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The Fantasy and Fear of Chernobyl’s Ruins

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by

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- Introduction -

The environmental crises brought on by the industrial and military technologies of the 1970s and 1980s created a Soviet landscape that revealed the failures of the Communist system’s model of guns over butter. The human race’s drive for “progress” coexists alongside the fears and lived realities of the (un)knowable consequences of technology. The stultifying wastelands of Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker* are littered with industrial debris and ruined military vehicles, inspiring both fascination and dread for a world after the fall. These seductive ruins predict the “accidental” destruction caused most iconically in 1986 by Chernobyl.

Bhopal in India and Chernobyl in Ukraine persist in global memory as the two worst industrial accidents in history; one a chemical, the other a nuclear disaster. Although they occurred in 1984 and 1986 respectively, these accidents are responsible for a contamination that is past and present, both physical and cultural. The cultural consumption of ruins, in the form of visions of nuclear fires, disfigured bodies, and other specters of accelerated military-industrial growth through altered landscapes and virile military machineries, is manifested in various visual media. The fascination with ruins is so pervasive as to be derided “ruin porn,” yet it remains, in some sense, critically under-valued.

Consequences emerging out of the Second World War played a key role in how most countries, big and small, would live out the ensuing fifty years. The destruction caused by the Allied and Axis air raids, as well as the atomic bombs dropped on Japan,
opened up an era of rabid militarization and tense containment as its central features. And so, when the US and the USSR, spurred on by the nuclear arms race, launched peaceful nuclear programs, they were part public relations and part empire-building policy.

Even though the history of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant begins in the second quarter-century after WWII, it is also more palpably relevant to the concerns of modern day, i.e. how we perceive the role of global business and politics in affecting the environment, regional development and peoples’ ways of life.1 Simultaneously, Chernobyl is a chronicle of the downfall of the Soviet Union -- a much feared and reviled behemoth from the outside -- the lived realities of whose citizens digressed from its crude image. I am part of the last generation to experience any part of Soviet life, although that experience was shortened by immigration to the United States. In hindsight, Chernobyl, was the type of foreseeable "accident" that, by showing major faults in the system (careless error, callousness, and an uncontainable global media event), brought about the end of the Soviet way of life, forever.

In 1938, Walter Benjamin admonished, “The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be

1. Kasperski, Tatjiana. “Politics and memory of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarus.” Politics & Society After Chernobyl Project, n.d. http://after-chernobyl.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76&Itemid=54&lang=en. Regionally, Chernobyl has played a key role in shaping the nationalist politics of Belarus and Ukraine. The research of PhD candidate Tatjana Kasperski, titled “Collective memory and Politics of the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster in Belarus,” at the European Humanities University, investigates how the Chernobyl event is represented in media and memorials, based on a combination of the collective Belorussian memory and the aims of internal political factions. She is part of a project group that at the approach of the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster organized the International Conference After Chernobyl in Potsdam, Germany, April 7-8, 2011.
victorious.” Benjamin gives urgency to the task of being prepared for one’s age in order to break the repeating oppression of “progress” and ruling power. While BP’s Deepwater oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has disappeared from the media, the loosely systematic forces of accident quickly regrouped to bring us the nuclear disaster in Japan. Nature had only a fraction to do with the tragedy in Japan; the plant’s exploitation by the “above-the-law” international technocratic elite is most responsible for the Fukushima plant disaster, but so is the audacity to build on the area for centuries known to suffer turbulent tsunamis. As experts, scientists, and concerned citizens grappled with an accident at the very edge of humanity’s lifespan, they remembered the frightful and still very living effects of Chernobyl, an event that turned 25 on April 26, 2011.

This through-line of twentieth-century history, which carries over into the twenty-first, links with imagined and mediated scenes of ruin and rubble. They speak to the viewer with textured, architectural aesthetic qualities and emotional, historical and philosophical associations. They are tied to the exploration of lived realities and their dispersal through media. They have been used specifically for representing post-disaster and post-abandonment sites and have recently entered the discourse as the “ruin porn” phenomenon (Figs. 2 and 3). As the name implies, ruin porn is problematic especially because of the photogenic quality of industrial ruins, which generates such imagery. Nostalgia for the ruins of the pre-industrial or industrial past and the consumption of their representation in books, films and exhibits creates a desire for “ruin tourism.”


coffee table books on the ruins of Detroit, for example Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s *The Ruins of Detroit*, are pricey products of collaborations with art institutions, indicative of the transformation of the consumption of ruin now underway. The photographs from *The Ruins of Detroit* were exhibited at the Gun Gallery in Stockholm, among other venues; *Detroit Disassembled* was the subject of an exhibition at the Akron Art Museum. “Moore’s images were blown up to old masters’ scale, mounted and lit as if we were being presented with the canvases of Rembrandt or Velasquez.” In light of this debate raging around such representations of Detroit, I will consider a ruin porn trend in Chernobyl photography in Chapter Two.

It should be mentioned that particularly the Russian filmmaker Andreii Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker*, 1979, was in many ways a starting and returning point in my searches for the notions of landscape as a source of both alienation and field of answers to moral dilemmas. The film contains a simulation of a nearly post-apocalyptic, radioactive, adulterated world, and a haunting nightmarish lifestyle that comes true in a few years in the nuclear accident of Chernobyl. It coincides nicely with the philosophy of Dylan Trigg, who lends a historical depth to his pursuit of the critique of reason in the embodiment of decline. In the *Aesthetics of Decay*, Trigg’s overall approach is an interdisciplinary tour-de-force on modern ruin’s ability to redefine progress, setting the contextual and ideological stage for certain case studies and a wider philosophical


application. Stalker, shot in Estonia, depicts our present-day fears of annihilation caused by modern technology and warfare and the cities and landscapes that suffer permanent damage (Fig. 4). The scrolling title card following the credits at minute 3 of Stalker reads:

“…What was it? The fall of a meteorite? A visit by the inhabitants of the cosmic abyss? One way or another, a miracle of miracles- the Zone, arose in our small country. We immediately sent troops- they haven’t come back. Then we surrounded the Zone with police cordons… Perhaps, that was the right thing to do. Though, I don’t know…”

Although the film won Cannes’ Ecumenical Jury Prize, Tarkovsky did not intend his own spirituality to take form as an explicitly Christian message and there have been many different interpretations.

Chernobyl is a case study for my argument about the visual depiction of ruins in the larger context of representations of disaster. The first chapter gives the history of Chernobyl as a nuclear plant and the disaster that occurred on April 26, 1986, and introduces Paul Virilio’s theory of the “integral accident.” The second chapter examines a set of images by professional photographers, tourists, and engaged citizens of Chernobyl and its ongoing aftermath. In the second chapter I look for a particular representational efficacy in the images: a photographer’s ability to attain visually compelling images balanced with a clear intention of responding proportionally to an incredibly complex event. While there are other remarkable sites of Soviet war technology, such as Baikonur and the ICBM radar fences, the problems posed by them are of a tangential nature to this

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thesis (avoided accidents or accidents of slow release) and would have to be dealt with in a future, expanded scholarly project. The former are symbols of a past civilization’s waning technological progress, one degrading, the other still launching more rockets than any other of the world’s cosmodromes.

In the art world, the Art History Newsletter of Fall 2010 ran a special story on the publications, the catalogue for Unknown Quantity, Paul Virilio says that the accumulation of traffic accidents largely puts an end to “chance,” and accidents become a “heavy industry.”7 While experimenting with failure in art is one thing, the real repercussions of disaster confer few benefits on the lands and lives affected.8 I believe that the issues of natural disasters, war, terrorism, trauma, amnesia and nostalgia have become coupled together in a certain realm of public consciousness in the last decade and half or so. This might help to explain the immense onslaught of tourism that Chernobyl is experiencing lately. This will be addressed in further detail in Chapter Two and the conclusion of this thesis.

The generation of form itself is manifested through ideology, whether functionalist or totalitarian, eclectic or postmodern. Tools of representation are by no means neutral. With this in mind, I bring together a cross-section of existing photographs from the wider pool of such images into a new Chernobyl canon. The photographers and images have been carefully selected as part of the thesis’ larger aim to provide a typology

7. Paul Virilio, Unknown Quantity (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 25. On the same page Virilio paraphrases a statement Sigmund Freud made from between 1914 and 1915: “Accumulation put an end to the impression of chance.” In a brief but relevant passage, Virilio also claims that “the scenarization of life is organized around sex and violence,” both commercial fodder for sensationalism in media.

for the visual depictions of disaster. Professional photographers and photojournalist, as well as tourists, have created the largely documentary nature of Chernobyl photography. It remains to be seen if the categories proposed in Chapter Two are applicable to the overarching aesthetics of military-industrial and post-catastrophic ruin.
Paul Virilio’s exhibition “Unknown Quantity” (“Ce Qui Arrive” in French) of 2003 posits that catastrophes, such as the Titanic, the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl, the explosion of the World Trade Center, and the UK foot and mouth crisis are rarely unpredictable or simply chance events, as the word “accident” might imply. In his view, every technology carries the potential of its own type of accident or disaster. In fact, the more powerful and efficient the invention, the more dramatic the accident.\(^9\) Paul Virilio’s self-described intellectual niche is that of a critic of the art of speed and technology, in short, of an “accelerated modernity.”\(^10\) Virilio adopts the Aristotelian concept that accidents are not external events, but are an intrinsic part of all “substance.” In his lifetime, “mass-production…industrialized the man-made accident,” whereas it could be said that the accident used to be “artisanal” in character.\(^11\)

Virilio is a renowned urbanist and philosopher who, turning 80 in 2012, has spun a singular and somewhat quirky list of contributions to the contested field of cultural theory. Though often grouped with the French poststructuralists and postmodernists of his generation, his sometime biographer, Steven Redhead, clarifies that he does not share their ties to sociology: “…Virilio's consistent influences over the years have been

\(^9\) Virilio, \textit{Quantity}, 70.


photography, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, stained
glass painting and anarchistic Christianity.”¹² From background to scope of interest (war,
media, power and politics), Virilio stands on his own merits.

President and editor of the *Architecture Principe* group's magazine since 1963,
Virilio developed theories on the oblique in architecture with Claude Parent, until, in the
wake of the events of 1968, he was elected by his students as professor Studies at École
Speciale de Architecture in Paris to then become its Director in 1973.¹³ He retired in 1998
and moved to La Rochelle from where he began to plan the “Unknown Quantity” exhibit,
a “prefiguration” of the full-scale Museum of Accidents, for which he has petitioned
twenty-five years, but which still exists in thought only.¹⁴ In light of the drive for moral
improvement and technological advancement, Virilio’s archival approach to accidents,
calls for the memorialization of Evil and offers a warning for moderation and risk
assessment.¹⁵ To Virilio, local accidents are precursors of global accidents, which have
brought on glimpses of the “integral accident” – what, he says, may one day become our
only habitat.¹⁶

The first deterrence, nuclear deterrence, is presently being superseded by the
second deterrence *[Strategie de la deception]*: a type of deterrence based on what
I call 'the information bomb' associated with the new weaponry of information

¹². Ibid.

¹³. “Paul Virilio - Professor of Philosophy – Biography,” *European Graduate School*,
http://www.egs.edu/faculty/paul-virilio/biography/.

¹⁴. Sylvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art* (Semiotext(e) foreign agents series.
New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2005), 93.


and communications technologies. Thus, in the very near future, and I stress this important point, it will no longer be war that is the continuation of politics by other means, it will be what I have dubbed 'the integral accident' that is the continuation of politics by other means.\textsuperscript{17}

An integral accident is a general catastrophe, not confineable to a particular technology or region of the world. For Virilio such harbingers have been: the 1998 world stock market crash – an accident brought about by the failure of automated program trading -- and Hurricane Katrina with the disastrous events that ensued. Cue Chernobyl – a perfect “integral accident” of chain reactions.\textsuperscript{18} The integral accident is not coverable by insurance.\textsuperscript{19} According to Virilio, the Chernobyl accident foreshadows a new kind of warfare and exemplifies the coming of an even more “integral” accident. However, in the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{19} Due to our immense dependence on the internet, cyber attacks or viruses are capable of exposing the vulnerability of vast numbers of consumers, service providers, institutions and libraries to cause them severe financial and psychological harm. The first case of such a computer-related “integral accident” was an Internet worm, allegedly began by accident in 1988 by Robert Tappan Morris. It was “a sort of devastating watershed event in hacker history; certainly it did more to make non-hackers nervous about the Internet than anything before or since.” http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/G/Great-Worm.html. Since it has thusly penetrated the human social systems, and made us dependent on it for commerce, medicine and communication, it is the sort of giant ship that shows potential of causing an integral accident. A year ago, there was a scare regarding the Stuxnet worm that was specifically targeting industrial control systems and plants. Gjelten, Tom. “Cyberworm’s Origins Unclear, But Potential Is Not: NPR,” September 27, 2010. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130162219.

Coincidentally, exactly a year later NPR reported on a new book by Mark Bowden, \textit{Worm: The First Digital World War}, about a yet-to-be extinguished cyber worm, discovered in Stanford in 2008, Conficker. If it keeps going and, for example, acquires 10 million infections, it would be capable of completely shutting down the internet and all life-assisting systems dependent on it. "It's the equivalent of shutting down the train system during the Civil War, where the Union troops and the Confederate troops used trains to shuttle arms and ammunition and supplies all over their area of control," says Bowden. "And if you could shut their trains down, you cripple their ability to function. Similarly, you could do that today by taking down the Internet."

\end{flushleft}
nuclear there was no declaration of war, marking the difference between war and accidents as indistinguishable. Accidents have out run traditional warfare (declared hostilities between human beings).\(^{20}\) In place of the reconstruction that can take place after the cessation of ethnic conflict, the lands of the Zone around Chernobyl lie fallow in their potential for renewed human life. What follows is a more or less chronological narrative about the area now called the Zone and how the Chernobyl accident occurred and its aftermath, from the epicenter throughout the world. The broad historical and sociological foundation of this chapter will set the stage for the comprehensive discussion of depictions of Chernobyl, and in turn of how one may represent accidents, in Chapter 2.

**Chernobyl**

The nuclear disaster at Chernobyl began as a test when on the morning of Saturday, April 26, 1986 the turbine at reactor number 4 of the Chernobyl power plant was disconnected. Operators were going to find out how long the turbine’s spinning could provide auxiliary electric power for running of the plant.\(^{21}\) The experiment was part of a bigger Soviet policy inspired by Lenin’s dictum: “Communism is Soviet power and electrification of the entire country.” (Prior to Ukraine’s independence, the plant had even been called V.I. Lenin Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station.) This ideological demand

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meant that the test was aimed at achieving an uninterrupted supply of electricity – an attempt to best the 30 seconds threshold for the start-up of diesel generators.

Tests of the nuclear reactor, which were centrally authorized, were to be coordinated in advance with the reactor designer, the station’s foreman and the USSR Nuclear Safety Commission. Chernobyl’s entire range of safety systems had been working normally and the plant remained stable. Earlier, such tests of inert turbine electricity production were common and went off successfully, but in all previous cases, the safety systems were on. Even though the program approved by Nikolai Fomin and Viktor Bryukhanov, the plant’s chief engineer and director respectively, failed to meet these requirements by planning to turn off the emergency core cooling system (ECCS), none of the relevant state agencies issued any warnings. In accordance with the test plan, on April 25 at 13:05, the reactor power was turned down to 50%. The Soviet electricity officials thwarted the next phase of the plan, which was to get the reactor further down to 30% capacity by 14:00. They insisted that electricity was needed, therefore operators

In Medvedev, Truth, 34: “…at all phases of the operation of a reactor, its capacity for nuclear power generation must not exceed the ability of the absorber rods to suppress the chain reaction.” While most of the world’s reactors are water-moderated, RBMK’s are done so with graphite, the same crystalline carbon used in pencils. A bunch of giant pencils, at its simplest, is what the core of the reactor looked like. A “moderator” like water or graphite plays a key role in fission, slowing down neutrons so they don’t fizzle out. The insertion of control rods into the reactor core under critical circumstances would be automatically triggered by the back-up safety system. The control rods, which in direct contrast to graphite, absorb neutrons without fissioning themselves, shuts the reactor down when they are lowered all the way, so that when they are withdrawn, the chain reaction of nuclear fission begins again. In order to slow down the overheating of a reactor, uranium and plutonium fuel bundles may be withdrawn to suppress an accelerating fission reaction.

23. Medvedev, Truth, 35.

24. Ibid.

maintained 50% power for an extra nine hours. Then, just prior to the test, the automatic shutdown mechanisms were disconnected and the emergency core cooling system disabled. Managers at the plant who answered directly to Party bosses had delegated this test to the rank and file operators who they knew were not specialists in nuclear science. Those on the night shift were put into the position of conducting a test whose specifics had not passed muster. Neither were they aware of a certain nuance in the operation of stressed RBMK reactors – that, “the RBMK reactor has a series of positive reactivity coefficients, which in certain cases take effect simultaneously and lead to what is called a ‘positive shutdown,’ or explosion.” The operator who became the first victim of Chernobyl was also the one who initially suffered all of the blame. At 00:28 on April 26, Valeriy Khodomchuk, committed an initial error when he forgot to reset a controller and so powered down the reactor to just 1% - too low for the test. He was determined to proceed and removed almost all of the control rods, which absorb neutrons slowing down the chain reaction of nuclear fission, and forced the power back to 7%. A well-known feature of the RBMK design was its instability at low temperatures. With the emergency shut down mechanism disabled and the core filled with water almost to the boiling point, an overwhelming amount of expertise and discretion would have been required to maintain safety. Realizing that a test was unworkable, Khodomchuk and the others, replaced the control rods, prompting the ‘positive shutdown,’ scenario. When the reactor

26. Ibid., 35.
power suddenly skyrocketed and they tried to shut the reactor down, it was already out of control.

At 1:23, in the early morning of April 26, 1986, a series of explosions destroyed the reactor in the building that housed reactor No. 4 and tore off its 1,000-ton steel-and-concrete roof. The young firefighters in nearby Pripyat were immediately ordered to the nuclear station, Flying bits of fuel and graphite had set off about 30 fires on the roof of the adjacent turbine building and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{28} Ill-equipped except for a sense of duty, they kicked at the burning graphite clad only in regular work boots. 31 of the 37 firefighters that had put out the roof fires that night became ill with radiation sickness and died within weeks. Days later, liquidation workers received shovels and wagons to help them with the task. At that time, it was not known that the explosion had exposed the reactor core. When a delegation from Moscow finally arrived on Saturday morning, they flew a helicopter above the exposed core of reactor number 4 and realized that the explosion had lit a serious graphite fire.

The fire burned for 10 days, infesting the air with radioanuclides such as strontium and the short-lived iodine-131, the long-lived caesium-137, which were particularly significant for the radiation dose they delivered to members of the public. The incandescence of 1200 tons of bitumen, a sticky cohesive that was to encapsulate the nuclear waste, burned along with the graphite and dispersed the radioactive particles across the world. Over the course of the station fire, because graphite melted the fuel, it “belch[ed]” out the equivalent of several Hiroshima bombs, altogether releasing five

\textsuperscript{28} Snell, “Introduction,” 19.
times as much radioactivity as from the initial explosion. 29 This quasi-secretive location in the back woods of Ukraine was about to become a household name and a major global issue. Immediately on April 27, workers at the Forsmark (Sweden) Nuclear Power Plant, approximately 1100 km from the Chernobyl site, detected nuclear particles on their clothes, and traced the source. 30 The smokestack from the explosion had raised radioactive gases a kilometer into the air, sparing the local population from the most lethal effects. Highly radioactive patches from falling rain soon marked countries and locations in the northern hemisphere that were seemingly at a safe distance, like Sweden, Bulgaria and Austria.

Soviet media did not report any accidents or violent incidents, with the exception of natural catastrophes. Until Chernobyl there was “censorship by prohibition,” whereas, by contrast, in a liberalist, Western democratic state there is “censorship by illumination.” 31 The fact that the disaster had mushroomed in severity and radioactive particles were spreading, literally, across all parts of the world, was censored by the new Gorbachev administration. Three days after the explosion, TASS, the Soviet news agency, issued an anemic statement acknowledging that an accident had occurred. 32 A


31. Virilio, Quantity, 72.

32. Full text from Izvestiya, “From the Council of the Ministers of the USSR,” a 20-second spot on the 9pm evening news about the events of early Saturday morning, when the evacuation of Pripyat was
brief note was issued in the Soviet flagship paper *Izvestiya* (lit. News) Later that evening, the same announcement occupied a 20-second slot on the state TV news program, *Vremya* (Time). In a public address ahead of the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev recalled from first-hand experience how the first print report came from the “communist mouthpiece,” *Pravda* (Truth) newspaper, which placed a brief article in very small font at the very back of the issue. Gorbachev made the first public announcement three weeks after.

In spite of the public concealing of the unfolding disaster, measures were being taken on the ground. The initial announcement of the forced evacuation of Pripyat came at 10am on Sunday, April 27. The day before, children could be seen playing in puddles of water that had been used to hose down the road. At 2pm a convoy of 1,100 buses 10 miles long drove to Pripyat and, by 5pm, left with nearly all of the 50,000 residents. The residents were advised that the evacuation would only last three days. Further afield, rural evacuations began one week after the explosion, as the core began heating up again, and the entire 30km zone was evacuated by the first week of May, but there are conflicting reports about the details.

concluding: “There has been an accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. One of the nuclear reactors was damaged. The effects of the accident are being remedied. Assistance has been provided for any affected people. An investigative commission has been set up.” Программа Время 28 04 1986 Чернобыль (*Vremya* program 04 28 1986 Chernobyl), [http://youtu.be/sC7n_QgJRks](http://youtu.be/sC7n_QgJRks).


34. Mycio, *Wormwood*, 22-23. Soviet newspapers had asserted that people together with 35,000 head of cattle and 9,000 pigs were evacuated, although the “ultimate fate of the livestock” is unclear.
“Based on gamma radiation readings in taken at various distances from the reactor, three circles were drawn around the disaster area. The innermost circle extended about a mile around, the second circle had a radius of 6 miles/10 kilometers; the third circle, a radius of 18 miles/30 kilometers.”\textsuperscript{35} The “Zone” is the area within 30 km of the reactor, while the area within 10 km is nicknamed the \textit{desiatka}, or the “ten.” “By the end of the month, a 100-mile perimeter of barbed wire, guard posts, and watchtowers bordered the 30-km zone…”\textsuperscript{36} Ukraine got the larger part of the 30-kilometer zone, together with the nuclear station and waste dumps. The Ukrainians calls this area \textit{Zona Vidchuzhennyya} (or \textit{Ochuzhdenniya} in Russian), a name it retained when the USSR collapsed. Most Ukrainian signs translate the name into English as “Exclusion Zone,” though a better translation is Zone of Alienation.\textsuperscript{37} Eventually, with additional radiation readings, larger areas were evacuated beyond the 30-kilometer zone in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. By the end of September, 116,000 people were uprooted from 188 towns and villages, including Pripyat and Chornobyl.\textsuperscript{38} 220,000 more were relocated in subsequent years.\textsuperscript{39} Because they had no means to leave and nowhere to go, residents stayed on lands with lower radioactive contamination. 23% of Belorussian land is

\textsuperscript{35} Mycio, \textit{Wormwood}, 23.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{39} Igor Kostin, “Pictures: ‘Liquidators’ Endured Chernobyl, 25 Years Ago,” \textit{Chernobyl, Pripyat, ChNPP Zone of Alienation}, n.d.,
contaminated fully. With a population of 10 million, 2.1 million people were affected, 700,000 of them children.

From where residents had fled, men were conscripted by the military to serve in clean-up work. The government called the workers "liquidators," for those who eliminate the consequence of an accident. Cleaning had to be done with human labor or by hand-operated machinery. In the first few days after the start of the accident, there were 600 emergency workers, including bus drivers who drove from Kiev to Pripyat on Saturday night and Sunday morning waiting to pick up citizens to be evacuated on Sunday. Coal miners dug underneath the seething core to allow liquid nitrogen to be pumped in and cool the nuclear fuel. Helicopter pilots dumped 5,000 tons of lead, sand, clay, and other material in an effort to douse the flames. Officially called the Shelter Object, better known as the “Sarcophagus,” a structure was built over the reactor by 90,000 liquidators. The Sarchophagus, made of concrete and steel, was built over the physical remains of the original reactor footprint, and serves as more than just a shell. One of its walls contains a mix of fuel and graphite fragments that littered the station grounds, concrete, asphalt, and 20-foot-deep layers of topsoil. Since the direction of the explosion was north, it punched a crater into the Cascade Wall and that part of the Sarcophagus was built first. It had to be built under radiation levels up to 2,000 roentgens an hour that is one of its least stable parts. The Sarcophagus was built large enough to contain the clouds of radiation

measuring hundreds of roentgens that “hovered above the crater.” According to Soviet estimates a total of between 600,000 to 800,000 people participated in the cleanup of the 30-kilometer evacuation zone around the reactor. 200,000 took action in the Zone in the first year.

A major international effort to build a new container that is meant to fit over the existing Sarcophagus is called the New Confinement, and should to be completed from 5 to 50 years from now. It will be a giant arch – a steel shield 328 feet high, 623 feet wide and 853 feet from West to East. It would be large enough to enclose St. Paul's Cathedral in London or the Statue of Liberty. It is supposed to last at least 100 years, although it may go for as long as 300. The conceivable expiration date of 2315 allows Ukrainian scientists or residents time to safely dispose of the waste. The New Confinement will weight 20,000 metric tons; some say too heavy for the Polissian terrain.

Decommissioning and clean-up workers and their families now live in a new town, Slavutich, 30 kilometers from the plant. It was built following the evacuation of Pripyat in the later 1980s to house the plant’s ongoing operation. “Chornobyl is not a ghost town like Pripyat. It is where the administration of the Zone of Alienation performs its dystopian task of running the no-man’s-land,” the entire extent of it. Today, the town of Chornobyl has a hotel, two shops and a bar, but people are prohibited from living or

42. Ibid., 228.
working anywhere in the Zone full time. Each of the two real-life characters out of Mary Mycio’s book, *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl*, opted in for a version of a work-around: Maryna lives in Chornobyl four days a week, while Rimma and her replacement alternate living and working there every two weeks.  

The Chernobyl accident, universally notorious, grew out of a specific context of place and historical precursors, citizen and industrial. Since 1932 the city of Chernobyl has been the administrative center of the Chornobyl Region. From 1970 onwards, a town called Pripyat, an “atomograd” originally nothing more than a construction project, was used to stage plant workers. Chernobyl was only officially proclaimed a city in 1979. Aside from the causes of man-made war and famine, the population density of the Polesye region was generally low before the construction of the power station. The Soviet-style modernization and the building of customary civil, recreational and industrial infrastructure took place based on the anticipated arrival of the nuclear power plant. Chernobyl was the ninth reactor to be built in the Soviet Union and many more

45. Ibid., 31-32.

46. It is more correct to use the spelling “Chornobyl” when referring to the town and the herb and the more Russianized “Chernobyl” in reference to the nuclear station and disaster.

47. The variety of secret cities did not end at “Atomograds”; so-called “Naukograds” (Science Towns) and “Akademgorodok” (Academic Cities) were devoted to basic research. These terms are used euphemistically and possibly even nostalgically to substitute the given name of a particular nuclear secret city; Pripyat is the best known. Stalin had decided to create centers of research and development excellence in the USSR to compete in the Cold War. In the mid to late 90s, there were about 130,000 people working and 730,000 altogether living in the top 10 secret cities. In late October of 2001, Russian Prime Minister Kasyanov added Norilsk and a handful of other Siberian towns to the list, so that the number of people residing in those towns grew to about 2 million, more like 3 million if the Akademgorodoroks are to be counted. They were made “secret” to safeguard against a totally new threat: a tide of immigration of citizens from former Soviet republics, primarily from Central Asia.

stations were in the pipeline. According to international reports, the Chernobyl reactors
started operating on May 1978 and the newest reactor – no. 4 – was brought online in
December 1983.49

The Soviet Union had sustained accidents since the very beginning of the peaceful
atom program. One of the earliest dates back to the “infamous” Kyshtym nuclear spill of
1956, in the Far East Urals. This was also the first major accident to get covered up. On
the occasion of its twenty-year anniversary, Russian dissident Zhores Medvedev penned a
commemorative article that was denounced and decried in the most patronizing language
by Western scientists and regulatory agencies.50 This first wave of such incidents, the
phenomena of industry and scientist attacks and covers ups involving human casualties
and environmental pollution, will begin sounding familiar to the concerned spectator.
Other accidents must have also been well known to the Soviet agencies: in the town of
Melekess in Ulyanovsk region, a great quantity of fuel was dumped underground. Plus,
the USSR was never alone in producing nuclear catastrophe. That failure of British
nuclear reactors at Sellafield had been causing a spillage of discharge into the Irish Sea
since the 1950s was international knowledge.51 Instances of accidents at Byeloyarsk were
known to happen consistently for almost 15 years, causing extensive exposure to
radiation for its employees. For example, in 1977, half of the nuclear assemblies melted

49. Väinö, Lehtoranta, “NSNL 120 - The Kiev woodpecker,” Numbers and Oddities, August


51. Ibid., 5 and 16-19. A diagram listing local Soviet and overseas accidents can be referenced in
these pages.
down and workers from other stations had to be brought in.\textsuperscript{52} The Chernobyl plant director Bryukhanov’s, protégé, Plokhy, was appointed chief engineer at Balakovo nuclear station. On the plant’s start-up in June of 1985, the carelessness of his operational staff and breaches in safety rules caused a heinous accident. His ignorance of the design of the pressurized water reactor in light of his level of authority in the plant, created an accident where fourteen men were boiled alive.\textsuperscript{53}

Internationally, the Three Mile Island accident in Pennsylvania was the first serious blow against the reputation of peacetime nuclear power, and dispelled the myth of nuclear plants’ safety. In 1981, the director of the Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado, pointed out that, "Every known route to bombs involves either nuclear power or materials and technology which are available, which exist in commerce, as a direct and essential consequence of nuclear power."\textsuperscript{54}

Soviet nuclear scientist Gregorii Medvedev was a Chief Engineer at the time of the construction of the Chernobyl plant in 1970. At the time of the Three Mile accident in March of 1979, he was section chief in Soyuzatomenergo, the Department of the Soviet Ministry of Energy and Electrification, which operated nuclear power stations in the former USSR. He recalls how he and his colleagues reacted to the “distressing event,” of the Chernobyl disaster, for having worked on the assembly and maintenance of many plants, they knew that the plants’ safety was always on “a hair’s breadth away from

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. [.5.]

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 44-45.

breakdown or disaster,” that some thing like this would happen sooner or later. On March 27, 1986, only a month before the accident, journalist Kovalevska published an article in the weekly Literaturnaya Ukraina, decrying the breaches in quality and operation of the plant. She was almost fired for writing the article, that is, until the accident took place.

Facts help us oriente in an infinite vastness of experience and feeling but the effect is more tangible and indelible than any historicizing formal paper written at a safe distance. Belorussian journalist Svetlana Alexievich collected over 500 interviews for her ground-breaking book, Voices of Chernobyl: the Oral History of the Nuclear Disaster. It was first published in Russian under the title The Chernobyl Prayer, 1997 and translated into the English as Voices from Chernobyl, 2005. The event that swept change into the lives of millions on that day did so by casting a pall of darkness – fear, anger, and uncertainty, over the region. Voices From Chernobyl struggles to find individuals that still seek happiness or adhere to glimmers of hope in their newfound lives.

When it comes to those who have lost loved ones, the histories sound like plaintive eulogies, their wounds still open and resentment at their fates dealt them by the hands of the Soviet authorities, still boiling. The devastating recollections are preceded by a few pages of historical numbers, a preface written by the translator and a page and a half of earnestly collected “clippings,” one from the leftover Soviet publication Ogonyok, another from the Belaruskaya entsiklopedia and the last from a paper from the institute of

55. Ibid., 7.

the venerated dissident and nuclear scientist Sakharov. For instance, Alexievich gives a higher toll of destruction – that a 485 villages were razed or evacuated. She brings the numbers to life by comparing the devastation to the activities of the Nazis, who wiped out 619 villages in the Polessye.\footnote{Alexievich, \textit{Voices}, 1.} \textit{Voices from Chernobyl}, Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award is the first book to present personal accounts of the tragedy, that contaminated as much as three quarters of Europe. Currently, 40\% of the European landmass is radioactive and will remain so for hundreds of years.\footnote{Statistic by Helen Caldicott, a world-renowned anti-nuclear advocate, author, pediatrician, and co-founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility, in an interview with Ian Masters on his program “Background Briefing”, March 17, 2011.} By highlighting certain information, such as the fact that the Belarussian SSR did not have any nuclear reactors on its own soil, Alexievich makes it clear that she wants to provide a mouthpiece to the people of Belarus – a country that has arguably suffered from Chernobyl the most.\footnote{Between itself, Russia and Ukraine, Belarus had the greatest percentage of land and people affected relative to its total national territory and population, the highest percentage of total radionuclides released and the greatest number of thyroid cancer cases.} Both by way of the statistical opening texts and the tragic personal narratives, the book clearly lays blame for the “accident” on the Soviet government. While the entrenched techno-bureaucracy considered the placement of the plant within 16 km (9.9 mi) from the Belarus border an instrumental political and economical convenience, the people of Belarus did not have the self-determination required to protest. In fact, the Soviet system treated the vast majority of citizens and large swaths of land as objectified objects and territories. In the course of the disaster, the victims were cast as mere
unfortunates who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. As the situation got out of control and reached a global scale, the Soviet regime too could plead victimhood in this escalation to Chernobyl’s status as a quasi “natural” disaster. Yet it is clear that events taking place in such ‘‘nature-cultures’’ (Latour),’’ of which the Soviet is just one example, are primarily political disasters.  

Alexievich does no editorial paratexting of the stories, but she does record for instance, her subjects’ silences, laughing and break downs; their names proceed the stories, followed by brief titles, such as liquidator, village teacher evacuated from the Chernobyl Zone, or wife of deceased fireman, and so forth. But the stories are titled as allegories, as fables: “About How a Person is only Clever and Refined in Evil” or a somewhat caustic “About How We Can’t Live without Chekhov and Tolstoy,” or “About Expensive Salami or About a Damaged Child.” They are sad, maddening – irrefutable.

In the voices of the people who suffered, one finds out the little facts that fill out the big picture of numbers and statistics. In short snippets that together form communal entities called “Choruses” and “Monologues,” Alexievich has placed the anecdotes of soldiers, children, and “Those Who Returned.” By choosing histories that contain passages about the heartache of bearing children in a contaminated region (still births, beloved children growing up with deformations or constant hospitalizations, pregnancies marked by a mixture of anticipation and dread), Alexievich leads with a compassionate

and feminist approach to the experiences of women, often historically marginalized as too subjective or personal.

Alexievich starts a story of young love and potential gone horribly wrong, the survivor able to relive each moment as if for the first time. Lyudmilla Ignatenko, only 23 at the time of the disaster, intends to tell a love story that turns into a story of impending loss. Her husband, Vasily Ignatenko, was one of the original group of firefighters, who received excessive exposure to radioactivity, suffered severe radiation sickness and died within a month’s time. A story such as this, poignant, and violently heart wrenching, is like a piece of social engaged photography – it makes you want to dismantle the systems that risk the destructions of relationship bonds and self-determined lifestyles.

By the August of 1986 when Gorbachev gave an address on Soviet Central TV it appeared a major change was underway. Gorbachev exhorted the public “to come to grips with the fantastic, powerful forces which it has itself brought into being.”61 This marked the first such sober assessment of the peaceful atom in three and half decades of the Soviet Union’s development of nuclear energy when scientists had been telling a different story to the public.62 Yet, the first and foremost concern of Russia’s information, media outlets and of the Politburo, was still Moscow’s reputation. While information could be controlled in the vast Soviet Union, nuclear detectors in Northern and Western Europe days after the event signaled widespread concern.63 The outcome of the

62. Ibid.
63. Politburo is shorthand for, The Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.
“accident” on April 26, 1986 prompted the German Green Party to take up what became a global slogan: Chernobyl ist Überall, Chernobyl is everywhere – or to use Virilio’s language, “integral.”  

In the short film Unknown Quantity, which lent its name to the exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, Paul Virilio and Svetlana Alexievich converse about Chernobyl as both a case study and a philosophical conundrum. Marked by completely divergent narrative/linguistic styles, the one a French theorist of speed and the other a Belorussian literary journalist, they complement rather than distract from each other’s arguments. They both make evident that the violence and disaster that rains down on those who did not technically wage a war comes about from a unscrupulous and careless development of a technology whose properties are best expressed in their failure or their “accident.” In characteristically poetic terms, Virlio calls Chernobyl a “time accident,” one of astronomical time - that of generations, centuries and even millennia.  

In the interview, Alexievich argues that the materialist state philosophy and literature proved powerless in the face of the imperceptible presence of radionuclides. Only religion alleviated the fear. Thrown from materialism into the infinite, she felt that she was observing not the past but the future.  

64. Mycio, Wormwood, 17.  
65. Svetlana Alexievich’s interview with Virilio, transcribed in the catalog, took place on September 28, 2002. As part of the installation, the interview was made into a 30-minute film, “Unknown Quantity,” from which the show got its English-language title.  
Virilio questions the “positive ideology of progress” and calls for the mentality of a “dromologist,” or an analyst of acceleration phenomena. Speed is responsible for man-made as well as ecological accidents, i.e. air pollution and eschatological tragedies as well as afflictions to our genome, biotechnology and computing.

One may add to the list newer events not explicitly covered in the show, such Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, the Fukushima Daichi plant leak and even the global markets’ economic and banking meltdown. Speed sets contemporary civilization apart from those that preceded it. According to Aristotle in his foundational *Physics*, “the accident reveals the substance,” the invention of the substance is also the invention of the accident. A time accident is the result of accelerated temporality. But, in “Physics” by Aristotle, it is not Time as such that corrupts and destroys, but the accident — that which happens. The “speed of emergence” affects the ruin of all things, each “substance” being, in the end, the victim of the accident of temporal circulation.” To restate Virilio: seen this way, the shipwreck is indeed the “futuristic” invention of the ship; the air crash, the

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68. “Aristotle’s Virtues and inherently safe reactors” in *Fire in the Rain: the Democratic Consequences of Chernobyl*, by Peter Gould (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 143-150: Gould invokes Aristotle throughout the chapter to remind the readers that the existence and consequences of nuclear reactors represent a choice that involves a road taken by various parties as exemplified in Aristotle’s writing on ethics. In the moral virtues of courage, truthfulness and prudence as informed by the words, *phusis*, *logos*, and *dike* (nature, reason and justice). In essence attacking progress, Gould writes how choices informed by Aristotle’s vices: rashness, ambition and prodigality were made only to be reinforced by spendy mean “Few can be expected now to act with prudence and wisdom with all of the inertia of historical investment” (146) The author contends that a prudent person had the opportunity to choose a safer path for energy production since two decades ago, a nuclear choice that is “inherently safe” (146). To this, he outlines four levels of power source possibilities, with level 1 requiring very little corrective action from humans and level four being at the level of the Chernobyl plant, the ‘worst-scenario’ (147). Gould’s solution is the modular gas cooled reactor or MGR as it is “extraordinarily simple” compared to current systems (147). So, Gould’s approach “No one deliberates about things that are inevitable” (144).
invention of the supersonic plane and the Chernobyl meltdown, the invention of the nuclear power station.

This, he says is sparked by the emerging evidence that scientists disparaged and concealed the harm of Chernobyl in Eastern France and secondly by the impetus to display an atom bomb - the H-bomb at the Caen Memorial Peace Museum as a symbol of the balance of terror between the East and West. Steven Redhead calls Chernobyl “one of the media events most fascinating to Virilio.” Indeed, Virilio invokes Chernobyl frequently and makes this name the most iconic of a destruction not capable of being humanly comprehended - a violence of universal proportion - a scream and a censure to what humanity has wrought.

By the end, we realize that Virilio has presented us with an overwhelming abundance of large-scale and notorious accidents. This effect is created by the examples in the texts as well as the graphics’ captions in the image spreads. If we art historians, trouble ourselves to memorize the titles, authors, and period styles of canonical pieces, it follows suit that perhaps, and for the very sake of survival, all observers of the world begin to pay close attention: spotlight, reflect on and maybe catalogue the mushrooming volume of “accidents” that come to directly challenge the violent status and definition of “war” in the 21st century.

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Chapter Two

Photographs of Chernobyl

Memory is the treasury and guardian of all things. — Cicero

The topic at the heart of this thesis is the content of images produced of the Chernoby world-famous disaster. These Chernobyl “artifacts” have been produced by high-caliber photographers ranging from practitioners of straight-forward journalism (Igor Kostin), to “engaged observation” (Pierpaolo Mittica and Paul Fusco), from landscape captured by an approach in between “military sublime” and documentary style (Robert Polidori) to a more sustained, yet visually interesting depiction of continuing life in the larger contamination zone (Michael Forster Rothbart). German photographer Gerd Ludwig’s more recent series covers the tourist aspect of the Chernobyl accident, intelligently revealing the behaviors of the new surge of visitors, allowing for a meta-dialectic to take place between fine art/engaged observer and tourist practices (Fig. 1).

In this chapter, I will read the presentation of the subject matter laid out in Chapter One through a critical and art historical analysis. Additionally, I will evaluate iconography and style as tools utilized by the arts to consciously achieve effects. In the end, questions of efficacy and ethics will take center stage as I consider the aims of various “types” of images in assessing their overall quality. Some of the recognized photographers have taken approaches very similar to tourist photographers, to end up with images that display the ethically aggrieved allure of “ruin porn” (Fig. 10). Following

70. Marcus T. Cicero, 80 B.C.
Michael Fried’s assertion, when revisiting the work of Diane Arbus, that while a “chain of implications” may be useful, one ought to resist reducing her work to “an ethical conundrum.”

Although it is worth to keep in mind the need to abstain from a stringent or one-sided approach to the charged field of Chernobyl photography, separating representations of the Chernobyl disaster from socio-political critique would appear artificial and conspicuously agenda-driven. This balanced searched for quality though efficacy (defined in my Introduction) is thus applied to this photographic Archive, when, in places, what may appear as an exaggeration of certain subjects out of personal concern for social crisis, masks a sensationalism that is defl ective and, inevitably, trite.

The images can be classified into three content areas: the site, the human subject and the landscape. Most of these photos were realized in the late 1990s and 2000s. In this chapter, I will read the cues for visual answers of various photographers, recognized or anonymous as they respond to the question: What is Chernobyl?

Before the disaster, the Soviet press and the contractors of the Soviet Government photographed the site with positive publicity clearly in mind (Fig. 5). In an increasingly reformist Soviet Union, select foreign nuclear regulatory bodies took aerial photographs of the plant. A weekly newsletter dedicated solely to news stories on the successes and


benefits of the power plant propagandized to the local Soviet masses.\textsuperscript{73} Notoriously, during and after the disaster, photographs and videos made by citizen journalists were confiscated or destroyed by Soviet officials, although some rolls of the photos that were taken with an explicit aim to “document” the moments of obvious historical weight have survived and some are being collected for projects on the Web.\textsuperscript{74}

Sergei Sobolev, deputy head of the Executive Committee of the Shield of Chernobyl Association, told Belorussian journalist Svetlana Alexievich:

Since you're writing this book, you need to have a look at some unique video footage. We're gathering it little by little. It's not a chronicle of Chernobyl, no, they wouldn't let anyone film that, it was forbidden. If anyone did manage to record any of it, the authorities immediately took the film and returned it ruined. We don't have a chronicle of how they evacuated people, how they moved out the livestock. They didn't allow anyone to film the tragedy, only the heroics. There are some Chernobyl photo albums now, but how many video and photo cameras were broken! People were dragged through the bureaucracy. It required a lot of courage to tell the truth about Chernobyl. It still does. Believe me! But you need to see this footage: the blackened faces of the firemen, like graphite. And their eyes? These are the eyes of people who already know that they're leaving us.\textsuperscript{75}

Immediately after the initial explosion, state news agencies took aerial photographs of the No. 4 reactor for government files only. Panicked citizens were desperate to document the events as they unfolded, but Igor Kostin’s training, media affiliation and drive created an opportunity for a curious international media machine to

\textsuperscript{74} “Red Forest: Liquidation,” Chernobyl, Pripyat, ChNPP Zone of Alienation, n.d., http://chornobyl.in.ua/en/red-forest-liquidation-1986.html. This link shows very rare photos from 1986 clean up, with the "photos received from the participant of the liquidation Alexander Petrovich Yakubchik. This person, as an employee of a military unit № 43187, was involved in works on burial of the wood affected with radiation."

\textsuperscript{75} Alexievich, Voices, 142-143.
publish news images taken from the perspective of a local. What for Igor Kostin’s became a lifelong coverage of Chernobyl spans the gamut from honorific images of clean-up workers to color-saturated portrayals of mutation. Recognizable through their wide media tirage, are his depictions of eight-legged colts, stillborn babies with webbed fingers emerging from their shoulders and misshapen apple trees, the latter’s emotional power underpinned by a play on their folkloric symbolism of Russia’s abundance and beauty. By applying varied formal approaches to documenting the heroism and plight of the people and the suffering of the land, Kostin has garnered a wide appeal; he has been a contributor to Time, Newsweek, Paris-Match, Liberation, and Stern. His images make up the photo-essays published by National Geographic and the Guardian UK on the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl in 2011. Seemingly without apprehending that global media’s appetite for his more sensationalistic work has stemmed from the ethos of yellow or tabloid journalism, Kostin has set forth an oeuvre that straddles the dichotomy between civilian journalism and the kinds of propagandistic images sought after upon the unfolding of the Chernobyl disaster.

Igor Kostin, the first professional photographer on the scene of the unfolding disaster, was then a 50-yr. old Moldovan who had had an assorted past of working as a Chief of Construction and a war reporter on USSR’s involvements in the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars. After returning from Afghanistan, Novosti Press Agency employed him occasionally based on his “non-alignment” with the Communist Party. 76 Intentionally choosing to not be an official member of the Party made it more difficult for

76. Novosti Press Agency has since morphed into RIA Novosti.
state-owned news agencies to trust Kostin’s impartial sensibilities. On the evening of
April 29, 1986, he was stationed nearby and a helicopter pilot and journalistic
collaborator of his alerted him that an explosion had taken place at the Chernobyl plant.
Without receiving official sanction from the authorities, Kostin rushed to the scene.
According to National Geographic, Kostin took the very first photos of the destroyed
reactor from the open door of the helicopters that were carrying experts on five daily
flights to gather information on radiation around the different parts of the reactor in order
to plan the cleanup (Fig. 6).77

Due to the force of the explosion, the radioactive elements saturated the air, so
that images taken from the helicopter are distorted by gamma waves and alpha and beta
particles. The effect is of granulation and streakiness, a kind of disfigurement of the
technology that, in by objective nature, is supposed to coolly capture the external world.
The coating of radioactivity over the photos’ formal composition, content and
iconography speaks to the critical environmental state of the captured moments. The
technology of photography used in reportage, and its ability to communicate, is giving
way under the damaging effects of an industrial accident, spawned by a very different
type of technology – nuclear. In so many ways nature also recoils, no longer being the
stupefying force, but a victim, or at best, a mediator of the man-made.

Once he received a permit on May 5, 1986, Kostin was able to follow the cleanup
workers onto rooftops and in helicopter surveys. Kostin’s irradiated photo of

“liquidators” on the roof of reactor 3 is shot mid-action (Fig. 7). Heaps of small particles and larger industrial pieces of rubble cover the roof. Human figures can be seen in the foreground, mid-ground and background of the image, laboring on the clean up. Two workers, creating a diagonal across the width of the photograph as well as into the third dimension of the photographed space, lift a piece of masonry or metal that has landed on the roof. The foremost figure appears like a cyborg, lifting and swinging his free arm at the shoulder for increased leverage, mechanized by his thick suit, clad with 2-4mm sheets of lead. A special subset of workers was brought in quickly when it was discovered that the mechanisms in robots became too damaged to operate. These experts were often referred to as “biorobots” or "roof cats." Indeed, they had to be quite limber under their awkward uniforms if they were to get any results picking up a shovel-full or two, before their time abridged by the maximum lifetime dose of radiation, of about a minute, was up.

Since their faces are covered with masks, we cannot see the strain or duress on their faces. They are performing at the physical peak of human potential yet not showing any expression. Paradoxically, this portrayal relegates them to the status of efficient robotic machines and at once intimates that the actual people performing these duties so fearlessly must be as superior in principles and abilities as superheroes. But, there is another aspect to the mechanization of the workers’ bodies in the image. It is a sanitizing effect, which may be reassuring the viewer that no human life was sacrificed in the

cleanup. Virilio traces the logistics of the image to go with the logistics of perception. That is, as militaristic technology permeates our lives and we get more and more addicted to speed, we change the way we perceive to accommodate and derive pleasure from this phenomenon.

“In the course of the cleanup, 600,000 “liquidators” – military and civilian – were sent to the zone on 15-day tours of duty to strip the surfaces from contamination.” The entire zone could not possibly be stripped, it was more than a thousand square miles and growing. Due to budget constrains, decontamination in Ukraine was limited to mainly roadways and shoulders, the nuclear station, Pripyat, and the town of Chornobyl, which was just outside the 10 km zone and became headquarters for the recovery process. Chornobyl’s clean-up included razing a dozen “hot” buildings, removing 150,000 cubic meters of radioactive soil, and laying 10 miles of fresh asphalt and concrete on roads and pavement. “Roadsides were completely stripped and buried, and the roads themselves were repaved. Five thousand hectares of surfaces were sprayed with chemicals to keep radioactive dust from rising in the hot and dry summer of 1986.”

In a moment of preparation before their trip to the roof, the liquidators stand in the hallway of a reactor building, darkness behind them, suiting up in the patches of light falling from the large windows to their right (Fig. 8). All but one of them has their faces covered, transforming into “biorobots,” their joint humanity underscored by the minute


81. Ibid.
and patient task of helping one another to be as safe and prepared as possible for their risky task ahead. Thus, Kostin finally grants us a human face amidst these overpowering conditions created by the breakdown of larger human ambitions. The man has his brow furrowed and faces down and to the right, towards the strap of his lead apron that has not yet been fastened. His gaze, which is cast away from the reporter, appears to be focused on the task at hand and the dangerous and responsible job ahead.

In the years following the initial accident, Kostin dedicated himself to tracking the personal stories of a number of types impacted by the disaster. For his efforts Kostin received the World Press Photo award in 1997, having been recognized twice before in 1986 and 1989 as a contest winner. His images of a severely deformed boy merrily finding a way to hold a rattle toy in one hand and kick a beach ball with another, first published by the local Belorussian press and then picked up by Die Stern, led to the UK adoption of this specific “Chernobyl Child.” A subsequent line of related work on mutation and disease by other photographers has diluted the lasting power of his images of the irradiated and deformed. Even thought the tastefulness of some of the images may appear questionable for their overly raked angles, Technicolor intensity and not least, the shocking subject matter, the status of having been among the first to produce such images has made his work some of the most important to come out from this disaster. The result of his 25 years of sustained coverage, including returning visits with former liquidators

82. Igor Kostin himself suffered five times the allowed radiation dose and has had multiple operations on his thyroid, however he is alive at the present day.

and a scientist newly-released from jail, is a 2006 book of photos called Chernobyl: Confessions of a Reporter. For their unique content, their affective power, and their pensive sympathetic clarity, the photographs taken in the first year after the disaster appear to me to be Kostin’s finest.

The work of Walker Evans provides an important context for understanding the documentary nature of Chernobyl photographs. For the catalogue of the 1971 retrospective of Evans work at the MoMA, John Szarkowski (a controversial figure in Walker Evans scholarship) explained that Evan’s photographs have expanded the “visual tradition,” affecting not only how we see other photographs but the billboards, post cards, gas stations, colloquial architecture and even the wall of rooms he had chosen to feature. Evans worked “collaboratively” with these resources, applying their “visual conventions…in his photography, not so much transforming or elevating his sources as transposing and appreciating them.” Szarkowski elicits Evan’s reflection on his own work to demonstrate how the images appearing to describe precise or significant facts actually took place within an indelibly “personal perception.”

It is this interplay between proximity and distance that generates the distinction between documentary and documentary style in photography. In the 1971 interview with


86. Adams and Salvesen, Topographies, 15.

87. Szarkowski, Walker Evans, 18 in Adams and Salvesen, Topographies, 16.
Leslie Katz, Evans calls “documentary” a “sophisticated and misleading word,” since it should refer only to literal documents. A police photograph of a murder scene would be as much. “You see, a document has its use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style.” According to Sarah James, Bernd and Hilla Becher, performed their exhaustive documentation of industrial buildings based on “an important impulse within their work … found in their aim to record the structures of a rapidly declining industrial era, before they were lost forever.”

Likewise, it is conceivable that the photographers aiming their lenses at Chernobyl are eager to record the town of Pripyat as a unique civilization they recognize as slipping irrevocably into decline. After all, one can hear as much from Volodymyr Kholosha, the actual head of the Zone’s administration, “Pripyat will become ruins, like those of the Aztec or Inca cities.” As James describes the oeuvre of the Bechers, she also touches upon what makes the study of the Chernobyl image archive an unusual pursuit, “In their work an aesthetic language … is found in the foreign ornament and vernacular vocabulary of industry, rather than the traditional lexicon of art history.” In Chernobyl photography, that “foreign ornament” encompasses all that emerged from the presence of a nuclear power plant and disaster in that area, from the forms of dilapidated industrial


90. Mycio, Wormwood, 232.

91. James, “Subject, Object, Mimesis,” 887.
structures, most prominently that of the decommissioned atomic nuclear plant (Figs. 16-18), to the lack of people in some places (Figs. 10 and 15) and the presence of both doomed (Figs. 9, 11-13) and well-functioning human beings in others (Figs. 11, 14 and 16).

Walter Benjamin had acknowledged that it is in photography’s essential nature that such a thing would occur. As Benjamin explains, the ways by which a piece of work loses authenticity through “technological reproduction” are double. Firstly, technological reproduction is more independent of the work than manual reproduction in the sense that photography can bring out aspects of the original that are only accessible to the lens, i.e. enlargement, slow motion and the depiction that “escape natural optics” altogether. The second, which is probably more important for Benjamin is that the copy can go places where the original cannot. It seems that when he talks about photography, Benjamin implies a documentation of other wonders, valuables, relics, some kind of indexes to notable things of passed times or of the present, which is interesting because this exact perspective is what can open up the canon of art. “The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room.”

In the last and most successful decade of his life, Evans sought to create artistic autonomy by distancing himself from the concern for social issues that his FSA images

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had seemingly dictated.\textsuperscript{93} William Stott’s reading of Evans and Agee’s collaboration, \textit{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}, propelled the possibility away from fixed readings of certain subject matter (sharecroppers and their shanty residences as hardship) as leading to such responses as “sympathy and activism.”\textsuperscript{94} This question of correlation, whether fixed or flexible, provides another jumping off point for exploring meaning in the work of the Chernobyl photographers. The decade after the 1986 accident saw a fantastic surge in photographic coverage of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and its victims. I believe that this close look at a specific blighted landscape was a reaction to a few striking phenomena: the rampant globalization of capital complemented by a rise in the world’s poor, the sudden acceleration of industrialization in countries such as China and India and, crucially, to the anti-climactic end to the Cold War. However, this topic also emerged in relation to more cultural types of developments, such as the boom in the alternate-reality gaming culture, the 90s’ apocalyptic Y2K-ism, and the budding phenomenon of urban exploration.\textsuperscript{95} To quote the introspective Irish recording artist Roisin Murphy, every era has its own apocalyptic scenario\textsuperscript{96}. In our time, these fantasies are associated with the devastating potential of atomic energy, whether in the form of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{93} Adams and Salvesen, \textit{Topographies}, 14.
  \item \textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Diary of Mu, “diaryofmu.com presents Róisín Murphy DIARY.” \textit{Vimeo}. Online video clip, http://vimeo.com/24652684.
\end{itemize}
weapons or nuclear power mishaps, having spawned anti-nuclear activism by the scientific and citizen communities since the mid-20th century.97

Such a sustained effort inevitably produces a pressurized agenda of set responses to the baleful topic of the Chernobyl phenomenon. Glaring icons of destruction and abandonment conjure the strongest pre-set responses. Thus, if the site or the human faces of Chernobyl are captured within and shown back to the culture that shares a similar knowledge about this large-scale event, these images operate as metonyms for a myriad of negativities regarding the consequences of the split atom. Few artists are able to extract meaning other than the obvious from coverage of Chernobyl, but the artist Pierpaolo Mittica achieves this in the “engaged observer” mode. His work, vast and technical, is so crisp and calculated that it creates an exaggerated fantasy of the horrors of Chernobyl. Mittica’s intention is to send a clear message to the public and the authorities: nuclear energy is an abysmally bad idea.

Like any genre, documentary photography and photojournalism involve great variation. In the decades following WWII, certain developments provided a platform from which photojournalism could flourish, taking on what Brett Abbot has called “engaged observer” attributes. This became a “self-assigned form,” which “tackled big-picture problems in a nuanced and evocative fashion,” but eschewed run-of-the-mill

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“beat” reporting or the appearance of neutrality. Moreover, what was key was that these individuals were taking the time to build up arguments through series of images made over long periods of time. Combining their skills as reporters and artists, they developed extended photographic essays that delved deeply into humanistic topics and presented “distinct personal visions of the world.” Their points of view were shaped by being informed about and immersed with their subjects or projects. The lasting impact of this form of photojournalism perseveres in vehicles for the dissemination of the current and historical stocks of artists, such as books, exhibitions and the Web.

Mittica is the kind of artist who gets right down to business and comes off very clear in his intent. He appears to try hard to control the reception of the photos, the buttons that they will press on his viewers. The resulting photographs undoubtedly show a concern for the state of the world and our responsibilities within it as well as the intention to keep the viewers attention through a number of strong-armed tactics. In her short introduction to Mittica’s photographs of Chernobyl, Naomi Rosenblum makes a case for the self-trained photographer, motivated humanist Pierpaolo Mittica as equivalent to a cadre of great documentary photographers, “If such images are to resonate beyond their immediate moment in time they need be more than a record of an event. They must carry the emotional charge that reflects their maker’s response to the event.

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98. Abbot, Observer, 1.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
and they must communicate this charge to the viewer."\textsuperscript{101} But, it remains to be seen if he can fill the shoes of his alleged predecessors: Salgado, Capa and Lange. Rosenblum’s introduction reflects a clear and self-conscious ideal, which can be delivered to the viewer through a defined variety of photographic practices – the established traditions of engaged observer photography mentioned above.

Trained first as a dentist, and then a photographer, Pierpaolo Mittica is the author of \textit{The Balkans: From Bosnia to Kosovo} and \textit{Chernobyl the Hidden Legacy}.\textsuperscript{102} Starting in 2002, Mittica spent over four years taking trips to Belarus and Ukraine, “studying all available scientific research and documenting what he saw through photography.”\textsuperscript{103} He is quick to secure a photographic lineage for himself, claiming a spiritual father in Paul Strand.\textsuperscript{104} He studied photography with Walter Rosenblum, who was a student of Paul Strand’s and mentored by Lewis Hine at the Photo League in New York. Like Edward Steichen who had a stint as aerial photographer for the US Army Expeditionary Forces in France, Rosenblum had major responsibilities during America’s wartime- he was a World War II U.S. Army combat photographer.\textsuperscript{105}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{101} Naomi Rosenblum, foreword to \textit{Chernobyl: the Hidden Legacy} by Pierpaolo Mittica (London Eng.: Trolley, 2007), 4[?].


\textsuperscript{103} Mittica’s publisher’s press release: \url{http://trolleybooks.com/blog/2011/03/chernobyl-25-years-on-chernobyl-the-hidden-legacy-by-pierpaolo-mittica/}.

\textsuperscript{104} “Pierpaolo Mittica’s photostream: Profile” \textit{Flickr}. \url{http://www.flickr.com/people/40238775@N02/}.

\textsuperscript{105} Walter Rosenblum’s biography can be found on his website at: \url{http://www.rosenblumphoto.org/wr_bio.html}.
\end{flushleft}
In the case of the documentation of Chernobyl, the situation is more directed to the specifics of witnessing of catastrophe, rather than the physicality of the “actor” in just any performance. In Thesis X of the *Work of Art*, Benjamin brings up the distinction between a “test” and a “real” performance, evoking the question of the subjects status in front of a film or photographic apparatus. This is illustrated by the thrower of the discus who does it for sport rather than the person who does it to kill someone. Benjamin defines the actor and athlete as both conforming to the “confines [of] the social value of test performances.”  

This is a consideration we must have while looking at portrait photography in general and at the delicate topic of victim photography specifically. Thus, the analogy of the film actor performing in front of the cameraman as if it were “an aptitude test” might be tried on for the cancer ward patient who Mittica situates in front of his camera (Fig. 9).  

It’s true that the photographs are taken in the patient’s suitable environment, the hospital ward, in the aftermath of the disaster. When the victim-subject is transformed to a product of technological reproduction, she is delivered in some altered fashion to the audience in the movie theater’s exhibition room or home viewing device.  

This is not unlike the patient subject in Mittica’s photographs. Each personage may only get one shot, one chance to showcase him or her-self. The little girls’ “performance” is not “a unified whole, but is assembled from many individual performances”... It is assembled, modified, manufactured or boldly stated, “staged” to some degree. The patients are no longer being themselves but being with themselves or with each other in

107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., 112.
front of a camera lens. It is a relational interplay between the observer and observed, actor and examiner, subject and photographer and of the audience to the final image. Martha Rosler makes a trenchant critique of the way documentary photography, the allegedly well-intentioned “liberal documentary,” has through the years, increasingly made a victim of its subject. \(^\text{109}\) By shattering the myth of photographic disinterestedness, Rosler has laid precedent for the awkward but imperative task of taking a critical stance on photographing actual victims, such as the girl in Fig. 9.

While Mittica’s work betrays earnest intentions, he exceeds the other photographers who have professionally worked on Chernobyl in his application of Ansel Adams’ precisionism. Due to the subject matter, the resultant sensationalism, akin to that of disaster tourism, is both in his subject matter and in his exaggerated, raked angles (Fig. 10). When discussing how photographers become accustomed to seeing objects in stereotyped ways, Joe Deal explained the problem of following Adams’ precedent in landscape photography: “When I actually went to Yosemite, it was like seeing everything in quotation marks.” A scientific study out of MIT found what makes one photograph more memorable than another. Human presence is the biggest factor, “…followed by images of human-scale space — such as the produce aisle of a grocery store — and close-ups of objects. Least memorable are natural landscapes, although those can be memorable if they feature an unexpected element, such as shrubbery trimmed into an unusual

Mittica succeeds in crafting images that are memorable, partly because his predecessors have carved out a genre of deformed or threatened children: the “freaks” of Diane Arbus in the 1960s, the distorted faces of the children running in Nick Ut’s photo of the Vietnam napalm attack 1972, and even the child laborers of Lewis Hine, whose social photojournalism was instrumental in changing child labor laws in the late teens in the United States.

The dreamlike perfectionism of Mittica’s imaginary does not invite the viewer to participate. If the space of the photographs were continued into the viewers’, there would be no ground for us to stand on – on a crane, a footstool or lying on a tarp stretched across the ground, possibly (Fig. 10). Is it not somewhat insincere to obscure the vantage point from the viewer? Artfulness could be considered an artist’s domain and virtue. Abstract to so many, nuclear contamination is brought closer through unnerving images of deformed fetuses and children, yet, locked in the cinematic language of commercial photography, the images often lose valuable tangibility. To respond to Rosenblum’s order to the engaged observer, the images are charged, and memorable but overwrought, “pushy.”

A predicament with Mittica’s work might partially be in his use of black and white photography. As a signifier of the documentary lens of fine art photography preceding the burst into color of the mid-1960s, it appears anachronistic for him to


employ it. However, Sebastiano Salgado also does not veer from either a black and white or a brown and white, duo-chrome palette. Black and white evokes a string of emotions *a priori*: a respect for or deference to the past, nostalgia, gravitas of the subject matter. Some of Mittica’s work demonstrates a mix of tropes from different traditions, appealing to mid-brow tastes and capturing post-modernism’s predilection for anything goes. British literary theorist Terry Eagleton critiques post-modernism as a “market-type relativism” suspicious of norms, hierarchies, traditions and standards. To conclude, aesthetically speaking, Mittica is instrumental in his application of form but subversive in content only.

Paul Fusco is another quintessential example of someone who has clearly applied an “engaged observer” approach to photographing of Chernobyl. An original photo essay produced by Magnum in Motion and launched in 2006 is composed of a slide-show of 37 photos and slide by slide voice-overs by the artist himself. About a million viewers watched it just in its first week, bringing an instant recognition of his name and work to a generation being exposed to documentary photography. In photographing Chernobyl, like Mittica, Fusco has also used “black and white,” but with an even greater emphasis on

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112. William Eggleston broke the mold.

113. Recently, Salgado was one of nine artists to be on exhibit *Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography Since the Sixties*, at the Getty Center, June 29–November 14, 2010. The following is a listing of the artists and the series that were featured: Leonard Freed: Black in white America; Philip Jones Griffiths: Vietnam Inc.; W. Eugene and Aileen M. Smith: Minamata; Susan Meiselas: Nicaragua, June 1978-July 1979; Mary Ellen Mark: Streetwise; Lauren Greenfield: Fast forward and girl culture; Larry Towell: The Mennonites; Sebastiao Salgado: Migrations; James Nachtwey: The sacrifice.


115. Paul Fusco, *Chernobyl | Magnum in Motion*,
images of children with severe genetic disorders and lethal cancers, though with slightly different results. In 1997, Fusco took the photos during a project that turned from a two-week to a two-month pursuit. He showed and published the results of his coverage of Chernobyl in 2001; "Black Wind/White Land - Living with Chernobyl" was shown at the United Nations under the auspices of the Irish Chernobyl Children’s Project. The book, called *Chernobyl Legacy*, was introduced by the then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan. The thrust of his message was that the most vulnerable victims of Chernobyl were those who were not even living or were just small children at the time, their adult lives destroyed or curtailed by the lasting radioactive effects of the Zone. Certainly, a large part of Fusco’s body of work reveals the horror of these aftereffects; it is impossible not to look and not to care. This book has been an unforgettable entrée into documentary photography for many readers. One reader said it has made him think not only about the “horrors,” but about how “such power for potential destruction of humanity and the world is often in the hands of only a select few people.”

There is a certain legitimate bias for why Paul Fusco maintains more *efficacy* or legitimacy as he executes work in black and white (Figs. 11 and 12). In part, his teacher-pupil relationship is undergirded by a 35-year membership in the distinguished photographic co-operative Magnum Photos. Magnum, founded in 1947 by Robert Capa and Henri-Cartier Bresson is a photographic cooperative that controls the financial and intellectual use of their members’ photographic output. It is also associated with the


dynamic black and white photography of the Post-War generations. In Chernobyl, however, the work of engaged observer photographers stands in striking contrast to that of tourists, whose subject matter is largely inanimate and thus eschews the historically endowed tradition of portraiture. The reasons for this trend in tourist photography, I believe, comes down to their lack of access to hospital wards, homes, orphanages, scientific offices – places of human work and habitation,

In the project to form a typology of photographic representations of Chernobyl, tourist photographs constitute a distinct type. There are modernist precedents for counting them among the photographs that serve to resolve what about Chernobyl has brought public fixation and scrutiny to this part of the world. Out of the barrage of images that have been generated, most of them are of the nuclear plant, wildlife and villages that fall within the 2600 km² Exclusion Zone, about the size of Luxembourg. When did the fashion for tours spring up? Apparrenlty it did so in light of the shift to a post Post-Communist regime – that of Putin, creating such a historical-imaginary gap with the events of the past, that even for local Russians and Ukrainians, not to mention those international travelers that esteem themselves “citizens of the world,” or righteous social commentators, footloose adventurers and sensation-seekers, this became an exotic and intoxicating journey waiting to happen?

Ukraine officially opened up Chernobyl to tourism in January 2011, but small groups have been able to visit the immediate zone for about the past 8 years. Most of

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118. Socrates, from Plutarch, *Of Banishment*, “I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world,” an aphoristic phrase.
these tourists come from far and leave with photos. Others pretend to ride in by
motorcycle from nearby cities, exploring the forbidden corners of Chernobyl’s Zone of
Exclusion. Elena Filatova, who went by “KiddofSpeed” garnered an enormous following
as the first tourist/stalker to organize a web presence. In a stifling and bland world, the
youthful Ukranian woman supplied a free-spirited armchair adventure for her
international group of followers; a fantasy embellished by her vague similarity to Mila
Jojovich’s onscreen action heroines. KiddofSpeed turned out to be a hoax: her husband
had entirely directed Elena on where and how she posed and spun the website’s personal
narratives.119 He continued to maintain the site in her name, even after their divorce and
oddly, even when the truth came out, fans responded angrily or ignored accusations of
falsification. Like some latter day John Wayne, her role as self-made Chernobyl
underdog “cowboy” captured the imagination.

Few tourist photographers make a concerted effort to explore the more mundane
lifestyles of those six million people who remained in the larger contaminated region. It
is an area spreading across Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, covering 56,700 square miles,
about 1.2 times the size of New York State. It would take the dedication of a cultural
geographer or anthropologist to seek out subjects and subject-areas to investigate
throughout the larger territory over an extended period time. In this regard, we can look
to the work of the photographer Michael Forster Rothbart, whose strongest presence is on

http://open.salon.com/blog/mary_mycio/2011/01/21/the_chernobyl_biker_chick_that_wasnt.
the Web. Although the gatekeepers at publishing companies or high-end galleries have not embraced his work, his photographs have toured widely through galleries in Russia, Ukraine and the US, and his work has hung in civic institutions like hospitals, and the gallery space in Madison, Wisconsin’s city hall. Rothbart’s photojournalistic abilities and his plan for covering Chernobyl gained an invaluable supporter when the project was funded and coordinated by the Fulbright Foundation. From 2007 to 2009 he lived in a small farming village in Ukraine, Sukachi, just outside the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

What is so meaningful and powerful about these photos is that Rothbart humanizes his subjects. They are not icons or symbols of something else, neither are they caricatures of themselves. He states that his focus is portraying the “human consequences of environmental contamination.” Dissimilar from Paul Fusco, a near photographer-celebrity who used the clout of his affiliation with Magnum to gain access, Rothbart made his way inside homes and institutional wards through the formation of relationships and the gaining of precious trust (Fig. 13). The project following “After Chernobyl” has been “Inside Chernobyl,” which documents the lives of nine of the 3,800 people who continue to work daily at the decommissioned Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. The subjects, their treatment and his originality make his work the most engaging, versatile and contemporary of what Chernobyl photography has to offer as it emerges from the shadow of scare-tactics (Fig. 14). The introductory text to his prompts the viewer: “If you lived near Chernobyl, would you stay? To the world, Chernobyl seems a place of danger, but for locals, Chernobyl is simply a fact of life.” Engaged Observer photographer Larry

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120. To find Rothbart’s photography, please consult: his own website, www.afterchernobyl.com, or go to FotoVisura Magazine and Boston.com and search for his last name.
Towell, construes this sentiment in a similar way, “Like literature, photography is best when it looks at ordinary things rather than sensational ones. This gets closer to the truth, just as ordinary people are closer to the truth than politicians and heroes. Anybody can photograph sensationalism because it’s exciting and dramatic but it takes a good storyteller to photograph nothing in particular.”

Tired of the sensationalism that he had noticed in the coverage of Chernobyl, Rothbart conceived of and executed a project on Chernobyl that seems so generous, and nuanced that the subject opens up to the viewer almost anew.

The work of late early 19th century Romanticists Caspar David Friedrich e.g. his painting *Monk by the Sea* (1809), remain limited in their ability to communicate to us about the experience of the Sublime. As a historical precedent, such work models a topical illustration of the play of the pleasure of terror induced in the subject by the unpredictable behaviors of an amoral nature and the viewers’ identification with the lone human subject who often faces off with such a force in Romanticist painting of the sublime. Aside from its popular application, the tenet of the *sublime* is acutely useful in our discussion of the kinds of photographs Robert Polidori and others have taken of the city of Pripyat and of the industrial armaments linked to the ChNPP. These post-disaster photographs conform to the principle of “military sublime,” as coined by the gifted British artist Simon Norfolk (Fig. 15).

Do not be misled by the term “military” into thinking that Norfolk’s lens focuses solely on the explicit events or tools of “war” given witness to by the mass media or

previous war photographers. In an interview with BLDGBLOG, Norfolk convincingly expands the definition of “military” by explaining that his larger project seeks to understand how war and the need to fight it has transformed our world: the technologies we employ and the spaces we occupy. Unlike the well-known cadres of war photographers from Robert Capa, to the Bang-Bang Club, Norfolk does not put himself into the middle of military action. He inhabits a realm at once more detached and more artistically enhanced. Though his photographs may include people, they are no more than specks on a landscape, assimilating and disappearing into it. Although interested in the ways we understand ourselves, society and landscape as created by military conflict, from the process of vicariously surveying the frequent subjects of his work, e.g. from ruins in Afghanistan to the supercomputers that painstakingly design nuclear warheads, we are led to a far deeper understanding of how our lives are shaped by war. Once the historical and topical concepts of war and the sublime point to the inevitable centrality of ruin to both, Norfolk addresses the problem of his unpopulated photography: ”anybody interested in the effects of war quickly becomes an expert on ruins.”

In possessing a demonstrable ideological and aesthetic overlap with Norfolk, Robert Polidori conspicuously omits people from his works, unless, in rare cases, they are actively posing for their portraits or otherwise noticing and confronting the camera with


124. Ibid., 109.

125. Ibid., 114.
their gazes. Perhaps he has internalized an aversion to shooting someone while they are 
or appear to be unconscious of the camera (what Fried has denoted as “absorption”), for 
such situations conjure up the history of voyerism, objectification and myth-making in 
representation. With the Bechers, “objectivity” is developed through “the avoidance of 
the human subjects” altogether, while Polidori is not so categorical.126 Rather he uses 
people as if instrumentally, achieving an effect by accumulating a sentiment from the 
telling behavior of a group of individuals. With these, his photographs construct a larger 
meaning about a specific environment or society. Walter Benjamin’s “lament”: “…to do 
without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations”; their 
“depopulated” photographs “accept this burden.”127 Thus, Benjamin believed that 
photography should strive to go beyond its application to portraiture, which he called “a 
refuge of cult value.” “But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the 
exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value,” Benjamin 
clarifies his convictions.128

126. James, “Subject, Object, Mimesis,” 876.
v. 2. trans. by Rodney Livingstone, ed. by Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University 
Press, 2005), 519.
value” can be found in Thesis VI of “Work of Art,” 106. The image or object went from being cloistered 
and only visible to the circumscribed few (this applied to objects meant to induce magic in the conception 
of a cult) to the kinds of art practices that would increasingly allow for exhibition. According to Benjamin, 
the connection of the context or location to the iconic statue or painting would prevent others from seeing 
it, unlike a bust that can move from one museum to another without losing its viability. The bust does not 
have “a fixed place.” What matters is “public presentation.” The mass becomes symphonic in being in 
favor of this.
“Benjamin Buchloh has argued that in contemporary photographic practice the exclusion of figures and faces has now become a photographic strategy as significant as their traditional inclusion had once been.”\textsuperscript{129} Buchloh perceives the exclusion of the subject as an a “denial of the social” and as “potentially renewing the photographic medium of the picturesque, its elimination of social reality, confirming a ‘melancholic complicity’, and engaging in a very picturesque abandonment and passivity.”\textsuperscript{130} But, in the work of committed landscapists such as the Bechers, man is invoked through the relics and artifacts of industry. Without calling attention to the actual subjects as engineers or unique personalities, the subjects Polidori photographed behave as indicators to further the message of a more abstract phenomena, in the case of his Chernobyl project – as the disaffected personnel of a closed down power plant, left to complete the decommissioning of a dangerous and failed site.

While portraiture in photography started out the default for publishers, most of the work in the opus \textit{Zones of Exclusion: Pripyat and Chernobyl} is of the type that Polidori is best known for: architecture or landscape. Often, the angles at which the photos are taken dwarf, magnify or abstract the subject into a pattern, potentially raising ethical questions about the photographer’s manipulation of the subject/object dialectic so as to create seemingly politically detached aesthetic effects (Fig. 16). Yet, the very subjects of his pieces, and semantically the word “battleground,” land in the area of overlap, twixt

\textsuperscript{129} James, “Subject, Object, Mimesis,” 876.

landscape and war at its most literal when we see *Vehicles waiting to be buried in Burakivka Field, near Pripyat* (Fig. 18).

Another salient feature of Polidori’s photography is his use of seriality, which has its most instrumental predecessor in the work of the Bechers. In fact, in *Zones of Exclusion*, Polidori shows us an astounding fourteen back-to-back pages of abandoned villages. The houses, from the village of Lelyov, the town of Chernobyl, and from the outskirts of Chernobyl, are displayed in grids of 2 by 3 photos laid out horizontally (Fig. 19). As far as documentary style goes, there is a touch of the apparently dispirited, detached vernacular style that Evans began and Ruscha was controversial for elaborating to the point of irony. The Bechers with their deadpan formal approach and as artists who worked explicitly to document disappearing industrial structures produce work most relevant to compare to Polidori’s grids of abandoned villages. However, the images of the Bechers’ are not “orthodox documentary images” because they have no narrative! From seriality, they are abstracted, the structures are aestheticized and made reminiscent of beautiful relics. This is made evident because the separation of frames, that defines serial photography, does not allow each to be displaced by the next in a narrative or temporal structure, and so generates tensions between the general and the particular – “proffering their own system of value which could be a model of sociality.”

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131. A new photoreportage has been carried out by two Belorussian photographers, is on the website “Chernobyl, Pripyat, ChNPP exclusion zone.” It provides a look at the plant and wildlife at the off-limits Belorussian Government Radiational-Ecological Reserve: http://cahornobyl.in.ua/foto-priroda-pgrez.html.

132. James, “Subject, Object, Mimesis,” 879.
Without falling neatly into the categories of military and industrial sublime Polidori’s work shares in their implied subjects: the problems of squalor, displacement due to development, natural and man-made disaster. Most often, what we see are the indexes of these human conditions, of gradual processes that are aesthetic documents of a pinprick in transitional time and space. As far as self-imposed limitations are known to produce creatively nuanced results, Polidori’s loyalty to the mode of “architecture” proves fruitful. It is not the lofty and abstract, sometime all-inclusive or high-art term, “architecture” that he fronts for himself. Polidori attempts to distance himself from the title of photographer of architecture, which to him sounds “too cold, glib, superficial.” What ring true are the professional designations of photographer-sociologist or anthropologist that critics bestow upon him.133

On June 6-9 2001, after months of arranging permissions, Polidori executed a photoshoot at Chernobyl over a three-day period. The scope of Zones of Exclusion: Pripyat and Chernobyl is of the after-effects of the Chernobyl disaster and it is wholly inclusive. The Chernobyl power plant, the worker’s town of Pripyat, designated radioactive dump sites and the surrounding Ukranian towns are all presented through Polidori’s anthropological vision. They are all places of former human habitation, work or refuse. He leaves work on resurgent ecological habitats to others.134


134. Articles that have a personal perspective, while focusing on the materiality of the Zone landscape, the flora and the fauna appear in such publications as WIRED, Slate, National Geographic.

Polidori photographs in the Chornobyl region, he sometimes leaves out pertinent details:
their names and country locations. Due to the way visitor documentation operates, we can
be sure that he stayed within the Ukranian part of the exclusion zone. An incredible photographer with a keen interest in Central European and cultural
geography, Gerd Ludwig is an inter-generational figure, whose work remains fresh
assignment and venture after venture. Born in Alsfeld, central Germany in 1947, Ludwig
interrupted his studies at the University of Marburg to travel around Scandinavia and
North America. Upon returning, he began to pursue photography under Otto Steinert at
the Folkwangschule in Essen, graduating in 1972 with a degree in photo design. After
founding Germany’s first photographer-owned photo agency on the Magnum model, he
moved to Hamburg to begin working for Time, Life, Stern and Spiegel as well as for
photo-advertising campaigns. In 1984, Gerd Ludwig relocated to the cultural capital of
New York, and continued with his success in working for major photographic
publications. Cumulatively, Ludwig has covered topics ranging from the reunification
of Germany, Brothers Grimm, the Salton Sea, Indians and Chinese in Brazil, the Gurunsi
tribe of Burkina Faso and the Napoleon’s long-lasting influence on Germany. Among so

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Teeming--Irradiated-Eden.html (must be viewed through a Safari browser to display images and user
comments).

135. Mycio, Wormwood, 30. I arrived at this conclusion from among other hints of hers, Mary
Mycio’s description of a routine, which she follows to arrange visits to the Ukranian Zone of Alienation.
After visiting time and again, Mycio finds the agency’s staff remarkably accommodating.
Chernobylinterinform has a pretty tight hold over movement into and around the area, but it appears to be
benign, unlike its distant predecessor Intourist, the official Soviet travel agency.

136. “Photographer Gerd Ludwig Biography,” National Geographic,
much other recognition, in 2006 he received IPA’s Lucie Award for International Photographer of the Year, the field’s equivalent to the Oscars.

Ludwig’s far-ranging coverage of the former Soviet Union is unmatched. It started when he was in his 30s and on assignment from European magazines, during the height of the Cold War. In the early 1990s, he signed on with *National Geographic* to do a series of pieces on social changes that were then taking place in Germany and Eastern Europe. The work that spanned almost ten years lent itself to a retrospective National Geographic book titled, *Broken Empire: After the Fall of the U.S.S.R.* It is obvious that Ludwig harbors a sustained passion for Russia. This was nurtured in him through his father’s tales of fighting for Germany in World War II, and he inherited a severe guilt over the crimes of his parent’s generation. For a long time in his work, Ludwig glorified “everything that Germany had wished to destroy,” repressing the memories of the stories about the darkness and suffering that his father witnessed, counting those together with the West’s desire to publicly malign its Cold War adversary. In hindsight, Ludwig understands he was “unable to separate people from political systems,” but from the text of *Broken Empire* it is clear that familiarization with Russian *dusha*, or soul, has enabled him with lucidity in making this distinction.


139. Ludwig, “Introduction” to *Broken Empire*, 25. The *dusha*: “An unconscious drive, belief in the inexplicable and the mysterious. It is people reading books in forests. All-night conversations. Drunks pondering the meaning of life. It's not the Western search for well-being, it does not acknowledge harsh
Of the virtual portfolios in the site’s indexical Stories page, about half are on keenly selected editorial topics concerning the myriad changes that have swept across the Former Soviet Union (Fig. 20). Religion, pollution, the nationalist reimagining of the capitol of former Soviet Republics, such as Kazakhstan and the subtle interplay between the exploitation of resources and the human livelihoods play the biggest roles amongst these. In every photo there is a visual tension and something to be gleaned about the real-life crisis of the region, which tramples its values as it muscles ahead, the “Soviet example of horrifying extremes.” The contrasts are engendered in the urban and rural, from Estonia to the Crimea, and in the individualistic world-class aspirations amidst Moscow’s glitz and grit.\footnote{Unlike Ludwig’s concern for living beings, Eruc Lusito is filled by a “fascination for the ruins of a collapsed modern civilization.” It is significant to look at the photographs in Lusito’s book, After the Wall: Traces of Soviet Empire, because even though there are none from Chernobyl, the resemblances are striking. After all, we could reality, it is the antithesis of everyday modern life. It is forgiveness, empathy, conscience, and the ability of humans to partake in the Divine. It is the Russian soul.”}

140. “Stories,” Gerd Ludwig Photography, \url{http://gerdludwig.com/stories/}.


142. \url{http://gerdludwig.com/stories/soviet-pollution-a-lethal-legacy/#read_story}.


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be talking about a type of post-empire space that all of these kinds of images represent in some hardly definable yet shared aesthetic manner. There are similarities in color, in texture, in the focus on scalar contrasts and on the interaction of a crumbling civilization with the environment. The pertinent theme of humans’ conflicting drives: to live alongside or tame nature by machinery, prominently surfaces in a handful of Soviet films from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Along with the science fiction film Stalker, they anticipate the history-altering events of Saturday, April 26, 1986. Both Siberiade, 1979 and Farewell, 1982 portray the man and nature-technology conflict through character-based storytelling and spellbinding images of untainted nature on the verge of exploitation. Farewell was shelved until 1986, when “glasnost” (openness) USSR government policy was put into place by then General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev. Elem Klimov’s film Farewell portrayed a Soviet present where the dream of communism has been widely abandoned, and a post-industrial Soviet society was coming to grips with the apparatchiks’ canned clichés on the benefits of progress.

The Italian-born, French-bred Lusito traveled the far reaches of the former USSR and satellite countries, from Mongolia to Estonia, and from Kazakhstan to East Germany to execute his first project. In it, indexical traces of humanity determine the focus, i.e. the bases, monuments, halls and other relics of abandoned communist institutions. Additionally, at the angles at which he depicts structures, Lusito creates slight upsets in symmetry, confusing the vantage point (Fig. 21). The discomfort of looking at Lusito’s images stems from the appearance that he is employing multiple perspectives. That could
hardly be the case unless the project was more explicitly about modifying photos to create illusions or effects, as in the work of Andreas Gursky.

Lusito’s images are as much unique as they are dissonant for their stark, formalist compositions with military structures that were built to laud heroes, and impress with their range, all for the purposes of furthering the Soviet communist ideology and all - in ruin. Like an advanced academicist photography student, Lusito relishes the tensions between depicting Eastern Bloc citizens whose reality was installed through propaganda, photography as a technical process used to represent reality, and real life physical decay of the very structures used to carry meaning and promote nationalistic activity.145 While the book is aesthetically sleek, even award winning, it seems cold, particularly in comparison Ludwig’s photos. What makes it stand out is its consummate geographic coverage. On the other hand, when Chernobyl has become metonym for aging Soviet ruin, Lusito skirts around it, avoiding its almost unyielding post-apocalyptic semiotics. By his variety and the spaciousness of the space within his images, he allows the viewer’s eye the opportunity to roam: to take in and appreciate the distinct local contexts of the symbols and structures therein. According to Francis Conte in the preface to After the Wall, “Lusito shows two interests which are deeply interwoven: firstly both art as propaganda and propaganda as art in the former Soviet Union; and secondly the ruins and the aesthetic attraction that the act of looking at these ruins provokes in the viewer.”146

145. Ibid.
146. Francis Conte, introduction to After the Wall: Traces of Soviet Empire by Eric Lusito (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2009) 6.
Whether the photos speak so eloquently for themselves is still debatable, but that conversation should be set-aside for now.

The philosophical and art historiographical fascination with decay and ruins invoked by Conte is but one of a number of perspectives relevant to the representation of Chernobyl within the larger context off visual accounts of disaster. The topic is intricate enough to be easily channeled into an investigative sub-genre that the many forms of Chernobyl’s spatial destruction and rebirth have spawned. A website with a bibliography dedicated to loss, decay and ending of space is a potent staging ground for such a pursuit.\textsuperscript{147} In the same regard, “ruin porn” is a reference to a contemporary phenomenon – the appeal of the ruins of modern industry and engineering as expressed through their depiction. What is “pornographic” about ruin? No article has taken the charge to explore the implications of this semantic selection, yielding to its cheeky derogatory power instead. It may be the photographer’s aim to create a glamorous image and titillate at all costs, exploiting blighted locations for their colors, textures and emotive qualities, without due consideration for their functioning during operation or reasons behind their collapse (Figs. 2, 3 and 10). There is the vicarious enjoyment of pursuing a shuttered, layered microcosm in which one can, via discovery and exploration, become a Ferdinand Magellan of the post-industrial age. Like the objectification of individuals in porn, there is a disembodied quality to these images, a tension between abstraction and pathos - for

\textsuperscript{147} “Place: Loss, Decay, Ending of Place,” Research on Place & Space, n.d., \url{http://pegasus.cc.uch.edu/~janzb/place/lossplace.htm}, is updated with sources published through 2005.
the “architecture buffs to drool over.” Now that the initial shock value has worn off, readers have done the better part of the job unpacking why images of blight might be called porn. One reader muses: “…you don't hear people calling Ansel Adams’ landscape porn’ or Anne Geddes ‘baby porn’ (although the latter would be amusing). If you're going to just randomly attribute meanings to words, why even have them? Particularly in the context of journalism?“\(^{149}\)

Andreas Huyssen attributes the “intense concern with ruins” to the privileging of memory and trauma in and outside of the academy.\(^{150}\) Huyssen sees obsession with the ruin, as nostalgia for “an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures,” that would frankly have liked to have seen an alternative end result to modernity that was the \(20^{th}\) century.\(^{151}\) He writes how “architectural ruin” is that combination of temporality and spatiality that triggers desires for a past, within the present that is no longer accessible, but there in “its residues.”\(^{152}\)

At the same time, critically speaking, the circumstances of the abandonment of a mental hospital, school or factory in a Matthew Christopher photograph, from a survey of over 300 locations throughout the US, are multiple. Even though the overarching sentiment is the dissolution of the American dream, in the case of Chernobyl, the logic

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149. James Lesher’s user comment in Greco’s, *The Psychology of Ruin.*


152. Ibid., 7.
behind each and every single image is a lot alike: there was the regime, which had the accident, which caused exodus, and without people, their built-up world is disintegrating. The relevance of the example from Detroit, is that visually you would not be able to tell whether the photos were taken in a derelict US old peoples’ home or an abandoned Chernobyl kindergarten (Figs. 2 and 3). However, Chernobyl is a more complex case and therefore more illuminating case study. The ethical questions all boil down to the consumption of images, most vital - the power relations in the practices of accessing the space, their capture and display. In order to find the root cause of ruin porn, so to speak, one only has to look back a little further to the now “classical” undertaking - the cult of ruins.

In returning to the thesis’ cadre of types, we will be able to deduce that since the undoing of the USSR, Gerd Ludwig’s extensive work, in contrast to that of ruin porn photographers, has led to a most nuanced understanding and concern for the condition of both living environments and their inhabitants. His look at Chernobyl can be seen as one such manifestation. From media coverage, it appears that in 2006, on its 20th anniversary, the world once again took notice of Chernobyl. In light of the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster and earnest international effort to complete the new containment shelter project, the world has shown sustained interest in Chernobyl, and Ludwig has found himself dedicating multiple trips over the last five years (leading up to its 25th anniversary) to document myriad aspects of Chernobyl. Gerd Ludwig’s website is a bit like a children’s paper fortune teller: you pick a topic and then find that the fortune teller has prepared you with multiple viewpoints on the same subject. Following the general structure of his
website, Ludwig has organized his coverage of Chernobyl into perfectly logical, easy to take in, bites. Though not immediately apparent through the “Stories” menu, once the viewer clicks on “Chernobyl: The Exclusion Zone,” links to four related stories with the titles: “Chernobyl: Update at 25,” “Chernobyl: A New Hotspot for Tourism,” “Chernobyl Cleanup: No End in Sight,” and “Chernobyl: the Victims,” sit at the bottom of the page, awaiting her attention. All of these “chapters” would deserve attention, but what is notable here is that Ludwig is the only photographer that has investigated tourism in Chernobyl.

Although, a non-commercial lens on the site’s cleanup might also be unique, matters of tourism have distinctly wide-ranging repercussions on issues of viewing, experience and representation. In a photo in Pripyat, Gerd Ludwig is taking the setting that serves as the quintessential staging-ground for pictures by tourists, and turning it into the very representation of tourists performing their activities (Fig. 1). As a wider shot of the empty ground lot, this includes the territories where the other shots were set up: a heart-jerking image of a toy (in Mittica), and a boat, or mushroom, (in the works of citizen/tourist photographers) all foreshortened in front of the new but forevermore abandoned Ferris wheel (Figs. 22-24).

Like a clan of roaming bandits or inhabitants from a different planet, the tourists have descended upon the grounds, which are notoriously effective for capturing something. On this trip, there are approximately 16 visible people in two categories: wearing white chemical safety suits and those clad in their drab winter blacks. The people, young to middle-aged men and women assume the poses of amateur
archaeologists, but what they are looking at would be mundane under most circumstances: patches of snow, asphalt. Other than their memories and the conversations they carry on with one another, the crowds, like other tourists in other places, are prepared to interpret their surroundings with cameras. These cameras will prove to their friends that they were there. They will probably be trying to stage the kinds of photos that show that they were solitary and that the abandoned territories are not part of an industry. However, it is to be presumed that these people, neither scientists, artists or journalists, arranged to travel here looking for thrills while reassuring their families that they will return safely. They might have tried to place a few calls to the Chernobyl town administration and found out that the small expert staff, experiencing a boom in tourism, is only going to personally guide select individuals. Whereas, the tourists might bring home tall stories of danger and adventure, their actual experience has become standardized, monetized and predictable.

There is little artifice in this image, in the sense that we do not imagine Gerd Ludwig is trying to control the circumstances of the shoot. We can intuit that he must have found one of the larger touring agencies in the area and asked to join them on their expedition. In the foremost grouping of Fig. 1, there are three men decked out in white suits, more hospital garb than hazmat suits. Off to the right-hand side, they are the focal point of the photograph. Gerd Ludwig capitalizes on the motif of the scene-within-a-scene quality of his topic as it ripples throughout the photograph. The photographer, Gerd Ludwig is capturing the contorting resident photographer of the group, whose lens sees something related to what we see. However, the subject’s friends are seizing the moment
to playfully manipulate perception for the beholder of their imminent tourist photograph, by creating a human-scale arch for the Ferris wheel. In our minds, we begin to construct what their own photo must have turned out like, but their gesture is at once childish, presumptuous and yet poetic in its reference to the human cause and effect tied to Chernobyl.

The crowd seems bourgeois, well dressed. They are a completely different species than those who fled. There is a narrative of return to a land that was once inhospitable, making the tale one of human overcoming. We can infer that this is the attitude of the three-some on the right: they are near giddy, immune to the catastrophe still unfolding around them.
- Conclusion -

The final exhaustion of the US-Soviet conflict in the late 1980s made for an indeterminate world for a number of reasons. A disintegration of an already fragile network of geopolitical relations took place with new political alliances being forged. Meanwhile, governments were being politically reversed or deposed. 1,000s of refugees began moving across borders.\textsuperscript{153} While discussing Russia’s concern in convincing other countries how their systems can make nuclear power safe, a Norwegian authority on Russia’s nuclear industry opined: “They promote the technology only because it engages the enormous military nuclear industry left over from the Soviet times.”\textsuperscript{154} While national boundaries have shifted, they have not stemmed the tide of radiation from the Chernobyl accident still inhabiting the landmass today and the forecast for the future of nuclear accidents appears to be cloudy.

As tolls of Chernobyl death statistics vary widely and continue to grow, the deceased point to the ill people who are next in line. People, whose bodies’ normative intactness is endangered by exorbitant doses of toxins, continue to roam the earth and are markers of a fundamental failure of societies and civilizations, of a pervasive cultural baggage of ruin. The human race’s drive for “progress” coexists alongside fears and

\textsuperscript{153} Peter Lang, \textit{Stalker Unbound}, 215.

unraveling evidence of the unknowable scale of the consequences of technology on nature and day-to-day existence.

What is it that makes the place and the images of Chernobyl so fearsome and yet so alluring? Do we pursue an aesthetisized handling of our philanoia or the love of madness; a delight and captivation by mindless behavior for pleasure, for a kind of frisson? Destruction and its spectatorship might very well be the two sides of the coin of catastrophic imagination. Tarkovsky foresaw that little would stop humanity from a compulsive madness of voluntary blindness to the fatal consequences of its actions and inventions. He acknowledges that, “These fragments of a civilization at once universal and alien, are like an epitaph to the futility of human endeavor, a sign that mankind has taken a path that can only lead to destruction.”155 The light and darkness of our internal spaces manifests itself in the external space, the “heterotopia” of Stalker.

In the catalog for the exhibition Unknown Quantity, Virilio reveals the existence of the science of risk-assessment - “cyndinics,” its similarity to “cynical” is ironic. Calculated risks are taken by companies who meddle with nature in their pursuit of business. The “Sigma” study by Swiss Re, a re-insurance company and a shining example of the cyndinics specialization, has recently reported that man-made disasters predominate over natural, 70% to 30%.156 Twenty-five years after Chernobyl, the media spotlight shifted focus to the Fukushima prefecture where, due to the Tōhoku undersea earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, the Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Plant


156. Virilio, Quantity, 25.
lost all power and the potential to pump water to cool the fuel. All six of the reactors at Fukushima experienced problems, and three of those went into meltdown following the natural disaster that took 10,000 lives. Within a few days, a 12-mile radius was evacuated, and 80,000 to 130,000 people have been required to leave behind their traditional livelihoods and homes.

Arriving at the end of this initial typology of the depiction of Chernobyl ruin, we should not claim to have found ourselves a neat or convenient dénouement. The disaster and the aftermath at Chernobyl – that spectrum mysteriously capable of being denoted to the mind by one word alone – takes enormous effort to express adequately by any other means. The multi-faceted event defeats attempts to represent it – so overwhelming, it approaches the sublime.

Although the depiction of ruins is so difficult, the realm of the visual reveals a bounty of critical offerings that journalism, science and the linguistic realm do not together exhaust. The visual is a place where, with Chernobyl and in other situations, the imagination and the “real” conflate to sear themselves on an image object-surface. Although the realms of art and mass media are sometimes forcibly separated, this project has demonstrated that a visual typology of Chernobyl’s ruins, be they inanimate, human or otherwise, cannot exclude one or the other. For instance, highly “reputable” journalistic sources with enormous circulation (the Guardian’s online offering is UK’s second most popular newspaper site after the Daily Mail) make instrumental and somehow instructive use of Igor Kostin’s photography. Kostin’s work is of quality, but showing his alone numbs the multiple perspectives that exist towards the disaster. For
one thing, such editorial processes allow the viewer to comfortably rebound from the sublime to the concrete – as to identify with the photographer as another single individual. Subconsciously to the viewer, and transparently to the magazines, Kostin’s prowess at bearing witness has been made more persuasive as he has extended his gaze over multiple Chernobyl “manifestations,” and held it steady from Chernobyl: Day 1 till the present era.

Mittica and Fusco, through an institutional lens distinct from Kostin and made up of “activism” and documentary photography, have also garnered incredible exposure. Like Kostin’s, it is also measurable by their presence on the Web, though through a less centralized system of numerous re-posts and viewer site “hits.” Polidori adopts the form of “documentary style” as coined by Evans, but, more than the other photographers, belongs to the prestigious art world. The restrained emotion, facile mise-en-scene and slightly abstracted perspective evident in Polidori’s compositions, enable him to eschew the debate of whether (his) documentary photography is art. Curiously, Mittica and Polidori, who represent two apparently opposite sides of the continuum, especially in the way they elicit sympathy, actually communicate a similar intention. Polidori pulls back and goes wide, showing us that he is attempting to find a way of getting immensity into the camera frame. Conversely, Mittica tends to go close – choosing to show a small thing that stands in or points to something larger, the device – a cross between a visual synecdoche and a metonym. In both regards, the impact is that there is a kind of momentum of viewing that begins with the eye that meets the contents of the frame and continues in the mind, which recognizes the incomplete nature of the physical “picture.”
In charting the effects of technology, the mirror of speed, Virilio anticipates the “integral accident.” According to him, Chernobyl was such an occasion and yet it is left for us to conclude if there are readings or narratives that are constructed by the photographs that do not conform to this definition. As recipients and even targets of this visual knowledge of the ruins of Chernobyl, we are exposed to different interpretations of the disaster narrative. The typology of photographs covered in this essay has in part addressed the challenge of how humanity can imagine, remember or react to Chernobyl. Keeping in mind the discursive framing that each of the employed mediums and styles carries, the viewer has recourse to a variety of niche or compound portrayals. We can conclude that such variety aids in surmounting what Virilio has called the media’s synchronization of collective emotions, that which greatly assists the administration of fear. Also, it appears that the multiplicity of readings available in the works does not reinforce a singular reading of Chernobyl as integral accident. If it were possible to somehow isolate all of the readings from the images (conflicting though their quality and ethical measure are) and add them into one concoction, we might approximate a dendrite-like map of the integral accident. It is doubtful that such a display would carry the same power as would one discrete Chernobyl image, whether of the likes of Mittica or Polidori. Frankly, the images make for more conventional readings of “the human cost of disaster,” producing empathy, anti-nuclear polemics and ruin porn. Whereas they satisfy

157. Ibid., 39.
an unpacking of the term Chernobyl, the integral accident is the kind of “logic bomb” that transmits its waves of critical influence below the radar.\textsuperscript{158}

In the poetics of frenetic urban living Benjamin frames this experience of alternative viewing. Whereas before, the city denizen was in a virtual “prison-world,” that world has now “exploded” so that one might “set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.”\textsuperscript{159} Benjamin has also written that any spectator of film or of sports becomes a quasi-expert upon their witnessing. The distinction between reader/writer or author and public has become blurred as the reader, through the proliferation of local and specialty journals is able to share his voice on specialized issues. The reader, even in a “minor capacity” is an expert and can publish in some forum or another. This is not unlike Mittica, whose transition between the professional work of dentist to the highly acclaimed role of humanitarian photographer was focused and purposeful move in the direction of his penchant for social justice. Even more to the point, it is not unlike the stock of tourist and “stalker” photographers, which has created a subculture and forum for such a project, specialists due to their devotion and interest in the subject matter, professionally unrecognized for their photographic work. It appears that Benjamin’s attitude to the following democratizing (equalizing) development is positive: a job cannot nowadays be performed without the ability to describe it and thus

\textsuperscript{158} Redhead, “The Art of the Accident,” \textit{Fast Capitalism}, ibid.

\textsuperscript{159} Benjamin, Thesis XVI \textit{Work of Art}, 117. Peter Lang, “Stalker unbounded: urban activism and the terrain vague as heterotopia by default,” in Dehaene, Michiel, and Lieven de Cauter. \textit{Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society}. London: Routledge, 2008. A group of college students in the 90s calling themselves “Stalker,” took this mandate more literally, wanting to explode the restrictive mode of architectural education through their brand of urban exploration, happenings and public tours of shunned or dilapidated sites.
“literary competence” is contained in polytechnic training, accessible to anyone.\textsuperscript{160}

Citizen journalism and artist photographs of abandoned biowarfare sites and bombed out buildings in the former Soviet Union seemingly conform to \textit{Stalker}’s vision of technologically littered landscapes. From Simon Norfolk’s “military sublime” to the shots of Duga ICBM site in Ukraine, known as "\textit{Chernobyl 2}," posted on the keenly sensationalistic site EnglishRussia.com, the world citizenry’s death drive is revved up.


About Star City – Cosmonaut Training Center in Russia. Travel Tours to Star City. http://www.bestrussiantour.com/space/about_star_city.


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“Zapechatlennoe vremia – Sculpting in Time” by A.A. Tarvkosky

“Arkhyv, vospominaniia, dokumenty – Archives, Recollections, Documents”


#Flickr#

*Entering the Secret Soviet Nuclear Bunker.*

*Pripyat - a gallery on Flickr.*

*Pedro Moura Pinheiro, chernobyl / pripyat - a set on Flickr.*
http://www.flickr.com/photos/pedromourapinheiro sets/72157603933583913/

"sad world" Flickr group. http://www.flickr.com/groups/1094352@N23/

by Meme [Chernobyl...20 years later] | Flickr.
http://www.flickr.com/photos/pandapericoloso/135321023/
Illustrations

Figure 1 – Gerd Ludwig, from “Chernobyl: A New Hotspot for Tourism,” 2011

Figure 2 – Matthew Christopher Murray, The Formula of Fear (HDR), Setting Sun retirement home, (location unknown), 2009.
Figure 3 – Joao Rechena, *Figure 89*, 2008. “Chernobyl” set, *Flickr*.

Figure 4 – Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 1979. Still photo.
Figure 5 – Mounting a Seating Ring for ChNPP, 1976. From booklet titled, “New city on the map of Ukraine,” Mistyetstvo Publishers Kiev.

Figure 6 – Igor Kostin, first known photo to be taken of the reactor, 14 hours after the explosion, April 26, 4 pm.
Figure 7 – Igor Kostin. *The Rooftop Runs of the "Biorobots*, 1986. Sygma/Corbis.

Figure 8 – Igor Kostin, Liquidators getting ready for their dashes to clean the undamaged surfaces, 1986. *Sygma/Corbis.*
Figure 9 – Pierpaolo Mittica. Anastasia, 3 years old, aplastic anaemia patient, at the oncology children’s hospital Lesnoie Borovlyany, Minsk, Belarus, 2002-2007.

Figure 10 – Pierpaolo Mittica. Contaminated lands, Gromyki evacuated village, Gomel district, Belarus, 2002-2007.
Figure 11 – Paul Fusco, Nurse Nina Azarkova hugs child with multiple sclerosis at the Children’s Home #1, Minsk, Belarus, 1997.

Figure 12 – Paul Fusco. Nikolai Yanchen, Maiski, Belarus, 1997.
Figure 13 – Michael Forster Rothbart. Leonid Budkovsky, Chernobyl liquidator, 2007.

Figure 14 – Michael Forster Rothbart. Chernobyl personnel checking their contamination levels at the Semikhody radiation checkpoint as they enter and exit the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, "2009."
Figure 15 – Simon Norfolk. "Bullet-scarred outdoor cinema at the Palace of Culture in the Karte Char district of Kabul," 2006.

Figure 16 – Robert Polidori. High voltage power lines and transformers at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, 2004.
Figure 17 – Robert Polidori, Guards in front of the Unit 4 sarcophagus, 2004.

Figure 18 – Robert Polidori. Vehicles waiting to be buried in Burakivka Field, near Pripyat, 2004.
Figure 19 – Robert Polidori, Abandoned Villages, Chernobyl Region, 2004

Figure 20 – Gerd Ludwig. Camels across the dry bed of the Aral Sea, Kazakhstan, n.d.
Figure 21 – Eric Lustio. Site 131, 2nd Guards Tank Division, Mongolia, 2009.

Figure 22 – Pierpaolo Mittica, Playground Ferris Wheel in Pripyat, 2004.
Figure 23 – Flickr user submitted “artsy” nostalgic shot of random small object photographed at an angle before never-used ferris wheel.

Figure 24 – Hunterbrandi. Chernobyl, 2009. HDR image, “Hunterbrandi’s photostream,” Flickr