

THE INTERPLAY OF CONTRADICTIONS: FORMAL STRATEGIES IN ESSAY FILMS BY LAILA PAKALNIŅA

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Abstract

In literary studies, an essay is traditionally and etymologically defined as an experimental presentation of a thesis, idea, or criticism, with pronounced authorial involvement in the construction of the argument. It is a genre that appears in various academic disciplines and art fields. The essay film has been a part of film theory and practice since the 1940s, and is currently a key topic in the international film industry. The essay film genre in world cinema includes works by directors such as Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker, Harun Farocki and Peter Mettler, among others. Individual essay film examples in Latvian cinema were created by Aivars Freimanis, Hercs Franks, Laima Žurgina, Dāvis Sīmanis, Kristīne Želve, Jānis Ābele, Betija Zvejnice and a few others.

The current article is dedicated to the work and artistic uniqueness of Laila Pakalniņa (1962), an internationally acclaimed and prolific Latvian director, screenwriter, and producer. The artist is considered the demiurge of conceptual filmmaking and the most consistent representative of the tradition of the essay film genre in Latvian cinema. The author of the current article aims to confirm that Pakalniņa's creative legacy belongs to the essay film genre by analysing the diverse formal techniques employed. This diversity emphasises the individuality and authorship of the artist, while simultaneously testing and expanding the boundaries of cinematic language and initiating an active dialogue with the audience.

Keywords: *Latvian cinema, documentary cinema, the essay, the essay film, cinema modernism, subjectivity, Laila Pakalniņa.*

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Introduction

The essay is a genre that connects and permeates eras and fields of art. “Essayistic compositions can already be found in the works of Seneca, Plutarch, Cicero and other ancient philosophers” [Cimdiņa 2000: 12]. To illustrate the transhistorical nature of the essay and the uncertainty of disciplinary boundaries, it is worth noting the intertextual relationships between, for example, the epistolary collection *Moral Letters to Lucilius* by the ancient Roman author Lucius Annaeus Seneca and the films of the currently active Swiss Canadian director and cinematographer Peter Mettler. They are united by several narrative features, including associative thematic leaps, fragmentary and disjointed expression, active dialogue with the involved characters, the use of “I” rhetoric, and the intertwining of introspection with an interest in social and political issues. The concept of the essay is also evident in contemporary theatre today. “Companies and directors use the means of theatre to “think aloud” publicly or to make theoretical prose heard. [...] In works that use theatre texts one can also find that the actors seem to be more engrossed in the debate about their subject and its representation than in the actual presentation of it. Such transitions to a form that could be described as a theatrical or scenic essay incidentally represent the reverse of the noticeably increased attempts to theatricalize the teaching processes in schools and universities” [Lehmann 2006: 113]. Theatrical or scenic essay can therefore be viewed as a public platform for reflection, whose loose structure emphasizes not the finished and completed work, but rather the process in which both its creators and viewers are equally actively involved. This aspect essentially coincides with two other interpretations of the genre in philosophy and cinema: the “arena for intellectual experience” formulated by philosopher Theodor Adorno and the “openness of the essay film” defined by theorist Laura Rascaroli. In the context of various creative industries, the scope and convergence of the essay genre means that theoretical concepts formulated in literature, theatre and other art forms are also useful for understanding the essay film, and these concepts will be further explored in the article.

When focusing specifically on essays in the field of cinema, it is important to mention Hans Richter, a German director and critic from the last century. He was one of the first people in the cinema industry to describe a film as an essay and provide it with context. Richter emphasised the aesthetic potential of the form, characterised by a blend of genres and styles and the incorporation of diverse audiovisual elements, such as photographs and animations. In his 1940 article *A New Type of Documentary Film*, Richter identified a then-innovative form of documentary cinema that was both conceptual and personal, and explained that “the staged scene as well as the reproduced facts are points in a line of argument that has as its aim to make

problems, thoughts, and even ideas comprehensible to everyone. Therefore, I consider the term “essay” appropriate for this type of form, as even in literature the word “essay” is used for the treatment of difficult subjects and themes to render them into a generally comprehensible form” [Richter 1940: 91]. This statement suggests that the stylistic and formal techniques employed in the essay film are organised elements that contribute to the depiction of a subjective thought process, rather than merely serving an illustrative or entertaining purpose.

In the early 1980s, film scholar Noël Burch also used the term “essay” to describe the approach of French documentary filmmaker Georges Franju, defining it as the development or interpretation of a theme. According to Burch, the works of this director do not merely offer a record of objective reality, fundamental to the documentary tradition, but “their entire purpose being to set forth thesis and antithesis through the very texture of the film” [Burch 1981: 159]. Of course, the ideological load – theme, message and intention – can be found in any film belonging to any genre. However, it is important to emphasise that, although they may seem fundamental, elements of an essay film, such as the plot, the psychological portraits of the characters and their relationships with each other, are not an end in themselves. In the structure of the essay film, all formal and narrative strategies – however arbitrary and eclectic they may seem – are employed to the same extent and with the same emphasis as they serve to construct a personal argument and the doubts, contradictions and uncertainties it contains. This aspect is crucial for justifying the presence of the substantive meaning contained within the essay films created by Laila Pakalniņa.

Although essay films are difficult to categorise, film scholar Timothy Corrigan has identified three key features of the genre. These features correspond to the structure of Laila Pakalniņa’s work and will be evident in the analysis of the selected films:

- 1) “A usually – but not necessarily – short documentary subject;
- 2) The lack of a dominant narrative organisation (although narrative may provide one of several patterns in the film);
- 3) The interaction of a personal voice or vision, sometimes in the form of a voice-over. In the essay film, the interaction of that subjective perspective and the reality before it becomes a testing or questioning of both, and the structure of the film, like the literary essay, follows the undetermined movement of that dialogue” [Corrigan 1999: 31].

It is important to note that there are various indications of the presence of a personal voice and perspective. There may be clear and obvious manifestations, such as the use of “I” rhetoric, the creation of a voice behind the scenes, an unconcealed filming process, and the creators’ physical appearance on screen. Meanwhile, Corrigan stresses: “When lacking a clearly visible subjective voice or personal organizing

presence, this act of enunciation can also be signalled in various formal or technical ways, including editing and other representational manipulations of the image” [Corrigan 2011: 30]. The selection, integration and, above all, combination of stylistic, formal and technical resources confirms the presence of a subjective voice in Laila Pakalniņa’s essay films, since the director rarely appears on screen or participates in other overt ways.

A personal voice and perspective is one of the three essential aspects that make the essay film genre relevant in contemporary cinema. The essay film is a form that emphasises individuality, and can therefore be considered an act of self-expression and nonconformity. In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote: “From this moment on, matter must be managed without illusions about any guiding or inherent forces, about any hidden properties. Those who do not wish to be included in the measures of calculability and usefulness seem suspicious to enlightenment” [Adorno, Horkheimer 2009: 24]. As can be seen, both authors are attempting to reinstate the importance of individual experience. In this case, the essay can be seen as a tool for challenging established beliefs and narratives by incorporating personal emotional, psychological and intellectual responses and viewpoints into our understanding of the relevant topic and the world as a whole. This is especially important given the rapid development of artificial intelligence tools that can automate and standardise audiovisual content.

Secondly, the essay film is arguably the most politically charged genre in contemporary cinema. As film scholar Laura Rascaroli points out: “To say “I” or “we” is, first, a gesture of responsibility and accountability, in filmmaking too. The moment of the essay film is, therefore, politically inflected. Precisely for this reason, we can venture, the essay film first boomed worldwide in the 1960s, a decade marked by a widespread desire for increased participation, democracy, and self-expression” [Rascaroli 2017: 5]. Representing the surrounding environment and its connection to personal experience demonstrates that the essay film is a significant format for public participation, encouraging critical thinking and discussion during periods of change and conflict. Film scholar Nora Alter has stated that “the essay film also tends to become more pointed and effective during periods of cultural, social, and political crisis” [Alter 2018: 15]. The popularity and interpretation of contemporary social processes confirm the power of the essay film genre to counteract the widespread commercialisation of audiovisual content and its apolitical nature.

Thirdly, the essay film is a captivating form that confirms cinema’s potential to stimulate and provoke thought. The form’s dialogical nature is confirmed by its specific and familiar forms of address, its ironic, critical, or polemical tone, its interrupted, unfinished, or shifted trains of thought, and its other rhetorical, technical, and formal manoeuvres. Laura Rascaroli formulates the term “openness of the essay film” in

this situation and explains: “The essay film constructs such a spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, “closed” argument, the essay’s rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual responses, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about” [Rascaroli 2009: 34]. It could be argued that the author of an essay film merely sketches ideas or outlines themes, rather than completing them. As with the aforementioned scenic essays, the audience is left to interpret them further. This demonstrates that essay films can stimulate critical thinking and encourage dialogue.

Examples of essay films have appeared regularly in Latvian cinema since the 1960s. The films *Frescoes of Kuldīga* (*Kuldīgas freskas*, Aivars Freimanis, 1966), *Dear Life* (*Dzīvīte*, Aivars Freimanis, 1989) *Flashback* (*Flashback*, Hercs Franks, 2002), *D is for Division* (*Mūris*, Dāvis Sīmanis, 2018), *Einarrrative* (*Einaratīvs*, Betija Zvejniece, 2022), *81 Meters* (*81 metrs*, Jānis Ābele, 2022), *Postpartum* (*Postpartum*, Katrīna Birkenberga, 2024) and many others can be viewed from the perspective of this genre. However, when it comes to this genre in Latvian cinema, special mention must go to director Laila Pakalniņa. The concept of essay film is exemplified by most of her documentary works, which demonstrate its formal, narrative and critical potential. Since the 1990s, Pakalniņa has produced over 40 documentaries and feature films, many of which have been screened and acclaimed at renowned festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin. Pakalniņa is a director who disregards commercial logic in favour of uncompromising artistic originality. In his review of the film *Spoon* (*Karote*, 2019), film critic Dmitrijs Rancevs wrote that “both *Hello, Horse!* and *Karote* seem at first glance to be films without a plot and even without any particular content” [Rancevs 2019]. This could explain why Latvian viewers are ambivalent towards the director’s films. Film scholar Inga Pērkone, who has thoroughly examined Laila Pakalniņa’s work, highlights that there have been challenges in terms of local interest in it. Pērkone explains this by deviating from the conventions of classic cinema, such as specific genres and plot frameworks, and the identification of characters [Pērkone 2021: 392–393]. Including and analysing the director’s work in the context of the essay film genre highlights its ideological depth, interpretative potential and deliberately experimental nature.

The majority of the director’s documentaries share a common thematic focus: everyday life in an urban environment. Similarly, her work consistently features certain stylistic elements, such as long, still and black-and-white shots, static compositions and unique camera angles. However, Laila Pakalniņa’s approach is essentially essayistic. It experiments with various formal characteristics, such as what is filmed, combined and arranged, thereby analysing itself and highlighting the diversity of cinematic

language. However, the combination of different formal elements in the film also affects its dramaturgy, creating a contradictory thematic layer of thesis and antithesis, as described by Noël Burch. The aim of this article is to confirm that part of Laila Pakalniņa's creative legacy belongs to the tradition of the essay genre by analysing the diverse formal techniques used in it. Firstly, it would confirm the presence of this genre in Latvian cinema. Secondly, it provides a new perspective on the style and content of the director's documentaries. Finally, an analysis of formal characteristics reveals how the genre highlights the artist's identity and authorship while expanding the language of cinema through experimentation. The research method used in this article is close reading of the following essay films by Laila Pakalniņa: *Papa Gena* (2001), *Dream Land* (*Leiputrija*, 2004), *On Rubik's Road* (*Pa Rubika ceļu*, 2010), *Hello, Horse!* (*Zirdziņ, hallo!*, 2017) and *Spoon* (*Karote*, 2019). It will be based on the involvement and comparison of theoretical concepts and approaches developed by film scholars such as Laura Rascaroli, Timothy Corrigan, András Bálint Kovács, Nora Alter, Inga Pērkone, Zane Balčus, and others.

Sound scores in *Papa Gena* (2001)

As director Laila Pakalniņa explained: "Image and sound are not different layers of perception in my films. The film's dramaturgy develops gradually, with the dominant elements changing and complementing each other from episode to episode. All of this creates the rhythm of the film: the movement of the image, the sound, the light" [Āboliņa 2019]. The director's early work already shows an emphasis on sound and the careful organisation of relationships between image and sound. Documentary short film *Papa Gena* (2001) was part of the Latvian exposition at the 49th Venice Biennale. It demonstrates a meticulous editing process, resulting in playful combinations, primarily between different soundtracks. They are also significantly complemented by the visuals. This creates a unique urban landscape where contrasts such as noise and silence, and stillness and movement, come together.

Mainly, the structural framework of *Papa Gena* is formed by the interplay of a triad of contrasting sound scores: silence, an excerpt from the opera *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and diegetic noises, that is, those contained in the documented environment. Like other films by Pakalniņa, *Papa Gena* is an object of urban landscape research, offering a relaxed, everyday portrayal of people moving through the harbour, an apartment building courtyard, the Old Town, a bus terminus, and other features of the urban environment. Pakalniņa's typically long and static shots of pedestrians and vehicles reveal the rhythmic pulsation of the city. This is occasionally interrupted by a request for the participants to stop and listen to a piece of classical music: Mozart's playful duet between the characters Papagena and Papageno from *The Magic Flute*. In this way, the essay film reflects

a liminal situation, juxtaposing movement and rest, and pitting the polyphony of the city against the integrity of classical music.

As Inga Pērkone points out: “The structure of the film here ironically follows the logic of how audio technology works: while wearing headphones, the viewer hears nothing; when the headphones are removed, the music plays, but the portrayed “listener” no longer hears it” [Pērkone 2013: 101]. The characters’ experience of classical composition through serenity, expressive facial expressions, humming, verbal comments and gentle movements becomes the central visual focus. However, it does not exclude real sounds, such as car alarms, barking dogs, chirping birds and rustling wind. This leaves the city *open* to the viewer. At other moments, though, the audience hears the soundtrack, thus becoming one of the film’s characters. The conceptual setting of the film – classical music in an urban environment – is reinforced at the end, when the wind *blows through* the sheets left on the washing line in the courtyard of a Soviet era apartment block.

In purely visual terms, too, Pakalniņa creates an antithesis: an alternative biography of Riga. Rather than filming tourist attractions and iconic landmarks, a new landscape of hidden places in the city is being created. The main elements are a remote, birch-covered hillside; an empty street; a residential courtyard; a fragment of a building; and a crumbling brick wall. Similar marginal or anonymous areas of the capital are also included.

Abstraction in *Dream Land* (2004) and *Spoon* (2019)

In his research *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), Timothy Corrigan distinguishes five modes of essay film: autobiographical or biographical, travel, diary, editorial and refractive. The documentaries *Dream Land* and *Spoon* reveal the hidden stages in the life cycle of everyday household products, namely the manufacturing process and waste management. This categorises both works as editorial essays. Corrigan explains: “As polemics about hidden, missed, or critical events and people or about moral, political, or philosophical imperatives for understanding those people and events, these essays offer or demand ways of understanding and, more important, ways of personally and publicly reacting to the news of daily life” [Corrigan 2011: 154]. In this case, Laila Pakalniņa conducts anthropological research by focusing on what seemingly does not apply to or affect society. She does not represent or confront people directly.

The documentary *Dream Land* is a detailed cross section of the solid waste landfill *Getliņi* in Rumbula, exposing the duality of the main inhabitants of the site – birds, insects and other animals. On the one hand, cinematographer Māris Maskalāns’ (1971) patient observation has resulted in a literal visualisation of the title: the dump truly serves as a wondrous, abundant place of refuge and nourishment. This aspect

is revealed in many of the shots. For example, there are seagulls picking at food scraps and small organisms; an active rat hiding in a packet of crisps; and a snake slithering along empty cigarette packets and feeding on the abundant smaller animals in the area. However, the film's title also has an ironic tone. The footage also reveals that waste – the invisible, redundant by-product of human consumer culture – can pose a dangerous threat to animals. We see them tangled in plastic bags and leaving the previously inhabited bodies of water due to the sheer number of discarded drink bottles.

The structure of *Spoon* consists of a series of long, monochrome shots. They rhythmically arrange individual emblems of the industrial environment in a line, such as walls, fragments of factory buildings, cranes, freight trains, cars, pipes and technical devices, as well as rows of workers. It resembles carefully organised *empty* shots of the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, such as the barren field in the 1964 film *Red Desert (Il deserto rosso)* where the barely perceptible silhouettes of buildings and characters can be seen in the wisps of smoke from factory chimneys. The visual configuration of *Spoon* corresponds to the conclusion by film scholar Zane Balčus: “Conceptual observation of the environment is characteristic of Laila Pakalniņa’s documentaries, in which camera position, framing and editing are used not to capture the action of events, but to reveal various elements” [Balčus 2021: 284]. In this film, the depiction of visual cues, such as electricity pylons, aeroplanes, vehicles, railway tracks, stairs and road signs, as well as pedestrians, joggers, cyclists and other city dwellers, and their various combinations, takes precedence over a clear narrative.

Timothy Corrigan agrees with Nora Alter’s idea that there is a connection between essay films and crisis, which is particularly evident in the context of editorial essays: “Although these kinds of essays can sometimes choose topics that are light or even trivial, more often than not they are attuned to crisis, frequently a crisis related to a social or communal collapse or trauma” [Corrigan 2011: 155]. Both essays appear to depict animals and urban ornaments from everyday life as the central characters. However, it is precisely this extreme reduction of content that gives rise to a general commentary on the ecological crisis. Therefore, an anthropological study is conducted using the concept of conditionality, which means to highlight individual images in the representation of reality. This technique corresponds to both the representation of subjective reality, as highlighted by Corrigan’s interpretation, and the fundamental principle of abstraction within the context of cinema modernism.

Describing cinema modernism and the essay film as one of its genres, film theorist András Bálint Kovács defines abstraction as one of the main characteristics of the films made during this period, which “means that the form refers not to traditional ways of representing nature or reality but to a conceptual structure or

system that is regarded as an essential summary of the main constitutive principles of reality or nature” [Kovács 2007: 204]. In the context of these two essay films, the summary is represented by two symbols: a landfill site and a factory. They offer a sharp social commentary on the climate crisis, highlighting the role of unprecedented production and consumption of goods. The polemic is constructed in two ways. Firstly, these zones are not part of the trajectory of everyday life and are beyond the limits of visibility. Secondly, both films are based on a conflict of ideas. The final montage sequence of *Dream Land* contains a warning about the devastating effects of waste on animal and natural diversity. A picturesque natural landscape with a deer silhouette in the foggy distance is replaced by an image of an animal in the landfill site manager’s office. This art object, like many others, threatens to become the only way to perceive and experience nature. But the aestheticization of the resources required for production in *Spoon* can be interpreted as being highly ironic. The shots’ intrinsic value, created through refined composition and highlighted textures, contrasts with the multilayered, difficult-to-grasp, otherwise horrifying grand scheme of producing small objects. This scheme only becomes clearer during the film through associations, such as production lines for small objects and people eating with spoons. This contradiction highlights how consumers are alienated from and distant from the many steps involved in the production process.

Both films demonstrate the correspondence of the essay film to the status of criticism, highlighting the form’s ability to interpret current events through rearrangements, reversals, superimpositions and other modifications of their meanings. In *Dream Land* and *Spoon*, this is achieved by narrowing or abstracting the content, meaning that only certain elements, detached from the everyday view, are highlighted.

Text and image in *On Rubik’s Road* (2010)

Film scholar Paul Arthur explains: “The conjunction of language and image, fundamental to film grammar, is a key ingredient of the essay film. In some sense all great essays are about complex relationships between words and pictures, the mechanisms by which speech can annotate, undermine, or otherwise change the signification of what we see – and vice versa” [Arthur 2003: 165]. As an example, Arthur mentions the 1956 essay film *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*) by the French director Alain Resnais, a meditation (or rather a statement on its impossibility) on the tragedy of the mass humiliation and murder of Jews by the Nazis in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The film’s visuals are based on the combination of archival footage (shots of piles of corpses, etc.) and present footage (shots of green grass and sunshine in a given area), but the background voice-over narration and its transcription are used in questions, multipoints and other rhetorical manoeuvres

that create a questioning, doubtful and polemical atmosphere. “Statements such as “There is no use even describing what went on here” and “There’s nothing left to say” limn the failure of language and image to offer a fully intelligible portrayal of events” [Arthur 2003: 166]. Contradicting text and images can create depth of content. This is precisely what forms the dramatic basis for Pakalniņa’s film, which was included in one of the competition programs at the Venice Film Festival and was screened and awarded at other film festivals at the time – *On Rubik’s Road* (2010).

This film documents everyday life along the pedestrian and cycle path that connects Rīga and Jūrmala. Thanks to the inclusion of two textual inserts that alter the neutrality of the image, the film gains the status of a political aporia. At the beginning of the film, the text decodes the title by providing a brief description of the person who initiated the construction of the cycle path: Alfrēds Rubiks [Redovics 2020]. Launching the initiative, Rubiks was then Chairman of the Riga City Executive Committee. He was also the First Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party and later Chairman of the Latvian Socialist Party, who in the 1990s was loyal to the Soviet Union system and opposed the independence of the Latvian state by brutal means.

The first textual sequence is followed by a series of everyday, small-scale events and gestures: young people chatting, cyclists colliding and runners falling. Dog owners, motorcyclists, firefighters and families with children are just some of the many people who have also chosen this area as a stage for human interaction. As Pakalniņa points out, the method used in her films is a prolonged observation of a particular territory, which allows the dramatic and the comic to be revealed in a seemingly domestic situation: “For example, when filming *On Rubik’s Road*, we put the camera in the same place every day, on the side of the road. There was nothing special, not even a pit or a road elevation, but believe it or not, miracles happened. People suddenly started falling in that place. And so it happens” [Āboliņa 2019]. In this film, it is particularly essential that the everyday, the mundane and the human are highlighted in the image. Moreover, these scenes are sometimes replaced by shots of complete inactivity featuring individual elements from unusual camera angles. As with *Spoon* and other essay films by Pakalniņa, certain codes are repeatedly presented alongside the prosaic scenes, such as bus stops, aeroplanes, puddles and sun-drawn stripes on the asphalt. In this case, film scholar Inga Pērkone explains the highlighting of individual elements: “The film is constructed using the polysemy encoded in its title, where the word Rubiks is associated not only with the last Latvian communist, but also with the Rubik’s cube, where a limited number of given elements can be arranged in an almost inconceivable number of combinations” [Pērkone 2013: 107]. Pērkone’s interpretation emphasises an essayistic approach, presenting these visual configurations and their variations as the film’s primary artistic focus. This

seems to suggest that the visual content of this film is apolitical, as it focuses solely on everyday scenes and combinations of urban symbols.

However, the second textual sequence at the end of the film changes this. It is important to note that Alfrēds Rubiks was tried for actions intended to weaken and overthrow the Latvian state. For example, he was involved in the August Coup of 1991 [Redovics 2020]. Nevertheless, this has not stopped him from pursuing a political career in Latvia. In the closing moments of the documentary, Pakalniņa highlights the rupture of collective memory by describing the absurd turn in this politician's career: "While we were making this film, the citizens of Latvia elected the leader of the Communist Party, Alfrēds Rubiks, to the European Parliament." Thus, the cheerful daily scenes and urban realities that we see on the screen, as well as the rhythmic arrangement of these scenes, can be perceived as a thesis for freedom of all kinds, including artistic freedom, which is what the essay film genre brings to the fore. In turn, what we read creates an antithesis, evoking associations with individuals and historical situations in which freedom was denied or taken away, both literally and figuratively. The extraordinary and dramatic political context and character of Alfrēds Rubiks are also juxtaposed with the everyday, creating a further contradiction within the film. The chosen filming location evokes certain associations that Pakalniņa highlights and builds upon through certain phrases. This creates a conflict between image and text in order to maintain the memory of the wrongs, injustices and oppression suffered by the Latvian people at the hands of Alfrēds Rubiks and others who directly or indirectly sympathize with the Soviet regime.

Strategy of repetition in *Hello, Horse!* (2017)

Pakalniņa's documentaries are usually based on collages of seemingly unrelated images. The essay film *Hello, Horse!* (2017), which has an extremely fragmented narrative, consists of a series of shots of a roadside, a farmstead, a birch grove, hay bales, electricity poles, a railway crossing, a road sign, and animals. These were taken on a small stretch of road outside Krāslava at different times of the year and day. This film meets all three criteria mentioned by Timothy Corrigan: a real documentary situation or context, the absence of a plot (most evident in *Hello, Horse!* and *Spoon*) and also a personal voice and vision. The latter characteristic manifests itself both in terms of content and form. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser has written that "[...] essay films are driven by a structure of thought, however apparently hidden or at first glance imperceptible this thought process may be. To that extent, even the disparity of sources and the assemblage of heterogeneous elements generally results in an order or a sequential logic that is less a matter of *compilation* and more the result of *composition*" [Elsaesser 2015: 241]. In this film, Pakalniņa reveals her thought process and begins a discussion by using repetition as a strategy.

The repetition of certain motifs, presented in contrast to each other, reveals the conceptual nature of *Hello, Horse!* and highlights the idea of change within an apparently unchanging landscape. This strategy challenges perceptions of reality by presenting successive representations of a stop or other element that seem to contradict each other, despite the composition of the shots dedicated to them remaining unchanged. To convey the possibility of the experience of change, Pakalniņa employs precise compositions and durations of repeated shots to capture a landscape or sign. She also employs seamless editing technique, primarily achieved through the use of passing vehicles. As Timothy Corrigan has already pointed out, technical techniques can also confirm the presence of the author, and *Hello, Horse!* is precisely the case. Inga Pērkone describes the development of artistic approach of Pakalniņa: “In fact, the development of the director’s handwriting shows an increasingly pronounced focus on editing as the foundation of the work’s structure, editing is understood here not only as the putting together of separately shot film plans, but also as the creation of an internal dynamic structure for each scene to be filmed.” [Pērkone 2013: 105]. The repetition strategy is effective and raises various questions due to the similarity or coincidence of image composition and hidden montage. Is the stop at dawn the same stop when evening comes? Is an electricity pole in winter the same as an electricity pole in summer? Does the flow of time mainly cause changes in objects and living things? Aspects of this discussion are summarised in the description on the website filmas.lv of The National Film Centre of Latvia: “A film about how things change while staying the same. Or, you could say, how everything stays the same as it changes.”

The important thing is that *Hello, Horse!* does not offer clear answers, but instead suggests ideas and raises questions. The essence of the essay is embedded in the etymology of the concept, which frees the form from the requirement for clear, coherent and logical expression and conclusions, and emphasises the process rather than the result. The form allows for ignorance, contradiction, doubt and irony, as well as other rhetorical devices that demonstrate the process of subjective thinking without insisting on the correctness of the outcome. As Paul Arthur explains: “Of course, documentaries in general frequently discover themes and structures after the fact, as a result of culling accumulated footage in the editing room. The essay, however, assumes that what it tells us and the order in which it is communicated could have taken an entirely different route, that it is one of several possible versions of the same concept. It delights in quirky arcs of logic, sudden digressions, unexpected epiphanies, pauses for self-reflection” [Arthur 2003: 165]. As we can see in this film, Pakalniņa is a tireless creator of combinations. She plays with and dynamically arranges the rather monotonous material created in this rather hermetic territory.

The openness and playfulness with which the author of the essay film expresses hers or his vision also implies a tendency to engage with the viewer in a dialogue

that requires a critical response. Here repetition is used to highlight the phenomenon of time and share the experience of it. Rather than proposing a specific thesis and antithesis, the film simply asks whether repeated visual signs are the same in different situations. This film specifically embodies Laura Rascaroli's aforementioned understanding of the openness of the essay film. This has been highlighted as one of the main characteristics and values of the essay genre by representatives of various fields of art.

In his article *The Essay as Form* (1958), Theodor Adorno writes: "In this experience, concepts do not form a continuous stream of activity, and thoughts do not flow in a single direction, but rather various moments are interwoven like the fabric of a carpet. The fertility of thought depends on the thickness of this fabric. In fact, the thinker does not actually think, but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without resolving this experience" [Adorno 2024]. The word "stage" in the last sentence of this statement is worth paying attention to – it refers to a shared, participatory experience. Literary scholar Kathryn Murphy adds: "The relationship of writer and reader is not [...] voyeuristic. Instead, the essay is a space for cognitive emulation, for vicarious experience" [Murphy 2020: 95]. A cognitive test is created using a repetition strategy, and a train of thought is drawn out: are these compositions the same or different? However, Pakalniņa does not answer, explain or argue, instead leaving the interpretation of the film to the viewer.

Conclusion

The films discussed in the article employ a variety of formal strategies, including abstraction, textual insertions, different sound scores and repetition. Their use demonstrates the prioritisation, exploration and fluidity of form that characterise the essay film genre. Laila Pakalniņa's relentless, artistically valuable and distinctive experiments also reveal the presence of a personal voice and position, which is particularly evident in the genre. According to András Bálint Kovács, the author's subjectivity, which is typical of modernist cinema genres, applies not only to the opinion itself, but mainly "as a new artistic way of looking at things" [Kovács 2007: 204].

However, although Pakalniņa's films lack a clear narrative, subjectivity is also present thematically. The formal experiments result in a variety of interpretations of the director's possible ideas, comments, and criticism, thus initiating a dialogue with the audience. Both in terms of form and content, the keyword that characterises the films discussed in the article is contradiction. *Papa Gena* is a conceptually rich film that portrays the modern urban environment and its liminal states, such as stillness and movement, silence and sounds, etc. This film reveals a wide spectrum of audiovisual means of expression, which are arranged in various combinations.

The principle of abstraction employed in the films *Dream Land* and *Spoon* manifests itself as a focused representation of individual images and objects that are beyond the limits of visibility and accessibility. Thus, Pakalniņa creates a paradox: these distant and even vague symbols signal a very close and real ecological crisis today. Meanwhile, the essay film *On Rubik's Road* uses textual descriptions to extend and even contradict the meaning of the images, giving the documentary a politically critical dimension. This film contrasts everyday life and freedom with political conflict, oppression, and the denial of independence, presenting a thesis and antithesis. And in the film *Hello, Horse!* Pakalniņa uses the strategy of repetition to challenge perception, leading to reflection on the experience of the passage of time. This time, the contradiction lies in the fact that, although the film appears to be held together by arbitrary images, it is precisely the composition and sequence of the frames that imbue them with an additional layer of meaning.

The essay film is an audiovisual form of expression that enables filmmakers to share their personal experiences and perspectives, engage with social and political issues, and interact with their audience. All these aspects can be found both in the works mentioned in the article and even in other films by Laila Pakalniņa. From an aesthetic perspective, the essay film lends itself well to experimentation, as demonstrated by the analysed examples. Taking all this into account, some of Laila Pakalniņa's creative work can be interpreted as belonging to the essay film genre. This genre emphasises the author's subjectivity and artistic exploration, inviting viewers to join the public platform for experimentation and reflection, and encouraging them to question their own subjectivity. The films analysed in this article clearly demonstrate that the concept and genre of the essay film, as well as Laila Pakalniņa's oeuvre, are both broad and promising topics, whether viewed together or separately.

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