

Exploring the Essay in the New Documentary Turn

Mining Stories by Hannes Dereere & Silke Huysmans and *Syden* by Hedvig Biong, Pablo Castilla & Niko Hafkenscheid

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The last decade, we have witnessed the rise of a new generation of documentary theatre makers with artists such as Milo Rau, Rabih Mroué, Thomas Bellinck and theatre and performance groups such as Rimini Protokoll, AndCompany&Co and She She Pop. In comparison to the documentary theatre of Piscator or Brecht, this generation is no longer interested in a politics of revealing the objective truth behind a perceived reality. This generation develops a renewed “attention to how documents, whether, real or fictional, material or digital are framed; to the status of documents as artefacts; and to their implications for dramaturgy, scenography and mise-en-scène” (Carol 2015: 40-41). Following performance scholar Martin Carol, these new documentary theatre performances “provide insights not only into how documents work as stage objects, but also how audiences perceive meaning in relation to documentation” (40-41). By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, these theatre makers question the way in which reality is represented by mainstream media in order to problematize the political recuperation of historical events and the politics of historiography. Through the current technologies that are employed by the media, archive and documentary material is easy to manipulate. In this process of manipulation, the clear distinction between fact and fiction is deliberately abrogated, whereby the dichotomy between fact and fiction becomes irrelevant. So, theatricality becomes an instrument to reconfigure (historical) facts. This theatricalization of the process of knowledge production allows for a deconstruction of “classic representational thinking and imagery” (Stalpaert & Jonckheere 2015: 110-112).

Elaborating on Deleuze, Christel Stalpaert observes how positivist theatre performances impose prejudices or ethical and moral claims on the spectator. In her reasoning, contemporary documentary theatre is in line with a “post-positivistic tendency”. Instead of revealing a “hidden” reality, these performances foreground *how* and by *whom* “truth” and “reality” is constructed (110-112). This tendency within documentary practices was termed as the “new documentary turn” in performing arts (Forsyth & Megson 2009). It is a trend in which “more complex and hybrid forms of representation” emerge and pose problems about

“the status of the image, the relation with the world beyond the imagination of artists and continuously provoke debates concerning the production, representation and status of knowledge, truth and reality” (Le Roy & Vanderbeeken 2016: 11).

In order to capture this rich and vibrant trend within the performing arts field I want to propose the essay as a new paradigm to study these complex and hybrids forms of (performing) arts that provoke debates about our knowledge and image production. Based on my observations – as researcher and dramaturge – I see that the nature and purpose of the essay echoes in the way contemporary artists with a strong documentary approach handle, structure and present their material. The essay has been widely covered, studied and commented on in literary and film studies. In recent theories on photography and installation art, the idea of the essay as paradigm has been introduced (e.g. Corrigan 2008; Graf 2013; Alter 2018). Despite the fact that the essayistic characteristics are detected in the new documentary turn, theatre and performance studies are lagging behind. The essay remains an uncovered and unexplored subject within performing arts theory. Explorations of the essay and its essayistic characteristics have barely been implemented within theatre and performance studies. In order to fill this theoretical gap in theatre and performance studies, my contribution to this *Documenta* issue will be a first step to sharing my ideas on the essay in the new documentary turn.

This contribution first discusses briefly the essay’s literary and cinematic genealogy as a framework to observe the translation of these elements within contemporary documentary theatre. By elaborating on the legacy of the literary essay and its cinematic offspring, this text subsequently observes *how* the essay appears in contemporary documentary theatre. Taking a closer look at *Mining Stories*, a performance by Hannes Dereere and Silke Huysmans, and *Syden*, an interdisciplinary project by the artist trio Hedvig Biong, Pablo Castilla & Niko Hafkenscheid, this contribution tries to touch some essayistic strategies in contemporary documentary theatre. These observations arise from my practice as a dramaturge, and my observations as a young theatre scholar. During informal conversations I had with several artists, the concept of the ‘essay’ popped up regularly. Apart from my observations, not all artists necessarily identified their artistic practices and performance with the essay or as essayistic. By elaborating on these findings with the artists, the relations with the genre of the essay became more discernible for the artists and myself. From that point onwards, I was engrossed by how the influence of the essay manifested itself in the essayistic

characteristics in performing arts. Discovering the legacy of the written essay and Essay Film, I was struck by the fact that the essay as a paradigm does not appear in theatre and performance studies. This was the main reason for me to conduct a PhD research on the matter and to explore the state of affairs in literature and film studies. This contribution presents a genealogical exploration of the concept of the essay that should enable us to trace how the essay is operative in contemporary documentary theatre. It is not my aim to develop a theoretical discourse that legitimizes certain performances or artistic practices. On the contrary, by developing a new theoretical framework that examines these performances and artistic practices from the essay's perspective, I hope to offer a touchstone to the artists to critically encounter their projects. The concepts developed throughout the research create awareness for their artistic choices. The essay offers a framework to take every step of the artistic process into consideration.

The essay, a perpetually changing genre in a perpetually changing world

The French philosopher and writer Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) developed his new literary genre, the modern essay, in the middle of the tumultuous sixteenth century. It was an age marked by upheaval, as Europe got rid of the dogmatic metaphysical ideas of medieval times. An age earlier, the arrival of Humanism had installed a new worldview. But at the same time, the humanist project was confronted with its boundaries. The euphoria of the humanist discoveries was ebbing away because of the fear and rigidity that was brought by the Inquisition in the Roman regions in Europe. By introducing the essay, Montaigne found a way to get a grip on superfluous times, and on a world in perpetual modulation. Inspired by the work of Plutarch and Lucretius, Montaigne tried to reflect on a wide range of religious, political but also banal concerns and problems people had to deal with. To essay means to assay, to weigh, but also to challenge, to test and to attempt. Astonished and anxious at the same time, Montaigne continuously observed his perpetually changing world. With his writings, Montaigne challenged the fixed ideas of his time and at the same time expressed his own thoughts and actions. For Montaigne, the essay was the ideal genre to channel his view on reality in moments of fundamental existential crisis. Disillusioned by how France was misgoverned by the royal court and the Catholic Church, Montaigne resorted in his family estate. There he questioned, through his writings, the hegemonic structures of his time and assessed his own thoughts and actions within these structures. The interplay with fact and fiction and the particular use of quoting enabled Montaigne to interrogate the status of authority that certain key influential thinkers of his time enjoyed. Juxtaposing specific

quotes of Greek thinkers or deliberately changing the author's name, Montaigne problematized values and ideas that were taken for granted. By developing this mode of quoting as a literary strategy, and by articulating the clear presence of an 'I' in the text, Montaigne introduced a dialogical dimension, trying to connect his critical mode of thinking with other authors and with the reader. By explicitly marking out his own position, Montaigne addresses and invites the reader to join him in the journey he undertakes in his essays.

Literary scholar Alexander Roose states that Montaigne's journey started off as an individual journey. Having retired from politics, Montaigne started his writing practice as "therapeutic practice" wherein he wanted to "reflect on his own thinking, not in order to understand the world around him, but to comprehend his own position in this world" (72). These reflective and meandering writings gave Montaigne the insight how "limited his critical thinking is" when it came to the fundamental changes and paradigm shifts his time had to cope with (101). This self-criticism brings forth a key feature in the political function of the essay: a critical self-positioning of the author.

This does not mean, however, that Montaigne's *Essais* are apolitical. Investigating the political meaning of the modern essay in the context of Montaigne's retirement from the Bordeaux parliament in 1570, Biancamaria Fontana observes how Montaigne's account of his personal experiences reflects a very particular preoccupation with politics (2008). From a similar perspective, Nora Alter argues that we have to understand the essay's political function "not as therapy or healing the wounds produced by the upheavals of the day, but as crisis diagnosis enabling and encouraging future social and cultural transformation" (Alter 2007: 51).

Conclusion: the modern essay, as introduced by Montaigne, is not autobiographical – despite the use of the 'I' – and not apolitical, although it claims to criticize primarily the personal position in society.

After Montaigne, many writers and philosophers followed his example, developed the essay and brought it to the level of an established literary genre. Regardless of its history, it is remarkable that it took until the twentieth century to develop strong theories on the essay. Georg Lukács, Max Bense, Walter Benjamin and especially Theodor W. Adorno were prominent figures in the essay's theorization. The legacy of the essay forms the foundation of a more well-thought out form of (cultural) criticism. In contrast to how the legacy of Montaigne's essay further

developed in the French and English cultural tradition, the German tradition cultivates the essay “as providing a unique combination of empirical knowledge and aesthetic form. It is not a work of art in the full sense, but a kind of hybrid of art and science, an aesthetic treatment of material that could otherwise be studied scientifically or systematically” (Good 1988: 152). From its position between science, philosophy and art, the essay resists the reductionist reflexes towards Totality and Truth. In its response, the essay wants to reassess self-reflexivity, the fragmentary, the polemic, the subjective experience and discontinuity. These features brought Adorno to the conclusion that “instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done” (152). Herein resonates what Georg Lukács noted decades before Adorno in his text *On the nature and form of the essay. A letter to Leo Popper*. Lukács pointed out that:

(...) the essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. (26)

What Lukács and Adorno have in common is an aversion towards “the ideals of purity and cleanliness” dictated by the rigorous scientific disciplines of their time that “bear the marks of a repressive order” (1984 [1958]: 152). By defending the essay and endorsing its qualities, they try to contest the restrictions and traditions of the academic. They oppose the omnipotence of Reason, installed by the highest philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Schlegel and Fichte. In their resistance to Totality, Adorno notes that the essay’s “totality is that of non-totality; one that even a form does not assert the thesis of the identity of thought and thing, the thesis which in its own content the essay reject” (152). Philosophy and criticism are in Adorno’s view jammed in its own dogmatic attitude towards its solidified concepts and definitions. “Philosophy has completed the fullest critique of definition from the most diverse perspectives”, summarizes Adorno (159). The essay offers a medium to inject scepticism towards the dogmas of traditional science and philosophy. By reevaluating the changing and the ephemeral, employing experience as preferred reflected form, and suspending the traditional concept of method, the essay abandons the main road to the origins of Things. A way out of what Adorno experiences as the philosophy of Absolute knowledge is what is offered by the form of the essay.

Just as such learning remains exposed to error, so does the essay as form; it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security, a lack which the norm of established thought fears like death. It is not so much that the essay ignores indisputable certainty, as that it abrogates the ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, and not in a hoarding obsession with fundamentals. (161)

The obsession by thinkers such as Hegel, Kant or Schlegel to Absolute knowledge that is attacked by Adorno, also applies to their obsession with Truth. Opposed to the notion of “truth as a network of causes and effects, the essay insists that a matter be considered, from the very first, in its whole complexity; it counteracts that hardened primitiveness that always allies itself with reason’s current form” (162). To break this tradition, Adorno suggests that “for whoever criticizes must necessarily experiment; he must create conditions under which an object is newly seen” (166). Adorno’s call to create new conditions reminds us of Montaigne’s venture centuries ago. The latter had the same sense of urgency: to create within the field of literature a new type or mode of literature that enabled him to question those issues he wanted to be addressed, but which the former literary tools were inadequate for. By allowing association, ambiguity of words and neglecting the logical synthesis, the essay makes the auditor an accessory in its process of truth making. Or as Adorno describes this process:

In the essay discreetly separated elements enter into a readable context; it erects no scaffolding, no edifice. Through their own movement the elements crystallize into a configuration. It is a force field, just as under the essay’s glance every intellectual artefact must transform itself into a force field. (161)

This force field where separated elements encounter, becomes the field of critical thought: “through the confrontation of texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each text intends even in spite of itself, it shatters the claim of culture and moves it to remember its untruth” (168). Adorno’s plea for the discursive form of the essay could be seen as arbitrary or as a hybrid lacking a convincing and independent tradition. The essay’s vague openness of feeling and mood could be perceived as naïve. How does the entanglement of elements, as interwoven as a carpet, enable us to judge? Referring to what Adorno stated earlier, when the essay creates its own rules, guidelines and conditions, how can

we judge? “Who gives him the right to judge”, riposts Lukács (26). He continues and delivers us his answer:

The criteria of the essayist’s judgment are indeed created within him, but it is not he who awakens them to life and action: the one who whispers them into his ears is the great value-definer of aesthetics, the one who is always about to arrive, the one who is never quite yet there, the only one who has been called to judge. (32)

To Lukács, the essay is a mere precursor of a judgement. Just like an artwork, the essay faces life with the gesture of an artwork. But it only remains a gesture, an attitude. The essay inhabits that which judges and that which is judged. Thus Lukács concludes, “the essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict but the process of judging” (34). In order to avoid the danger of the dogmatic omniscience of classic philosophical writings, the essay in Adorno’s conceptualization lacks a standpoint towards the concepts, experiences and theories it touches and absorbs. Only by avoiding to take a clear stance towards its subject, the essay can “polarize the opaque, to unbind the power latent in it” and construct “the interwovenness of concepts in such a way that they can be imagined as themselves interwoven in the object” (170). By avoiding reductionist’s reflexes, the essay displays the complexity of things *as* complexity.

Although Adorno pops up every time the theorization of the essay is discussed, it is the work of his colleague Walter Benjamin that was a paragon for Adorno in illustrating the power of the essay. The latter was responsible for the theorization of the essay – one that has had a significant influence – but it was Benjamin who had a serious impact on the twentieth century practitioners of the audio-visual form of the written essay (Alter 2007: 48) Not Adorno’s ideas on the essay, but Benjamin’s essays were the source of inspiration for many artists, ranging from different disciplines, to derive discursive practices for their projects. The impact and influence of Adorno’s *The Essay as Form* and Benjamin’s writings pushed away Lukács’ ideas on the essay. In the light of the translation of the essay into other artistic disciplines, I want to point to crucial features of his conceptualization of the essay that will help us to understand the example of *Syden*, later on in this text.

With his text *On the Nature and Form of the Essay. A letter to Leo Popper*, Lukács theorized the translation of the written essay into an autonomous art form, “a

form which separates it, with the rigor of a law, from all other art forms” (17). Referring to Schlegel, Lukács defines the essay as an “intellectual poem” (34). Here Lukács differs from Adorno, for whom the essay remains “essentially language” (160). For Lukács, the essay had a creative autonomy in relation to what it discussed. Early twentieth-century Vitalism or Lebensphilosophie influenced Lukács’ theory, terminology and approach, whereas this Vitalism emphasized the dynamic process rather than a finished product. Just like an artwork, the essay faces life. But it only remains a gesture, an attitude. This important connection to life brings Lukács to the conclusion that the modern essay has lost the connection with life. He states that through the loss of the essay’s naivety, the modern essay “lacks the energy to rise above the vulgar level of given facts and experience” (32). By describing an essay as an intellectual poem, this conceptualization reveals the importance of the poetic, the abstract, the phenomenological and the naïve attributed to the essay by Lukács. He considers this lyrical dimension an essential feature of the essay, in contrast to Adorno’s perspective on linguistic eloquence. The essay’s attitude toward narrative forms, fictional structures and the working of narration bears the danger of forgetting the lyrical. The essay’s ability to question and redefine representational regimes does “not usually offer the kinds of pleasure associated with traditional aesthetic forms like lyrical poetry; they instead lean toward intellectual reflection that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses, well outside the borders of conventional pleasure principles” (Corrigan 2011: 5).

When Cinema and the Essay Meet: the Essay Film

Since Montaigne and Adorno, the essay evolved from a literary genre to a series of practices that includes photography, film and currently essayistic installations and digital platforms. The genealogy of the essay film begins in the 1920s and 1930s, when avant-garde cinema and documentary film intersected. Already in these early experiments by filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, Alberto Cavalcanti, Walter Ruttmann and Luis Buñuel, the defining characteristics of the essay appear in the essay film: “the blending of fact and fiction, the mixing of art- and documentary-film styles, the foregrounding of a personal or subjective point of view, a focus on public life, a dramatic tension between aural and visual discourses, and a dialogic encounter with the audiences and viewers” (Alter & Corrigan 2017: 3).

In 1940, Hans Richter introduced the term ‘Essay Film’ to describe the entry of the essay in film as “an attempt to make the invisible world of imagination,

thoughts and ideas visible” (91). It was considered a new type of intellectual but also emotional cinema that employed more expressive means into documentary film. The qualities of the essay film as new cinematographic form managed to merge intellect and emotion and steer between the roots and the betrayal of the documentary genre. Because filmmakers were no longer bound to the traditional parameters and rules of documentary making, the essay film gave “free reign to the imagination, with all its artistic potentiality” (Alter 2003: 7). Because filmmakers could chuck chronological sequencing or representational depiction of phenomena, the term ‘essay’ was the choice term signifying “a composition that is in between categories and as such is digressive, playful, contradictory, and political” (ibid: 8).

By implementing these features, the film essay “offers a range of politically charged visions uniquely able to blend abstract ideas with the concrete realities, the general case with the specific notations of human experience’ (Renov 2017 [1995]: 183). Up until today, the essay has received renewed critical attention, “in an epoch in which ideas such as hybridity, non-identity, contingency, indeterminacy, the reflective, the interdisciplinary, the transient, and the heterotopic resonate both with prevailing theoretical paradigms and with vast sectors of social life” (Arthur 2003: 58). In our times governed by a neoliberal hegemony and confronted with mass migration, growing inequality and ecological disasters, the traditional and convincing social narratives are outdated. As Laura Rascaroli observes, the essay “invites different forms of expression, and different dimensions and way of engagement with the real – ways that are more contingent, marginal, autobiographical, even private” (2009: 190). By allowing these new engagements with the real, it – or at least that what we consider as the real - is challenged. These confrontations denaturalize events and representations of the accepted ways of viewing and understanding the world. Therefore, Alter recapitulates, the essay is more than a mere product of critical thinking and writing. The interest in the essay, its evolution and transition towards other artistic disciplines indicate that “essayism is not just a mode of producing – it is a method of reading, viewing and interpreting” (2018: 16).

Already in its literary origin, the essay was a form that stressed the importance of the position of the reader and insisted him to take up an active role. In order to establish such a dynamic position, Montaigne addressed his readers and invited them to interact with his process of thinking. By installing such a dialogical relationship, the structure of the essay is characterized by a “constant interpellation” of the reader/spectator (Rascaroli 2009: 35). In the essay you are

not addressed as “a member of an anonymous, collective audience”, but as an active participant who is “called upon to engage in a dialogical relationship with the enunciator” (ibid: 35). In the essay you become “an explicit partner in the communicative negotiation” who is “overtly asked to enter into dialogue with the filmmaker/essayist, and to contribute to the creation of a constitutively open and unstable textual meaning” (Ibid: 189). As a viewer you become part of a process that is described as “essayistic thinking”; you are invited “to experience the world in the full intellectual and phenomenological sense, as the mediated encounter of thinking through the world, as a world experience through a thinking mind” (Corrigan 2011: 35).

In this process, the spectator “inhabits partially the unstable subject position foregrounded in the film itself and partially the expanding position of participating in other ideas and worlds” (ibid: 35). In its desire to communicate directly with the spectator, the essay does not try or deny the own apparatus. In case of the essay film, “it recognizes that the body of the film exists, and is capable not only of being perceived, but also of perceiving the spectator”. With the help of all possible means, “essayistic cinema addresses and interpellates the embodied spectator, asks her to engage with the film and, through the filmic body, with the filmmaker” (Rascaroli 2009:189).

These experimental, playful and critical dimensions of the film essay, are what attract performing arts artists and incites them to transfer certain features and leave others behind. As stated by Alter, “the nature of the essay encourages and promotes its translation not only into different languages but also into other media and forms” (2007: 55). Hence it is important to stress the “temptation to overtheorise the form, or even worse, to crystallize it into a genre” (Rascaroli 2009: 39). Therefore we have to think of “essay as a mode”, which explores the ways in which this mode is appropriated, manipulated, interpreted, modified and reinvented by film and video makers and in case of this contribution, by artists working in the field of performing arts (ibid: 39). It is by “loosening the bonds of genre, which have, in any case, never managed to contain the essay’ that we are able to question “some of the fundamental assertions, in order to propose an alternate set of conditions” (Papazian & Eades 2016: 3). Thinking about the essay as a mode, not as a genre, enables us to distinguish the essay as “rhetorical organization or structure”, the essayistic as “an inflection or tactic within a primary practice” and essayism as “a dissipation or intellectual pause of that primary practice” (Corrigan 2016: 15). This proposition of the essay as mode eschews not only the essentialist notions of genre and form but allows me,

following Alter, to translate the essay into performing arts. In what will follow, I will try to translate some of the ideas and concepts that I touched on earlier into an analysis of the essayistic structure of two performances. The first, *Mining Stories*, is a documentary performance by Belgian theatre makers Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere. The duo investigated in their performance the role of memory, emotion, narrativity, power structures and economics in the traumatic aftermath of a mining accident in Brazil. *Syden* is the second example that operates as a starting point for the rest of this article. This multidisciplinary project by Hedvig Biong, Pablo Castilla and Niko Hafkenscheid uses tourism as alibi to cope with one of today's major challenges: immigration. With *Syden*, I articulate the poetic and aesthetic qualities of the lyrical essay, disrupting narrative and rational structures.

Tracing the essay's editorial dimension in *Mining Stories* by Hannes Dereere (BE) & Silke Huysmans (BE)

On the fifth of November 2015, a dam built by mining company Samarco collapsed in Minas Gerais, a mountainous region in Brazil. A flood of toxic waste mud thundered down the hills. Within minutes, houses and small villages were completely destroyed. The official investigation of the Brazilian authorities showed that the company Samarco was responsible for the economic, ecological and human disaster. The company was aware of the decay of the dam, but in the end, they were not prosecuted, because their economic activities have provided a steady income for the households in the region.

15 February 2016. After three months, Samarco started their economic activities again. Business as usual. The people of Minas Gerais tried to turn the page but the emotional traumas, the ecological disaster and the sad stories remained. What was stunning, and even shocking, was Samarco's publicity campaign launched that very same day entitled *É sempre bom olhar para todos os lados* - We have to look at this event from different perspectives. Belgian theatre makers Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere took Samarco's call to heart. Huysmans was born in the affected region and spent the first seven years of her life in Mariana, one of the villages that were washed away in 2015. Huysmans and Dereere spent months collecting stories. They interviewed survivors, people who lost friends and families, the local mayor and the Samarco management. Apart from interviewing those who got directly affected by the disaster, the duo also talked with ecological activists, economics and specialists in trauma recovery. Talking to these 'outsiders' enabled the artists to create a meta-perspective to survey what kind of

underlying mechanisms causes these kind of events and how those affected by it cope with such a catastrophe. Within Dereere's and Huysmans' approach and relation to the totality of testimonies, it was not the aim to give a voice to the victims of the disaster. Such an approach enabled to treat each story and testimony as equal. In reality, in the aftermath of the disaster, the company Samarco and the government tried to impose their version of the event: everybody who is part of the mining community is partially responsible, was their official statement. *Mining Stories* became an instrument to interrogate the dominant narrative of the aftermath of the disaster and explore the mechanisms that caused the disaster. The stories of pain, despair and anxiety for what the future will bring were the starting point to go beyond the events in Minas Gerais and address the precarious economic and ecological situations that we find all over the world.

In *Mining Stories*, Huysmans is alone on stage, assisted by a looping station that she uses in order to start playing excerpts of the recorded conversations. The uttered words of the conversations are projected on wooden panels flanking the sole performer. We hear an economist, a specialist in traumas, a neuropsychologist, an ecological activist and a jurist. Five different voices, sharing their opinions that at first sight has nothing to do with a mining disaster. They talk about how the process of remembering and recollecting memories works, about economic growth and the significance of storytelling. This “*methodically unmethodical character of the essay*” is put central in the first part of *Mining Stories* (Verschaffel 1995: 11). By starting the performance on a meta-level, they try to go beyond the mere anecdotes and stress the complex web of human emotions, political interests, ethical questions and social issues that are interwoven with disastrous events such as in Minas Gerais. In their attempt to transgress the anecdotal, the performances addresses and questions fundamental economic mechanisms, political hegemonies and problematic power relations that are at the basis of such ecological catastrophes. Therefore, the disastrous event itself is never discussed during the performance. The stories we hear are about the *post-event*: feelings that popped up afterwards, the traumas that came to light, the sneaky procedures that were started by the government and the mining company in order to forget all that happened as soon as possible.

Since Montaigne, the essayistic practice has operated as “an investigation into the truth and ethics of social events and behaviour” and as “an editorial intervention in the news of everyday history” (Corrigan 2011: 154). In the literary essay and the film essay this editorial dimension is articulated in order to “unveil and

analyse not only the realities and facts that are documented but also the subjective agencies of those realities and facts” (ibid: 155). Within their essayistic approach, Dereere and Huysmans articulate “the necessary play of consciously and decisively mobile subjectivities within those reports, reports not only about facts, realities, people, and places discovered and revealed but also about the possibility of agency itself within a state of current affairs that is no longer transparent nor easily accessible” (ibid: 155). This distinguishes the essay from the documentary genre. Whereas the latter claims to “present unambiguous truth and a relationship to history that is not arbitrary, the essay allows for contradictions and play” (Alter 2007: 52). By reciting these different perspectives and blending abstract ideas with concrete realities, *Mining Stories* avoids the danger of narrativization of the disaster. Huysmans’ actions and gestures on stage while using her looping station are crucial elements in the theatre makers’ attempt to avoid this pitfall. As a disc jockey, Huysmans picks a way through the conversations, opinions and statements herself. The audience observes how she makes her own associations. As an essayist, performing live on stage, she is at once “a critic and a metahistorian” (Rascaroli 2017: 189).

But the biographical dimension of *Mining Stories* undermines the performer’s critical position. Huysmans’ binary position – her emotional connection with the region, juxtaposing her position as a critic and meta-historian - articulates “the question where the essayist should be positioned in relation to the story to be told (...), because querying the narrating stance and its ethos (its proximity to/ distance from the story) is part of the essay’s self-evaluative process” (Rascaroli 2017: 152). By making Huysman’s subjective position explicit, the essayism implemented in *Mining Stories* problematizes the dominant narrative of the events in Minas Gerais “through the disintegration of narrative agency, the exploration of the margins of narrative temporality as history and the questioning of the teleological knowledge that has conventionally sustained and shaped narrative” (Corrigan 2016: 16). The constant interaction of Huysmans’ subjective perspective and reality becomes a questioning of both. And just as in the literary essay, the movement of an appeal towards and a dialogue with the audience takes place in the performance. It is a dialogue that takes place within a three-poled frame of reference: there is “the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal” (Huxley 2002: 329).

The playful mixture of the stories by Huysmans in order to create certain associations is also an invitation to the spectators to join her in this process. It is a

challenge for the audience to cope with the poetic interplay of voices. Just as in Montaigne's modern *Essais*, where the writer explicitly addresses the reader, *Mining Stories*, as a theatrical essay, is written by pressing the pedals of the looping station. By implementing this essayistic strategy via contemporary technology on stage, the spectator – aware of the apparatus – is not overwhelmed and paralyzed by opinions and statements but is encouraged to leave his passive position and to take up an active role in the process he is invited to. Herein resonates a key feature of the essay that was mentioned earlier: the act of constant interpellation. The essay – in its literary, cinematic or theatrical form – explicitly invites its readers and spectators to relate to what is (re)presented. Including readers and spectators in “a true conversation” allows them “to follow thorough mental processes of contradiction and digression” in order to break “the neutral contract of spectatorship” and forces them “to acknowledge a conversation, along with its responsibilities” (Lopate 1996: 19). Just as in other essays, literary or cinematic, the spectator in *Mining Stories* becomes “an explicit partner in the communicative negotiation; he is overtly asked to enter into dialogue; and to contribute to the creation of a constitutively open and unstable textual meaning” (Rascaroli 2009: 189).

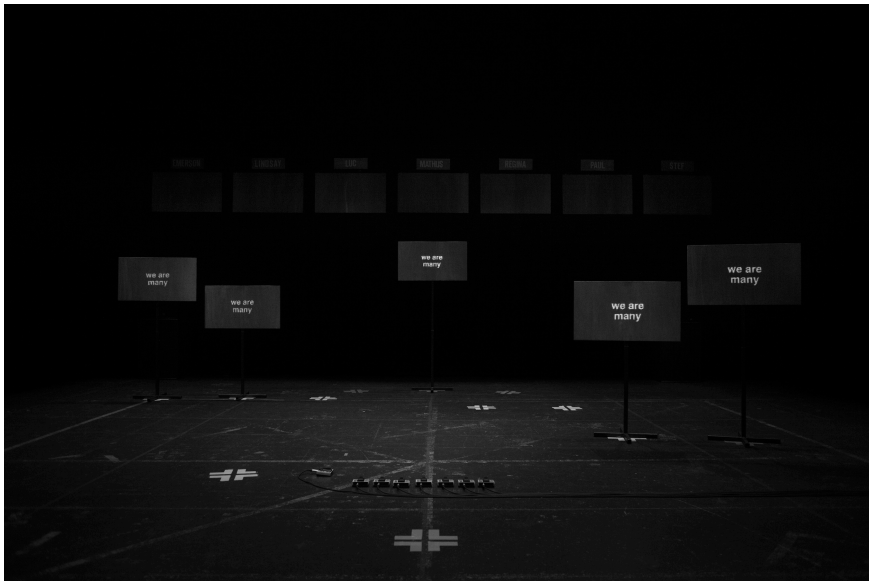
The invitation in *Mining Stories* towards the audience is an invitation to join the performer in her journey through the stories and events of Minas Gerais. It is an invitation to join her in a search where our own thoughts and actions are being explored and scrutinized. The flood of information you get through the testimonies makes it impossible to digest and analyze everything, something that could enable an outsider to judge the situation. The essayistic approach leaves space for failure and offers a possibility for stories of the performance to resonate with the stories of the spectators. As a spectator, being confronted with the stories and the complex web of causes and (shared) responsibilities that are part of what happened in Minas Gerais can be overwhelming. But at the same time, you are invited to, just as Huysmans does, “reclaim an active subjectivity as a kind of editor seeking a face, where to edit means to investigate or to open events with “an opinion”, thought, or idea. Thinking through current events becomes the demonstration of an agency or a place of agency as it arrests and reconfigures itself within that current event, both archeologically *down* through a past and *across* a moving present” (Corrigan 2011: 171). It is up to the individual spectator to copy and paste, to question and to work a way through the complexity. The outcome of the concatenation of stories is an appeal to relate, individually and collectively, to similar situations in the world. Within this process of essayistic

thinking, you question your own ability to critique your subjective position, thoughts and actions.

The format of the essay is hence a genre *par excellence* that could make people aware of their shared responsibilities and the power they have in order to react. This focus on agency expresses the aim and desire of the essay to construct “a speaking “I” who is inquisitive, pensive, searching and self-searching, engaged and self-reflexive. It is an “I” who wishes to address and engage within a shared space of embodied subjectivity” (Rascaroli 2009: 191).



Mining Stories - © William van der Voort



Mining Stories - © William van der Voort

**Syden by Hedvig Biong (NO), Pablo Castilla (ES) & Niko Hafkenscheid (BE)
and the lyrical potential of the essay**

Artists Hedvig Biong, Pablo Castilla and Niko Hafkenscheid adduce the twilight zone between prose and poetry – as pointed out by Lukács – in their project *Syden*. ‘Syden’ means ‘South’ in all Scandinavian languages. Musician and composer Niko Hafkenscheid, visual artist Hedvig Biong and filmmaker Pablo Castilla departed from a series of interviews they did in the touristic south of Spain with tourists and relocated retirees. Most of the respondents were retired middle class Europeans who left their home country and spent the last years of their life at sunny beaches. They narrated what an average day looks like, what they like about how they live right now and how they envisage the upcoming years. Gradually, the plate-armoured story about the idyllic life they have in Spain gets cracked once the intentions of many of these ‘tourists’ come to light. For many of the respondents, the move out from their home country was triggered by negative experiences: a divorce, a bankruptcy, the death of beloved friends or family or a fight with their children. For many of them, their migration to Spain is a resort, away from private problems at home. Biong, Castilla and Hafkenscheid use these testimonies, with tourism as an alibi, to talk about deep-rooted human desires to live in a place that is safe and peaceful. The stories about how wonderful the food is or how lovely the water is in the swimming pool mask the concealed desire for a secure and warm place to live. Biong, Castilla and Hafkenscheid’s purpose is not to share the stories of these people with an audience and so to show the dark side of their luck. What they try to do is to present a deconstruction, reframing and reconfiguration of the archetype of the tourist. They use the archetypal representation of the tourist to address issues concerning migration.

Syden is a diptych, consisting of a performative video installation entitled *Syden, a Moment of Utopian Being* (2015) and a musical performance entitled *Syden. Songs from a Valley of Love and Delight* (2017). In the performance, seven of the initial respondents form a choir and sing their testimony. Despite the differences in form, the diptych shares the same aesthetic. The performative video installation consists of three book standards, set up in a triangle shape, and positioned in a dark space across from each other. The same triangle returns in the light falling down on the three standards. The standards are bathing in the soft glow of the top lighting. This setting evokes a spiritual and religious atmosphere. The Bible-shaped books on the standards reinforce this sacred feeling. One can turn the pages and read aphorisms, based on the that interviews Biong, Castilla and Hafkenscheid conducted. From the ceiling, idyllic pictures of

the places where the trio went to take the interviews are accurately projected on the books. In a subtle way, one picture fades away and another picture appears. Almost without noticing, when you turn the page, the descriptive aphorisms change but the type of places we see appearing on the pictures are not. All photos show idyllic and picturesque places in southern Spain people like to wander about. With a semblance of the sunset, the pictures take you to the Spanish coastline or the swimming pool. Salient is the absence of people in the pictures. By reading the aphorisms we 'hear' the people but we see nobody. The picturesque images, bathing in the evening glow, are juxtaposed by the absence of human activity. This tension between the verbal and the visual generates an ambiguity that makes the images balance between the idyllic and the post-apocalyptic.

By creating a dialogical tension between the verbal and the visual, "the visual itself begins to acquire the expressivity and instability associated with the verbal realm of the literary voice", in the case of the installation (*Syden, a Moment of Utopian Being*) and the written aphorisms (Corrigan 2011: 20). The places where people talk or wander, expressed in the aphorisms, become redeemable and the dominant representational regime is questioned. By dramatizing the text in the installation, "the shifting subjective perspective and its unstable relationship with the photographic image it counterpoints" is concretized (ibid: 20). This aesthetic strategy is inspired by Biedermeier art, a bourgeois and sentimental art form that was popular in Germany and Austria between 1815 and 1848. In reaction to the ornamental style of the period, the upcoming middle class preferred art that corresponded with the bourgeois lifestyle. Sentimentalism, the idyllic and the picturesque characterized Biedermeier art. It was an escapist reaction of the bourgeois middle class, a cover up of the uncertainties of a rapidly growing population in times of urbanization, economic growth and political stability after the Congress of Vienna.

The notion of sentimentalism is pushed to its grotesque limits in the performance *Syden. Songs from a Valley of Love and Delight*. Seven respondents were asked to write a laud based on their own testimony. This resulted in intense emotional lyrics, accompanied by the music of Niko Hafkenscheid. The same spiritual and religious atmosphere of the set-up of the installation is retained in the performance. The audience is seated in two rows, facing the performers/singers, just like in a church. One by one, the retired performers step into the spherical triangle-shaped light beam and with an enormous devotion they start to sing

their personal hymn. The content of the paeans range from how delicious the buffet in the hotel is to how lovely it is that the sun shines every day.

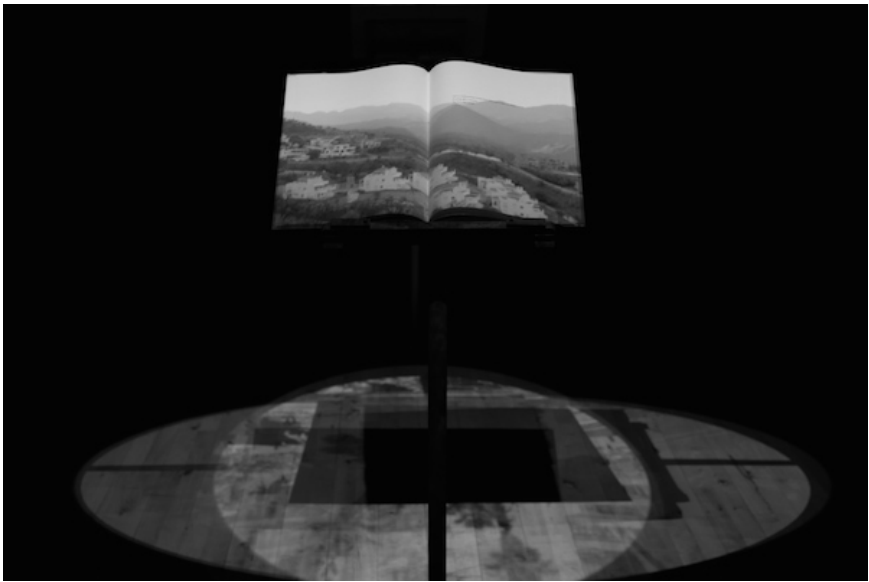
In the installation, however, the excessive presence of sentimentality becomes an artistic strategy to reflect on *what* is told and *how* the stories are being performed. By doing this, the archetype of the tourist is foregrounded and questioned. One can detect the archetypes that are represented in the installation and the performance. However, they are not presented and staged as critique but as an appeal to engage with it as a spectator. Everyone can relate to some elements of the performance or the installation and this forces you as spectator to reflect on your own position. Not only does *Syden* elicit our imagination; it also confronts us with our lack of imagination when it concerns our inability to transgress certain archetypes of people such as ‘the tourist’ in Spain. The artistic choice of using lyrical elements allows for more suggestions and associations than we, as spectators, tend to think of at first sight. As a spectator you soon find out that judging the archetypal characters or archetypal quotes is irrelevant for the performance; the challenge lies in interrogating the archetypes that we fix too easily. While *Mining Stories* focuses on rational thought and the deconstruction of narrative thinking, the lyricism in *Syden* tries to surpass this preoccupation with rationality. Because of its emphasis on the lyrical, *Syden* differs from *Mining Stories* because it explores a part of the essay’s argumentation that tends to be overlooked. It is the aim of Biong, Castilla and Hafkenschied to scrape off the political layers of the documentary material they had to deal with and try to get human emotions and desires to the surface. Herein lies the power of lyricism, because it is “an undoing that is essential to the disjunctive textuality of the essay, one that can break off at any time, just like epistolary offers the essay a structure of gap that is potential for disassemblage – and that at once facilitates the location of the right distance from the subject matter” (Rascaroli 2017: 163). Biong, Castilla and Hafkenschied are aware that this “break off at any time” can easily happen when one balances between emotion and kitsch. When one works with personal statements, dreams and desires of white middle class retirees who reached a certain degree of financial stability that enables them to migrate to southern Spain, the risk of tear-jerking lurks around the corner.

Essayism and Essayistic Practices in Contemporary Documentary Theatre

Cinema’s resort to the essay was seen as an attempt to encapsulate the “sublimely paradoxical wish to communicate directly with the spectator, to bypass the obvious constraints of an apparatus” (Rascaroli 2009: 191). Thanks to

technological improvements the camera became just like a pen: “increasingly flexible, portable and responsive to human thought” (Rascaroli 2017: 4). Talking as a dramaturge with Dereere & Huysmans and Biong, Castilla & Hafkenscheid, *in* and *with* their projects they all uttered the desire to articulate the dimension of debate, dialogue or a dialectic tension between a subject or an image and its audience. The qualities of the essay that I tried to foreground in this text, according to my observations, function as a refreshing and useful toolbox to work with documentary material. I believe that the essay and its characteristics are fully relevant today and so it is not surprising that young (documentary) theatre makers are looking for new forms of expression and different ways to deal and engage with the real, in ways that are more “contingent, marginal, autobiographical, even private” (Rascaroli 2006: 190)

When we look back in time to the radical and revolutionary ideas of Brecht and Piscator, we see that this new generation of documentary theatre makers is polemic but not revolutionary. They are not disruptive but rather constructive. Herein lies again an element of the essay: dialoguing with what already exists. Inspired by film scholars that wrote a similar claim about the Essay Film, this contribution outlined that the essayistic should not necessarily be seen simply as an alternative “to more conventional forms of documentary theatre; rather it rhymes and retimes them as a counterpoint within and to them. The essay does not create new forms of subjectivity, realism or narrative; it rethinks existing ones as a dialogue of ideas” (Corrigan 2010: 219). The focus of the essay on the interpellation and activation of the reader/spectator is a key element in the essay’s attempt to rethink existing ideas and to dialogue with what we tend to leave in the past. From this perspective, I believe that the field of the essay opens up a lot of opportunities to create new frameworks or implement concepts for contemporary documentary and/or theatrical practices. On the one hand, the essay and its properties inspire artists to make the creative process more transparent, tangible and feasible. On the other hand, the performative qualities of the performing arts expands the notion of the essay because “the performative inasmuch as it does not present its object as a stable given, as evidence of a truth, but as the search of object, which is itself mutating, incomplete, and perpetually elusive and thus deeply uncertain and problematized” (Rascaroli 2017: 187). In this view, it is not only the nature of the essay, which enables artists within performing arts to enlarge their artistic possibilities. By engaging with the essay and its legacy, the performing arts can partially embody in a unique way the essay’s search of an object and thus of itself – as an open, performative, unfolding text wholly dependent on such a search.



Syden. A Moment of Utopian Being - © Kevin & Harry



Syden. Songs from a Valley of Love and Delight - © Kevin & Harry



Syden. Songs from a Valley of Love and Delight - © Kevin & Harry

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