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Hauntological Environmental Art: The Photographic Frame and the Nuclear Afterlife of Chernobyl in Lina Selander's *Lenin's Lamp*

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Abstract

This article draws attention to how photography is changing art, by imagining a politics through which to structure a future around something other than the failed visions of technological modernization and nuclear expansion. Focusing on the ongoing environmental damage of events such as Chernobyl 32 years later, the author considers the Swedish artist Lina Selander's 'Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant Hut' to examine how photography and video may work together to address the present and future force of that disaster's ongoing environmental aftermath with history's failed Soviet dream of progress. She proposes that 'Lenin's Lamp', in its work with the temporality of material remains and impressions, is a work of hauntological environmental art that engages viewers in hope and dread. How the work stages this dual affective response through its work with the temporalities of photographic and filmic artifacts is the subject of this article.

Keywords

affect theory • Anthropocene • Chernobyl • ecological art • environmental film • Jacques Derrida • photography • Roland Barthes

This article discusses the ecological work of Swedish artist Lina Selander, and in particular Selander's *Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut*, a series of 2011 that is composed of a mixed-media installation and a video. I focus primarily on the black-and-white HD video, a 25-minute work also titled *Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut*, to address the relationship of film

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montage to the photographic frame in this work. Selander's title references the process of electrification as a condition of the utopian socialist project. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin championed a countrywide electrification campaign that laid the foundation for industrialization throughout Russia during the 1920s and 1930s. The vision became such a part of daily domestic life in Russia that the phrase 'Illyich's Lamp' was the colloquial name for the pervasive household incandescent lights hung from the ceiling by wire. Selander links the political ethos of electrification to the nuclearization campaign and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster of 1986. The work points to the development of photography and film as parts of the same modernity that spurred these progressivist campaigns. Foregrounding memory and the ephemeral material document, Selander connects radiation as an unseen poisonous trace material from nuclear fall-out to the medium of photography and to the temporality of film, forms juxtaposed in *Lenin's Lamp* as video and as installation. In the video, Selander uses montage, but in slow form. She intercuts long swaths of footage including long fragments of Dziga Vertov's *The Eleventh Year (Odinnadcatyj)*, a 1928 film about the construction of a Ukraine power plant on the shores of the Dnieper river which celebrates the 10th anniversary of the Soviet state, and footage shot by Selander herself in Pripyat, the town on a tributary of the Dnieper established to house Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant workers – now an evacuated ghost town. Along with the video, the installation includes a vitrine of photographic-radiographic prints made from rocks that bear uranium traces.

To understand the significance of electrification and nuclear power in the Soviet vision of progress and the power of living labor (see Figure 1), it is helpful to recall a slogan of Lenin's from 1919: 'socialism = soviet + electricity'. As Antonio Negri (2017: 2) explains, this slogan was introduced at a moment when it became necessary to define 'the model of production and the ways of life that the proletariat wanted to construct under socialism'. The point was not simply to put the Soviet leadership in charge of electrification (and, later, nuclear expansion) but to give power to the living labor of the worker in producing new technological systems – an initiative that ultimately failed with the demise of the USSR in the wake of Chernobyl. This vision lives on – stochastically and hauntologically, I will suggest – in the contemporary nuclear state.

Below, I propose that *Lenin's Lamp*, in its work with material remains and impressions of the Soviet vision figured through the political vision of electrification and the sequelae of that vision, articulates something uncanny about the future. It enables us to foresee new forms of ecological dangers by virtue of underscoring temporal dislocations connected to the ongoing political history of the progressivist electrification vision in nuclear technology's advancement in the continuing political and environmental fall-out of that vision, through the stochastic effects of events such as the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters. With its ongoing ecological consequences from radiation 32 years later, Chernobyl is invoked in Selander's *Lenin's Lamp* as an icon of our own present dread about a future actualized in Fukushima, a disaster that occurred in 2011, the year of this work's production.¹ The photographic frame and the film still, in the installation and in the video,

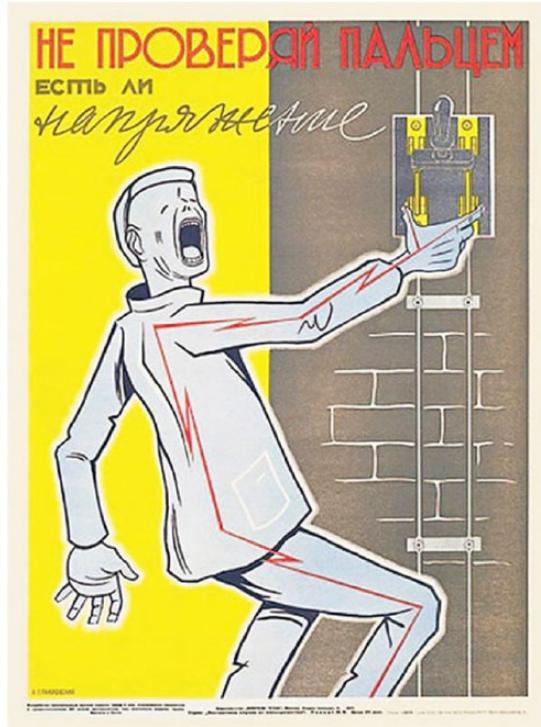


Figure 1 Soviet-era work safety poster warning workers not to use fingers to check for electrical current (reprinted from Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 2013).

appear as memorial objects that are neither present nor absent, dead nor alive, invoking this past and fueling our present apprehension about what is to come as the failed vision of nuclearization continues to haunt us in its material impacts and current rhetorics of threat.

Photography, along with the film still, figures centrally in Selander's work with time in late modernity. Her work with photographic, cinematic, and video frames and sequences focuses on remnants or debris from a mythical industrial modernity that are also remnants of the socialist revolutionary spirit – the negative matter produced in this disaster's wake. In her use of montage and in the unfolding of time fragments throughout the video, Selander foregrounds what Rob Nixon (2011) calls the 'slow violence' (wrought by climate change or toxic drift) that hovers right below the level of perception, as in the form of residual, stochastically unfolding impacts that continue from Chernobyl's nuclear fallout. In a number of ways described below, *Lenin's Lamp* reactivates the past for a present marked by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster of 2011, by ongoing state nuclear energy programs, and by the specter of nuclear war revived in discourses between US and North Korean leaders in 2017. Thus *Lenin's*

Lamp is timely in the contemporary moment, during which we need more than ever to imagine a politics through which to structure a future around something other than the failed visions of technological modernization and nuclear expansion. Selander's work with artifacts of Soviet electrification and nuclear disaster in this series invites suspension of the myths of modernity and brings to the foreground a transformed aesthetic and political sensibility about the technological progress that is more proper to the late modernity of risk societies (Beck, 1992).

By reworking and juxtaposing the respective temporal frameworks of photographs and films to stage the unfolding of environmental and political breakdowns and their remains, Selander engages her viewers in hope and dread, affects more attuned to the contemporary condition of living both in the wake of and with the threat of technological disaster. How the work stages this dual affective response through its work with the temporalities of photographic and filmic artifacts is the subject of this article. Visceral and cognitive responses to photographs and films and the relevance of such affective responses to environmental disasters and their aftermath have until recently occupied at best a marginal place in the study of photography and visual culture (Von Mossner: 2014: 1). My concern follows from a point made by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, a text widely regarded for marking a critical turn away from signification and toward the affective dimensions of photography in relationship to time. Barthes (1981: 312–32) famously notes that photography suspends time in a perpetual moment of death-in-life, posing ineluctably the question of immortality and afterlife not only for the viewer, but also for entire societies and historical periods. In *Specters of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida describes this quality of historical, temporal, and ontological afterlife as a form of haunting, a 'hauntology'. In this text, Derrida is concerned not with photography, but with what remains of the socialist vision after the 1989 collapse of communism in the Soviet Union. The domain of this 'specter' belongs, for Derrida, to what haunts and thus returns, something from the past as yet unfulfilled or unfinished that colors and shapes the present even after its collapse. Discussing media in his later writings, Derrida (2001: 44) returns to this concept of hauntology to consider the temporal disjunction introduced by media forms themselves, such that media texts are particularly adept at capturing and exposing the gaps and fissures of recent history.

In what follows, I highlight the role that photographic and filmic 'haunting' plays in the temporal dimension of feelings generated through this specific environmental work of Selander. Focusing primarily on the montage video, I interpret the series *Lenin's Lamp* as a work of *hauntological environmental art*, a paradoxical form in which the present is troubled by a traumatic past and a dreaded future and, at the same time, sits in judgment of that very same recent past.² In what follows, I connect the political agenda of technological advancement that both Negri and Derrida discuss to the media 'haunting' performed by photographic and cinematic frames and sequences to convey an experience of time that is anachronistic, out of joint with the present, yet through haunting the present also brings it into view, and foreshadows its future.

Lina Selander's *Lenin's Lamp* (2011): Remnants from an Industrial Dream Gone Awry

In the video *Lenin's Lamp*, Selander deploys the characteristic style of the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov and editor Elisaveta Slilova to create an aesthetically rich and provocative montage. The montage is composed of the artist's own footage and stills, archival material, and excerpts from Vertov's film *The Eleventh Year*. In fact, the title of the work (given to both the series and the video) is borrowed in its entirety from an intertitle in this commemorative film of 1929. Vertov's film was made to document and celebrate the electrification of the countryside as an achievement of the Socialist revolution. The footage that Selander appropriates for her video presents an optimistic celebration of the achievements and glories of the USSR in the eleventh year after the revolution, notably innovations in hydroelectricity (dams), irrigation, and electrification. We may recall Lenin's famous claim that 'communism is the government by the Soviets plus the electrification of the whole land' (Lenin, 1920: 513).³ The terrible irony of this statement is revealed as Selander intercuts shots from *The Eleventh Year* with Soviet news footage of the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, an event that helped precipitate the fall of the Soviet Union. This juxtaposition reminds us that if electrification built the USSR, then its most advanced stage – the production of nuclear power plants – later helped destroy it, poisoning large segments of the human and nonhuman population nearby and introducing effects that would unfold in stochastic time. Impacts of electrification policy would be cast into the future, out of joint with the present.

This sense of time out of joint is further imposed by the addition of footage (shot by Selander herself) documenting the present state of a contaminated zone in the abandoned city of Pripyat, and archival still images from the rescue efforts of the Ukrainian coal miners who helped with the remediation work at the disaster site, and who later lost their lives from their exposure to the radiation. Where we see reproduced in the video photographs of the workers from memorial displays and photographs, Selander also includes documentation of artifacts from the Chernobyl museum in Kiev, the site that administered the historical heritage of the accident. Thus the film is a composite of stochastic time, containing documentation from critical moments before, during and after the critical event.

Selander's montage, by virtue of its juxtaposition of materials from different time periods, creates a complex perception of time that distances us from the celebratory modernity of political utopias from the early 20th century – the period of fervor around electrification that Vertov's film records. Her composition of the Chernobyl disaster draws us into the fascinating set of suggestive temporal 'hauntings' of that electrifying political moment constructed through montage as a dynamic archive of stochastic time. Many of Selander's selections, such as images of out-of-date machinery in the reactor control room – machines that might have contributed to the disaster, tend to highlight unexpected outcomes: the reactor's meltdown,



Figure 2 Lina Selander, *The Chernobyl Museum, Reactor Control Room, Reconstruction of Events Leading to the Accident in Video*.

for example, may come back to haunt the viewer, its image triggered in the viewer's historical memory by the mere sight of these machines, which were tragically anachronistic even in their own time (see Figure 2). This haunting, I argue, reveals the ties between the contemporary nuclear energy ethos and the Soviet era, when Lenin's 1919 slogan 'socialism = soviet + electricity' first appeared.

These images, taken during a Soviet forensic reconstruction of events leading to the accident, gesture toward viewers' own fears about nuclear energy now and the possibility of what may be to come. Photographic recording of the anachronistic machinery of Chernobyl offers the image as a kind of memorial of time gone awry, with sadness about the tragedy invoking dread about the future that, in 2011, was about to unfold (Selander produced the video in the immediate wake of the Fukushima disaster). Shots of medals displayed at the Chernobyl museum similarly function to suggest an experience of time unfolding that is tragically disturbing in its implications for the future. These awards were given to Ukrainian workers who participated in the clean-up – individuals who, by the time of the video, had long since died from the radiation poisoning they endured in that heroic effort. Like the machine and the medals themselves, the photographs of medals serve as hauntological registers in which repetition and the triggering of memory play a key role. We may be prompted to recall, for example, those workers at Fukushima who were honored for their role in the clean-up, but who became gravely ill, and who are visible only through their extant medals. This threat of intrusion of the past into the future (our present) effects a play with time, re-provoking the feelings of dread of future environmental disasters and failed apprehension captured in the hindsight of what haunts documentation and display. Both photographic time and cinematic time



Figure 3 Lina Selander, *The Chernobyl Museum, Model of Reactor in Video*, 2011.

are important here, especially in the way that both photography and video may be used as forensic documents, recording the past in ways that shape the future.⁴ The video, in its use of the montage form, moves forward and reworks the same material in different ways, entering photographs and archival clips into compressions of time, past and future.

The video moves from what were once misguided optimistic moments of the past (found archival footage of socialist propaganda, for example) to materials and sites such as those from Chernobyl in the present that evoke feelings of precious dread related to information about the misguided and mistaken policies of the past and their tragic consequences, evoking the viewer's pity and horror in the present. Midway through the film, Selander has inserted somber melancholic sequences of calamities shot by the filmmaker herself in the present. The soundtrack is silent. Against this contemporary footage is intercut found socialist propaganda sound footage from the period when the nuclear plant first opened in 1970. The mistaken optimism of this sequence startles the contemporary viewer, who may be filled with dread based on what they know is to come – dread made all the more horrible by the misguided optimism of this footage, as when a sudden outburst of celebratory music from a symphony orchestra abruptly and deliberately shatters the complete silence of Selander's black-and-white footage of the current time, and we are shown footage of a model of Chernobyl being presented as a sacred object, representing nuclear energy as a mass utopian project that promises to bring about the good society (see Figure 3).⁵

This juxtaposition echoes the earlier segment in the film, when Selander uses footage from the Vertov film of 1928 that celebrates innovations in electrification in conjunction with Chernobyl's aftermath. It is these unexpected analogies, juxtapositions and connections between these different moments of Soviet history that make us think between and across the historical development of electrification and nuclear energy, encouraging us to consider the complex temporalities of dread and irreversible outcomes,

and inviting us to question why the whole socialist project embraced so fervently this massive shift to nuclear industrialization. With the hindsight of the Chernobyl disaster, Selander uses montage to explore the gaps and absences in these historical and technological shifts, and makes us notice the ways in which the perceptual passing of time and the affects it generates ultimately disrupt the linear view of time that presupposes a tie between progress and the smooth passage of time from the past to the present and further on to the future.

Throughout the video, Selander makes a contrast between still and moving images, between the cinematic and the photographic. One can even see the montage as a kind of bridge between photographic and cinematic forms of time. The contemporary silent footage abandons the machine-like and almost hallucinatory perspective of Vertov's film camera movements and its visual exuberance (life), its celebration of the socialist experiment. Instead, Selander's camera slows down the sequence of images making use of still images in a stunned, perhaps frozen expression of assessment of disaster. Her use of longer shots, slower movement and stills emphasizes the decay and death of environmental ruin that is also reflected in the contemporary photographs of buildings, fossils and x-rays.

It may be argued that Selander, as a filmmaker, has her own artistic debt to modernity and its faith in technology to transform society and render the truth. After all, her tool of trade is the same apparatus used by Vertov to celebrate electrification. Vertov's (1924) famous statement: 'I am an eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, am a machine, I am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see', introduces the new technology of the camera as the promise of a radically new way of seeing, of existing, during the Soviet socialist revolution.

Vertov's vision of the camera as a miracle machine capable of inducing euphoric and startling energy may be said to be in the service of what Ulrich Beck (1992) calls a 'simple modernity'. However, for Selander, the camera is a critical apparatus that enables the telling of a layered melancholic and provocative story using eerie remnants of time from across a long industrial dream, a dream that has gone awry. Whereas Vertov's approach is about epistemology and phenomenology of seeing that creates desired (revolutionary) new meanings that reach into the future, Selander's is about the chaos of emotions when we are faced with time out of joint in a context where the future returns from history as a failed vision in action. By re-editing sequences from Vertov's film that celebrate the technologies of the future from the first decade of the Soviet state, and cutting into those sequences contemporary footage that details the terrible failure of that dream, Selander returns the history of cinema to photography, with cinema nothing more than a hauntological archive of photographic knowledge, stoppages and disappearances reminding us, as Derrida suggests in *Archive Fever* (1998), that the archive not only curates memory, but buries it as well – freezing it in time (p. 17).⁶

Throughout the video *Lenin's Lamp*, there are a number of images that register regret and an eerie feeling of dread. Footage of the cold deserted



Figure 4 Lina Selander, *Lenin's Lamp* (2011). The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Exclusion Zone, Residential Building.

industrial landscape of Pripyat that focuses on its strangely beautiful empty buildings, landscapes and decay seems to invite this response from viewers (see Figure 4).

The video takes a more self-reflexive turn in the extraordinary footage of a former archive, now abandoned, its paper and documents chaotically scattered all over the floor. A shot of boxes falling down is in itself an unsettling image, suggesting as it does an otherwise neatly ordered museum archive literally coming apart, and with it a breaking loose of memory into disjointed fragments – a history in pieces, shaped by the very documents now scattered on the floor (see Figure 5).

A Photographic Series of Images Created by Radioactive Zones

In certain ways, video and photography work together in the overall installation of *Lenin's Lamp* to register the calamities embedded in the archive of modernity. Only together can they speak to the disjointed condition of time in the wake of the overheated fantasies of electrification and its cinematic ethos of progress. The rise of photography as part of modernity, and specifically in its ties to nuclear technology, are most explicitly addressed in the series by a set of images created by radioactive stones that have left their imprints on photographic paper. Along with the video, this set of images constitutes a major work within the overall series. The emphasis on radiation that is so prominent in this work is of course present in the video, which records the astonishing complex history of visibility connected to this elusive phenomenon. But this photographic series of radioactive imprints leads the viewer to focus on what one cannot see, what are the negative effects embedded in objects that are the remnants of triumphant industrialization and scientific discovery from an earlier era. These are the materials that contain the remains of the energy that



Figure 5 Lina Selander, *The Swedish Museum of Natural History, Department of Palaeobotany*, 2011, in video.

transformed the built environments of the Soviet Union. Here, for Selander, it is as if photography, as the trace of this energy's invisible presence in the most mundane objects, and not motion picture film or video, holds the potential to document the limits of what could be called the hauntological condition: that which is the enduring and irreversible condition of dying and the mortality of the human, and not the immortality and afterlife of the cinematic reel.

For Selander, it seems, the film and photographic archive, which appears in footage within the video, is a metaphor for the poisoning effects of radiation over time. The photographic component of her installation gives material centrality to radiation's traces, taking the material form of black shadows on a series of light sensitive white developing paper exposed to uranium rocks (see Figures 6 and 7).

These shadow-like traces which are displayed in the vitrines as prints are meant to recall the invisible dimension of radiation and the ways in which radiation ordinarily eludes visible inscription, as are the various x-ray photographs shown in the last sequence of her video. They are also meant to recall how nuclear radiation was discovered in 1896 by the French scientist Henri Becquerel during his experiments with photographic plates. By focusing only on the black traces of radiation from these uranium rocks, these images also underscore photography's deep connection to the scientific discovery that made it possible to make visible and harness power as an energy source. Significantly, the traces of radiation that appear in Selander's black shadow photographs contain and hold still a disconcerting progressivist history, showing the temporal process of radiation and its poisoning impact as harbingers of future destruction into the present. We might view this process as something like Barthes' punctum: 'that accident which pricks, bruises' (Barthes, 1981: 26–27).

But to return to the video: in one segment, Selander presents the fallout of cesium, another lethal form of radiation that we cannot see or ordinarily



Figure 6 Lina Selander, *Vitrine of photographic-radiographic prints made from rocks that bear uranium traces*, 2015.

capture in images except in the results of fallout: in damaged life, dust and decay but which nevertheless lives on in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone where the contamination from fallout is highest and human habitation is restricted. In this portion of the video, we see abandoned horses shot through a scrim of trees (Figure 8). Their figures, presented in film negative, forage at the bank of the Dnieper. Their survival eerily suggests life-in-death in the present future of nuclear disaster, animal life in a chemically contaminated environment bereft of human life.

This is a startling sequence in that it invokes the absence of humanity at the same time that it presents to us the lingering presence of damaged life – a zone catastrophically impacted by humankind. Selander's camera's presence reminds us that the abandoned horses suffering from radiation poisoning share an unearthly kinship with beings invoked in other images presented in the video: animals and birds, for example, that appear minutes after this sequence in ghost-like x-ray photographs of their radiation-damaged bone structures and internal organs, images Selander took in the archive of a natural history collection; a 2000-year-

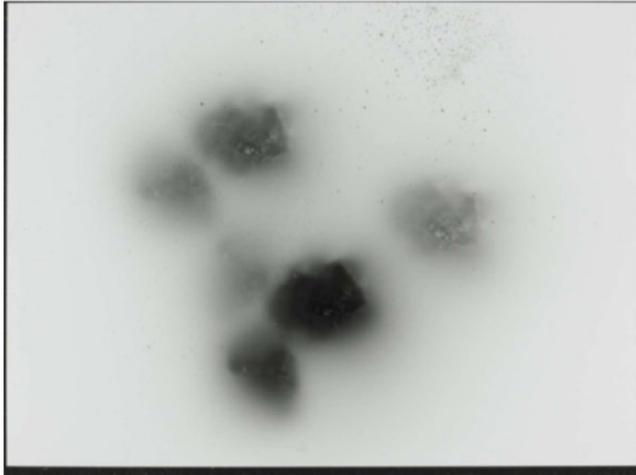


Figure 7 Lina Selander, Photographic-radiographic print made from rocks that bear uranium traces, 2011.



Figure 8 Lina Selander, The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Exclusion Zone in Video, Animals not evacuated become wild, 2011.

old Scythian from another geological age – a human whose skeleton appears in footage taken from Vertov's *Eleventh Year*. But I return to the horses because they best illustrate the uncanny experience of time in this work. Through slow-paced montage, Selander coaxes an awareness of time, enabling the viewer to envision, to project forward, the horses' slow death. At the same time, the radiation affecting this death, which the viewer knows to be there and to haunt the frame, is not explicitly visible. It is not the horses that haunt the frame, it is radiation: its invisible but disjointed movement of progress by way of suggesting at once the past time of disaster, the present time of invisible contamination, and the

future time of certain death. Radiation makes the images that Selander captures truly uncanny in its compounding of fragmented temporalities, and it haunts us in turn by virtue of its intimacy with the non-human, and its proximity to her lens. Furthermore, the specter of radiation invoked in the frame produces a different awareness of time in relationship to the human/nonhuman rather than simply temporal relationality. Selander's still images in the montage sequence suspend time (a perpetual moment of death-in-life) and present Chernobyl as a near-present extinguishing event by making visible the dangers of radiation as that which haunts, showing how its political fallout can cause such a deadly violence. At the same time, Selander's video alerts to us to the ways in which nuclear accidents can always happen again, are part of the fabric of time for humans and nonhuman life today.

Conclusion

Selander's *Lenin's Lamp* presents an hauntological juxtaposition of photography and film, and of present images with those of the past. The article argues that the photographic frame of the past no longer gives us the same access to the world because it cannot take into account the unthinkable aspect of late modernity and its technological vision, such as the invisible dimension of radiation and the poisoning effects of radiation over time from the ongoing environmental fallout from Chernobyl 32 years later. These otherwise unseen traces and their results are captured in the black shadows on white developing paper exposed to uranium rocks in Selander's installation's vitrine and the un-peopled landscapes and deserted buildings of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone that are the subject of her video. Soviet propaganda film in the context of Selander's video raises the specter of the revolutionary dream, revealed, through montage with video footage of the present, to have been a catastrophic failure that lives on. The belief that the industrial reshaping of the world could bring about the good society for the masses, not just individuals, into the future did not simply die. Motion picture film, as evidenced by Vertov's *The Eleventh Year*, celebrated that socialist movement and dared to imagine an electrified, technologically progressivist social world that would be reshaped in a utopian image. Selander's video comments on the profound significance not only of the failure of Soviet's modernization and electrification missions marked by Chernobyl, but of its marking of the end of that moment of socialist revolution and the inspiring photography and film during the October Revolution that inextricably connected revolutionary photography and film to a failed dream of massive industrialization whose impacts continue to haunt in nuclear sequelae.

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Notes

1. This work has been exhibited at The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, Stockholm (2011); Manifesta 9, The European Biennial of Contemporary Art. The Deep of the Modern, Genk, Belgium (2012); Kalmar Konstmuseum, Sweden (2014), The 8th Seoul International Media Art Biennale, Seoul (2014), and at the Venice biennale 2015, Arsenale, 9 May – 22 November 2015. The film can be seen online at: <https://vimeo.com/28228797>. For the catalogue on this work, see Holmberg (2013).
2. For more on hauntology, see Mark Fisher's 'What is Hauntology?' (2012).
3. For a further discussion of the Lenin slogan about electrification, see Antonio Negri's 'Lenin's Slogans' (2017).
4. In addition, whatever these photographs may be, they are also commemorative and activate a sense of mourning, and an unconscious responsibility to the claims of the dead.
5. See Walter Benjamin's notion of the dreamworld in his *Arcades Project* (1999[1927–1939]) that was central to his theory of modernity as the re-enchantment of the world, and Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreams and Catastrophes* (2011[2002]) which looks at the Soviet dreamscape from behind the Iron Curtain retrospectively.
6. For a further discussion of how cinema as an institution and apparatus is part of modernity that also became a mode of representation in science see: Lisa Cartwright's *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (1995). Further work by Akira Mizuta Lippit in *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (2005) focuses specifically on the materiality of what both can and cannot be seen in the nuclear after-life in postwar Japanese and French cinema.

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