven't talked about. You know all science fiction people have an octopus fixation. So yeah, can you say a little bit about your thoughts about human characterization underwater? I guess like the stars of the underwater. I mean, I think we're aware you know,

there I, I don't know. I still kind of want to come back to what I think you called the hyper masculine. Cyborgs in James Bond like the notion of like the kid out frogman. I think emphasis on man and then also the kind of bathing beauty side of things, but those are kind of the two. Like cliched characters that come to mind for the underwater is there, is there more to be sad about characterization of humans in in the water?

Margaret Cohen: That's such a great an interesting question, so uhm. The human face underwater when you're dumb. When you're breathing in a comfortable fashion is generally masked and you can't see it.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah.

Margaret Cohen: So acting without being able to use the face is a real. And Cameron actually just to come back to the abyss for a minute. Cameron had special helmets designed that would show the face in order to enable his actors to like really more fully act underwater and before that you have several choices. One is to breath hold right? So you know that.

John Plotz: That beautiful underwater ballet scene that you talk about is amazing. Yeah, the temple of Neptune. No temple of yeah.

Margaret Cohen: Oh yeah, going back to Annette Kellerman, who was this?

John Plotz: Yeah, and that's Kellerman, right, exactly, yeah.

Margaret Cohen: Extraordinary actress and swimmer. You know she's the heroine in the biopic done by Esther Williams, who's also an extraordinary swimmer and actress. \$1,000,000 mermaid. She performs these very. Very alluring vaudeville act, essentially underwater. She was inspired by vaudeville and came out of vaudeville, breath holding and because women are the bathing beauties. They are the ones who have to breath hold so you know. Then I have an image in my book of Esther Williams in a film shot. Underwater,

that's kind of. Uh, uh, neoclassical Fantasia called Jupiter's darling where she's dancing and breath holding, and she's surrounded by these guys who are filming in scuba gear. You know it's like she's it's what they say about you know Ginger Rogers. She has to do everything backwards in high heels you know, as we tested French.

John Plotz: Yes, right?

Margaret Cohen: So, so that's one thing to say. I mean, another thing to say is yes, there's a fascination of with the rubber latex. You know fetishistic side to scuba gear that I think is Hollywood is very reluctant to broach. So you know in the 1950s. It's all kind of light hearted and romantic and I have as you know, a large chunk of the book on Sea Hunt where Lloyd Bridges is, you know he's this. It's beefcake and he's also a brilliant actor. And it's a lot of fun. That whole that whole series. But it's all very, it's very. Very light hearted words. When you get to bond. I think there's a lot more made of the fascination. I mean, you know, Thunderball is so explicitly interested in ***** that all that rubber and the men you know brawling in their scuba suits, and you can't see their faces. And I mean, that has much more clearly fetishistic composed.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so can I also, can we come back to the the space and undersea question to just maybe remind us of some of the things you say in the book? 'cause I really love how you set up these two. You know previously unavailable and now potentially attainable realms in the mid-20th century. And obviously. You know when I teach science fiction now, my students think in terms of those space films that start coming out in the 60s and 70s and 80s. So yeah, but clearly, I think you know part of what you persuaded me of is that the actual experience of underwater. Becomes like a lens through which people can think about what's. But, you know, space as a as an alien but available atmosphere.

Margaret Cohen: Technologies to access space and the undersea both

emerged from the Second World War and are developed in the 1950s and space and the undersea are equivalent realms for human exploration and both are fascinating and so there are underwater habitats that are saved in the 1960s. And there's a lot of interest in the potential for colonization undersea. I mean, is that a good thing about then? We could discuss that. But then by the 1970s, the. Cultural focus and the resources in the United States certainly have shifted to outer space, and although the undersea is. Heavily practiced by professionals. It's, you know. Submarines undersea cables. It is not captivating to the general public and instead it's the fantasy of going to the moon of going to Mars. It's *Star Trek*. It's the undiscovered realms and why you know it's Kubrick's *2001*. Why space should take on that charisma and the undersea should lose out when it's such a productive realm. Is just a puzzle and. So you know now I would turn it back to you and say like why do you think space is so charismatic? Uh, when it's so inaccessible compared in some ways to the end.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, I don't know. I think it's a great question like I'm writing something about sort of, you know, Hannah or rent talks about Sputnik at the beginning of human condition. And she says a little bit about science fiction. She says it's just almost like an afterthought. She says that except it. I think an important afterthought. She says, you know that we ought to look to science fiction to tell us how we conceive of mastery of the earth. And I think the idea of Sputnik being over our heads. It does seem like it instantly changes people. Vision of what the earth is. I mean, I don't know. I'm sort of slowing down 'cause I'm thinking it out loud I like your timeframes in terms of the 50s and 60s like you tend to think in science fiction terms, you tend to think about the Golden Age as being, you know, jumpstarted by the fact of atomic explosions in the 40s. I mean, there was lots of science fiction before that. But the atom bomb. Terrifies people makes them think, oh, we really could blow each other up so the planet seems very small and vulnerable then and then Sputnik. I mean, even though

it annoys the US government, I think the US taxpayer kind of likes it because it's exciting. You know, it just opens this. This gateway and the question you're asking is, as I understand it, is like why is that gateway any better than the gateway to like 70% of the surface of the earth which is actually accessible to us? Uhm, yeah. Can I turn it back to you I? I feel like you've probably got. A better answer. Than I do.

Margaret Cohen: So what's the I mean? No, I think this is a puzzle, you know, for the historians of culture and science, and particularly those of us with a maritime bias. I mean, yeah, you know, I think. The answers I have are just so speculative. You know that it's easier to fantasize about what you actually don't have to engage with in a nitty gritty way that the depths are. In some way. Well, not in some way that that humans just don't belong there, and there's such difficulty working down there that it's very obviously a space that requires professional expertise. And in that way, you know fantasy just can't roam free. Uh, it. Activities there are too complex. I don't know. I mean, I, I just I think it's an it's a lost opportunity and I think now we're realizing that you know we have to integrate all the activities conducted undersea into our account of the cosmos and the planet. Uh, both because they're integral to you, know human planetary transactions like undersea cable networks, for example. And because? Because of climate.

John Plotz: Yeah, so you know, just I'm really glad you mentioned *Solaris* and I guess maybe the movie *Interstellar* also is relevant 'cause it has the ocean planet in it as well but that point in *Solaris*? That is definitely not in the Tarkovsky movie, and I don't think it's in the more recent movie is either, which is that the sentience of the creature the like Gaia like. Living creature is precisely about tide control, because if it couldn't control its ties, it would be the planet itself would be destroyed. So there's this sense that. That mastery of the oceans is the thing you cross the space you cross space to find, and that in the Tarkovsky movie, which

is probably from the 70s or something, it's a land-based encounter, right? Like when he encounters the alien intelligence, he just goes down into that kind of dacha kind of space. So yeah, I now I feel like the. Timing of Solaris is really significant, that's great.

Margaret Cohen: That's so cool I never thought of that. But you're right. I mean, yeah, I just. I mean I'm flashing on all those scenes where he goes back into his memory in the dacha and you know, like why is he not? Out, you know. And whatever the name is.

John Plotz: Yeah, 'cause in the movie it's this. I mean in the in the novel it's this very unlikely tower. They have very fragile tower that's on the ocean and. Yeah uhm, yeah. Ah, that's really interesting.

Margaret Cohen: So that makes perfect sense given you know where Lem is writing from and where Tarkovsky is. You know filming, and yeah, yeah, that's great.

John Plotz: Yeah, but I haven't seen the George Clooney movie. Have you? Do you remember how?

Margaret Cohen: Yeah, I haven't.

John Plotz: It's yeah. OK, shoot.

Margaret Cohen: After Tarkovsky, how? Can you? How can you go anywhere?

John Plotz: Yeah, OK, well I'm I. I want to hear from some listener who thinks that George Clooney solved the secrets of the grad of the Solaris. Hey Margaret, as we as we sort of, I think we're turning the corner to home, but can I ask you? A kind of. Broad open question, which is like did you have an unexpected piece of research or just like a, uh, amazing either archival find or piece of film discovery as you were

doing this book, something that really. Just sent you off in a whole new direction.

Margaret Cohen: One of the underappreciated films in the US it was it was a cult film in France. Is Luke Bissell's *The Big Blue* about this rivalry between Free divers and it just has the most stunning underwater imagery that was filmed at very low budget. And you know, influenced by surrealism, influenced by the ability to create these fantasy scenarios using water and I could go on about. In fact, you know I have a small color insert in my book because one of the challenges in the book was how to write. About color with black. And white imagery, you know. So we have a small color inside. And a disproportionate number of the images are from the big blue, because they're just as stunning.

John Plotz: Yeah, it looks amazing. I still it's still on my list. I went right out and saw the man Ray film but I haven't seen *Big Blue* yet. Yeah, well, that's actually a great cue marker to ask us that you know, as listeners. No, we always ask this question of like the recallable book. Though we have a capacious definition, so let's say the recallable artwork, which is basically. You know, if you enjoyed this conversation, what is the one? Peace, you know piece of work that you would point people to. So yeah, do you wanna? Can I hand that? Over to you.

Margaret Cohen: OK, well so I've already mentioned the Big Blue, so I did mention something different.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah.

Margaret Cohen: I guess I'm going to be teaching it in my narrative poetic score, so that's a strong endorsement creature from the *Black Lagoon* by Jack Arnold.

John Plotz: Oh my God, love that.

Margaret Cohen: 1954 Yeah so I.

John Plotz: 3D, yeah.

Margaret Cohen: I was looking up IMDb trivia. You know on it, and apparently, Ingmar Bergman watched it every year on his birthday.

John Plotz: Oh wow huh?

Margaret Cohen: And it was inspired by Mexican cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, who filmed the Pearl, which is, like you know, a masterpiece of Mexican cinema and a story that he told some Hollywood reporters during making Citizen Kane. This is all off IMDb. But it's just a really beautiful. The underwater sequences are very innovative, and I could go on about that. But this interspecies love affair, which is presented mostly as longing from the side of this very sympathetic. Creature, it seems to me, although the creature gets integrated into Hollywood conventions, is extraordinarily moving and that underwater podded between the creature and the K, the scientist assistant is just a memorable, beautiful scene that could be, you know, surrealist it. It just it just stands out. You know to just make my case that you should. You should see his film, you know. Guillermo del Toro is inspired by it in making the shape of water which won best Picture in 2017, which I didn't include because it's underwater sequences are shot dry for wet.

John Plotz: Ah, I wondered, huh?

Margaret Cohen: Uh, but, uh, yeah, but he then gives sympathy to both sides of the story. Both the creature and then the woman in love with him. So yeah, I would say creature from the black.

John Plotz: OK, that's great. Well, so mine is actually from 1953 too, so maybe we're in the same ballpark as that. I mentioned this novelty, John Wyndham, who's basically a young adult science fiction writer. He wrote day of the Triffids, so he

wrote a novel called the Kraken Wakes in which the idea is that aliens come from another planet, but they come. I think they come from Jupiter, I can't. I'm a little fuzzy on the details, but they need intensely high pressure, so they arrive and immediately plunge to the depths. You know the deepest depths of our oceans and then 'cause the oceans to rise. Thus you know being to blame the giving humans a good villain to fight against. But also there's just this incredible. Image that in my mind sort of merges together the space of the space of space and of deep sea because they're both from beyond. And also you know, down in the depths. Anyway, it's you know Wyndham is amazing 'cause he is a children's book writer, but he puts pictures in your head that you don't really, they can't. You can't get rid of and that's one of.

Margaret Cohen: Ah, that's extraordinary.

John Plotz: Them so yeah.

Margaret Cohen: I feel like I just want to continue this conversation. Cause now I'm about to scroll through all the nuclear kind of grade B disaster movies.

John Plotz: Oh yeah, sure. Of the two.

Margaret Cohen: 50s, you know the attack of the giant crab monsters that.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, it always comes from the Mariana Trench or something. Yeah, yeah, it's interesting because like there's that 19th century tradition of the hollow Earth novel, I feel like there are more French ones than American than American or English ones. But you know, the hollow earth is replaced by the crack in the earth. You know which is those deep trenches. The upside-down Everest's under the ocean, yeah?

Margaret Cohen: Oh wow.

John Plotz: Uhm wow.

Margaret Cohen: Which truly are geologically on a continuum, you know now you're going to get me talking about my favorite place. I live of Monterey Bay and the way in which you know the mountains go down into the sea and into this deep ocean trench, just five or 10 miles offshore that goes down to 5000 feet, so it is all connected.

John Plotz: That is fascinating, man. I wish OK, I wish next time next book? Well, it's your next book, Margaret. I guess that's a great question to end on. Do you have one or is it still the.

Margaret Cohen: Well, OK, so we may need to cut this. I don't know what you think of it, but I'm considering writing a book about learning to surf late in life because as you did, say the beginning of a surfer and what that has taught me as a professor about both teaching and learning.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah. Wow amazing cool. Do it yes. OK. OK cool well thanks. So Margaret this has been a huge pleasure. Thank you for taking the time to be me. And if you enjoyed this conversation, dear listeners, you may want to check out our older conversation with the Amazing Mike Lee, as well as our recent conversation with Dana Stevens about her new Buster Keaton book. So thank you all for listening and hope to talk with you again soon. *Recall this Book* was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and Me, John Plotz. It is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English Department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms, and thoughts. If you like what you hear, please subscribe rate, and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts from all of us here at *RtB*. Thanks for listening.