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## **Gaining perceptibility for what is hidden in history, Yelena Popova's video-essay *Nuclear Utopia***

Today, the discourse around the essay-film is transmitted by the idea of heterogeneity and is considered to mirror the current mode of production. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in contrast, the essay-film was one of the most advanced forms of cinematic expression for filmmakers such as Hans Richter, Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard. For them, grounded in the tradition of the essayistic, it constituted a critical, self-reflective way of addressing complex topics. It allowed the cross-fertilisation of early film practices such as the experimental and the documentary,<sup>1</sup> fostering the interplay of a personal, a factual and a more abstract level.<sup>2</sup> In today's digital age, Hito Steyerl, a filmmaker and theoretical writer herself, has claimed that the essayistic has lost this critical potential. For her, the video-essay has deteriorated into a random mix of contradictory materials in a copy-paste manner, which produces a floating surface of heterogeneity mirroring a hybrid and supple subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> These different views raise the question of whether the essay has now become a superficial artistic tool that can be used arbitrarily for any subject to generate heterogeneity as an effectively absorbed version of criticality.

The artist Yelena Popova, a younger contemporary of Hito Steyerl, has used the essayistic form for her recent video works *Unnamed (Part 1)* (2010), *Nuclear Utopia* (2011), which are screened together under the title *Unnamed*, and *Particulate Matter* (2012) and considers them as cinematic essays or artistic documentaries in the tradition of Chris Marker or Patrick Keiller.<sup>4</sup> As will become clear in the following analysis of *Nuclear Utopia*, Yelena Popova deploys a specific mode of the essayistic in order to challenge a fixed understanding of history, which contrasts Steyerl's

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *The essay film. From Montaigne, after Marker*, Oxford, New York 2011, 51. The notion of the essay-film as an expanded documentary practice was first introduced by the filmmaker Hans Richter in the text *Der Essayfilm*, 1940. He called his investigations into complex topics 'essay-films', mostly of a philosophical, intellectual or abstract nature.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Hito Steyerl, *The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on Global Image Economies*, in: Sven Kramer und Thomas Tode (eds.), *Der Essayfilm. Ästhetik und Aktualität*, Konstanz 2011, 101–110, here 101–103.

<sup>4</sup> Yelena Popova, *Mail 3rd February 2012*. In a written interview (3/2/12) with the author she said: "Yes, sure it is a cinematic essay in the tradition of Chris Marker. I also liked the work of Otolith group and Patrick Keiller. Also documentary seems to be an art form of this century. I've made an artistic documentary with a strong personal (biographic) angle and some poetic metaphors."

notion of the essay as a ready-made formula. In addition, the essay in Popova's videos provides a forum for abstract concepts such as progress and hidden aspects of history to become visible so that they can be critically considered. In doing so, as I claim, she questions Steyerl's overall assertion that the essayistic has lost its force as an artistic expression of critical thinking in the digital age.

First of all, I will discuss the essay as a form of critical knowledge as understood by Adorno and later developed by Ursula Biemann as a structure of complexity for the video-essay. This notion is contrasted with Steyerl's position, which will be traced back to the process of deconstruction associated with the essayistic in order to understand its implication for the conception of heterogeneity. This theoretical debate will prepare for the analyses of Yelena Popova's work in the second part of the analysis. *Nuclear Utopia* will be the focus of attention as the question of utopia, which is explored in a specific context of Soviet Union history in relation to individual experience, addresses the central aspect of debate surrounding the essayistic, thus challenging a mode of thinking that proceeds from objectivity. The analysis is guided by two questions: In what way can Popova's use of the essay-film be considered in terms of criticality? What does her specific mode of the essayistic contribute to the understanding of the topic she is dealing with?

**The essay as structure of critical and complex thinking:** Research into the essay-film is a relatively new field and an agreed definition has not yet emerged.<sup>5</sup> The debate has unfolded on several levels concerning the question of genre,<sup>6</sup> intermediality,<sup>7</sup> the essay-film as film theory,<sup>8</sup> and the essayistic as a structure for producing critical knowledge. As a distinct genre, the essay goes back to 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who devised it as a form for testing

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<sup>5</sup> Sven Kramer und Thomas Tode, *Modulationen des Essayistischen im Film. Eine Einführung*, in: idem, (eds.), *Der Essayfilm. Ästhetik und Aktualität*, Konstanz 2011, 11–26, here 16–19. Kramer / Tode give a good overview of the research into the essay film and the questions discussed so far. They argue that the term is established in French and German filmmaking, whereas in the Anglo-Saxon context it is still tentatively used.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. Can the essay film be considered as a film genre as Christina Scherer (2001) or Timothy Corrigan have suggested? Or is it determined by the absorption and remix of the other film genres, as Bill Krohn (2001, in Blümlinger / Wulff, 171-177) has argued, and does it resist the classification as a genre?

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. Within the debate around the 'iconic turn' the essay film has been discussed within the realm of intermediality. Questions of how different media such as the auditory, the visual and the textual interact with each other have caught attention.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15. Volker Pantenburg, 2006, developed Godard's understanding and sees the characteristics of the film essay in the specific relation between text, images and sound and its ability to think theoretically (film as theory).

subjectivity, ideas and society by weighting thoughts.<sup>9</sup> With shifting emphasis, the essay was influential for a variety of critics in later centuries such as De Sade, Ralph W. Emerson or Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>10</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century its significance was highlighted by Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno and Roland Barthes, who elaborated it in different directions as a genre between literature and philosophy.

Most relevant for the discussion of the potential of the essay for critical thinking is Theodor W. Adorno's text *The Essay as Form* (1958). Here he conceptualized the essay as the most advanced articulation of knowledge as "the critical form par excellence (...) it is the critique of ideology,"<sup>11</sup> and thus the immanent critique of intellectual constructions. For him, it allowed a complex and self-reflective approach to any given topic, opposing methods of rational logic established by Descartes for scientific knowledge in the empirical tradition.<sup>12</sup> For Adorno, the basic function of the essay is to criticize any form of knowledge that is conceived as objective or naturally given and therefore, in his eyes, ideological.<sup>13</sup> For him, the critical potential of the essay lies in its ability to reveal the ideological framework<sup>14</sup> of every conception<sup>15</sup>, thus fostering doubt as to the very method of thinking. This is achieved because the essay introduces a form of knowledge which is self-reflective, open, fragmentary, associative, or even antagonistic as opposed to total and systematic.<sup>16</sup>

For Adorno, knowledge in the essay is considered as a form of interpretation. Subjective in its focus, it exposes any claim to objectivity.<sup>17</sup> It is a cautious, tentative mode of approach from a multitude of perspectives opposing the sharp-edged

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<sup>9</sup>To essay means to assay = to weight.

<sup>10</sup> Corrigan (as note 1) For a concise overview of the essay as a philosophical and literary genre, see Corrigan, 13-49; for the history of the essay-film, 50-75.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Essay as Form*, in: *New German Critique*, Spring -Summer, Issue 20, 1984, 151-171, here 166.

<sup>12</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Der Essay als Form*, in: idem. (eds.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, 9-33, here 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>14</sup> David Macey, *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory*, London; New York 2001, 198. The word ideological or ideology is used in Marxist tradition and in the social sciences as a term to describe a distorted or illusory form of thought which departs from a criterion of objectivity. Authors such as Daniel Bell have identified fanatical totalitarianism with such a misconstrued world-view.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno (as note 12), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 23.

single focused analyses in rational science.<sup>18</sup> Knowledge in the essayistic form is not logically deduced through a coherent argument in a chain of subordinated arguments, but instead arises in a meandering network (*Geflecht*) comparable to the movement of thoughts.<sup>19</sup> The elements within an essay are loosely arranged.<sup>20</sup> They have alternating effects on each other and generate, as it were, force fields (*Kraftfelder*) that overlap. Knowledge in this form is only possible in the particular – not as a general conclusion.<sup>21</sup> The loose and fragmented structure which Adorno attributes to the essay is constantly counterweighted by a striving towards continuity and is an entity which cannot be fixed. It is this structure of non-identity, which ensures that meaning is still possible, although only partially and fragmented.<sup>22</sup> The essay is in Adorno's view also a form that intrinsically comprises moments of freedom for writer and reader as each can participate in the production of meaning and isn't exposed to fixed results.<sup>23</sup> As will become clear in the analysis of Yelena Popova's video-essays, Adorno's formal description of the essayistic still provides a useful tool for delineating those structures which have the effect of approaching a topic in a critical way and which produce a provisional form of meaning.

The artist and filmmaker Ursula Biemann has recently described the video-essay as a contemporary form for organizing complexity. In doing so, she gives a useful formulation of how Adorno's description of the essay structure has been adapted for the video-essay. For her, not empirical knowledge production, but a simple notion of the documentary<sup>24</sup> practised by mass media news reports<sup>25</sup> is the source of ideological<sup>26</sup> thinking. For Biemann, it is this illusory belief in a simple and direct

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 31/32.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21/22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>24</sup> It can be argued that documentary films have developed their own means to circumvent the auctorial narration in order to approach a topic from various angles. One example would be the documentation Jeremy Deller's re-enactment of the *Battle of Orgreave* by Mike Figgis, in which interviews with different people who witnessed or experienced the miners' strike are put together.

<sup>25</sup> Ursula Biemann, Writing counter-geography, in: Jacinto Lageira (ed.), *Appel à témoins. Éric Watt, Ursula Biemann, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Anri Sala, Seifollah Samadian, Fiona Tan*, Quimper 2004, 40–62, here 55. "In other words, the essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities."

<sup>26</sup> Ideological in the sense of an illusory belief in the appearance of the world as objective. See footnote 10.

representation of reality<sup>27</sup> which the video-essay has to oppose. It does not aim to gather facts, but is concerned with capturing the multiple layers of an event.<sup>28</sup> On a technical level, it is the combination of multiple visual materials, voices and sound tracks in non-linear editing, which contributes to complexity.<sup>29</sup> In her video-essay *Europlex*, we can see how Biemann traces different groups of people using the border between Morocco and Spain to make their living. Her documentaries film of different border crossings, in part digitally manipulated and combined with statistics, present the viewer with the complex fabric of the borders to Europe.

It would appear that the notion of self-reflectiveness, already important for Adorno, is also central to Biemann's understanding of the video-essay. Indeed, Timothy Corrigan, who defines the essay-film primarily as a critical construction of an unsettled subjectivity,<sup>30</sup> sees the difference between a documentary and an essayistic practice precisely in the disclosure of subjective agency.<sup>31</sup> Following this strand of thought, it is the voice-over commentary which creates a fragmented narrative and thus, for Biemann, distinguishes the video-essay from the documentary. It ties together the different sources of information in a non-linear string of reflections and thus contributes to a picture of complexity without surrender to random heterogeneity. It also introduces a subjective and self-reflective perspective, which situates meaning in a specific subject and therefore resists any claim of abstract conclusion.<sup>32</sup> As an agent for self-reflectiveness, the voice-over is constantly aware of the interpretative aspects of meaning production.<sup>33</sup> The voice-over in *Europlex*, spoken by Biemann herself and recognisable by her distinctive accent, provides complex conclusions for what the camera observes. This first example of the video-essay introduces a fragmented and subjective narrative by the voice-over which clearly guides the viewer. It provides little room for independent

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<sup>27</sup> Helmut Schanze und Susanne Pütz, *Metzler Lexikon Medientheorie, Medienwissenschaft. Ansätze, Personen, Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart 2002, 68. The definition of the documentary film as the simple and direct representation of reality goes back to the Lumière Brothers. The term was first used in opposition to the feature film, fictionalizing reality. This simple duality has been questioned in film theory.

<sup>28</sup> Biemann (as note 27), 60.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Corrigan (as note 1), 55. The notion of the essayistic as way of questioning the subject's identity goes back to Montaigne's initial text.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> Biemann (as note 27), 56.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

considerations and thus excludes the audience's participation in the construction of meaning, thus contrasting the very aspect which Adorno had attributed to the essay.

**The essay as random heterogeneity and radicalized deconstruction:** For Hito Steyerl the essay has lost all this potential to generate complex understanding and critical knowledge. She argues that the central structure of the essay (understood as the non-coherent combination of separate areas of information once responsible for generating a critical discourse) has been absorbed by the 'copy-paste' ideologies of new global production of random heterogeneity.<sup>34</sup> In her interpretation, the essayistic mimics "the contemporary brand of capitalism based on the compulsory manufacturing of differences in a custom-tailored niche market."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, she also sees the essay in the digital age as mimicking the hybrid construction of subjectivity in the post-Fordist age.<sup>36</sup> For Steyerl, critical engagement in this situation is only possible through alternative methods of production such as strategically deployed piracy or web collaboration.<sup>37</sup>

In order to understand the shift in Steyerl's interpretation of the essayistic, the relation between the essay-film and the concept of 'deconstruction' as established in recent discourse is illuminating.<sup>38</sup> Authors like Klaus Kreimeier have argued that the essay-film can be described as an epistemic practice in the sense of Derrida's deconstruction.<sup>39</sup> As a mode of the disruption of knowledge,<sup>40</sup> the essayistic generates a net of differences without a core or a centre that organises it. As an operation of deconstruction, the essay-film annihilates coherence.<sup>41</sup> The author

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<sup>34</sup> Steyerl (as note 3), 102. "If Adorno's coerced identity corresponds to the age of assembly line, contemporary essays also reflect the 'copy and paste' ideologies of new global chains of production, which constantly integrate and juggle surprising new elements."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 102..

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 104/110. She argues later that audio-visual economies based on batter, theft and appropriation provide an alternative to capitalist-driven media mainstream. For her, home computers, amateur cameras and databases produce today what she associates with Adorno's critical role of the essay: alternative forms of vision, knowledge and grounds for discussion.

<sup>38</sup> Klaus Kreimeier, Die List der Dekonstruktion: zur politischen Qualität des Essayfilms, in: Sven Kramer und Thomas Tode (eds.), *Der Essayfilm. Ästhetik und Aktualität*, Konstanz 2011, 59–76, here 59. 'Deconstruction' is defined as "Kalkül, das bei der Lektüre von Texten angewandt wird, um die Geltungsansprüche einer auf die Ermittlung von Sinn ausgerichteten Interpretation zu unterlaufen." (*Reallexikon der Deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, 1997, 335)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 65–66.

considers the method of discontinuous montage such as jump cuts or contrasting montage as the basic device for deconstruction in the essay-film as it destroys the illusion of producing coherence.<sup>42</sup> Steyerl's understanding of the essayistic as mimicry of new capitalist production modes and its constitution of the subject has similarities to other post-Marxist approaches. Boris Groys, for example, claims that this heterogeneity without a centre, is the structure of today's (post)-democratic society in which, he suggests, segmentation has gone too far as a result of a rigorous process of deconstruction.<sup>43</sup> For him, the subjects in such a society are constantly exposed to limitless differentiation, so that they become heterogeneous in themselves.<sup>44</sup> In Groys eyes, the subject in dialectical materialism<sup>45</sup> is supposed to be constructed differently, comprising heterogeneity and its opposite identity without dissolving this paradox through deconstruction.<sup>46</sup> In general, he compares the way this subject functions to the performance of the artist: it declares how things ought to be, without objective reasoning or complete arbitrariness.<sup>47</sup>

Catherine Lupton allows us to see this idea applied to practice. She has described a process of deconstructing subject identity named "heteroglossic" for the deployment of the voice-over. Its effect is to undermine a notorious self-assured self from within. It is achieved

"...by multiplying the speaking selves or personae who provide commentary, by deferring or displacing what they have to say into assorted forms of reported speech – such as the letter, the quotation, the recollected saying of conversation – by asserting their fictional or, at least, ontologically ambiguous status with regard to actual people (including and especially the filmmaker) and by fomenting indeterminacies, tensions and disagreements among them."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 68–69.

<sup>43</sup> Boris Groys, *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*, Frankfurt am Main 2006, 71–72. He comes up with the term post-democratic, but doubts whether this is the ultimate stage, since for him not only communism but also democracy has the potential to transform itself constantly.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 73. Quite problematically he argues that the striving towards heterogeneity is embodied by the communist movement fighting for the liberation of the suppressed, and its opposite, a totally administrated and defining pole, materialized in the state communism.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 78–79.

<sup>48</sup> Catherine Lupton, *Speaking parts: Heteroglossic voice-over in the essay-film*, in: Sven Kramer und Thomas Tode (eds.), *Der Essayfilm. Ästhetik und Aktualität*, Konstanz 2011, 157–188, here 159–160.

For her, this heteroglossic use of the voice-over can go beyond the process of purely generating infinite difference since it is able to make space for “voices and experiences of socio-cultural otherness”.<sup>49</sup> In monologic tactics, she argues, what is feared and shunned within the constitution of the self is projected onto the other.<sup>50</sup> As we shall see in Yelena Popova’s video *Nuclear Utopia*, a similar effect is created by a twofold structure of the voice-over.

**Yelena Popova’s *Nuclear Utopia*:** In characterising her videos as cinematic essays or artistic documentaries, Yelena Popova relates her practice to the tradition of cross-fertilisation of documentary and experimental film currently employed, as we have seen, by artists such as Ursula Biemann. Following the conceptual discussion outlined above, it is the specific use of the voice-over in combination with the editing, which allows us to distinguish the self-reflective, complex and fragmented form of the essay from a random montage of heterogenic elements or a documentary. In the following analysis, I will characterise the effect of these devices in Yelena Popova’s video essays focusing on *Nuclear Utopia* to re-assess the applicability of the theoretical discussion surrounding the essay.

Beginning with the examination of the thematic strands of the three pieces, we can see how the theme influences the voice-over. On a thematic level, her video-essays *Nuclear Utopia* and *Unnamed (Part 1)* are investigations into the history of two so called ‘closed towns’ as secret settlements for the development and production of nuclear technology in the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>51</sup> *Unnamed (Part 1)* addresses and reflects upon the long suppressed nuclear disaster in the late 1950s in the city where the artist grew up. As the video-essay develops, the representation of the disaster becomes a central metaphor for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By alluding to Maurice Blanchot’s *L’écriture du désastre* (1980), the failure of science is compared to understanding (the comprehension of details) as opposed to knowledge (the awareness of consequences and coherence). As the multi-layered title suggests, this video-essay reflects on the question of how invisibility of both the history of the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Closed\\_city](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Closed_city) [latest accessed on 23/4/13].



town and of a prototype disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can gain a form of sensuous perceptibility so that it can be faced and considered.

A similar secret settlement built by the Soviets in satellite Estonia is the focus of *Nuclear Utopia*. On her journey to this place, the first person narrator is constantly reminded of her experience as a child in such a town. The juxtaposition of past and present, which is at the heart of this quest, circles around the notion of 'communist utopia'. The perfect system imposed by force as a central aspect of Stalin's ideology<sup>52</sup> is addressed within the exceptional framework of this hidden nuclear production site. As an enclave within an enclave, the unnamed town this time works as a metaphor for the questionable premises of a fulfilled utopia.

In her most recent video *Particulate Matter*, Popova develops the investigation into abstract ideas and looks into the structure of progress as the foundation of living conditions in Western Europe as opposed to China during their respective phases of industrialization. Here the more fragmented use of the essayistic journey provides a reflective space for the confrontation of East and West. Audibly set apart, there are three voices within the voice-over commentary, juxtaposing and echoing each other, addressing the failure of these underlying notions of progress to provide balance and well-being for the people. It is the male English voice which relates the linear time of the West to the idea of beginning and end as well as to the periodic table, the embodiment of a scientific comprehension of the world. The female voice with a Chinese accent, in turn, compares the circular model echoing the cycles of nature to the structure of the Taoist temple. By pointing to the paradox of the suppressed trade unions in China and their political exploitation in other communist countries, she brings the notion of emancipation within communism into play, highlighting its failure to enable working people to shape their own living conditions.

**Images / Montage:** A documentary dimension is introduced in all three videos by the camera, which examines the surface of the visited places in a fieldwork manner. The different takes of the observing camera are filmed at various paces and under different light conditions. They form an uneven rhythm disrupting any illusory whole,

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<sup>52</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the future. The desire called utopia and other science fictions*, London; New York 2007, XI. "Utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on the imperfect and reluctant subjects."

preventing the viewer from becoming immersed into a coherent secondary reality and thus contrasting the suggestive mode of the propaganda footage introduced in *Nuclear Utopia*. These slightly shaking documentary images, which constitute different proportions in each film, stress the relation with the hand of the filmmaker holding the camera, locating them within a subjective, bodily agent. Repeated single documentary takes stand out as metaphors or symbols. They work as anchors of meaning within the flow of images. In *Unnamed (Part 1)* and *Nuclear Utopia* it is the swing, reminiscent of childhood, which is transformed through repetition into a symbol. In *Particulate Matter* the spiral shape of the Taoist temple is emphasized in contrast to the grid of modernist buildings. This figurative use of images is expanded by motifs, physically created or specifically chosen by the artist for metaphoric reasons. In *Unnamed (Part 1)*, the images of a kiln and melting glass in combination with a paper-folded figure stand out as metaphors for underlying processes and the division of understanding and knowledge. A snow globe containing a worker, self-consciously marching, makes visible the artificial enclosure of the unnamed towns in *Nuclear Utopia*. In *Particulate Matter* it is a precarious tower of toy bricks which signifies the fragile stage of a society in danger of collapse. The documentary and metaphoric images are combined with footage from personal collection or historic archives, introducing a wider dimension of the past. Filmed photographs of artworks provide a further level, reflecting the process of gaining visibility as fundamental to art. In irregular intervals, all these types of images, varying in proportion in each film, are introduced or followed by black frames that interrupt an illusory realism, marking out space for reflection. The different documentary shots and the other types of images are combined in methods of discontinuous editing, such as hard cut or jump cut, thus constantly interrupting a simple mode of coherent representation. The documentary mode of representation, which constitutes the majority of visual material in *Nuclear Utopia*, is interspersed with a small number of figurative images. Like islands in the sea, they form, centers of attention within a structure of loose association, similar to what Adorno has described as fields of forces in the essay.

**Voice-Over:** The essayistic of Yelena Popova's videos is further developed on the level of the voice-over and is applied in different modes for each topic. In all three films, one part of the commentary is spoken by a female voice with a Russian

accent suggesting a relation to the filmmaker herself. In *Unnamed (Part 1)* and *Nuclear Utopia*, in which Popova addresses her personal history, this female voice delivers the entire commentary. In *Nuclear Utopia*, oscillating between a factual and a personal mode of expression, the voice-over commentary interrogates the documentary approach of the camera for possible meaning while relating it to information, reflections, philosophical thoughts, doubts, personal comments and subjective memories. It also takes on the function of entwining the different images and sounds into a provisional, fragmentary, self-reflective whole. In *Particulate Matter* this voice speaks only the part of the first person narrator. Here it is the arrangement of the recurring images which forms a kind of entity, characteristic for the essay as form.

Russian in origin, Popova herself appears in *Unnamed (Part 1)* and *Nuclear Utopia*, thus proving a possible embodiment for the voice in a particular, historical human being. In *Unnamed (Part 1)* we encounter her towards the end of the film, near the neoclassical rotunda, emphasising her own attachment to the past. In *Nuclear Utopia* she stands in an iron blue sporty dress at the shore of the Baltic Sea looking beyond the horizon. This image identifies her as a possible former member of the communist sports youth we later encounter in the film on historical footage. It also works as a metaphor for the whole video and its deployment of the essayistic: the confrontation with the world outside gives visual expression to the idea of breaking open new horizons and opening up the ideological enclosure<sup>53</sup> the narrator lived through as a child in the specific situation of a secret nuclear settlement in the Soviet Union.

The voice-over commentary in *Nuclear Utopia*, following a fragmented travel-narrative, takes the viewer on a journey to the 'closed' town in Estonia from a first-person's perspective. This narrative device, deployed in essay-films by Chris Marker or Patrick Keiller, allows the reflection of the self as the other by distancing its current form from its past disposition.<sup>54</sup> Popova uses it for the confrontation between the self of the child and the self of the adult in order to construct an

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<sup>53</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology. An introduction*, London [etc.] 1991, 13. Ideological is used here in the sense of principles, which are enforced upon a society by stately power.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Scherer, *Ivens, Marker, Godard, Jarman - Erinnerung im Essayfilm*, München 2001, 31–32.

antagonistic self-conception, thus modifying in a distinctive way what Corrigan has called an unsettling subjectivity.

The film begins with the moving past of images of a landscape taken from a driver's cabin, accompanied by a crackling vehicle noise. Dark layers of beige, brown and black trees, resembling a romantic landscape, give way to a frontal view of an overland road, still at night or in the early morning. A sudden cut and click exposes our view to bright daylight. Inside the car, we then vaguely recognize a person while the female voice begins to speak in a kind, calm tone expressing a personal doubt: "I thought I would like it here." This mixture of longing and estrangement, which she reflects upon as "bitter sweet nostalgic moments,"<sup>55</sup> is stimulated by the landscape and the visible traces of Estonia's Soviet past, which reminds her of her childhood in a similar city.<sup>56</sup> Different shades of emotional attachments, neutralised and mirrored in the calm and kind tone of voice, are constantly addressed as the journey continues. As we soon realize, this sudden change from night to daylight, which we experience in the initial sequence of *Nuclear Utopia*, has the function of a metaphor for the shift in experience through which the narrator constantly goes on her journey to Estonia. Here a particular version of communist utopia, which she experienced as a child in an 'closed' town in Russia, confronts her adult perception while travelling. Constantly triggering memories, the journey to the foreign location works as a displacement and opens up a space for reflection. The temporal and spatial distance of the journey allows her to confront her past self (emotionally immersed in what she later calls 'plentiful communism') with her adult perspective (engaged in reflection and informed by historical knowledge). By combining observation and knowledge, the adult self constantly reveals the ideological construction of the places to which the child was emotionally attached. As the film continues the two states of selfhood become intertwined in a complex manner, raising the questions of what to do with these feelings and in what way they are relevant for the present. This

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<sup>55</sup> Yelena Popova, *Nuclear Utopia*. Transcript 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia*, New York 2001, 50–51. The narrator's longing for the past thus corresponds with the notion of 'reflective nostalgia', envisioned by Svetlana Boym as opposed to 'restorative nostalgia'. While the later evokes national past and future that wants to reconstruct emblems and rituals of home and homeland, reflective nostalgia is approached in individual narrative engaged with details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another and that affective memories oblige to judgement and critical reflection.

use of the voice-over highlights its function of creating a complex and antagonistic picture of a situation as it introduces conflicting views.

On the level of image, it is the children's swing which addresses the emotional attachment. In two long takes, the camera focuses on a red swing standing immobile in a shadowed part of an abandoned garden. This motif, as we already know from *Unnamed (Part 1)*, works as a metaphor for a desolate but still desired experience of the past. Later we encounter a white swing in use, wangled energetically by a girl. Boris Groys has argued that the historic materialization of communism in the Soviet Union died in 1989, but its conceptual idea as a linguistically mediated form of intellectually planned statesmanship based on equality could be renewed in a different form.<sup>57</sup> With the red swing Popova seems to consider such a notion of the essence of communism, but suggests a perceptual shift by the change of colour.

As the journey continues, we see yellow fields of wheat under light blue skies passing by, again evoking emotional memories in the narrator. Behind overgrown trees and a mess of signposts and masts of power lines, this real, so to speak de-idealized version of the landscape stands in stark contrast to the ordered and shiny adaptation we later encounter on filmed photographs from the mosaics decorating the Moscow metro-station. Designed, as we learn, by Alexandr Deyneka in the 1930s in social realist style, we see pilots and engineers in steep perspective from below flying into a golden Soviet sky. A female comrade, triumphantly handling a harvest machine, appears to allegorise the ideal of collectivized farming as brutally enforced by Stalin at the time. By alluding to agriculture and the metro-station, the first prestigious industrial project to be completed, Popova introduces two central fields of Stalin's ambition. The transformation of the Soviet Union into a place of unalienated labour, enforced by heavy industrialisation, was his declared fulfilment communist utopia.<sup>58</sup> Failed economic policy is further subtly addressed as the narrator, on her way to the Estonian town, comes across decomposed industrial buildings in modernist style. The damaged architecture of modernism bears witness to the ambition to change society by modes of production and exposes its failure.

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<sup>57</sup> Groys (as note 45), 94–95.

<sup>58</sup> Eva Maeder und Christina Lohm, *Utopie und Terror. Josef Stalin und seine Zeit*, Zürich 2003, 159.

The derelict plants and deserted tractors hint at the abandonment of the settlement in a mad rush in 1989 and testify to the disaster of the Soviet Union, the narrator suggests. The camera then focuses on the dual busts of Lenin and Stalin with their neckerchiefs, smiling in an unworldly way.

While later visiting the town, the narrator discovers more traces which contradict her memories of her past experience. It is the juxtaposition of the voice-over commentary and images which makes us aware of the ideological framework of the charming looking neoclassical architecture and the idyllic location of the Estonian settlement near the sea. The place, which now looks like a seaside resort for elderly people, was built, as we learn, in the 1940s to house the best scientists and engineers, forcefully appointed and made to sign an agreement never to leave. The style of the garden city with vast areas of greens, once theorized as an urban version of utopia in Modernism,<sup>59</sup> had the simple function of concealing the settlement from above. This location near the sea once again evokes feelings of longing in the narrator as she declares that it was chosen only for its geostrategic benefits of providing sufficient water for the highly flammable uranium of the nuclear plant. The water belts around these places, also much romanticised, functioned as natural protection zones to keep the settlement secret. This passage clearly makes us aware, of how Popova carefully deploys the collocation of images and commentary in order to build up a field of forces for critiquing the ideological framework of this nuclear settlement. It thus employs a central operation described by Adorno for the essay.

As Popova explores the city centre, she also discovers the iconic images characteristic of her hometown. In every such settlement, the narrator informs us, monuments were constructed to celebrate the power of the communist party and its glorious future. In the Estonian town, it was, as we learn, a monumental staircase with statues in social realist style representing perfect citizens of the ideal communist society, which inscribed the ideological vision in the city centre.<sup>60</sup> Soviet culture under Stalin in the official style of social realism, as Groys argues, inherited the avant-garde belief that human kind could be changed and that art played a vital

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<sup>59</sup> Jameson (as note 53), 20. He mentions the garden-city idea as model of utopia in modernism and alludes to Ebenezer, Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, 1902/1965) in the footnote.

<sup>60</sup> Boris Groys, *Art power*, Cambridge, Mass 2008, 146.

function in the creation of a new, communist mankind.<sup>61</sup> These artworks, “realistic in form and socialist in content,”<sup>62</sup> were thought to be accessible to the masses in order to educate accordingly.<sup>63</sup> To the narrator’s regret, these oversized figures of scientists, engineers, sportsmen, and women with dynamic futurist bodies representing the ideological aspiration of Soviet communism to forcefully forge a new society, disappeared in the early 1970s. This was a time, when the regime returned to Stalin’s principle and reversed reforms such as freedom of speech.<sup>64</sup> As a ruin of the time, only the staircase is left. As we are exposed to old photographs on which ordinary people pose next to these vibrant super heroes, the gap between ideal and reality becomes visually evident. Thus we understand the irony as the narrator wonders whether it was an act of self-criticism to remove the statues when the regime realised that the ideological message was too big or whether it was simply a pragmatic action because the maintenance was too expensive. The seemingly innocuous comments and questions which the narrator articulates while facing the ruined staircase, once again open up a forum for critique to be recognised by the audience, thus involving it in the critical production of meaning.

The blossoming flowers suggest that the inhabitants still cherish the staircase as if they wanted to express their emotional attachment to a bygone time or its lost promise, thus echoing the narrator’s longing for the past. The camera reflects the breakdown of the past and its utopian vision by showing the staircase from above and contrasting it with the upward look from the old photographs – a perspective which reinforces the aspiration to ascend to a great future. Indeed, the utopian aim to change society according to the communist vision and its failure (symbolized by the social realist statues) is subsequently addressed in Popova’s video in relation to the very notion of utopia. After a black frame, the steady craftsman in the snow-globe (representing the enclosed system of those nuclear towns) is introduced as a metaphor for the artificial existence of these places where communist utopia reached its highest articulation. It is the artificial enclosure which makes the narrator

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 148. They were of social realist style, the official artistic expression from the 1930s until 1989. After Stalin’s death all utopian aspiration and dreams of absolute artistic power became obsolete and Social Realism became simply a part of Soviet bureaucracy.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Wolfgang Leonhard (ed.), *Sowjetideologie heute*, Frankfurt am Main <sup>15</sup>1977, 251-256

think of the conditions of utopia famously described by Thomas More in 1517 as an artificial island separated by a trench from the rest of the world. For Frederic Jameson, More's text is the founding articulation of utopia as an imagined alternative social and economic form, spurred on by the obsessive search for the elimination of fundamental ills.<sup>65</sup> He argues that enclosure is thus a pre-condition for utopia.<sup>66</sup> As an imaginary enclave within the real social and historical space, utopia can therefore never be socially fulfilled.<sup>67</sup> In Jameson's eyes, utopia has to be distinguished from of a life in material prosperity and happiness, which he calls idyll or pastoral.<sup>68</sup> Popova hints at this misinterpretation of utopia by exposing the seaside resort quality of these settlements, thus mirroring the plentiful communism experienced here as anti-utopian. In doing so, she exposes the notion of fulfilled Soviet communism as a contradiction in itself.<sup>69</sup> For the narrator in *Nuclear Utopia*, who translates utopia as 'no-place', it is the enforced enclosure of these nuclear towns that can only be seen from outside, which lays bare the utopian enterprise in the service of ideology in its false premises. The visual devices in combination with the literary allusion thus amplify the central reflections of the video-essay, allowing the audience to discover the deludingly crafted surface of the unnamed town without imposing a narrative on us.

From within, these towns functioned as the embodiment of the ideal communist enterprise, for, as we learn, the entire population was committed (although not freely) to maintaining the collective project. From outside, it becomes clear that it was not the successful materialisation of the idea of communism which granted them unprecedented prosperity from the 1950s right through to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, but the nuclear technology they provided, as required in the power struggle with the West. As the narrator tells us, these people had enough food, health care and education, whereas in the rest of the Soviet Union, people suffered constant shortage of basic goods. They represent an enclave within the enclave of communism, so to speak, the fundamental structure of the system, the

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<sup>65</sup> Jameson (as note 53), XIV. On More's utopian island money and property were abolished.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 5. "In More, to be sure, closure is achieved by that great trench the founder causes to dig between the island and the mainland and which alone allows it to become Utopia in the first place."

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 12. Jameson sees the idyllic as the striving for happiness as articulated in the founding texts of Western democracy written by John Locke.

<sup>69</sup> Groys (as note. 45), 94–95.



imbalance between people's need and ideological concern, being able to produce nuclear weapons while failing to manufacture basic goods.<sup>70</sup>

The aspect of the false utopian conception is addressed by the narrator in the fact that people in these unnamed places, indeed experienced life as it was portrayed in social realist paintings and Soviet propaganda. We see happy comrades on footage introduced towards the end of the video: well nourished and with optimistic gazes, preparing plentiful food in canteens catering to the collective. Later we see healthy youths parading in mass formation representing the sports elite. The heroic hymn, audible with these black and white images hints at the propagandistic nature of these staged mass rituals to proclaim happy communist life.<sup>71</sup> The narrator states that this questionable utopia, reflected in the title of the video itself, was nevertheless central to her past. We are left with emotion and insight.

In *Nuclear Utopia*, as has become clear throughout this analysis, Popova is re-evaluating a period of the history of the Soviet Union in a particular place, interrogating the notion of communist utopia. It is a history which is ideologically charged or thought to be irrelevant after 1989 by authors such as Frederic Jameson. The analysis has shown that the essayistic is deployed here not primarily to generate complexity (Biemann), but to create a form of critical insight for the re-evaluation of history, thus rejecting Steyerl's concept of random heterogeneity in the video-essay and shifting Adorno's notion of 'critical knowledge' to critical understanding. In Popova's video, methods of producing heterogeneity such as jump cut, black frames and fragmentation of the commentary are used to interrupt a consistent flow of images and a closed narrative, thus disrupting a coherent and simplistic understanding of history. The function of striving towards continuity - important for the creation of meaning - can be attributed to patterns of repetition, such as the image of the red swing or the landscape. On the other hand, it is the use of the first person perspective of the voice-over which provides a form of fragmented coherence. This specific use of the voice-over is, moreover, responsible for a distinct construction of the subject.

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<sup>70</sup> Maeder u. Lohm (as note 59), 197–198.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 157.

**Constituting a space for the self and its other:** The contrast of *Particulate Matter* with *Nuclear Utopia* highlights the specific use of the essayistic for specific topics. The personal comment in the voice-over in *Nuclear Utopia* can be attributed to a specific person in a given historical context. This possible embodiment establishes a strong personal view of history, thus avoiding abstract conclusion or falling back to an evolutionary model of history, which, as we have seen, Boris Groys still suggests.

In relating the internal and external perspective by relating the emotionally attached memory of the child to that of the adult, who responds with knowledge and distance in its encounter, *Nuclear Utopia* brings together the fixed and the fluid, that which forms identity and simultaneously dissolves it. The two approaches are not resolved, but counterbalance each other in the sequence of the video-essay as well as on the level of images. In this, Popova uses the structure of the essay to open up a space for reflection for the viewer to consider this constellation of emotion and reflection, past and present experience.<sup>72</sup>

These two different modes of expression of the voice-over stand, so a further conclusion, for two configurations of the self. Rather than destroying the subject's identity, as Lupton has suggested for the essay-film within a theory of deconstruction, these two poles (comparable to Groys' identity and differentiation without charging these concepts ideologically) constantly mirror each other in a timely deferred way. Thus the essayistic makes room for the self and the other. In this double expression the subject is characterized as being influenced by history as well as being able to articulate a personal perspective on it. In the specific context of *Nuclear Utopia*, which addresses communist utopia in its aspiration to forge a new collective of ideal people through abstract concepts, the reestablishment of a subject capable of agency, I argue, is to be considered as a feature of criticality in that it introduces what was oppressed in the collective vision. The double conception of the emotional and reflecting self not only deconstructs the anonymous corporate ideology of communism, but also works against the authoritarian gesture to change people's beliefs arbitrarily from the outside.

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<sup>72</sup> Alter Nora M., Memory Essay, in: Ursula Biemann (eds.), *Stuff it. The video essay in the digital age*, Köln 2003, 12–23, here 21. Nora Alter has described a similar arrangement for example for Chris Marker's essay-film *Immunity*, in which the viewer is pushed to create new texts rather than consume histories.

**Making the underlying and hidden perceptible:** What the analysis of the use of the essayistic in Popova's video-essay has further shown is the importance of gaining visibility as a fundamental quest for working against ideological beliefs. In all three films, the artist is concerned with the question of how to provide critical visibility for the underlying concepts that govern our reality or inhabit our understanding of history. In this undertaking, the form of the video-essay plays a vital role, as I claim, because it provides a complex structure for the embodiment of that which is concealed. Encircling immaterial aspects through a multi-layered network of images, sound and voices, it is able to bestow upon them a form of sensuous presence, making them accessible for the audience to reflect upon. In doing so, Popova not only narrates the critical understanding as Biemann does in *Europlex*, but also involves the audience as the third part in the process of generating critical meaning.

The aspect of creating perceptibility for underlying concepts or ideas (which itself has to be critically considered), is reflected in Popova's videos on a meta-level through references to art. In *Nuclear Utopia*, it is the scrutinizing of socialist-realist sculpture on the staircase of the nuclear town which reflects the process of visibility and its request for interpretation as a fundamental operation in art. In *Particulate Matter*, on the other hand, the allusion to William Turner's landscape painting at the beginning of Western industrialization addresses this process. Popova uses this ability of art in the form of the video-essay in *Nuclear Utopia* to create a sensuous space for reflection upon a troubling history.