

“THOSE WHO MIGHT, ONE DAY, THEMSELVES FACE ANNIHILATION”: DARK
TOURISM AND CHERNOBYL

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis as I dedicate most of my life endeavors: to my beloved late father, Larry Birns. He was a brilliant mind and a fellow academic who did not share many of my research interests, but nonetheless told me when he first learned of what became this project, “I don’t know what it is you *do*, but I *like* that you do it!” I did it, Daddy.

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ABSTRACT

“THOSE WHO MIGHT, ONE DAY, THEMSELVES FACE ANNIHILATION”: DARK TOURISM AND CHERNOBYL

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This thesis utilizes Chernobyl, site of the world’s largest nuclear disaster, as a case study through which to parse the phenomenon of dark tourism, “travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (Stone 2006:146). In light of the COVID-19 pandemic precluding in-person travel, the author conducted virtual ethnographic fieldwork through distributing questionnaires and conducting interviews with participants who had visited---either on an official guided tour or illegally---to build on secondary research on dark tourism and further nuance the visitor experience at Chernobyl. In the body of work, the author explores scholarly conceptions of dark tourism; motivations to visit Chernobyl; the influence of mass media on visitors using the theoretical frameworks of hauntology and hyperreality; legends and narratives about Chernobyl pre- and post-disaster; visitor and tour guide ‘performance’; and the ethics and future of Chernobyl as a site of dark tourism. This thesis is unique within the realm of scholarship on Chernobyl by virtue of its predominantly folkloristic and ethnographic lens, as well as its focus on

illegal visitors known as Stalkers, about whom very little academic writing has been published and who are necessary for a cohesive understanding of what it means to be a visitor to Chernobyl.

INTRODUCTION: CHERNOBYL AS DARK TOURISM

Initial reports were cautious in tone, and only on the following day, April 27, did we learn that an explosion had taken place at the nuclear power station, at least two people had been killed, and radioactive material had been released downwind. International media, however, had already started to speak about a radioactive cloud. We received more concrete information on April 28 and started informing the Soviet public of the serious nature of the disaster, focusing on efforts to manage the very dangerous and worsening situation.---Mikhail Gorbachev

The photographs are now iconic; the stories of doomed, heroic firemen, ‘mutant’ children and animals, and a large-scale government cover-up amplified in the popular imagination as the pop culture zeitgeist has shifted to a renewed interest in the disaster. Video games, documentary series, films, and HBO’s titular *Chernobyl* have all made Chernobyl their focal point. In the lived experience of many who were cognizant in some form during the 1980s and for whom the USSR had unsettling connotations, Chernobyl was a watershed event that underscored the dangers of nuclear power, bolstered the menace of the Eastern bloc, and laid bare the USSR’s bloated bureaucracy and fatal flaws. The fateful events of the Chernobyl explosion serve at once as a memento mori and a cautionary tale with contemporary ramifications. And, for an increasing number of travelers, with the remove the passage of time affords, it is a fascinating phenomenon, and one they find merits a visit to its associated sites.

Why Chernobyl, and Scope of My Thesis

In the years since the Chernobyl disaster, and despite the grim outlook of some members of the scientific and medical communities on its lasting environmental and health impacts (World Health Organization 2005; Zablotska 2016), the Exclusion Zone has undergone a sea-change: no longer a forbidden space, rather a sacralized site of excursion. From the time I began researching and writing about Chernobyl in the spring of 2017, tourism rates have climbed exponentially. There are no official published figures available for 2019 or 2020---and the COVID-19 pandemic naturally will have skewed the upward trend for the latter---but according to the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, tourism to Chernobyl exponentially grew since 2014, when the site received 8,404 visitors, to 2018, when the total count was 71,862; in May 2019 alone, it received 12,591 visitors (Magra 2019). There are a number of exigent factors to account for this surge of interest in going to experience Chernobyl first-hand, but succinctly, I believe they can be attributed to, in ascending order of relevance: the installation in 2019 of the permanent protective sarcophagus over Reactor 4, site of the explosion, thereby promoting a greater sense of safety for visitors; media such as video games that feature Chernobyl as their setting; the titular HBO show that premiered in the summer of 2019, and the trend of dark tourism, writ large, increasingly becoming more mainstream.

As a person with Ukrainian lineage (my grandmother was raised in Odessa) and a self-described dark tourist who made Chernobyl one of my main areas of academic study, I increasingly became fascinated with the notion of visiting there, and I decided to move from the realm of abstract scholarship to the applied through ethnographic fieldwork. I was keen to understand not only underlying visitor motivations to see a site of dark

tourism, but overt ones, including the framework of Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone as a legendary site and some of its visitors as legend-trippers. As well, I wished to tease out some performative and meaning-making aspects of the visitor experience, both during the experience itself and upon later reflection. In this respect, the study of Chernobyl is a conduit to better understand the phenomenology of dark tourism.

What Is Dark Tourism?

As contemporary tourists increasingly yearn for the elusive “authentic” travel experience, the undesirable, abandoned, dangerous, and infrastructure-less places of the world beckon. The postmodern tourist is drawn to the ironic, the counter-cultural, the tourism-for-tourism’s sake---to travel to “escape ordinary” (McCabe 2002: 62). As Ritzer and Liska discuss in their article, “McDisneyization and Post-Tourism,”

It could be argued that tourism is becoming an ecstatic form...anything and everything is coming to be defined as tourism...There is no end to tourism other than limitless increase. There is no end for the tourist than to visit as many sites as possible...(1997: 109).

Dark tourists are a specific subset of the postmodern tourist---they seek out that which exists beyond the parameters of hegemonic, ordered society and its accompanying ‘conventional’ forms of travel in favor of travel whose underlying purposes span the pursuit of narrative, education, “dark leisure,” haunting, memorialization, moral instruction, and *memento mori* (Hryhorczuk 2013: 26). One leading voice on the subject, Phillip Stone, defines dark tourism as “travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (2006:146). Beyond this classification that hews so closely to the act itself as to perhaps seem almost simplistic, dark tourism has been described varyingly in scholarship as a more intent-based “travel to a location wholly, or partly motivated by

the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death” (Seaton 1996: 240); a “product of the circumstances of the late modern world” (Lennon and Foley 2000: 3); a “rite of social passage” (Roberts and Stone 2014: 1); and an “affective socio-spatial encounter” (Martini and Buda 2018: 1). Dark tourism, then, can be viewed as an ostensive act or a reflexive one; it is also at once both experienced and performed. When framed as a facet of postmodern tourism, it can be the “first step in the overall mediation of mortality process, whereby death and suffering is presented and interpreted” (Hryhorczuk, 2013: 26).

As a tourism category, dark tourism is hardly contemporaneous, however; its historical antecedents include medieval pilgrimages to sites of holy reliquaries (Roberts and Stone 2014: 1) and jaunts to “gawp at figures in asylums such as Bedlam” (Hooper and Lennon 2017: 3). Dark tourism locales can range from a haunted house to a concentration camp, with resulting degrees of these sites becoming commodified and “kitchified” (Potts 2012); dark tourism is also a business and an organic byproduct of touristic consumption (Stone and Sharpley 2008). Stone (2006) created a chart that demarcates the spectrum of tourist sites and attractions from ‘lightest’ to ‘darkest’; “Sites of Death and Suffering,” within this rubric, are those that are educational, historical, ‘authentic,’ have a close proximity to the occurrence of the dark event in question, and offer a lower infrastructure for tourism.

Academic interest in tourism emerged in the 1970s as an amalgamation of several different disciplines, including sociology, history, economics, business management, and heritage studies (Gyr 2010). The focal point of intellectual curiosity,

though, centered on the motivations of individuals or groups to travel and the accommodation infrastructure in areas designated touristic (Westcott et al. 2015). Soon after its disciplinary conception, tourism studies adopted and implemented theories from postmodernism, veering away the homogenous “either-or” interpretation of modernist touristic analysis (Uriely 1997: 982). Postmodern tourism viewed the tourist as a complex, multi-motivated personage who interacted with and absorbed facets of touristic sites in more nuanced fashion, beyond empirical observation and rigid binaries; postmodern tourism is interested in the area that lies betwixt the poles (Uriely 1997: 983).

Dark tourism is a relatively novel area of academic inquiry, and many of the same concerns, concepts, and debates since its emergence as a distinct discipline in the 1990s remain pertinent within contemporary research (Convery et al. 2014; Light 2017). These issues include such topics as dark tourism’s relationship to heritage studies and representation (Roberts and Stone 2014); how a site gains its ‘dark’ status through historical scrutiny (Lisle 2016; Stone et al. 2018); and reconceptualizations of key theoretical perspectives. However, during the mid-2000s, many dark tourism scholars shifted focus mostly toward touristic motivation and interaction with dark touristic sites (Light 2017) and drew attention to expressions of identity and affectional responses in terms of the site (Martini and Buda 2018) and the tourist experience in general (Packer and Ballantyne 2016); influences on the sites and the touristic experience from exterior forces and motivations, including politics (Friedrich and Johnston 2013), marketing and economics (Bird et al. 2018; McKenzie 2018), and mass media (González-Tennant 2013;

Sharpley and Wright 2018); and through expansion of the categorization and conceptualization of what constitutes a dark tourism site.

I have chosen Chernobyl as a case study to explore a site of ‘darkest’ tourism in action. The site adheres to all of Stone’s qualifiers and is emblematic of a growing fascination with toxic tourism (Light 2017), in which visitors actively seek out sites of chemical disaster. Chernobyl can be classified a dark tourism site on the grounds of its actual and discursively/performatively constructed toxicity. Sites of toxic tourism are relatively understudied within folklore studies as a discipline; Freeman’s analysis of atomic tourism based on the Manhattan Project (2014) and Milspaw’s (1981) discussion of folklore and the Three Mile Island disaster are two exceptions I encountered. Therefore, one of the goals of my thesis was to further the expansive trend of dark tourism research through a folkloristic lens and a continuance of the examination of exterior forces on sites such as Chernobyl. Folklore theory can elucidate much about touristic motivation and communicative behavior, including visitor performance and Chernobyl-centered narratives, while dark tourism provides frameworks for an analysis of landscape and space manipulation to bolster contemporary folkloristics’ exploration of sense of place.

Overview of Chapters

My thesis consists of four themed chapters and a conclusion. In chapter 1, I look to the history of Chernobyl and explicate how Chernobyl today functions as a site of dark tourism. In so doing, I discuss Chernobyl as a postmodern destination and its liminality as a space that rests on the axis between a utopia and dystopia; in its ruin, the natural world

has reclaimed it, resulting in a biodiversity bloom. Chapter 2 focuses on Chernobyl and the media utilizing the theoretical lenses of analysis of hyperreality and hauntology; how various types of media frame the disaster, including newspaper and magazine articles, video games, television programs, and movies; and their influence on the influx of tourism there, particularly HBO's *Chernobyl* miniseries. In chapter 3, I then examine Chernobyl as a legendary space for its visitors, using narratives of emic and etic folklore and the illegal visitors known as Stalkers who engage in legend-tripping. Chapter 4 focuses on the visitor experience and performance on site, including how tour guides present the realities of the Chernobyl disaster; visitors' self-perceptions of their own and fellow group members' behaviors while touring; and Chernobyl as a sacralized space which visitors are privileged to access. I focus on the emotional aspects of the experience and on the notion of authenticity---and what they perceive the 'authentic' to be. I give special attention to staged authenticity, in which visitors physically stage sites through strategic manipulation of existing objects such as gas masks and dolls; how my informants perceive this phenomenon; whether they engaged in it themselves; and why, if so. This thesis is primarily concerned with how visitors to the site perform staged authenticity, though I briefly explore how and recognize that locals involved in tourism likewise engage in staged authenticity. I was especially interested in the meaning-making aspect of the visitor experience in their post-visit reflections. In my conclusion, I look to the implications of tourism to Chernobyl; the ethics of visiting a site of dark tourism with its particular history and environmental and health implications; and how we can utilize Chernobyl as a case study for dark tourism trends. In each of my chapters, I draw not

only from an array of scholarship, but also ethnographic research in the form of questionnaires and video interviews with participants who visited Chernobyl, whether on official tours or illegally. My questionnaire was specifically designed with relevant questions that pertain to my respective chapter themes.

Through my thesis I address such questions as: what meaning might visitors derive from their experiences? How does Chernobyl function as a site of legend building and legend tripping? How might the visitor experience differ between locals—for whom Chernobyl embodies pre- and post-Soviet significance—and foreigners? And ultimately, what insights do such lines of inquiry afford us into contemporary fears and beliefs surrounding death? I believe my research is timely and relevant, with dark tourism as a phenomenon that is reflective and refractive of collective anxieties concerning disasters, danger, and mortality that pervade mainstream cultural trends.

Methodology

In the initial stages of my research---in addition to compiling resources for my literature review---I undertook virtual fieldwork, first by reading literally hundreds of visitor reviews of guided tours to Chernobyl and performing a close-reading of their rhetoric. I then pursued official channels and wrote to the Ukrainian Embassy as well as the Association of Chernobyl Tourism to explain my project and to seek advice on how best to proceed in terms of relevant foundations/groups, individuals I could interview, etc. I was unable to make any inroads with the embassy, but an official at the Association responded to me and suggested I revisit TripAdvisor, this time to contact tour groups directly. Once again, representatives from the tour groups themselves were seemingly

uninterested in what I viewed as my worthy cause, so I reshuffled my approach and decided to solicit feedback directly from tour participants.¹ I selected my participant pool from the official tours listed on TripAdvisor that had the highest number of reviews: Chernobyl Tour, SoloEast Travel Chernobyl Day Trip, Full-Day Tour of Chernobyl and Prypiat from Kiev, and Chernobyl Tour from Kiev. I direct-messaged the individual reviewers I had noted during my initial data collection who provided the most comprehensive accounts of their experiences, surmising that they would be most likely to respond to me. I also turned to Reddit, where I queried the subreddits r/darktourism and r/Chernobyl for volunteers to assist me in my study. All told, I received 43 responses, but only 21 of the respondents completed the questionnaire I subsequently sent users who agreed to assist with my research; some were likely daunted by its length because I, in my infinite enthusiasm, saw fit to include 20 questions.

My questionnaire was both qualitative and quantitative, and consisted of the aforementioned 20 structured, open-ended, self-reflexive interview questions. The first three questions were demographic ones, and the rest concerned the visitors' prior knowledge of the disaster, on-site experiences, and reflections in the wake of their visits. I included questions about their awareness of legends about Chernobyl, broadly defined, and ones intended to ascertain how they would describe their "performance" during their visits. With such a broad and varied swath of questions, my hope was that the

¹ I applied for IRB approval (1495129-1) prior to contacting informants and received informed consent from all participants in my ethnographic collection stages. No identifying details are used for them except in two instances in which I interviewed authors who were willing to have their names disclosed. One informant permitted me to use a code name.

questionnaire would come across as sufficiently neutral in tone so as not to sway my respondents in their answers.

The second phase of my research was intended to entail on-site fieldwork at Chernobyl, undertaking daily guided tours with different tour groups and interviewing fellow group members in the wake of the tours. Due to travel limitations pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, I had to modify this plan when it became patently clear that it would not be possible to travel overseas for the foreseeable future, and in consultation with my thesis committee chair, Dr. Lattanzi Shutika, we determined that my only option was to pursue additional virtual fieldwork so as to obtain as robust a data collection as possible. I then added to my existing questionnaire a final question about participants' willingness to be interviewed over a recorded Webex video chat. I also modified the format of the questionnaire from a Word document to a more user-friendly Google Form and recorded a brief introductory video about myself and my project to aid in my recruitment efforts. I recruited 9 additional participants garnered from TripAdvisor and conducted 8 virtual interviews. I also conducted interviews separate of recruits who responded to my Google Form questionnaire. I was fortunate enough to speak with two authors of books on Chernobyl, Andrew Leatherbarrow, writer of *Chernobyl 01:23:30* (2016), and Darmon Richter, who authored *Chernobyl: A Stalker's Guide* (2020). My questionnaires and interviews form the bedrock of my analysis for my thesis, in conjunction with a body of scholarly research from multi-disciplinary areas including folklore, tourism studies, social theory, mass media studies, and pop culture studies. I

also draw on news articles about Chernobyl and tourism there as well as about HBO's *Chernobyl* and video games that feature Chernobyl to bolster my analysis.

Demographic Results

In terms of the demographics of my questionnaire respondents, the mean age was 36.5, and the median was 32, both of which were higher than I expected, but the survey answers contextualized this fact because, with the disaster having occurred in 1986, some of the respondents vividly remembered the occurrence and were intrigued by it for years. As well, I sent out my first questionnaire before HBO's *Chernobyl* had aired, and had not anticipated the full extent of its popularity, so the pop culture element I was surprised to see was so influential to my respondents was video games, with over half of them citing these games (particularly *Call of Duty*, *Fallout*, and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*) as their salient motivator for visiting across age, gender, and nationality groups.

Nineteen of the respondents were men and 11 were women. One third self-identified as British nationals (n=10), followed by Eastern Europeans (n=9), Americans (n=5), Swedes (n=4), Belgian (n=1), and a New Zealander (n=1). All but 5 respondents visited on a sanctioned tour; of those latter visitors, one made both legal and illegal excursions. I had been curious as to how legends of Chernobyl differed for different nationalities, and from my findings, the most elaborate and detailed ones were told by those from Eastern European countries and/or those who had been old enough to remember the disaster when it happened. My respondents were united in agreement that whether or not their visit was an adventure, it was also a sobering experience that had a

profound emotional impact on them at the time and upon reflection---as evidenced by the considerable effort they undertook to answer my questions so exhaustively. They all believed themselves to have comported themselves respectfully while visiting; they performed their visit almost as though the Exclusion Zone was sacred ground, and considered themselves to have valorized access to it. No respondents described themselves as dark tourists and few as legend trippers (I had provided definitions of each term in my questionnaire); many interpreted dark tourism to mean taking ghoulish delight in a place with a tragic past or actively seeking the supernatural, and all but two hastened to distance their experience from visiting a concentration camp, which they believed to be “darker” sites due to intention and scale of death. Perhaps my most reflective respondent concisely summarized her experience at Chernobyl as, “almost symbolical [*sic*] for me in a way that it can be seen as a journey through my own fears and insecurities, which could be relieved once I got more hard facts.”

Limitations

My methodology, although necessary due to the restrictive role of COVID-19 during my data collection period, presented me with several challenges. The first---and most overt---was that I could not experience Chernobyl first-hand, myself, and record my autoethnographic observations, nor observe tour guides and tour participants in action and analyze their respective ‘performances.’ The data collection process itself was also more difficult during my second fieldwork period in the late summer and fall of 2020; despite initiating my second round of recruitment in August 2020 and pursuing it

aggressively over the next two months, including reposting my recruitment message on Reddit and individually messaging travelers on TripAdvisor and Facebook, I was only able to gather an additional nine completed questionnaires and conduct 8 interviews. As with the last questionnaire period in the spring of 2019, I had far more initial interest in my project from my recruitment attempts project than materialized in actual results. To my frustration, 6 of my respondents for my Google Form agreed to be interviewed, but only 3 followed through, scheduled an interview, and completed it with me; I furthermore had several no-shows for scheduled interviews.

The final limitations were language and cultural barriers. As my thesis evolved, I found myself especially interested in illegal visitors to the Exclusion Zone, or Stalkers, and the majority of them are native Russian and Ukrainian speakers, so I was not able to speak with as many Stalkers as I had hoped and had to modify my planned questions for those with whom I was able to connect. I recruited through the subreddit r/chernobyl one immensely helpful Ukrainian Stalker, roJla_Cpaka, who explained to me that most Stalkers would be hesitant to speak with me due to not being proficient in English. In Ukraine, roJla_Cpaka told me, the social media site Telegram is more popular than Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and other sites commonly used in the United States, and without speaking Ukrainian or Russian, myself, I therefore was unable to utilize it for recruitment within the Stalker communities that operate there. roJla_Cpaka queried fellow Stalkers on Telegram on my behalf, but as they relayed to roJla_Cpaka, all were reluctant to speak with me, as an outsider to the community, and mistrustful of my intentions.

Although my project evolved along very different lines than originally intended, I nonetheless received some valuable insights from my questionnaires and interviews that enabled me to make certain assertions about visitor experiences as mediated through virtual fieldwork. As well, having the experience of a virtual tour of the power plant afforded me a window into the ways in which tourism to Chernobyl might evolve in the wake of COVID-19. I do plan to expand on the thesis and visit Chernobyl once the pandemic is no longer a prohibition for travel, and at that time I will engage in participant observation and oral ethnographies to bolster my existing research.

A Note on Spelling, Terminology, and Formatting

Throughout my thesis I use the English transliteration of Russian spellings for place names (i.e. “Chernobyl” as opposed to the Ukrainian “Chornobyl”) except when reproducing quotes from my informants. I made this decision in keeping with how the names appears in my secondary sources and at present are more widely recognized by an English-speaking audience but wanted to note that my Ukrainian informants, understandably, felt strongly that their preferred spelling become more mainstream. As . roJla_Cpaka explained, “*By the way, Wikipedia is officially starting using Kyiv instead of Kiev. Hope it will be the same with Chornobyl and Chernobyl in awhile.*” I use “Chernobyl” and the “Exclusion Zone” or “the Zone” interchangeably when discussing the area, depending on the context. For example, unofficial visitors focus their forays much more on the Exclusion Zone itself than just Chernobyl or the city of Pripjat and tend to use “the Zone” when describing their experiences. I use the umbrella term of

“dark tourist” rather than “toxic tourist” or “thanatourist” because the latter two I find to be too restrictive in their definitions for the type of visitor to Chernobyl I encountered in terms of their motivations (e.g., not everyone was actively seeking out the site because of its associations with death or toxicity). Finally, when providing quotes from my questionnaire responses or interviews, I italicize the text. This is particularly necessary to differentiate in the case of the authors I both interviewed and quoted from their published works.

CHAPTER 1: “ESCAPE ORDINARY”: CHERNOBYL AS DESIRED

It may be that in the Gothic we find, therapeutically, the shaped and ordered externalization of our own fears and anxieties, our own private nightmares. If we slow down and “rubberneck” as we pass highway accidents, if we rush to nearby house-fires, we witness the horrifying events in solipsistic safety: the event is experienced by a stranger; we are the unthreatened observer (Scott 2002: X).

But did I say they were monsters? Do the utopias of our time necessarily breed monsters? Were we monsters when we, for the sake of a utopia we were not willing to postpone—justice, equality, humanity for all—fought those in whose interest this utopia was not (is not), and, with our own doubts, fought those who dared doubt that the ends justify the means? That science, the new god, held all the answers we would seek from him? (Wolf 2001: 30).

January 23, 2021, Chernobyl Power Plant

Our guide, representing the tourism agency CHERNOBYLwel.come, walked briskly, the crunching of snow as she made her way along the road sounding a sharp report in the stillness. Though it was 3:00 PM and the sky was a vivid blue, a slow-blooming sunset was already visible on the horizon. The guide is named Yulia, and she strikes me as being in her 20s. She is an attractive brunette with a silver stud nose piercing and long geometric earrings, dressed for the harsh Ukraine winter with a puffy metallic parka, bright blue turtleneck sweater, and a bucket hat of a slightly duller blue hue. I note her manicured nails perfectly coordinate with her coat: silver and with a mirrored finish. She wears no protective gear, nor that staple of the present pandemic, a face mask. She does, however, carry with her a canary-yellow dosimeter, which she holds

aloft for us to take note of the radiation levels (reassuringly low) at various intervals along the tour.

After enthusiastically addressing our small group as “my dear friends,” she sets off with no further preamble, and so our tour begins. I had immersed myself in countless photographic experiences of the power plant prior to this tour, but they proved to be ultimately disjointed and did not adequately provide a cohesive and expansive view of the site. To my surprise, it looked rather...normal. From our view near the entrance, it was not desolate and post-apocalyptic; there was no shadow of the great tragedy that happened here nearly 35 years ago, when I was not yet 2 years old. The gleaming sarcophagus over Reactor Number 4 known as the New Safe Confinement belies what lies literally beneath.

A Brief History of the Chernobyl Disaster

To formulate an overarching view or even a snap judgement of Chernobyl of today, we as visitors must necessarily look to its past. For some, Chernobyl perhaps can be interpreted as the graveyard of humankind’s hubristic folly: the failure of man and technology, a metonym for a former Soviet utopian dream. It was not always this way, however. The Soviet Union first began operating nuclear plants and asserting their viability at Obninsk, near Moscow, on June 27, 1954 (Schmid 2015), and throughout the 1960s and 1970s was driven to compete with the United States for dominance in “one of the few fields where [it] could plausibly lay claim to be at the helm of human progress” (Guth, Lüscher, and Richers 2018). A multi-pronged concerted effort was undertaken by nuclear proponents to convince political leaders, economic authorities, and the public that

nuclear power both dovetailed with Communist ideology and would significantly bolster the resources of the state; for the public, this entailed “establishing rhetorical legitimacy...and ingraining the symbolic value of nuclear power in the popular imagination” (Schmid 2015). Early on in the tour, Yulia shows the group a statue of Prometheus near Reactor 4 that was relocated from Pripyat to its present-day location, heavy-handed symbolism, I thought, for how the Soviets perceived nuclear power as a gift to the people and an ominous foretelling of their punishment to come. Echoing this theme of romanticizing nuclear power was a sculpture on the side of the power plant featuring a dove paradoxically holding a “peaceful atom” in its beak.

As Yulia explains, when construction on Chernobyl began in western Ukraine on the banks of the Pripyat River in 1970, in a farming, woodland, and marshland area known for its “rich soil,” the site was intended to be “the greatest power plant in the Soviet Union,” and its related *atomgrad* (atomic city), Pripyat, a worker’s Eden. Chernobyl, she tells us, was considered a plum posting for a nuclear worker to land, and Pripyat a utopia in contrast to the cities and towns from which many of its future inhabitants hailed. In its marketing efforts:

...the city council---the *ispolkom*---had prepared a glossy book, filled with vivid color photographs of its happy citizens at play. The average age of the population was twenty-six, and more than a third of them were children. The young families had access to five schools, three swimming pools, thirty-five playgrounds, and beaches on the sandy banks of the river. The town planners had taken care to preserve the city’s sylvan environment...The buildings and open spaces were decorated with sculptures and spectacular mosaics celebrating science and technology. For all its modernity and sophistication, the city remained encircled by wilderness, offering a sometimes enchanting proximity to nature (Higginbotham 2018: 17).

As Yulia walks us past reactors 1 through 3, decommissioned in the decades since the accident, she provides an overview of the history of the region. She solemnly says to our group, “It’s a place which died twice.” She describes the government’s resettlement of the “big village” that once stood at the site of the future power plant, stating that the Soviet Union “decided to erase the history of this village.” This could well be an example of one of the legends of Chernobyl that have emerged since the disaster; either way, I could find no record through Internet research of such a village having existed, only the namesake Chernobyl 14 km from the power plant. Despite the hopes and dreamed-of glories of its planners, it would take years to finish construction on Chernobyl. Beset by delays endemic to the slow-rolling juggernaut that was the USSR, the plant would not see active duty until the summer of 1983, when Reactor 4 was set live prematurely after pressure from the national Communist Party. This action was undertaken without a key safety test being conducted beforehand and corners cut throughout the construction process with shoddy materials and a critical design flaw of the reactor itself---the preferred Soviet model of RBMK-1000---which utilized graphite-tipped control rods to moderate the reactivity of the reactor core (Perez 2009; Lallanilla 2019).

On April 26, 1986, at 1:23:58 AM, an accident caused an explosion in Unit One of Reactor 4 of the Chernobyl power plant, resulting in the largest-scale global nuclear disaster of the 20th century (Eilam and Sher 2019: 2). In an ironic turn of events, the accident was the outcome of what should have been a routine safety test of the plant’s backup power systems to determine whether coolant in the reactors could continue to circulate without the main power source until the background generators could take

effect---the very safety test that should have been conducted before the reactor was put into operation. The ensuing events were, in layman's terms, an unhappy confluence of the aforementioned reactor design, with graphite a poor material for this purpose due its properties of conducting heat rather than moderating it; a failure on the part of the attending crew---particularly the chief engineer, Anatoli Dyatlov---to adhere to safety procedures; operator inexperience and error; and a malfunctioning mechanism to execute emergency shut-down of the reactor (Eilam and Sher 2019: 2; Ingram 2005: 30); Kortov and Ustyantsev 2013: 203). Less than a minute after the safety test was conducted, a steam explosion blew off the lid of the reactor, dispersing fire, large pieces of graphite, and radiation particles into the open air; the graphite core fire in Reactor 4 would burn for a further ten days beyond the initial incident, releasing radiation into the atmosphere all the while (Hasrin and Othman 2019: 81).

The repercussions of the disaster were both immediate and long-term and extended far beyond the confines of the approximate 30 km in Ukraine and neighboring Belarus that came to be known as the Exclusion Zone. There is little in the way of consensus on the human cost. By many official counts, there were 31 deaths as a direct result of the accident: two plant workers killed by proximity to the steam explosion and 29 firemen/first responders, victims of radiation, thermal burns, and one death from cardiac arrest (NEI 2019). There were a further 6000,00 liquidators sent to clean up the accident who were exposed to high levels of radiation in the wake of the incident. What remains disputed today, however, is the death toll from lingering effects of radiation. Documented deaths and predictions of future death count vary widely depending on the

source, with former Soviet countries' data tending to downplay the potential scale as well as the documented mortalities. A 2005 report released by the UN Chernobyl Forum and the governments of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, "Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident and Health Care Programmes," provided the figure of 9,335 deaths linked to radiation, particularly from thyroid and other cancers, but cautioned, "The estimates related to the longer term are much less certain [than deaths directly attributable to the accident], as they are subject to major confounding factors, competing causes of death and projection models" (104).

As the tour continues, Yulia shows us the memorial to the fallen first responders, a simple red brick arch adorned only by a brass bell hanging beneath the apex. Both the Prometheus and dove sculptures are within view, in a sobering juxtaposition. As we examine the memorial, a ray of dwindling light engulfs it and briefly sets it aflame. It is one of the most affecting moments of the tour. Yet the New Safe Confinement sarcophagus over Reactor 4 is the arch that calls to me, and I strain to see it more clearly beyond the security wall. It is not to be; not on this tour, anyway. For Yulia and the Chernobyl Power Plant are roughly 8,000 km away from me, my tether to them only my laptop screen. Yulia---and I---can go no closer, and I must be satisfied with an experience that only whets my deep-seated desire to see more, more, more.

Chernobyl and Dark Tourism: Contextualizing My Research

I set out with my thesis in part to reconcile my own inclinations toward and relationship with dark tourism in general---and Chernobyl in particular---but from the

existing scholarship, why does a person so inclined choose to visit such sites? Typologies of dark tourism sites in the literature tend to have a categorical rigidity. My research suggests that these categories are not mutually exclusive; one site does not need to be limited to one single category, despite the overarching motivation to visit a site based on its primary association, e.g., a battlefield with war (Light 2017). Chernobyl may be classified as a site of toxic tourism but also of disaster (Lennon and Foley 2000), dystopia (Podoshen et al. 2015), and even of the supernatural, as Hannam and Yankovska (2018) demonstrate—depending on the motivations for visitation and interpretation of the site by the tourist.

There have been a number of other dark tourism case studies conducted pertaining to Chernobyl specifically: Goatcher and Brunsden (2011) analyze tourist photographs of the site through the lens of the postmodern-sublime and anxiety; Hryhorczuk (2013) argues from an autoethnographic perspective of participating in a tour that Chernobyl should be granted UNESCO World Heritage List designation; Stone (2013) propounds that Chernobyl is a post-apocalyptic heterotopia; and Hannam and Yankovska (2018) utilize tourism mobilities to explore Chernobyl as a spectral landscape. There have been no case studies of Chernobyl I have encountered, however, that have approached the site through exploring the legends of Chernobyl with which visitors might have been familiar prior to undertaking tours that would influence their decision to visit. I believe pursuing this avenue is relevant within a folklore context because it nuances Chernobyl as a legendary space in keeping with one of the characteristics of Ellis' (2018) definition of such places, in which adolescents seek sites associated with violent death. The direct

pursuit of aesthetic as outlined in a legend—or of the actions performed in legends—is known as ostension, or, more colloquially, legend-tripping, e.g., visiting a purportedly haunted cemetery to incur the wrath of a ghost. Ellis has especially written about this behavior (1989, 2004) and attributes it to adolescents looking to act out against authorities through visitation and vandalization (in some cases) of cemeteries, haunted bridges, sites of crime, etc., or in behavior, such as occult ritual performance. Other folklorists have made meaningful contributions to the aesthetic response and thrill-seeking attainable through ostension; Grider (2007) discusses this phenomenon through haunted house visitations; Cowdell (2014) examines urban legend-tripping and history in the ghost tour medium; and Lindahl (2005) analyzes ostension as a form of healing, to name a few examples. In all of these instances, emotional responses to ostensive action are discussed meticulously, as well as the social effects of legend-tripping (Bird 1994).

Scholars from other disciplines have incorporated both semiotic and folkloristic understanding of ostension to their world, such as semanticist Bel Deering, who examines how Foucault's concept of the heterotopia applies to ostension in cemeteries (2015). More recently, scholars like Kinsella (2011) and Blank and McNeill (2018) have discussed ostension in digital contexts. I argue that, in the process of legend-tripping, visitors to Chernobyl attempt to enact and reinforce legends concerning Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone and continue the transmission process of the legends through digital communities, including Reddit and YouTube, where they recount their experiences with photographic and video aid. The studies I have read also did not go in-depth into visitor behaviors during the experience beyond autoethnographic accounts; the notion of staged

authenticity; nor comprehensively evaluated the on-site touristic experience of the place and the ways in which the tour guides stage their tours, all of which my work concerns itself with. I also examine visitor experience under the rubric of Ryden's (1993) concept of sense of place and the invisible landscape as "imaginative vistas built upon the actual physical landscape" (294).

Tourist Motivation

Dark Tourism Versus Thanatourism

Scholarly interest in touristic motivation has conceptually demarcated thanatourism as a subset under the umbrella of dark tourism. Seaton suggests that the primary distinguishing factors behind thanatourism as opposed to dark tourism in general are the desires to interact symbolically and exclusively with death (1996). The scope of dark tourism, on the other hand, is broader and encompasses tragic phenomena not restricted to death, as well as the commoditizing efforts in play at dark touristic sites (Light 2017: 279-81). Crucially, though, Seaton proposes that thanatouristic motivations exist "across a continuum of intensity" in the reasons for visitation (1996: 240). This model of a "continuum of intensity" informed subsequent typological models developed to formulate "the Shades of Darkness" as applicable to touristic sites, such as those of Stone (2006) and Sharpley (2005). Of course, reasoning, as well as meaning and interaction with dark touristic and thanatouristic sites, is both individually and contextually contingent (Ashworth 2008). Within such a framework of touristic motivation, then, visitation to the same site may be driven by thanatouristic factors in one

individual and broader, dark touristic factors in another, as scholars like Lennon and Foley (2000), Poria, Butler, and Airey (2004), and Roberts and Stone (2014) have and continue to debate (Golańska 2015).

Thus, the significance of the site is determined by the tourist just as much as the site may trigger emotional reactions or be attributable to identity formation. Several scholars have discussed emotional responses to dark tourism sites from multidisciplinary perspectives. Biran and Buda (2018), for example, analyze how sites induce a fear of death, and sadness, using psychological theory. The interface between dark touristic sites and identity has also been extensively studied in relation to specific categories of dark tourism and the type of tourist that they attract; Podoshen (2013) examines black metal fans and their interaction with sites associated with death and paganism; MacCarthy (2016) investigates the intersection between identity through clothing and visitation of dark touristic spaces; and Slade (2003) views visitation to the battleground site of Gallipoli by Australians and New Zealanders as an affirmation of collective, patriotic identity. I am interested in the manners in which individual or collective identity is expressed or reinforced through visitation to Chernobyl in terms of psychological/affective responses to the site and, in this respect, how my informants might differ.

Why Visit Chernobyl?: Death, The Gothic, The Sublime, and Heterotopia

In the existing literature on Chernobyl, scholars have made visitor intent their focal point, White and Frew delve into visitor motives for dark tourism sites writ large:

Some individuals wish to indulge their curiosity and fascination with thanatological concerns...in a socially acceptable environment that provides them with an opportunity

to construct their own contemplation of mortality...However, some visitors are motivated to visit for ghoulish titillation, and to be entertained (2013: 3).

Whether Chernobyl could be construed as a “socially acceptable environment” is debatable; despite its growing popularity, dark tourism is still considered a niche form of travel, and from my autoethnographic experience, my desire to visit this particular dark locale is often greeted with skepticism at best, outright dismay and disapproval at worst. Yet, no one has had an adverse reaction when I have recounted my experience of visiting Auschwitz and Birkenau or expressed interest in other concentration camp sites, which reinforces Stone’s (2006) spectrum-within-a-spectrum of darkest tourism and underscores the perceived danger elements of visiting a site of toxic tourism. I interpret White and Frew’s argument to mean that the visitor to a dark tourism site is not motivated by *mastery* of fear, but rather the need to *acknowledge* the fear and reconcile oneself to one’s own mortality.

There is an inherent *schadenfreude* dark tourism affords, and the ability to have a sanctioned encounter with danger and death that performatively provides the visitor with a sense of valorized access places Chernobyl on a different plane than other dark tourist sites, such as a battlefield. In the latter case, one must rely extensively on imagination to recreate the historical moment and invoke its loss and horror; Chernobyl is, in a sense, a living memorial, with a plethora of structures and artefacts on display that render the tragedy omnipresent, and the site must necessarily remain comparatively unaltered due to the risk of radiation exposure and leakage. Danger at once *feels* and arguably *is* real here, and the protective accoutrements some tour companies encourage visitors to wear

optically reinforce this fact. It is precisely because Chernobyl remains an active site of destruction that I firmly place it in the darkest tourism end of Stone's spectrum, alongside such latent sites as concentration camps, despite the scale of death being incomparable.

One of Stone's criterion for what he would categorize as a site of darkest tourism is length of time elapsed between the occurrence of the given event and the present epoch, and 30-odd years is still well within the realm of collective remembrance, whereas the remaining Holocaust survivors are increasingly scarce in number, as are those who have extensive recollections of World War II. Bittner reinforces Stone's metric of proximity of time scale, citing a study in which participants stated that "...visiting an area in more recent history (e.g. twenty years ago) is much more intense than those from World War II" (2011:157). The event in 1986 has had a ripple effect that is perceptible in the present in the form of mutations and cancer found in local wildlife, volunteer cleanup workers, and former residents, and the consequences of the accident will endure for millennia.

The literature on dark tourism and Chernobyl are especially relevant in the context of visitor motivation, but one need only look to the popularity of dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels, T.V. shows, movies, and video games to discern the ways in which it is seemingly human nature to at once fear and romanticize sites of ruin and past trauma. To turn to the epigraph for this chapter, I see Chernobyl as a contemporary Gothic space, both in the physical ruins that, until 2019 and the installment of the New Safe Confinement sarcophagus, were visible to onlookers, and as a concept. Bowers looks beyond the supernatural connotations of the Gothic: "The Gothic's forte is its

expression of the mystery of death...[and] becomes a mode that conveys the fear surrounding the unknown” (2017: 160). A visitor to Chernobyl is a rubbernecker to an accident, albeit one who is removed from the immediacy of its horror through the passage of time. As in literary examples of the Gothic, Chernobyl is haunted, but by its literal fallout; “this haunting remains largely invisible, spectral” (Gere 2013: 219).

Another related way to frame Chernobyl and the effect it has on someone who experiences the site is that of the sublime; several scholars have approached dark tourism through this lens. Edmund Burke wrote that “...whatever is in any sort terrible, or is analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*” (1844: 51). The concept of the sublime, a display that is on a grand scale and induces awe in the onlooker, is associated with Romanticism and is most prevalent in literary theory and art but can be extrapolated to tourist sites as well. ‘Awe’ connotes a state of wonderment or fear, and the latter is pertinent when parsing touristic intent and experience at sites of dark tourism. I find Lyotard’s similar treatment of the role of the sublime in art to be probative when framing that of the sublime in dark tourist sites:

The arts, with whatever their materials pressed forward by the esthetics of the sublime in a quest for intense effects ... must test their limits through surprising, difficult, shocking combinations. Shock is...the evidence of (something) *happening*, rather than nothing, suspended privation (1994: 252).

Goatcher and Brunsden, in their analysis of tourist photos from Chernobyl, argue that these photos are manifestations of the visitor’s search for the uncanny or sublime, explaining that, “The sublime combines fear in the face of the infinite or incomprehensible, with a transcendence of that fear” (2011:128). They adopt the stances

of Burke and Lyotard, then, but expand on them through their assertion that the tourist of the sublime seeks to conquer fear. 'Intensity' is a characteristic of the sublime experience, and to revisit what Lyotard (1984) referred to as [the search for the sublime] being a "quest for intense effects," one can assert that a visitor to Chernobyl experiences the state of transcendence innate to that which is sublime (252).

Bittner relatedly discusses the notion of the sublime in her study of thanatological attractions, in which she draws from prior research on the ontological phenomenon of "...tourists constantly looking for new experiences, out of fear of internal 'emptiness,'" and notes that "...the lack of classic curator practice in destinations where thanatologically themed attractions can be found, brings the modern visitor to unexpected experiential paths" (2011: 149). Chernobyl is, ironically, relatively 'unspoiled' in terms of the volume of tourists who have explored it to date, and undeniably offers a unique and "unexpected experience." Despite the proliferation of images and general public awareness of the disaster, there is ample empirical evidence that tourists are astonished by what they encounter during their visit. Many TripAdvisor reviews of the various guided tours of Chernobyl employ diction of the unexpected, such as "surprise" and "unreal." For tourists to embark willingly on this relatively expensive, off-the-beaten path experience, they necessarily must have certain preconceived notions of the sites, but they nonetheless experience "unexpected experiential paths." The guided tour groups commoditize this touristic desire for the unexpected and the sublime, most flagrantly in the form of charging for the use of Geiger counters and protective suits, but opportunity would not exist were it not for demand. Within the guided tours there is an underlying

symbiotic relationship in which monetizing and sacralizing transpire concurrently, which Stone and Sharpley (2008) delineate: "...darkest or black tourism occurs where a fascination with death is provided for by the purposeful supply of experiences intended to satisfy this fascination" (579).

Stone (2013) concurs that Chernobyl offers the experience of the sublime, but he provides a fascinating take on the motivation for visitors to the site by arguing that the site is our collective post-apocalyptic nightmare made manifest, a "heterotopia...in which the familiar and uncanny collide" (91). He frames Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' as "...a ritual space that exists outside of time – in which time is not only arrested but notions of Otherness are consumed in a post-apocalyptic place" (79). A heterotopia occupies the liminal space between utopia and dystopia, deviant from societal hegemonies; it is 'Other' from a psychogeographic perspective and as a mediator of space and time. Rush-Cooper argues, like Stone, that Chernobyl is a post-apocalyptic site "...in a manner which re-purposes a post-apocalyptic imagery as a salient political narrative that holds a fidelity to events, pasts and futures" (2013: ii).

Tourism has been sanctioned by the Ukrainian government at Chernobyl since 2011, and an increasing number of structured tours offer access to the Dead Zone and the experience of exploring the ruins of Pripyat as well as other villages, feeding mutant catfish in the cooling pond of the power plant, and even partaking of a meal (prepared outside of the Dead Zone) in the former Chernobyl canteen. Armed with protective clothing gear and rented Geiger counters, toxic tourists, especially those who opt out of protective outerwear, can enact their post-apocalyptic urban explorer fantasies and seemingly have a brush with

danger and the ‘forbidden.’ Multiple reviews on TripAdvisor and questionnaire responses reference the fact that tour guides consciously avoid crossing paths with other tour groups. Rush-Cooper notes how his tour guide overtly avoided using the term “tourist,” and instead referred to his groups as “...visitors to a very special place, a restricted place” (2013:1). The semiotics of danger are encountered prior even to commencing their tours and after they have concluded; visitors must purchase special insurance and sign health waivers, and are screened for radiation upon departing the site. The Ukrainian government, in contrast to tour operators, downplays the dangers of visiting in their official literature. Perez paraphrases a government guide to Chernobyl: “...visitors will most likely be fitted with face masks, shoes, hats, even jump suits, all unnecessary, but highly dramatic” (2009: 35). Some of my older respondents emphasized the potential danger of the tour more so than younger respondents; one 50-year Swedish woman told me, “I’m not proud of this reaction, but at the same time, the Chernobyl disaster was a major incident in recent European history, and it shaped our collective culture and consciousness. And danger is a bit exciting in itself, of course.” The travel writer David Whitley (2013) described his experience of visiting Reactor 4: “You can get within 100 metres...and it’s altogether terrifying.” A review I encountered on TripAdvisor from 2016 typifies many visitor reflections on the experience:

Chornobyl has been a must-see place for us for a long time. This tour is not only about sightseeing, but also makes you realize what tremendous consequences human error might have. I'd recommend renting a eiger counter as well as including lunch. There are hot spots in the zone, where you will be amazed or even shoked [sic] looking at the numbers on your counter's screen.

On the 26th anniversary of the event, another travel writer, Elyse Pasquale (2012), wrote in an article about her visit to the elementary school in Pripyat, “The darkened, rubble-strewn hallways evoke the set of a horror film.” She also ruefully noted that, “It takes a certain kind of tourist to sign away their life and board a bus to the site of the world’s worst nuclear disaster.”

Who, then, is this “certain kind of tourist”? Death is thematically at the root of darkest tourism, and in pursuing the sublime on a subconscious level, I would argue tourists to Chernobyl ultimately seek out an intimate experience with mortality, albeit one from which they can walk away. Stone and Sharpley devised a chart to illustrate the interplay between dark touristic consumption and ontological attitudes toward death and discuss the ways in which these views are transmogrified through the dark tourism experience:

This neutralizing effect is aided by dark touristic exposures to death, where the process of continued sensitization of dying ultimately results in a sanitization of the subject area. This creates a perceived immunity from death... Thus, both sensitizing and sanitizing death allows individuals to view their own death as distant, unrelated to the dark tourism product which they consume... these kind of deaths are ‘therefore reassuring rather than threatening, since they orient people towards strategies of survival rather than making them aware of the futility of all [life] strategies in the face of mortality’ (587).

Visitors to Pripyat and Chernobyl must attempt to reconcile uncomfortable and unsettling visuals and the resulting shock, terror, and awe---the feeling of the sublime---they evoke with their own fears and notions of death and suffering. The self-aware ‘darkest tourist’ might inwardly examine his or her motivations for seeking out so fringe a travel experience as Chernobyl, as did a number of my questionnaire respondents. It is reasonable to assume that ‘terror’ and ‘shock’ would be key components of the visitor

experience to as sobering a location as Chernobyl, and this diction, in fact, is utilized frequently by the traveler accounts I read on TripAdvisor as well as in my questionnaire responses. As visitors to what constitutes a post-apocalyptic site, rather than desiring to meditate upon the unspoiled landscapes so integral to the Romantics, tourists to Chernobyl specifically turn their gaze to the ultimate spoiled landscape, which, as nature reclaims it, inverts the scene to the sublime once more. In a sense, Chernobyl is sacralized as a presentiment of the fall of civilization that one day might actualize. A *New York Times* magazine article from March 29, 2020---in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic---lends credence to this notion. The author plainly states, rendering himself an almost Gothic figure: “I was on a kind of perverse pilgrimage: I wanted to see what the end of the world looked like. I wanted to haunt its ruins and be haunted by them.”

Fear, then, can be as much a motivator for travel as curiosity, and in an uncertain world dark tourism affords us an escape from the present reality and a scrying tool for what could come to pass should history repeat itself. Pandora’s box contained hope alongside all the ills that were unleashed, and a paradoxical optimism can be found within a site of dark tourism. For the onlooker to be able to observe the place means that there is yet survival. Surprisingly for many visitors, around Chernobyl and throughout the Exclusion Zone is abundant plant life and wildlife, some of which was formerly endangered, and which now thrives. Darmon Richter (2020), author of *Chernobyl: A Stalker’s Guide* and one of my informants I interviewed, describes not a wasteland, but rather a prelapsarian world:

Chernobyl today is a place of greenery and life, of branches sagging under overripe fruit, and of wild animals that in the decades of our absence have begun to lose their distrust of

humans. Foxes will eat bread from the palm of your hand, while all around, ponderous symbols of the former regime give way to flowers, berries, and ants. It is a place where the humble might find inexhaustible beauty, where the curious may glimpse nature's future order (12).

This sentiment is echoed in numerous articles that explore the phenomenon of the resurgence of nature throughout Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone:

Species absent for decades, such as the black stork and white-tailed eagle, started to reappear; in 2008, birds were actually nesting inside the sarcophagus...and a bear's paw-prints were recorded. Today, there are more wild boar than you can shake the proverbial stick at. Badger, beaver and otter populations are also booming and so is the boar's historic predator, the wolf. Bigger and shyer animals that normally shun humans have to date fared better than smaller ones. Plutonium residue abounds---game animals are too radioactive for human consumption - but otherwise still appear to be healthy” (Coates 2014:508).

So, too, did Yulia assure our group that animals “live pretty good here; they have no health issues.” That animals have “no health issues” is in dispute; as Mousseau and Møller (2017), among other researchers and scientists, state, “there is little doubt that the radioactive contaminants associated with the Chernobyl disaster have generated genetic damage and increased mutation rates, with many studies also finding phenotypic effects that were correlated to the levels of genetic damage reported” (265). The aforementioned Swedish respondent to my questionnaire provided a compelling narrative of just how far-reaching the environmental consequences of the disaster were:

“In 1986, when the disaster happened, I was 18 and it had a great impact on our lives. The accident was first noticed at a Swedish nuclear power plant, Forsmark, which is close to where I live. One of the workers there was found to have elevated radiation levels as he left the power plant, and only later they realised that the levels were even more elevated when he came in from outside than when he left. So they concluded that something had happened somewhere, and were speculating as to where it might be. I remember when they talked about this on the news. And then, when Gorbachev admitted there'd been an accident on TV. And then, when people measured radiation levels everywhere and kids were told to play inside, and we weren't allowed to drink milk or eat mushrooms and berries. The reindeer had to be brought south (from Lapland) to feed,

because the lichens they eat were contaminated. And so on, and so on. People were discussing the effects of Caesium 137 and Strontium 90 on TV no end. So this was a part of our communal consciousness around here. There's a small island off the east coast of Sweden that is one of the most contaminated sites in Europe, even today."

The preponderance of wildlife is unquestionable, however. Anecdotally, many of my informants discussed wildlife in Chernobyl they had witnessed first-hand. In one instance, a questionnaire respondent wrote, "One of the things that actually felt good during our visit was to see how nature is taking over, taking back what it once lost." Another lamented that wildlife "...is thriving without humans in the area. The fact that radiation is less harmful to them than human contact is depressing."

Why Visit Chernobyl? Ethnographic Findings

My questionnaire and interview data concerning motivation for visiting Chernobyl validated the existing research on visitor motivation to dark tourism sites writ large as well as to Chernobyl specifically. A number of the questionnaire responses specifically contained terms associated with Romanticism and the sublime, like "amazing," "awe," "humbling," and "terror." One respondent even likened her visit to a religious experience, writing: "But entering the sports hall for instance, almost felt sacral. It was so still and quiet, like a monument of a time that has been lost forever." Others also described the sights in a way that depicted Chernobyl and its surroundings in the vein of Stone's (2013) heterotopia where space and time had been arrested and a sort of paradise had emerged. Darmon Richter, of his first visit to Chernobyl on a guided tour, wrote, "'Like everyone else, I had expected to find a dystopia here, but it was quite the opposite of this - the bittersweet ghosts of a would-be utopia - that greeted me instead"

(2020: 44). Another respondent did not experience Chernobyl as ‘dark,’ but rather wrote, “it didn’t feel like there was death in the air or even like there was a tragedy. It felt more like a new world, or exploring the ruins of a different civilization. It’s closer to visiting an old castle or the Roman Forum than it is a disaster site.”

There is an entire subset of visitors to Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone who take this view of the place as a new world and focus not on its past, but its present. These are unofficial or illegal visitors, depending on the beholder. The umbrella term of “Stalker” is used for this group, by themselves and others, referring to Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 movie of that name, based in turn on the 1972 novel *Roadside Picnic*. The story is set post—extraterrestrial occurrence known as the Visitation which took place in six different zones, with strange phenomena transpiring there in the wake of the event. The zones’ boundaries are tightly regulated by the government to keep supernatural artifacts discarded by the Visitors from being removed. “Stalkers” here is a term for scavengers who trespass in the zones to steal and sell these objects. The parallels between the narrative in *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker* are not insignificant: the Chernobyl accident can be seen as a proxy for the extraterrestrial event; the restricted area surrounding the disaster site is also known as a Zone; irradiated artifacts are strictly supposed to remain in the Zone; and some Stalkers do, in fact, steal them for profit. As Riley (2017) notes, “Mystically inclined admirers of Tarkovsky like to note that he ‘foretold’ the Chernobyl disaster” (20).

Unofficial visitors are more nuanced than merely opportunists looking to line their wallets, however. In an interview with Darmon Richter, who spent a good deal of

time with the Stalker community and himself participated in unofficial visits to the Exclusion Zone, I asked him how he would define a Stalker, and if there is a particular “ethos of a Stalker.” In his assessment:

“Rather than simply labelling all trespassers in the Zone as stalkers, I think it’s more accurate to use the term “illegal tourists” – and this is what the administration officially calls them. Within that group, I would use the term “Stalker” only for people who self-identify as such. But still, this group ranges from reclusive eco-explorers who make almost shamanic trips through the zone and never share the details with anyone... to the people with tens of thousands of Instagram followers, who shoot videos in the Zone, sometimes leave graffiti (or in other cases clean it up), and have websites offering tours in multiple different languages.”

I was able to make a connection with three self-described Stalkers who contacted me after seeing my recruitment message on the subreddit r/chernobyl; one of them, roJla_Cpaka, referred me to another “very experienced Stalker” I then contacted on Facebook. He did not consent to be interviewed, but was willing to complete my questionnaire. These Stalkers fell within the spectrum Richter went on to detail on the non-commercial side, making excursions with small groups of like-minded companions. They were a welcome inroad into the Stalker community, which both Richter and I agreed was very difficult to infiltrate, especially if one does not speak Ukrainian or Russian. As Richter explained,

“At one end of the scale there are people who call themselves “Stalkers,” and will be your best friend if you pay them for a private illegal tour of the Zone. At the other end, I’m sure there are plenty more who wouldn’t dream of even having a conversation with a tourist like me. Like you, I found people during my research who just wouldn’t talk to me – despite the fact that I’d already made one illegal trip myself. Many just don’t want coverage, and some of the older ones still harbour this inherited Cold War-era mistrust for Westerners too. I think all that people like you and I can do, is to be aware that we’re really working with the tip of the iceberg here. It’s a cultural phenomenon that we can study from outside, but never truly get to the bottom of!”

His point is well-taken; even were I able to meet with these Stalkers in person and accompany them on an illegal visit to the Zone, I would need to be wary of the phenomenon of what Forsey (2010) terms “the sacralization of participant observation” (77) and putting too much weight on my observations in trying to understand the ethos of a Stalker. The twin factors of the Stalkers’ performative behavior as a paid guide as well as the limitations of participating as an etic observer to a community must be accounted for, especially when my entry into this community has been accomplished only digitally and with a small sampling. There are other considerations, such as Hall’s (2000) observation that an outsider’s curiosity can be misconstrued by the gatekeeper, or potential informant, or Gurney’s (2002) assertion that gender, for women, can be an impediment in gaining access to a male-dominated community, as with the Stalkers (Gray 2014: 6).

The closest Richter and I came to defining the Stalker ethos and their motivations for visiting Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone was an overriding love of the place. I would argue that this love does not always translate to respect, however. In a comedic moment during a chat with roJla_Cpaka, I described to him the notion of heterotopias, and he replied,

“Haha, as you writing me all these things about Foucault, heterotopia, many pictures of drunk stalkers in Pripyat throwing furniture out of windows popped up in my head. What a difference between theory and practice! There are many Stalkers who brings like 5-10 liters of vodka to the Zone and [are] just drinking it for 3-4 days there.”

That said, he also shared with me that there is a strong sense of fellowship and community among the Stalker groups he belongs to online, where they share tips on how

not to get discovered while camping and hiking. For roJla_Cpaka, his motivations for visiting the Exclusion Zone, where he aims to go “once a season,” harken back to the danger element I previously examined. But it is not radiation that is the danger for him and his fellow Stalkers:

“First of all it was a challenge for me to infiltrate into the Zone and get to Pripyat and "Duga" Antenna (commonly known in the US as "Russian Woodpecker") without being caught by the local police or border patrols. Secondly, I wanted to see everything in the Zone with my own eyes and experience how it's to be there and staying overnight in abandoned buildings.”.

A Lithuanian Stalker similarly spoke of “a lot of adrenalin-inducing excitement while trying not to get caught, walking during the night, hiding or running from approaching cars, sleeping in abandoned buildings etc.” Danger seems to be commingled with a Thoreauvian yearning to self-isolate for some Stalkers. Another Ukranian Stalker informed me:

“The first few times the primary motivation was the desire to see the city of Prypiat without restrictions. Over time, everything has changed. Now my main motivation is to relax from people, to plunge into the only place of complete wildlife available to me.”

Here, again, we see the allure of wildlife for visitors, and a view of Chernobyl as a utopia rather than a dystopia, in contract to visitors on sanctioned tours. In my ethnographic findings I soon discerned that there was a marked difference between Eastern European visitors---whether legal or illegal---and their attitude toward Chernobyl as compared to other nationalities. A Bulgarian respondent who participated in a guided tour wrote:

“I grew up in a post-Communist country (part of the Soviet Union) hearing a lot of stories about how things used to be back then. Some of the stories were bad and some of them good. I couldn't experience it firsthand but somehow I fell in love with the "good old times" people told me about. I feel nostalgia and something romantic in everything related to this time period. I find beauty in the Communist architecture, art and music

styles. Everything seemed to be perfect and in order, everyone seemed to be equal and happy. Of course this just an utopian way to imagine Communistic lifestyle, and it's very far from the truth. Nonetheless a part of me craves to live in a society just like the one in Pripyat, away from our modern day problems, mostly characterized with lack of respect and love for people. I wanted to get as close as possible to the Communist dream and lifestyle.”

The unifying theme is how they perceive Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone, where the accident is not at the forefront of their intent; none of the Stalkers I interviewed even considered themselves to be dark tourists. As Richter (2020) summarizes it, “the idea that a visit to Chernobyl can never be anything other than disaster tourism suggests an understanding of the Zone preoccupied with the events of 1986. Of the people I met, more had come to see scenes of life and progress, than of disaster” (90).

Life/progress and disaster are the two poles between which Chernobyl exists, and in the tension between them we can find why people are drawn there. Whether their motivations are subconscious or overt, they will keep coming, the pandemic only halting the tide for a time. They will come to rubberneck or mourn or infuse themselves with excitement; they will come with their “own fears and anxieties,” their own “private nightmares,” but also their hopes. roJla_Cpaka was undeterred by any travel restrictions and made a visit in December to get winter in the Exclusion Zone, the only seasonal visit he was lacking, under his belt. He fell silent for a few weeks after and missed our first planned video interview, then contacted me later to explain he had been very ill. It was not the virus, he explained; he caught a chill after fording a river and remaining in his wet clothes. “Bad news for Stalkers,” he warned; if I intended on making an illegal excursion, I should go soon, for the Ukrainian parliament is planning to impose harsher punishments

for illegal tourists. Currently one faces a fine of about \$30 USD, but under the new restrictions, it would be 10 times that and possible imprisonment up to 3 years. I do not know if Stalkderdom will be in my future when I go; I suspect not. But I am beginning to understand why it is I *want* to go. Perhaps I will even make the journey with my old friend Yulia.

CHAPTER 2: CHERNOBYL AS MEDIA

It is not enough to recognize that mass media play a role in folklore transmission. It is closer to the truth to admit that the media have become part of folklore (Dégh 1994: 25).

When I mentioned my research interest in dark tourism and then brought up my thesis to friends or acquaintances, they would respond with a variation of the following, sometimes accompanied by a visceral recoiling:

“You’ve seen the HBO show, right? It was so good! But how could you possibly want to visit there after seeing that? Didn’t you see how those people died so horribly? And I’ve heard that if you even sit down on the ground you will get really sick and die, and people who live near there have 3 eyes.”

*“Did you read the article in [New Yorker]/[New York Times magazine]/[The Guardian, etc.?] Chernobyl looks so [interesting][scary], [but *I* could never][and I would never] go there! I read that you shouldn’t go if you’re a woman who hasn’t had kids yet because it will make you sterile.”*

“All I really know about Chernobyl is from playing the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. games. It looks so creepy there!”

A few, more enthusiastic, parties cited things they had seen/read/heard about Chernobyl and volunteered themselves to accompany me on a tour for my fieldwork, or asked me to tell them how my experience was, but to promise I would wear protective gear and not

pet any of the stray, “mutant” animals they assured me were abundant there, and to stay away from the wolves running rampant.

Exterior Forces, Interior Forces, and Manipulation: the Hyperreal and the Hauntological

In each of these examples, Chernobyl as depicted by mass media sources shaped the perceptions of my interlocutors and lent credence to rumors and contemporary legends they in turn transmitted to me; these sources and the ways in which they were synthesized by the speakers serve as examples of “the folkloric processes by which popular culture and mass media are used by communities and individuals” (Foster 2016: 14). For these individuals, the sway of these media forms was significant enough to deter them from ever desiring to visit. For others, though, mass media specifically influenced them to conduct a pilgrimage there.

A key facet in the comprehension of the Chernobyl disaster and how scholars can interpret media representations of it is how its presentation is manipulated in accordance with the desires and motivations of the viewer, which is thus encoded into cultural discourse and (pre)conceptions of what Chernobyl is and was. We see this in action with how the speakers above interpreted and in turn relayed to me their perceptions of Chernobyl as an event and a narrative. This transmitter/manipulator-consumer relationship is repeated *ad nauseum* with each iteration of Chernobyl in mass media (Brown et al. 2012), with the communicative and reflexive effect of semiotic reinforcement or reestablishment of those discursive elements structured on the site (Waterton and Watson 2014).

When looking to an example of a television show like HBO's *Chernobyl* and its influence on the viewer through its signifiers:

The televisual sign is a complex one. It is itself constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural. Moreover, it is an iconic sign, in Peirce's terminology, because "it possesses some of the properties of the thing represented" (Hall 2001, 2006: 166).

Chernobyl is an ideologized work of fiction representing a historical occurrence, and therefore possesses some apparently historical properties, but the showrunners consciously chose what to portray, and how, and the viewer/consumer chooses how to interpret these representations. For those viewers of the show who went on to visit, *Chernobyl* provides an excellent case study to observe the phenomena behind the interrelationships of consumer culture, the tourist, and the touristic space. Scholars of dark tourism, curiously, have not applied semiotic analysis to their research in any major way, with the works of Cave and Buda (2018) and Waterton and Watson (2014) being some notable exceptions. Therefore, Jean Baudrillard's critique of mass media effects using his elaborations of the concept of hyperreality are relevant to my analysis (Baudrillard 1994 [1981]; Redhead 2008: 14-32).

Hyperreality

Essentially, hyperreality is characterized by the underlying concepts of the simulation and the simulacrum. The former muddles reality and representation to the point that the 'real' is no longer recognizable or distinguishable from the 'represented,' while the latter is a 'false' symbol based on representation, not in reality, a dynamic

Baudrillard terms ‘implosion,’ in which the real and the imaginary cannot be discerned (Baudrillard 1994 [1981]). Simulacra are invested with credence because they comprise a world in which symbols are valorized over reality (Baudrillard 1994 [1981]). In this sense, then, simulation through ‘false’ representations of reality command consumer attention through images perceived to be ‘real’; life and reality are thus governed symbolically.

When applied to Chernobyl as a dark tourism site and to mass media centered on it, Baudrillardian designations of the imaginary—such as photorealistic video games with supernatural/science fiction elements or horror movies—are presented with these elements in order to “make us believe that the rest [of the site] is real,” despite the site’s own fabricated authenticity as a hyperreal location (Baudrillard 1994: 262). We see this in action with the ‘found footage’ format of *Chernobyl Diaries* (2012), a horror film in which a group of tourists illegally enter a recognizable form of the Exclusion Zone but encounter terrifying, mutated animals and humanoids. In the same vein, ‘realistic’ representations of Chernobyl—such as the HBO series or documentaries about the disaster—are perceived as authentic reports of history, based on the intense symbolic realities that they convey, and inform our understandings of the history of the event and the subsequent cultural response, dialogue, and behavior towards it, in retrospect and in real-time (Messmer 1988; Triandafyllidou 1995; Zhukova 2016). Authenticity is continuously fabricated at sites such as Chernobyl based on the interrelationships between exterior forces like mass media, interior forces, such as tour guides, and the tourist experience (MacCannell 2011, 2013)—all founded in the notion of simulated

hyperreality and the perpetual fabrication of authenticity (Eco 1983: 1-58; Baudrillard 1994 [1981]).

The notion of hyperreality, fabricated authenticity, and the simulated world that is manifested in simulacra, “never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none,” (Baudrillard 1994 [1981]: 166) dictate the conceptualization of Chernobyl as heterotopia (Stone 2013). Here, the “familiar and the uncanny collide” in the symbolic imaginary superimposed on and interwoven between perceptions of the site (Stone 2013; Burlacu 2017). Such images and transmissions of Chernobyl as heterotopia are repeatedly disseminated and embedded within cultural discourse (Reid-Pharr 1994) and quietly influence the viewer and also the touristic experience, subconsciously or through more direct manipulation (Stone 2013; Simpson 2017).

Hauntology

Whether mass media--induced preconceptions of a visitor to Chernobyl are actualized upon their visit or not, my assessment of my ethnographic findings suggests that, for all these visitors, hauntology can be considered a defining substrate of their visits. Hauntology, a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida, is a portmanteau of “haunting” and “ontology” and is a deconstructionist/postmodernist concept that relates to cultural memory, the retrofuturistic, and the ways in which the past asserts itself; it concerns itself, in Fisher’s (2012) conception, with “the failure of the future” (Fisher 2012: 16). The past, then, “haunts” the present with a specter that “marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*” (Hagglund 2008: 82). Derrida explains that “to haunt does

not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept (1994: 161). Chernobyl serves as the embodiment of a hauntological site: it exists in a liminal state at once suspended in time as a monument to the 1980s and the futuristic vision of the Soviet Union and also transmogrifies as nature takes back the space and human innovation overlays the ruins of Reactor 4.

One of my respondents pertinently captured the effects of hauntology on Chernobyl in her reflections: *“The visit can induce questions and feelings that relate to human existence, its frailty and its meaning. Here we see a city, once at the height of civilisation in that country, now being completely and ruthlessly taken back by nature.”* On my virtual tour, I expected, like her, to be visually haunted by the specter of the site’s history. I was surprised to see that the physical space of the power plant looks to be not a static graveyard, but rather an evolving and embodied space that felt, at first glance, *present*, not past. Yet, the past lingers; the present iteration of the site would not be ‘Chernobyl’ without its history, and it is a persistent phantom.

This and similar perceptions were paralleled by remarks from my informants who took in much more of the Exclusion Zone than I was able to do within the confines of my tour. Another informant wrote, of Pripjat,

“Even though the place has been looted of anything remotely valuable there are still signs of its former existence everywhere. Discarded bicycles, tables, chairs, pianos etc. The nursery is filled with stuff. It almost feels like everyone had just left.”

Yet I saw of Chernobyl only what the Ukrainian authorities sanctioned my tour group to see, the result of which optically focused not on failure, but rather human triumph in successfully containing the site of the disaster. Even in my limited viewing, though, the

statue of Prometheus I saw serves as a perfect hauntological metaphor for Marxism and the failure of the future in the context of Chernobyl, both as location and as story.

Prometheus was punished for trying to alter the state of humankind and bestow a technology that was not his to impart, much as Soviet ambitions and the state of nuclear technology at the time were an ultimately doomed conjoining. The planners of Prip'yat could not have known that their chosen symbol was more apt in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster than it was for their intended workers' utopia, but the statue now represents the specter of the past and the ill-fated choices that were made, and how it haunts the present. But there is still hope to be found there; Richter writes that the Exclusion Zone is now:

a new Eden populated by scientists, settlers and scrap-metal thieves; where hordes of tourists come by day to explore a living memorial to the fragility of civilisation; and where 'stalkers' conduct their own nocturnal quests: rites of passage born from a blend of post-Soviet counter-culturalism, sic-fi escapism, and perhaps a yearning for spiritual self-discovery (2020: 14).

For all of these groups Richter presents, hauntology underlies their actions and their experiences in the Exclusion Zone, which is a “new Eden” superimposed against the backdrop of a failed Eden and a future that never was. Fisher writes that “Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time” (2012: 19). The Exclusion Zone is both stained by time and the specter of the disaster, but also is a physical manifestation of broken time; the past must live in the present. Scientists there study the tension between wildlife reemergence and how radiation haunts the populations of flora and fauna. Settlers attempt

to build lives from the ruins of ghost towns. Thieves engage with relics whose value to them derives from being discarded. And for visitors, the space is haunted by specters of Chernobyl's past that persist, driven in part by folklore surrounding Chernobyl and how mass media portrays the site, which imbues it in turn with an aura of notoriety. Valk and Sävborg (2018) state, "Notorious places appear as animated; they generate a sense of personal relationship and emotional awareness" (11). The very specters of a failed future that haunt Chernobyl are what lend it emotional resonance and animate it for the onlooker. As one of my informants wrote, "*I can understand why people get hooked on dark tourism, because the emotional response is so much stronger than what you get in art galleries or beautiful cities.*" In the previous chapter I explored the ways in which dark tourists to Chernobyl might be motivated to seek out a heterotopia. In so doing, they further might have an emotional reaction, as we see with my respondent above, when taking in the ruins of Pripyat and the ghosts of its past.

Hauntology does not just conceptually frame how one experiences a physical space, but also is present in media representations of that site. Riley (2017) discusses the hauntological in the film *Stalker*, where spectrality is not only a representation of the failure of the future to materialize, but "a still-pertinent guide to our present moment" (18). He argues that the film "mobilizes ghosts that are traces of a repressed past and of a promised but aborted future through [its] use of science fiction tropes and supernatural imagery" (19). In the same way, media representations of Chernobyl invoke these tropes--either overtly, as in *Chernobyl Diaries* and the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games with their Baudrillardian uncanny elements, or are haunted by the viewer's foreknowledge of the

past that is to come, as with *Chernobyl* opening with Legasov's suicide and voiceover that ushers us into the disaster that will unfold over the course of the series. So, too, does *Chernobyl* utilize one of "hauntology's signature traits, the conspicuous use of crackle" (Fisher 2012: 18); in this instance Fisher was referencing the influence of hauntology in pop music, but the crackle of the Geiger counters and Legasov's narration in the form of audio tapes are aural signifiers of what a contemporary viewer would regard as retrofuturistic technology.

Riley also discusses the affective role of hauntology in ruination in *Stalker*: "ruined buildings, overrun with grass, lichen, and other signifiers of the natural world, are the site of meditative, uncanny, and epiphanic experiences," and this ruination is a focal point in other media representations that overtly depict Chernobyl (2017: 22). For many of my respondents who played video games featuring Chernobyl, when they detailed seeing the advancement of nature in the Exclusion Zone, they presented their experiences as almost transcendent, and the natural elements juxtaposed against the ruins imbued the place with a haunting, supernatural quality even in the absence of any supernatural occurrences transpiring. They varyingly used words like "mystical," "eerie," and "ghostly" to describe it. Valk and Sävborg (2018) note that "The landscape, as it becomes storied, turns from a passive surrounding into an active participant in creating the supernatural environment" (10). Media representations of Chernobyl in part contribute to its creation as a storied place and source of supernatural folklore that arises from its hauntological aspects; I will go on to explore some of the folklore that Chernobyl generates in the next chapter.

Representations of Chernobyl in the Media

Media representations of a site direct what Urry (1990) describes as the “tourist gaze.” Tourism is, for most, a visual phenomenon through both mediascapes and physical landscapes and is reliant on the intake of images which the tourist consumes; we “live in an oversaturated image culture where representations are everywhere...What we increasingly consume are signs or representations” (Larsen 2014: 306). Larsen further argues that “tourists often travel to places that are made ‘special’ through the media.” The Chernobyl disaster has been portrayed through the mediums of film, television, and video games as early as 1987, with the documentary *The Bell of Chernobyl* (1987). This was followed by other documentaries, including, chronologically: *Black Wind White Land* (1993); *Chernobyl Heart* (2003); *Surviving Disaster: Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster* (2006); *The Battle of Chernobyl* (2006); and *The Russian Woodpecker* (2015). For many who developed interest in visiting Chernobyl, however, it was a fictional dramatization that specifically enticed them: HBO’s miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019); this phenomenon is known as movie-driven tourism, or “tourist activity induced by the viewing of a moving image, and...accepted as encompassing film, television, pre-recorded products” (Connel 2012: 1009). Richter (2020) describes the show’s effect on the tourism boom there:

The final count for 2019 was 124,000 visitors - a new record in total numbers, but still only the third-greatest annual growth seen in the past five years. Chernobyl visitor numbers grew by 90 per cent in 2015 (from 8,400 to 16,000 people); by 125 per cent in 2016 (to 36,000 people); by 36 per cent in 2017 (to 49,000 people); by 47 per cent in 2018 (to 72,000 people); and then by 72 per cent in 2019. The HBO miniseries had the effect of putting the industry into the spotlight like never before (98).

The HBO show's influence was undeniable in my own ethnographic findings: in my second stage of questionnaire collection, which occurred after the show had aired, about half my respondents specifically cited the show as a driving factor in their motivation to visit, with one informant saying, "The HBO series taught me about the event and seems to me to be incredibly accurate."

This assessment is an example of the ways in which fictionalized depictions of a historical event can serve as a proxy for the occurrence itself or even become the dominant paradigm; as Hall (2006 [2001]) notes, "Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse...the event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event" (163). Chernobyl is an event that has become a story and, in turn, a communicative event. The story of Chernobyl as relayed by the HBO series calls to mind horror and disaster movie tropes and its audiovisual narrative effects induce a mounting dread; the portrayal of the accident is but the tip of the iceberg. The show abounds "with a mournful pewter sheen of morgue imagery" (Zoller Seitz 2019). The first episode opens with the suicide by hanging of scientist Valery Legasov, a scene that shocks the viewer because his death follows in the wake of him calmly feeding his cat. The show is unflinching in its visual depictions of bodily trauma and death, including the devastation radiation poisoning inflicts on the doomed plant workers and first responders who received lethal doses, but relies equally on audio cues to impart gravitas. After the explosion in Reactor 4, in a scene that would not look out of place in a horror film, workers head into the bowels of the plant and wade through the flooded lower level in near darkness; the ominous crackling and clicking of Geiger counters builds to an

almost maddening crescendo during the scene. The soundtrack itself is prominent; as *AV Club* reviewer Randall Colburn (2019) described it in his article, aptly titled “*Chernobyl* Is the Scariest Show of the Year,” “Gudnadottir’s looping, elegiac drones evoked the rotting wail of a distant siren, serving as an audial manifestation of the poisonous air” So, too, is an aural rather than visual effect used in episode 4 when two liquidators, tasked with hunting down irradiated dogs and cats and shooting them, come across a mother dog and her puppies. The viewer (and the nameless young liquidator we follow during the course of the episode) is spared the horror of directly witnessing their execution, but instead we hear the individual report of gun shots as his boss takes out the family one by torturous one.

Where *Chernobyl* veers from horror toward the dramatic one encounters in a disaster movie is best embodied in a scene when Legasov, deputy head of the Soviet government Boris Shcherbina, and a helicopter pilot fly near Reactor 4 to assess the extent of the graphite fire in Reactor 4 during an operation to dump sand on the reactor to contain the fire:

Shcherbina orders the helicopter to get closer, over Legasov’s protestations that they’ll all die instantly. The helicopter pilot refuses, an act of disobedience that saves the lives of everyone onboard. Another helicopter crew in the hot zone is not so lucky: We see the aircraft from a distance hovering in the center of a smoke plume, then falling from the sky like a wasp zapped with Raid (Zoller Seitz 2019).

This scene struck a chord with one of the more skeptical individuals who expressed consternation over my planned travel to Chernobyl; she cited it as an example of the “Soviet disregard for human life,” what Hall would consider to be an instance when visual “signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional,

more active ideological dimensions” (Hall 2001, 2006: 168), in this case the coded American mistrust of the Soviet Union. In her reaction we also find Baudrillard’s simulated hyperreality in action; the incident with the helicopter never actually transpired, but because it was presented in a medium with a high production value based on a historical event---and was billed by HBO as the “untold true story” of Chernobyl---she interpreted it as the event rather than as a story (Smith 2019).

A number of reviewers took issue with *Chernobyl*’s factual liberties and the ways in which they in turn create for the viewer a hyperreality centered on the accident. Masha Gessen (2019) laments in a *New Yorker* article, “What HBO’s ‘Chernobyl’ Got Right, and What It Got Terribly Wrong,”

In the absence of a Chernobyl narrative, the makers of the series have used the outlines of a disaster movie. There are a few terrible men who bring the disaster about, and a few brave and all-knowing ones, who ultimately save Europe from becoming uninhabitable and who tell the world the truth.

They also accuse the show of veering “between caricature and folly,” a sentiment echoed by Zoller Seitz (2019) in a *Vulture* article in which he refers to “the sheer horror and ridiculousness of the tale.” The very elements that rendered the show to be outlandish to those with a factual knowledge base of the disaster seemed to be most compelling to my respondents who were inspired by the show to visit, with American respondents particularly fascinated by the more ominous elements of Soviet life as represented on *Chernobyl*. Although Soviet bureaucracy writ large cannot be contested, certain elements of terror were embellished on the show, as Gessen, a Russian-American journalist who is no apologist for Russian regimes detailed, among other inaccuracies:

There are a lot of people throughout the series who appear to act out of fear of being shot. This is inaccurate: summary executions, or even delayed executions on orders of a single apparatchik, were not a feature of Soviet life after the nineteen-thirties. By and large, Soviet people did what they were told without being threatened with guns or any punishment (2019).

In one of my questionnaire questions I asked how familiar my respondents were with the events of Chernobyl prior to visiting. For my respondents who had separately cited *Chernobyl* as their primary influence for visiting, they informed me that their familiarity with the disaster was largely derived from having seen the show, and they were particularly keen to see the places where lives had been lost, with several referring to the aforementioned helicopter crash and one referencing the so-called Bridge of Death in Pripyat from which “all the onlookers of the accident got sick and died.” Adam Higginbotham, author of *Midnight in Chernobyl* (2019), explained in an interview that he found “no evidence” of the veracity of this claim:

Indeed, I spoke to a guy who was seven or eight at the time, who did indeed cycle over to the bridge to see what he could see at the reactor, which was only three kilometers away. But he’s not dead. He’s apparently perfectly healthy” (Stover 2019).

Of the fictionalized helicopter crash in Chernobyl, which was seemingly inspired in the HBO show by footage of a helicopter crashing near the reactor, he explained:

Well, that film was shot of a helicopter crashing beside a reactor on October 6, 1986, months after the fire had gone out, months after this operation had finished. It did not happen in association with that operation. These seem like small things, but there’s this accretion of all these small things that are constantly repeated, that creates this mythological version of the Chernobyl accident” (Stover 2019).

Higginbotham referenced newspaper articles published in the year following the Chernobyl disaster that in part fostered the contemporary legends and rumors that emerged and created a “mythological version of Chernobyl,” but it is noteworthy that

over three decades later they still persist in the cultural consciousness and contribute to Chernobyl as a hyperreality, enough so to be incorporated into the narrative of HBO's *Chernobyl* and in turn be transmitted to me by my informants who watched the show. Popular culture and folklore should not wholly be conflated on the grounds of cultural form or transmission. Yet, as Bird (2006) explains, "Certain popular cultural forms succeed because they act like folklore" (346), and the interplay between the media about Chernobyl and the folklore that has emerged as a result must be acknowledged.

The HBO show was not the only pop culture representation of Chernobyl that proved influential to my informants in terms of visiting. Video games were cited by over half my respondents as a significant determinant in their decision to visit: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, *Call of Duty*, and *Fallout* in particular were referenced. Of these, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (Scavengers, Trespassers, Adventurers, Loners, Killers, Explorers and Robbers) series by a Ukrainian game developer, GSC Game World, was the most overtly inspired by the historical events of Chernobyl. As one of its creators, Oleg Yavorsky, explains, "We had a dream to create a game based on the story of Chernobyl. To help make the Chernobyl story well-known around the world—especially to younger people" (Morris 2014). The way in which this dream was executed in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series was in the form of first-person shooter games with a horror/survival theme set in the Exclusion Zone in an alternate reality. The first game, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007) is set in 2012, 20 years after the Chernobyl disaster, when a second explosion happens at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant after scientists experimented in labs in the Zone with the psychic abilities people in the area had developed after the first, historical explosion. This

second explosion resulted in the further dispersal of radiation and strange phenomena and mutations in humans and wildlife in the Zone. Plot-wise, the game draws on *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker* as its influence, with special artifacts endowed with supernatural properties and Stalkers who break into the Zone intent on collecting them for financial gain playing significant roles in the games, as well as the Zone cordoned off to avoid such illegal activity. A prequel, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky* set a year before the fictitious second explosion followed in 2008, and then a sequel, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Prip'yat* in 2010. According to a trailer on the GSC Game World website, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R 2* is in the works, with no official release date yet.

The *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* games were resoundingly popular, with over half a million copies sold in the first two weeks after the release of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R : Shadow of Chernobyl* in former Soviet countries, and around 5 million copies of the series sold worldwide as of 2018 (Palumbo 2018). Rossingol (2008) refers to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* as “a masterwork of modern mythology (213),” and this sentiment was shared by its fanbase. A phenomenon that resulted from the popularity of the games was the creation of a folk group of players for whom the game was not so much a hobby as a lifestyle, united as a folk group in Dundes’ (1965) broad definition in that they “share at least one common factor” (2) with their own emergent folklore “produced out of the social experience” (Bronner 2007: 21).

A whole subculture—'stalker culture'—took shape around this game series, including not only online communities, but also events offline, such as conventions and competitions. One example was the international festival S.T.A.L.K.E.R.-Fest which took place in Kyiv in 2009. The central city square was turned into a huge exclusion 'Zone', with a replica of the Chernobyl nuclear power station. The festival included a costume contest, a light show, a stunt show and fights in S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s style. A rich internet folklore has

sprung around the games, including numerous anecdotes, 'post-nuclear' poetry, even toasts (Sokolova 2012: 1571-1572).

A point of clarification is necessary here to differentiate between the gaming collective who call themselves Stalkers as opposed to the ones I referenced in the previous chapter. While there is overlap between the two in some cases, and the term itself derives from the same source material of the novel *Roadside Picnic* and film *Stalker*, the folk group I am discussing in this instance specifically are referencing the video games when they call themselves a “Stalker”, and as such I will refer to them as the acronym S.T.A.L.K.E.R.s, as their name is often stylized.

This is not to say that anyone who was influenced by the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series to visit self-identifies as a S.T.A.L.K.E.R.; what renders a visitor a S.T.A.L.K.E.R. when they visit the Exclusion Zone is the performative element of their behavior and how they “inhabit” the zone as they do the video game, with the built environment of the latter “generating a culture around those players” and creating a narrative for their tourism experience (Reinhard 2018: 91). The major overlap between S.T.A.L.K.E.R.s and Stalkers manifests in the form of both groups illegally visiting the Exclusion Zone and camping there; the salient difference is that the former group intentionally tries to simulate the hyperreality of their video game experience in the Zone. Stalkers predated S.T.A.L.K.E.R.S., but after the release of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, “squads of gamers began to experiment with breaking into the zone for real, living out the fantasy without the blessing of the game’s creators,” (Morris 2014) and “local security guards tell stories of their nights spent chasing S.T.A.L.K.E.R. fanboys” (Young 2016: 132).

Yavorsky acknowledges, “Many of the guys wanted to visit the real site after playing...We didn’t expect that to happen, of course. We were just trying to make a cool game” (Moriss 2014). Within my demographic results, his assessment bore out in my respondents who were influenced by video games to both learn more about Chernobyl and visit, but my demographics were less gendered than how Yavorsky or Young presented it (“fanboys,” “the guys”). One American woman wrote that, prior to actually visiting Chernobyl so as to ensconce herself, she hoped, in the world of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games, “I was inspired by them in the intervening years to read or watch every book title or documentary I could get my hands on.” For these gamers, the hyperreality embodied by video games was powerful and permeated their subconsciouses, such that one respondent told me, “When entering the old supermarket in Pripyat I felt as if I had been there before - in *Fallout*.” Another respondent explained, in response to my question about his pre-existing knowledge of Chernobyl, “I had pictures in my mind of what it would look like in Pripyat, influenced by video games.”

As Young (2016) describes it, “*S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* [and other video games] has transformed this place into an augmented landscape...at once virtual and material, a new type of city distributed across the planet into flickering constellations of luminous rectangles” (132). In an interview with a Belarusian player of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games that called to mind my Bulgarian respondent who wrote, of his motivations to visit Chernobyl, “*I fell in love with the ‘good old times’ people told me about. I feel nostalgia and something romantic in everything related to this time period,*” the Belarusian

encountered in the augmented landscape of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* his version of Ryden's (1993) sense of place from his own lived experience:

"You know, there is a mystical part in the main idea in the game, but I found real details of the ex-Soviet life. I mean I saw all these brick buildings, cars, or something on the floor in my childhood as USSR had typical engineering solutions among all the countries. For me it is a real chance to dive into my careless times."

Davies (2013) writes "This "'retrospective utopia' that only nostalgia can create blurs the boundary between memory and history, turning two historically separate events into one view of the past" (126). That a horror/shooter game can evoke such a nostalgic reaction was an unexpected ethnographic finding for me, but ties into Reinhard's (2108) notion of video games as archaeological sites and Schleiner's (2017) related concept of this medium as "digital monuments" (42).

The Belarusian went on to describe the sense of community he had found with other players from former Soviet countries---what Schleiner refers to as "shar[ing] the formative memories of their youth with other nostalgic players" (42)---and spoke of a friend garnered through a gaming forum who found in Chernobyl a contrast to the simulacra of the game and encountered something altogether different when he visited, as with my questionnaire respondents who were surprised to see the power of nature to reclaim the site. The Belarusian informant clarified that this friend was "*not a Stalker, just a digger, and was there finding some artifacts and was impressed to see that unlike in the games in Pripyat there [sic] almost no asphalt -- all of the streets are held by grass or trees.*" Although his friend does not self-identify as a S.T.A.L.K.E.R., he arguably could still be considered a Stalker; illegally visiting and digging for artifacts are both defining characteristics of a Stalker in *Roadside Picnic*, *Stalker*, and in the real-world

variant. In his case, and in contrast to people I surveyed/interviewed who were brought to Chernobyl by video games and found that their expectations shaped by the games were echoed by the reality, he saw a vision that “impressed him;” what he seemed to be expecting was a man-made dystopia, and instead was greeted by a verdant heterotopia.

In his exploration of the ‘eerie’ as distinguishable from the ‘weird,’ Mark Fisher (2016) observed that the former

concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: *why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?* The unseeing eyes of the dead; the bewildered eyes of an amnesiac – these provoke a sense of the eerie, just as surely as an abandoned village or a stone circle do. (4)

Chernobyl, whether in popular imagination or in physical visitation, does indeed invoke these questions, but concurrently; people should be living in Pripyat—and yet, there are none. The buildings are all abandoned. The radiation should render the site completely inhospitable—and yet, animals scurry about in lush vegetation. This ontological uneasiness renders Chernobyl both heterotopic and hauntological, at least in an aesthetic sense. Chernobyl is, due to its history, an eerie place.

This eeriness can be capitalized, though, and Chernobyl’s appropriation by popular culture—its commodification into an economy of symbols—is evidence of this. The consumption of Chernobyl in “signs or representations” (Larsen 2014: 306) through popular culture further conditions its existence in the implosive maelstrom of the hyperreal. Media forms simultaneously generate conceptions and corporealize *preconceptions* of Chernobyl as it permeates vernacular discourse and cultural memory.

Mass media iterations of Chernobyl imbricate the ideological systems of the cultures in which they are produced, becoming instead formal vehicles of ideological representation. In this sense, their continuous function in depicting Chernobyl as a heterotopic site layers it with more and more fetishistic specters, in turn influencing how Chernobyl is communicated in folk culture, dark touristic motivation, and its reception in terms of an affective eeriness and a hauntological aesthetic. For dark tourists, though, to a large extent, these latter consequences are initiated and reinforced by the media; they are manufactured rather than signifiatory of anything innate about Chernobyl itself. Chernobyl, in a dark touristic sense, is built by stories, and the stories that mass media tell are highly pervasive in vernacular culture. As such, it is important to recognize the relationship between popular and folk culture with respect to how Chernobyl is portrayed and how these portrayals instigate and perpetuate a dark fascination with the site.

CHAPTER 3: CHERNOBYL AS NARRATIVE

When places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where the latter may lead is anybody's guess (Valk and Sävborg (2018: 8).

- *"We heard legends of radioactive bears or dogs terrorizing the abandoned buildings."*

- *"Here is a Stalker proverb: No dosimeter — no radiation!"*

- *"There is a ghost story about Stepan Polotno (Степан Полотно), a young Stalker who went to the Zone alone and got eaten by a pack of wolves. Now he's wandering in the Zone, especially in the dark time of the day and scaring people. It's completely a made up story that emerged as a scary story in order to scare off the newbie Stalkers from going to the Zone."*

- *"Here is a ghost story about "the black IMR", IMR stands for Russian IMP — Инженерная машина разграбления. The story tells us about the time right after the disaster. There were many IMRs during that time, they were destroying abandoned huts in the Zone villages in order to prevent people from coming back to their homes and some IMRs were in the Red Forest, they were cutting down contaminated logs. The Red Forest is the place where one of the IMRs disappeared and nobody could find the machine operator and the vehicle. But rumor has it that even nowadays people can hear strange noises from the Red Forest in the night, it's the black IMR continuing to cut down the trees in the contaminated forest. All stories about it have in common that a "black*

character" died long, long ago and now is wandering around helping good people and punishing bad people. There is also a story about the black Liquidator. He was a firefighter who fell down to #4 reactor's core and died."

- "There is some kind of an anecdote about the major Nemchitskij (майор Немчицкій). It seems that it's a real story that happened a decade ago when a group of Stalkers were caught in the Zone and brought to the Chornobyl police department. But there was a major Nemchitskij who had a birthday party that day and he ordered to let that group of Stalkers go since it's his birthday. Since that time major Nemchitskij is considered as a holy patron of all Stalkers. There is a liquidator monument in Kyiv where the family name Nemchitskij is engraved and he is a major, that makes Stalkers think that's a true story."

- "I heard a few stories, mostly of the weird encounter in a dark hallway type."

- "The community of illegal visitors to the Zone is almost a separate subculture. We have our own legends. There is also a great fictional story about a Stalker who was eaten by wolves, which we even voiced on national television."

In the previous chapter I examined the influence of mass media and how it can generate folklore about Chernobyl. Reciprocally, folklore can find its way into media representations of Chernobyl and manifest in the form of the folkloresque, "popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore" (Foster 2016: 5), as seen in the last quote in the chapter opener. Collectively, the quotes from my informants represent a sampling of the folk narratives about Chernobyl they shared with me: rumors, contemporary legends, ghost stories, and a proverb. In this chapter I will discuss the

various forms of folklore about Chernobyl I gathered through my fieldwork and secondary research and delve into the fascinating world of Stalkers and their associated folklore. Some of the legends imparted to me by my informants clearly are based on renditions of Chernobyl in mass media, while others circulate communicatively and represent a dynamic tradition of dialogical storytelling, with members of a community (such as the Stalkers) negotiating and evaluating the truth or falsehoods of the body and content of the legend. Most legend scholars agree that the inherent dialogism of a legend is its fundamental feature, and, at a site with such dark connotations and mysterious reputations as Chernobyl, the generation and proliferation of such legends is understandable (Tangherlini 1993; Dégh 2001; Oring 2008).

The Folklore of Chernobyl

Narratives of Disaster: An Emic Perspective

Though today, the folklore of the region tends to be “defined exclusively in terms of those narrative forms that developed following the accident,” consisting of “rumors, personal narratives, children’s games, short rhyming *chastushkas*, parodies of popular songs, and jokes” (Fialkova 2001: 182), the folklore of Chernobyl did not develop in a vacuum after the disaster. Nor is the nuclear event the sole defining tragedy to afflict local communities, which also bore witness to religious persecution of practitioners of Eastern Orthodoxy—perceived by 19th-century Russian officials to be “the native faith of rustic folk” (Roudometof, Agadjanian, & Pankhurst 2006: 153)---two pogroms of Jewish communities in 1905 and 1917 (Khandros 2017); the famine-induced genocide under Stalin known as the Holodomor; and Nazi occupation and the exportation of some

inhabitants from what is now the Exclusion Zone to work as forced laborers in Germany in the 1940s (Morris 2017). Richter (2020) wrote of folklore associated with a tree in the village of Polissya 2 km from the power plant that drew on Eastern Orthodox belief and the historical Nazi presence in the region:

Deep in the same forest stood an old pine tree in the shape of a cross, with horizontal boughs sprouting at right angles from either side of its trunk. The tree, already fully mature by the time of the Great Patriotic War (1941-44), was important to local Christians as it recalled for them a particular story from the Orthodox tradition: the three angels of the Old Testament who announced to Abraham the imminent destruction of the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah left their staffs with him, and he in turn gave them to his nephew Lot, who planted them in the ground outside Jerusalem where they grew into a triple-trunked tree composed of three types of wood -- cedar, pine, and cypress. King Solomon later had the tree cut down, while building his great temple. It was also said that wood from this same tree was used to make Christ's cross. During the wartime occupation, Chornobyl's cruciform tree became a symbol of sacrifice in its own right, with local stories of the Nazis using it as a gallows for captured partisans (62).

As in this story, with its symbolic foretelling of more sacrifice to come, calamity and misfortune characterize the pre-accident folklore of Chernobyl, which is haunted by the collective memory of its past and its doomed future. “Chornobyl” itself translates to “wormwood” in Ukrainian, a bitter-tasting plant; Wormwood is the name of the star in the Biblical prophecy outlined in the Book of Revelation that fell to earth and poisoned one third of rivers and springs (Lindbladh 2019: 241). One account in Svetlana Alexievich’s (1997) *Voices From Chernobyl*, a collection of oral histories and written narratives from which HBO’s *Chernobyl* drew inspiration, describes the informant’s interpretation that Gorbachev, the Chernobyl accident, and the fall of the Soviet Union was predicted in the Bible:

That there’ll be a big boss with a birthmark and that a great empire will crumble. And then the Day of Judgement will come. Everyone who lives in cities, they’ll die, and one

person from the village will remain. This person will be happy to find a human footprint! Not the person himself, but just his footprints (44).

In similar prophetic instances, Halley's Comet passed by Earth mere days before the disaster, and "the moon disappeared in a total lunar eclipse - another traditional omen of doom - and two nights later, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded" (Richter 2020: 65). Another prophetic figure in digital folklore about Chernobyl is the Black Bird; a Mothman-like winged humanoid figure with red eyes who was purported to have materialized before plant workers on April 26, 1986, the same day as the explosion. Those who saw him were said to receive ominous phone calls and suffer from nightmares after the encounter (Unwin 2019). In some accounts, the apparition appeared days before the disaster, and in others directly after the accident specifically to the workers who later succumbed to radiation poisoning; they saw him "gliding through the swirling plumes of irradiated smoke pouring from the reactor" (Creepypasta). Across all the narratives, however, he was never seen again.

It is important to note that the narrative forms about Chernobyl that emerged in the wake of the accident are emic and etic in nature; though I argue that both types reflect the tragedy that has come to define the region. It is necessary, then, to look to folklore about the disaster that emerged for both locals and outsiders and their respective symbolic functions within their communities; as Valk and Sävborg (2018) note, "places appear differently to local people and to outsiders, and the related narrative traditions are transformed when they circulate in various media and across boundaries" (9). Davies

further elucidates how placelore functions differently depending on the observer and their lived experience with Chernobyl specifically:

The Chernobyl landscape is a place infused with contested meanings: for some, a rural idyll tarnished by the invisible specter of radiation; and for others, simply "a place called home." Its legacies run deeper than its unknowable death toll and spread far beyond the abandoned villages and overgrown industrial graveyards of the Exclusion Zone. Instead they live on in the memories, photographs, and everyday lives of those who call this nuclear landscape "home" (116).

These “contested meanings” are evident in my ethnographic findings of those who viewed Chernobyl as a heterotopia as opposed to the accounts of locals, though I did not obtain any direct ethnographic data from local demographics, but rather relied on the accounts in *Voices from Chernobyl*. For the latter communities, who were directly affected by the ramifications of the disaster, their narrative forms enable them to mediate their personal trauma. Folklorists such as Carl Lindahl (2012) have written about narrative responses to disaster scenarios and the social effects such narratives had on afflicted communities. In a similar vein, Kürti (1988) and Fialkova (2001) studied genres of humor as narrative sociocultural healing in direct response to the Chernobyl catastrophe. The affectional purpose of these narratives was positive; the communities were healed and reconstituted in the wake of a calamitous event. Yet for others who lived through the accident and its aftermath, their narratives represent that there is no true healing to be found, just remembrance and an attempt to understand what transpired, especially because official accounts of the disaster were so tightly regulated by Soviet authorities and depictions contrary to the Communist Party line were deemed hearsay (Fialkova 2001).

Rumors proliferated and came to be recognized as more reliable than the Soviet media, lending credence to Shibutani's (1966) definition of rumor as "a recurrent form of communication" among people who, while "caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources" (17). As Fialkova explains, "In folklore about Chernobyl, the official stance on nuclear safety is juxtaposed with narratives of an apocalyptic reality foisted upon ordinary people---and at their expense---by unscrupulous or irreverent authorities" (198), and this trope is reflected in the use of the rumors, jokes, and song in the personal narratives in *Voices From Chernobyl*. Among these accounts I encountered rumors predominantly, a selection of which I include below, all of which convey uncertainty and unease, along with distrust of scientists and government authorities.

We heard rumors that the flame at Chernobyl was unearthly, it wasn't even a flame, it was a light, a shining. Not blue, but more like the sky. And not smoke, either. The scientists had been gods, now they were fallen angels, demons even (197).

Is it [radiation] white, or what? What color is it? Some people say that it has no color and smell, and other people say that it's black. Like earth. But if it's colorless, then it's like God. God is everywhere, but you can't see Him. They scare us! The apples are hanging in the garden, the leaves are on the trees, the potatoes are in the fields. I don't think there was any Chernobyl, they made it up. They tricked people. My sister left with her husband. Not far from here, twenty kilometers. They lived there for two months, and the neighbor comes running: "Your cow sent radiation to my cow! She's falling down." "How'd she send it?" "Through the air, that's how, like dust. It flies." Just like fairy tales! Stories and more stories (52).

"There are camps behind Chernobyl where they're going to place those who received heavy doses of radiation. They'll keep them there awhile, observe them, then bury them (132)."

“They’re taking the dead out of the nearby villages in buses and straight to the graveyards, burying thousands in mass graves. Like during the Leningrad Blockade (132).”

“Several people supposedly saw a strange light in the sky above the station on the night before the explosion. Someone even photographed it. On the film it turned out to be steam from an extra-terrestrial object (132).”

In Minsk they’ve washed the trains and the inventories. They’re going to transfer the whole population to Siberia. They’re already fixing up the old barracks left over from Stalin’s camps. They’ll start with the women and children. The Ukrainians are already being shipped (132).

“It wasn’t an accident, it was an earthquake...The military knew about it beforehand, they could have warned people, but it’s all very strictly kept secret there (132).”

“There are now pikes in the lakes and rivers without heads or tails. Just the body floating around. Something similar is going to start happening soon to humans. The Belarussians will turn into humanoids.” (132)

The Chernobylites are giving birth to children who have an unknown yellow fluid instead of blood. There are scientists who insist that monkeys became intelligent because they lived near radiation. Children born in three or four generations will be Einsteins. It’s a cosmic experiment being conducted on us. (133)

These rumors grapple with the unknowable (what radiation looks like, the fate of those affected by the disaster) and the known: authoritarianism based on historical precedent. Many of them center on bodily trauma and body horror in the form of the grotesque, which is in keeping with Davies’ (2013) assessment of Chernobyl narratives: “Stories of death and illness relating to the accident are a common thread throughout communities

near Chernobyl, and the accident is blamed, rightly or wrongly, for all manner of health issues” (119).

In some cases, Alexievich’s informants and examples from Fialkova’s article utilize gallows humor in their accounts, a form of emergent folklore that is borne out of difficult or perilous situations. Obrdlik (1941-42) writes of gallows humor that its:

social function is twofold- positive and negative. Its positive effect is manifested...in the strengthening of the morale and the spirit of resistance of people who struggle for their individual and national survival; its negative effect (which, of course, is again something very positive from the viewpoint of the oppressed) reveals itself by its disintegrating influence among those against whom it is directed (716).

This humor arose immediately in the wake of the accident, was widely circulated (variants of the jokes can be found in collections of folklore about Chernobyl across different nationalities), and shares similar themes with the rumors: distrust of authorities and contempt for their incompetence; fear of radiation and its effects; and bodily concerns, particularly impotence, mutations, and death (Fialkova 193):

At a meeting: "What shall we do if there is an explosion of the second reactor in Chernobyl?" A lonely voice: "We'll work sixteen hours a day!" "Very good! What shall we do if there's an explosion of the third reactor in Chernobyl?" The same voice: "We'll work twenty-four hours a day!" "Very good! There's a good example for everybody. Where do you work?" "At the cemetery" (Fialkova 193).

“Guy comes home from the reactor. His wife asks the doctor, ‘What should I do with him?’ ‘You should wash him, hug him, and put him out of commission’” (Alexievich 1997:81).

“After Chernobyl you can eat anything you want, but you have to bury your own shit in lead” (Alexievich 81).

This prisoner escapes from jail, and runs to the thirty-kilometer zone at Chernobyl. They catch him, bring him to the dosimeters. He's 'glowing' so much, they can't possibly put him back into prison, can't take him to the hospital, can't put him around people. Why aren't you laughing? (Alexievich 95).

"After the Chernobyl disaster two friends meet. They chat a bit and on parting say, 'All the best! Have a pleasant decay'"(Fialkova 193).

An American robot is on the roof for five minutes, and then it breaks down. The Japanese robot is on the roof for five minutes, and then---breaks down. The Russian robot is up there two hours! Then a command comes in over the loudspeaker: 'Private Ivanov! In two hours you're welcome to come down and have a cigarette break. (Alexievich 191).

A grandfather and his grandson are walking over the ground of Chernobyl. "Grandpa, is it true that once there was a beautiful town here?" "True, grandson, true," grandfather replies, patting him on his head. "Is it true, grandpa, that people lived in it?" "True, grandson, true," sighs grandfather, patting him on his other head (Fialkova 191).

Some of the jokes are in the form of poetry, a narrative form in which function follows form to impart its sobering message:

"The street is quiet/and clean is the floor,/thanks to Reactor/Number 4" (Fialkova 2001:188).

"Zaporozhets" isn't a car/A Kievite isn't a man/If you want to be a father/Wear lead all over (Fialkova 2001: 188)

"One, two three; one, two, three/Of leukemia will die thee" (Fialkova 2001:189)

The gallows humor evident in these examples serves to not only identify the core issues of a crisis and unite affected communities by virtue of their collective trauma, but also turns the tables on the authorities by making jokes at their expense, as Feinstein (2008) describes this humor form in the context of concentration camps (53). Morreall (1987) notes the inherent incongruity in the tension between humor and misery, that "The greater

and more unexpected, in the apprehension of the laughter, this incongruity is, the more violent will be his laughter (55). Oring (2003) refines this term to “appropriate incongruity” that exists “between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous,” but “does not suggest that an incongruity is resolved” (1-2). A situation as devastating and impactful as the Chernobyl accident might seem at odds with laughter, but laughter is and was the coping mechanism most readily available to those communities most affected.

Narratives of Disaster: An Etic Perspective

From an emic perspective, then, narrative forms serve a sociopolitical function that is ultimately subversive and helps its participants navigate their difficulties toward a positive affective end. Yet, what of outsiders and the narrative forms they use to understand Chernobyl? For dark tourists, visiting a site like Chernobyl enables them to experience, albeit at remove, the negative emotions---such as fear, sadness, and dread, as Rush-Cooper (2013) describes---that locals directly experienced and attempted to mediate and transmogrify into something more palatable through their narratives. As with emic narratives about Chernobyl, etic ones also utilize humor and share some of the same themes, such as the dangers of radiation and its mutating effects. They also predominantly take the form of legends writ large; I use legend here following Turner’s (1992) encompassing definition that “*Legend, urban legend, proto-legend, rumor, urban belief tale, rumor/legend, and contemporary legend* are all labels used to identify the informally transmitted discourse through which...beliefs circulate” (426).

The legends about Chernobyl with which my questionnaire respondents were familiar were representative of a collective anxiety about radiation and its effects, what one of my Swedish respondents referred to as “our communal consciousness.” Most people in my sampling wrote about hearing of outsiders illicitly existing in the Exclusion Zone, camping and living off the land, heedless of radiation, as in the below example of the Stalker “Bat.” The presence of real-life Stalkers and S.T.A.L.K.E.R.S. living out their video game fantasies no doubt played a role in the transmission of these legends, as well as media representations of illegal entrants to the Zone. However, the Stalker figures were amplified, in some examples I collected, into people who were mutants with monstrous features, an instance of the way in which legends serve as “...cultural fabric which people can employ...for anxiety-provoking and duly understood situations” (Victor 1990). The figures also took on supernatural elements, as in the examples provided by one of my Stalker informants of Stepan Polotno and the “black character” who enacts justice in the quotes section with which I opened this chapter.

Stalker Folklore

Although crossover elements in Chernobyl folklore as in the above, with the supernatural figures, exemplify that “Despite its name, Chornobyl folklore is by no means local. Its global proliferation is due to different processes: spontaneous generation of jokes in different countries and languages, migration of narrators, telephone and mail communication, written media, and television programs” (Fialkova 2001:181), I had been curious as to how legends of Chernobyl differed for different nationalities, and from my findings, the most elaborate and detailed narratives were told by those from Eastern

European countries and/or those who had been old enough to remember the disaster when it happened. The richest mine of all of these proved to be my Stalker informants. A Lithuanian Stalker who illegally visited the Zone three times exemplified in his narrative to me the influence of mass media on Chernobyl folklore; the type of rumor and anti-authority stance I explored earlier in the chapter; and also legends that are unique to the Stalker community:

“In this story it is argued that the whole Chernobyl disaster was purposefully orchestrated to conceal the failure of over horizon radar DUGA. DUGA cost insane amounts of money to build and involved high officials whose reputation was at risk. Other legends about the same DUGA radar say that it was so powerful, that people living nearby could induce free electricity from metal fences, or that it could make watermelons “sing” if a metal rod was inserted into the fruit, or that DUGA may have actually caused the Chernobyl disaster in an unsuccessful test. There are not only legends about the Zone itself, but about some Stalkers as well. There is a legendary or rather infamous Stalker whose nickname translates as “Bat”. He supposedly has slept in the Red Forest, drank unfiltered water from Pripyat port, brought a bucket of a very radioactive sand back with him and put some under the pillow as an aphrodisiac. Oh, and he built a working nuclear reactor in his balcony.”

In a case of ostension, this respondent actually camped out in the Exclusion Zone with friends and lived there for several weeks, filtering water from streams, sleeping in abandoned houses and hiding from soldiers and scrap metal thieves by day, and moving by night. In performing these activities, which would be perceived by some to be nearly as reckless and improbable as those of the legendary Stalker he described, he and other Stalkers who perform similar behaviors become legendary figures in their own right, circulating their stories within their Stalker groups with their tales growing in the telling and making their way into the wider-proliferated legends of Chernobyl. Ostension in this context is what Dégh and Vázsonyi define as “presentation as contrasted to representation

(showing the reality itself instead of using any kind of signification)” (1983: 6) and consists of enacting and reenacting elements of different legends about preceding Stalkers at Chernobyl, behavior classified by Ellis (2018) as “ritual acts of rebellion” (69). These rituals are defined by the very transgressive nature of illegally entering the Zone, but also the consumption of alcohol and the destruction of property; all are acts that “[play] chicken with adolescent anxieties” (67). However, these are not the only identifiable characteristics of ostension present among Stalkers. If rituals are conducted to achieve some social end within a cultural sphere, legend tripping socially actualizes the fabric for Stalker self-significance through “ostensive action” (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983: 8). In narrative form, the aesthetic desires of Stalkers appear in their legends of the Zone that persist within both personal and digital communities. Accordingly, the template for what it ‘means’ to be an ideal Stalker—social values, cultural practices, etc.—can be located in narratives, or, more specifically, the figure of a Stalker in legends and their actions, like Bat or the Russian Woodpecker, whether these narratives derive ultimately from popular culture, folk culture, or not. Stalkers like my Lithuanian informant thus do not only reenact the legendary actions of past Stalkers; they also carve a name for themselves within the Stalker legendarium.

The folkloristic concept of differential identity (Bauman 1971) as it relates to the nature of Chernobyl as a deviant space can be applied to the Stalkers. Bauman’s proposal for what constitutes identity as a counter to dominant ideologies or power systems (1971) seems applicable to Chernobyl if we consider the site to be a heterotopia; it is the ultimate sign of the failure of once dominant power structures of the Soviet Union (Kürti 1988;

Dickstein 1993; Fialkova 2001) and a metaphor for societal collapse on a global scale, and happened recently enough to survive in cultural and living memory. Stalkers, I believe, especially represent a type of differential identity—or at least an identity fostered by their action(s) in terms of visiting the site illegally and their rather dismissive views on any instance of authoritative control over Chernobyl, including ‘official’ tours. As such, differential identity as apparent in Stalkers should be approached not exclusively from an abstract conceptual application, but rather in how differential identity is enacted through practice and how such practice makes its way into some of the narratives I was told. The figure of the “Russian Woodpecker” is an example of such a phenomenon; the character is described as a sort of archetypal Stalker. This figure is of particular interest because it stems ultimately from popular cultural institutions but has been repurposed by Stalkers like the Lithuanian and RoJla_Cpaka to embody their social values with respect to the anti-institutional, values materialized through action. Stalkers, then, can be viewed as visitors motivated by an ostension of differential identity.

Stalker folklore serves a specific function within digital and in-person communities to reinforce a sense of community and belonging among those in the know, and in the case of the supernatural legends, they seem to be circulated by experienced Stalkers as a gatekeeping tool to, as one of my informants noted, “scare off the newbie stalkers from going to the Zone.” In fact, to be recognized as a Stalker by other members, I am told, one must infiltrate the Zone multiple times and be familiar with code language that allows for linguistic assimilation into the community in terms of its aesthetic (the ‘authentic’ experience) and social valuation of the Zone. roJla_Cpaka shared:

“Many Stalkers use 430 instead of the Zone, Chornobyl, etc. as this number looks like ЧЗО (short for Russian Чернобыльская Зона Отчуждения, Chornobyl Exclusion Zone in English). Also Stalkers use a Slavic female given name Зина because it looks like and sounds almost like Russian Зона (the Zone). If you use 430 and Зина in Stalker communities you might look like you are an experienced Stalker!”

Interestingly, for Stalkers the goal is not necessarily to trespass into the Zone and successfully evade detection; a popular phenomenon they engage in on YouTube is sharing videos of their capture and subsequent arrests or expulsion from the Zone. There is a certain currency of respect accorded to those who create a scene when arrested and “stand up to the police,” with the authorities positioned as the establishment tamping down on the free will of explorers who view themselves as the rightful heirs to the Zone. In that respect many Stalkers can be assessed as something resembling Byronic heroes, to return to the notion of Chernobyl as a Gothic space, who enter the Zone in defiance of rules to connect with the land and, in so doing, work out their own internalized conflicts. As most Stalkers are young---to successfully function in the Zone one needs to be relatively fleet on one’s feet and in good physical shape---this can be in the form of the ostensive behaviors Ellis discusses as a form of “adolescent rebellion,” such as drinking, partying, or acts of destruction, or the “almost shamanic trips” Richter described to me to find oneself.

One example of such a figure who has become prominent in Stalker folklore is a young man described to me as having “some form of mental illness” who vowed to enter the Exclusion Zone as a personal challenge to himself to both “prove that he could and to attain the status of a Stalker”; he video-recorded his adventures and posted them on YouTube. He is an object of reactions ranging from affectionate amusement to derision

from other Stalkers, having established himself as something of a quirky character who approached his trip as though truly enacting a post-apocalyptic scenario, armed with more intense gear than even is needed for a long-term excursion into the Zone. While some of the commentary about him is cruel and in poor taste, he is the only person to become a legendary in Stalker folklore for whom I was able to identify a real-life counterpart, unlike Stepan. roJla_Cpaka sent me a meme featuring him after we had our interview that is just one of countless others distributed in Stalker digital communities (below).

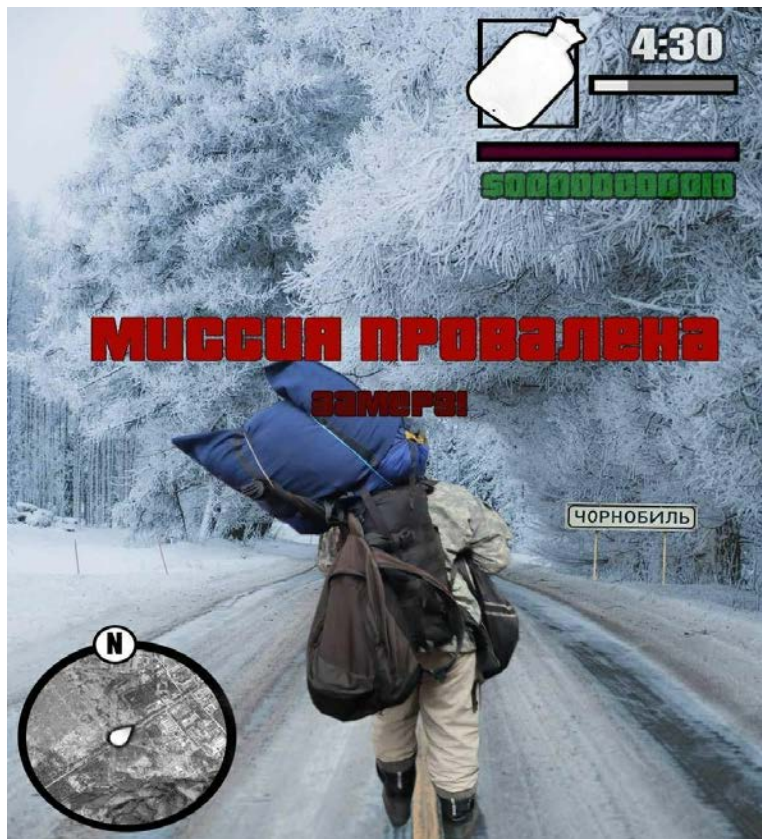


Figure 1. A meme featuring a notorious Stalker. Source: roJla_Cpaka. Used with permission.

In the meme, a photo of the man undertaking his journey with all his gear was interposed with textual elements from the video game franchise *Grand Theft Auto*; note the coded 4:30 as the timestamp and the vodka bottle denoting low fuel, as well as the paltry amount of available money. The text is in the same color and font as that which appears in *Grand Theft Auto* when one's character is killed, or "wasted." A sketch of his face is in the mock Wanted poster a previous Stalker had pinned on the wall of an abandoned home in the Zone, pictured below with roJla_Cpaka seated at the table.



Figure 2. A Stalker informant in an abandoned home in the Exclusion Zone. Source: roJla_Cpaka. Used with permission.

The most popular video this would-be Stalker posted was of him arguing with the police when he was caught several days into his adventure, for which he attained some measure of respect from other Stalkers and, at least in the eyes of some, fulfilled his goal of attaining their ranks. What makes a Stalker ‘belong’ in the community writ large is a multi-faceted concept and a source of debate that is constantly being negotiated. In the eyes of some, it is not enough to merely enter the Exclusion Zone illegally more than once, but rather how much of it one traverses. roJla_Cpaka defines himself as a Stalker primarily because he “entered illegally and marched 200 km there.” For others, one is not a Stalker, contrary to the depictions in *Roadside Picnic* and *Stalker*, if one undertakes trips for profit, leading tours. For still others, one is only a Stalker *only* if one does so. Richter (2020) interviewed a female Stalker, Alina, who shared her take on the term that is accordance with his own:

For me, that word is very powerful...It signifies a person who enters the Exclusion Zone illegally, but who also protects the Zone, someone who loves it sincerely and unquestioningly. To hike more than 100 kilometers with a heavy backpack through the thickets of the forest, hiding from police patrols, your feet blistered and sore, even in rain or hail -- this can only be a masochist or a stalker (112).

In chapter 1 I explored the definition of a Stalker within the context of the types of visitors to Chernobyl—official and unofficial. It seems to me, though, that being a Stalker is more than just a self-reflexive label, but rather, as Brubaker and Rogers (2000) would term it, a classification of “self-understanding,” with the divergent swath of desires and motivations of Stalkers to illegally enter the Zone creating a groupness that “may rest on categorical commonality and an associated feeling of belonging together with minimal or no relational connectedness” (20). A love of the Zone and desire to protect it may be

true of some Stalkers, but certainly not all, as evidenced by those who actively commit destruction while there.

Stalker folklore, a unifying thread that reinforces groupness among their communities, does not provide any specificity when it comes to defining a Stalker; the term is used without caveat. The tropes that are evident in Stalker folklore do reflect a certain type of Stalker, however: solitary figures engaging in reckless behaviors in the Zone, whether these characters are ill-fated like Stepan or triumph over radiation like Bat. The proverb “No dosimeter — no radiation!” is one example of the bravado that seems to characterize some Stalkers’ mentalities toward excursions into the Zone, similar to the view that Alina and roJla_Cpaka espouse that one attains Stalker credentials after hiking significant distances in the Zone, and that if one does get caught, one should resist the authorities.

Taken together, emic and etic folklore about Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone provide a lens through which to deepen our understanding of how people perceive the disaster and the site of today. From the various folkloric narrative associations that locals make with the area and its history, to expressions of touristic motivations influenced by popular culture and discourse, to legends that Stalkers circulate amongst themselves that articulate the self-understanding of what it means to be in the group, Chernobyl as a site represents a multifaceted patchwork of social and cultural perceptions. Folk narratives about Chernobyl, whether legend, joke, or rumor, from both etic and emic cultures, further contribute to the status of Chernobyl itself as a complex story, inseparable from its history.

CHAPTER 4: CHERNOBYL AS REALIZED

While wandering through a derelict school in a partially abandoned village on the outskirts of the Exclusion Zone, I found myself reproducing the same tired photographic clichés for which Chernobyl, at least visually, has become known. Walking over the broken glass and old Soviet textbooks in the school, I recreated my own collection of "ruin porn"; a guilty visual process that celebrates urban decay while ignoring the tragedy that it represents (Davies 2013: 122).

Conversation with RoJla_Cpaka

Aug 26, 2020

RoJla_Cpaka 10:42 AM

Hello! Regarding the Exclusion zone, my e-mail is [redacted]

Tatharnim 11:20 AM

Thank you so much! I e-mailed you

RoJla_Cpaka 03:33 PM

[redacted] This is the CEO of the monopolistic organisation that makes legal tours to the Zone for the past 5 years. I'm pretty sure he would be able to spare some time to talk with you about the Zone since you are from the USA, he likes that kind of stuff. He won't answer your questions in written form though. He will tell you about the official side of the Zone tours. And, of course, he will blame Stalkers in everything bad that happens in the Zone. Anyway, it's useful for you to get another opinion, but he is a businessman, don't expect him to be completely honest with you.

Tatharnim 06:15 PM

Thank you! That would definitely be an interesting perspective, though I will take it with a grain of salt :) I couldn't find anyone official involved with tourism there willing to talk to me. I really do hope to get to visit; it's such a shame about this miserable pandemic.

RoJla_Cpaka 06:20 PM

It's actually true, especially for post USSR countries, most people want just the money you bring with you. For example, the official tour to Chornobyl for foreigners is like ~100 Euros and ~50 Euros for locals.

Tatharnim 06:21 PM

Oh, I didn't realize there was such a price difference!

RoJla_Cpaka 06:22 PM

Hahaha, if you contact some Stalkers in order to get to the Zone they would tell you the price is 150-200 Euros per person. There are many foreign tourists who got robbed in the Zone by their illegal guides

A piece of advice about that CEO: Write him that you are gathering information about the Zone and you have friends that visited the Zone via his organisation, they had a great time and you desperately want to make a conversation with the CEO of the biggest and successful travel firm that provides the best guided tours into the Zone. He'll melt, I bet.

Sep 21, 2020

Tatharnim 06:52 PM

I've contacted some of the people you recommended who visited illegally, and only one responded, alas. He was too busy to do the questionnaire when I wrote, but said he might have time at the end of the month, so I just followed up. I would love to talk to more illegal visitors!

RoJla_Cpaka 06:55 PM

It's not a surprise that only one responded, I bet it was[redacted], AFAIK he speaks English well and I'm not sure about the others. The most hardcore Stalkers don't speak English at all. They are mostly into hunting or military stuff

RoJla_Cpaka 07:12 PM

I sent a message in a few chats in Telegram asking about Stalkers who might be interested in your Zone studies. Since it's nighttime here nobody responded but I hope during this day I'll find some volunteers for you

Tatharnim 07:16 PM

I really appreciate the effort, even if it comes to nothing!

RoJla_Cpaka 07:18 PM

Would be great if more people will learn more about my country, though it's not the best part of it. And at the same time you can see how my country and culture were pressed during Soviet occupation

So, do you want to visit the zone illegally?

Tatharnim 07:30 PM

Well, as an American, would I be in massive trouble if caught?

RoJla_Cpaka 07:35 PM

Ofc not, you'll be totally fine because you are an American. In general, all the foreigners in Ukraine who have EU or US citizenship are like holy cows in India. US and EU are our main partners against Russian federation so you as American may do whatever you want in Ukraine and if you have any troubles with the police just say them: "Leave me alone or I'll call to the US Embassy" and you'll be fine Regarding the Zone: if you get caught you'll be transported to the police department in Chornobyl, searched and released on the same day. Our government is very interested in your well-being in Ukraine. Ukraine is corrupted as well. If you get caught in the Zone you can just give \$30 to each of policemen and they will let you go

Tatharnim 07:40 PM

How often do people get caught?

RoJla_Cpaka 07:46 PM

Depends. For example now there are many border control patrols since there are some rallies in Belarus, so now you can find border control soldiers in the most remote areas of the Zone, while a few months before the situation wasn't that harsh and you could feel safe wandering through some distant places of the Zone. In Autumn many locals are going to the Zone in order to gather and sell contaminated shrooms, police is making more ambushes, therefore it's more likely to get caught now than in summer

Tatharnim 07:46 PM

Contaminated mushrooms? What do people do with those?

RoJla_Cpaka 07:46 PM

In winter, especially if it's very snowy it's easy to get caught since you leave a visible trail. They eat them or sell

Tatharnim 07:47 PM

I read those shouldn't be touched at any cost. Eat them, wow. And also that you shouldn't pet the dogs.

RoJla_Cpaka 07:48 PM

People are pretty dumb what concerns radiation. At the same time radiation levels aren't that high and you won't die instantly after eating something that has grown in the Zone

RoJla_Cpaka 07:51 PM

Yup, there are many dogs, they help guards at control points. Also there are many dogs in Pripyat. But most of them are harmless. 10-15 years ago there was a pack of halfdogs-halfwolves, they were very dangerous since they weren't afraid of people that much as wolves are

Tatharnim 07:53 PM

What happened to them?

RoJla_Cpaka 07:54 PM

They died out because they weren't adapted to life in the wild. They had puppies in winter, couldn't get them enough food and died out

Tatharnim 07:55 PM

Did you see any interesting wildlife?

RoJla_Cpaka 07:56 PM

Yup, elks or moose don't know the difference. A squirrel out of the window in Pripyat. Some birds.

Tatharnim 07:57 PM

Boar?

RoJla_Cpaka 07:58 PM

Nope. I was making noise in order to avoid that meeting. I didn't have any weapons against men or animals so I decided to prevent any unexpected encounters. And I was moving mostly at a nighttime when animals hunt. I think I saw some green eyes of a fox or a lynx, don't know for sure.

Tatharnim 08:00 PM

You, sir, are pretty badass

RoJla_Cpaka 08:01 PM

Stupidity + a dream of visiting Pripyat

RoJla_Cpaka 08:41 PM

The Zone isn't that dangerous as many may think. It's not early '90 when the radiation levels were still high and there were armed marauders, looters, scavengers after every corner. Anyway, you might be disappointed in the Zone, it certainly won't fit the built up images in your head but still will fulfil your expectations if we are talking about feelings and vibes. The Zone is a unique place, there isn't such place anywhere in the world. Fukushima is somewhat similar but still unique in its own way. Most of the stalker community are people with a low income, a tour to the Zone is the only thing that brings joy in their lives. Don't forget that the average wage in Ukraine is ~\$400. Officially. And really it's like ~\$250-300. Half of it goes for apartments, quarter for food and the rest for entertainment. By mentioning the average wage I mean that the illegal tours to the Zone are almost the only free entertainment for people who like hiking and exploring. Slavic culture is much different than western. We are part of Europe but we aren't at the same time. If you could make some researches here at the place you'll get to realize the Chornobyl tragedy at a whole new level.

The above is an excerpt from a series of chats over Reddit messenger conducted with a Ukrainian male informant I have referenced previously who also responded to my questionnaire and completed a video interview with me. A self-identified Stalker who has a deep and abiding love for the Exclusion Zone and a jaundiced eye toward many in the Stalker communities, roJla_Cpaka (his chosen codename) was my entry point into the world of the Stalkers, and served as a proxy of sorts for a visitor experience I was not able to have as planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He provided a plethora of useful contacts, links, and videos, only some of which resulted in my being able to speak to a

relevant informant. (The “monopolistic” CEO never did get back to me!). But roJla_Cpaka’s---and the other Stalkers I spoke with---most invaluable service was that he nuanced for me the very meaning of what it is to be a visitor to Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone---that sanctioned tours are only one of the possibilities---and that visitor experience there could be not just in ephemeral form, but a repeatedly enacted process in addition to a temporally bounded action. Stalkers are a more tightly defined folk group than the umbrella label of ‘people who visit Chernobyl,’ and their experiences and contextual cultural framework add a vital extra dimension to an analysis of visitation. After exploring in my previous chapters motivations to see Chernobyl in person, mass media representations of the site, and folklore that emerged following the disaster, I turn now to the visitor experience at Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone writ large, where the prior aspects of my analysis are brought to bear on visitor on-site performance---whether that visitor made an illegal trip or an official one.

Visitor Performance

The question of what constitutes the ‘authentic Chernobyl experience’ is a complex one for which my respondents, naturally, had divergent views. Hyperreality and hauntology conceptually affect individual and communal perception(s), and legends function as transmissive agents of contextually or communicatively appropriate expression. Touristic performance through manipulation of the site (e.g., elaborate displays of gas masks or arrangements of baby dolls to instill fear in future onlookers, as I will go on to discuss) further fabricates authenticity but also gears the site more towards preconceived notions of what it *should* be to the tourist (Goatcher and Brunsden 2011;

Rush-Cooper 2013; Brown 2017). As a concept, performance was first fleshed out into folkloristics as a viable area of study in the 1970s by Richard Bauman (1977) and continues to be a notable component of the disciplinary paradigm; I adapt it here perhaps unconventionally, but I believe it has applicability in conjunction with cross-disciplinary concepts of tourist performance in sociology and tourism studies. The basic premise of folkloristic performance theory is that an individual with adequate competence within a culturally-specific genre—and its relevance to a given social context—must manipulate communicative rules of that genre to be effective in its performative context, or risk being evaluated poorly by the audience on the basis of the strictures of those same rules (Bauman 1977); this is in keeping with Edensor's (2001) assertion that "forms of tourist habitus are also determined by unreflexive, embodied, shared assumptions about appropriate behaviour in particular contexts" (60). For example, how one comports oneself on a tour of Chernobyl would be assessed and evaluated as a type of performance coded by the expectations of others in the group; this was the case in my ethnographic findings of guided tour participants, Stalkers, and even autoethnographically on my virtual tour with Yulia. However, "invisible" performances at Chernobyl, such as the examples of staging the site I mentioned above, have no direct audience for the performer, suggestive of a kind of precursor to a personal narrative performance and for the sake of future visitors with the effect of (re)confirmation of preconceptions of Chernobyl. The phenomenon of performance turn in contemporary tourism studies is also relevant to understanding the tourist experience. In contrast to Urry's (1990) tourist gaze, which focuses on the visual aspects of tourism, the performance turn "employs

performative metaphors to conceptualise the corporeality of tourist bodies and embodied actions of tourist workers and tourists” by “shifting the focus to ontologies of doing and acting” (Larsen 2009: 7-8). The tourist experience, then, is one both *enacted* and experienced.

Visitor experience and its resulting emotional effects were the predominant theme in my questionnaire, with the questions designed to attain a sense of the performance of the visitors during their tours; how they perceived fellow members of the tour group, if applicable; and the ways in which the tour guides presented the site and staged their tours. I also was looking to assess my informants’ self-understanding as transmitted to me and how they defined themselves within the tourist rubric (e.g., did they consider themselves to be dark tourists). My Stalker respondents answered variations of the questions that were more targeted to their type of excursions, but still were focused on their own performances during their visits. Taking into account that tourist groups are not monoliths and comprise many nationalities, for which “national culture can be used to explain variations in the social behavior of different nationalities, particularly in international settings such as tourism experiences” (Kim, Prideaux, and Kim 2002), conversely, “participants involved in the tourism process create a distinct “tourism culture,” which is distinct from that of their routine and everyday culture (Özdemir and Yolal 2017: 315).” That said, the scope of my thesis is such that I am not attempting here to do a deep dive into how the tourist experience at Chernobyl differs along national lines beyond instances where the nationality of an informant bears relevance to their attitude and positionality about Chernobyl based on my ethnographic findings. Instead I will

analyze my informants within the framework of tourism culture and their self-reflexivity as tourists within this context, as part of a collective. Below are abridged questions I asked my informants that frame this chapter and serve as useful subsections under which to discuss my ethnographic findings; for related questions, I have combined them.

1. If you were on a guided tour, how did the tour guide(s) represent Chernobyl?
2. Did you have any expectations of the Chernobyl experience prior to visiting? If so, did it meet your expectations?
3. How would you characterize your emotional reaction to seeing the sites? Please describe in as much detail as possible. For example, did you experience fear, unease, sorrow, excitement, euphoria?
4. What was the most impactful thing you saw during your visit, and why?
5. Were you able to explore, or were you contained to specific areas?
6. How would you characterize your actions during your visit?
7. Did you directly feel in danger during your visit? After?
8. Did you move or manipulate any objects while there? (E.g., placing a doll on a chair). If so, why?
9. If you did not, yourself, move any objects, did you see other visitors staging scenes with objects? How did that affect your experience?
10. Do you feel you had an authentic experience during your visit? Why or why not?
11. Did visiting Chernobyl alter your perspective on the nature of death, disaster, etc.? If so, how?
12. Would you consider visiting Chernobyl comparable to visiting a site such as a concentration camp? Why or why not?
13. Do you regularly engage in dark tourism? If so, why?

In preparing my questions for my informants, Bruner's (2011) "four-fold perspective" informed my conceptualization of the factors that comprise the tour experience:

The tour as imagined, consisting of expectations and pre-understandings: what is in the mind of the tourist before embarking on the trip.

The tour as lived, the actual objective living-out of the tour in the destination country. It is very difficult to describe what really happens on tour, in part because so much is happening at once and descriptions are not bias-free neutral accounts. The tourist account is really the tour as told, not as actually lived. Becoming a tour guide...embeds the scholar in the tour, a good methodological move but the scholar does not live the tour as the tourist does.

The tour as experienced: what emerges to the consciousness of the tourist, the inner reactions to the tour as lived.

The tour as told: the recounting of a tour and the telling of a narrative about the travel (199).

The “tour as told” is, of course, the closest I, in a position entirely extrinsic to my informants, could attain to a sense of their experiences, but through my ethnographic findings some degree of the “tour as experienced” can be gleaned in narrative form.

How Did the Tour Guides Represent Chernobyl?

In their assessment of their guides, my respondents addressed how the former represented the history of the disaster, as well as their stances on contemporary dangers from radiation:

“Our tour was interesting in that our guide was the daughter of one of the liquidators of Chernobyl. Before arriving she stressed that we need to follow and respect the guides since Chernobyl is a protected zone. She emphasized not to touch certain things or stray from the group. Even though buildings were off limits she still took us inside several that were more sound. She discussed the human aspect- how many residents had lived their whole lives in the town like generations before them, how everyone was forced to leave suddenly, how plant workers and firefighters were the first heroes and were immediately impacted. She also discussed how it negatively affected the environment but then how many plants and animals were thriving now due to the area being a nature preserve. She also discussed the seriousness of radiation, and her frustration with "stalkers," some of which break into contaminated areas like the hospital basement for a social media photo. She took a photo book around with her to show us what sites looked like prior to the disaster and tried to give us a picture of what the "model" Soviet town looked like.”

“Our tour guide emphasized the dangers about what happened. And made it clear that the radiation was waning (above ground), with exception of the radiation in the ground making its way to the aquifer. She also talked about the New Containment sarcophagus, that it would provide better safety and radiation levels. She also mentioned the monetary issues it provided to the Ukraine and its people. Not really sure many people from the Ukraine would say otherwise.”

Of note in the first example is the negative take on Stalkers, which focuses on the more unsavory aspects of some of their behavior but tarred all with the same brush. This take

dovetailed with how roJla_Cpaka described the CEO of one of the tour groups in our Reddit messenger chat---blaming Stalkers for trespassing for photo opportunities---but I found much more evidence in my ethnographic findings as well as news media sources that suggested that this behavior was conducted, at least for the purposes of social media postings, by visitors on sanctioned tours.² For most of my informants, as with my own virtual tour, the guides were Ukrainian, which seemed to inform how they presented the disaster on a historical level and were, per my below respondent, “respectful.” Like the guide in the first example who was the daughter of a liquidator, my guide was the daughter of a firefighter, and much of our tour focused on the heroics of the firefighters and first responders.

“Our guide was Ukrainian and his discussions/thoughts on the Zone were fairly representative of his age group and nationality in my experience. He offered a sobering and knowledgeable perspective on the disaster but did not tolerate unnecessary instruction or chiding from older officials, especially at the NPP, as “they didn’t always know what they were talking about”. He cared for our safety but did not require us to follow all the rules. His generation seems to have been less affected by the disaster and it provides his siblings a good business opportunity but his parents worry for his health and do not strictly approve. That said, he was very respectful towards the Zone. There are some interesting (though often stereotypical and potentially racist) discussions on urbex forums regarding the quite different attitudes towards the Zone between Russians, Ukrainians and the rest of the world. Age also seems to be a factor in such distinctions but the general viewpoints of each group fits quite well with my own experiences at Chernobyl. Basically, the theory goes that Russians are fairly condescending of the zone, Ukrainians respectful and the rest of the world naive or overtly privileged.”

One of my British informants who was the earliest visitor in my data (2011, before the site was opened officially to the public tours), discussed how his tour guide focused less on the “human impact,” but acknowledged the underlying factors that might be at play,

² See <https://www.news.com.au/travel/travel-updates/instagram-influencers-slammed-for-sexy-hazmat-selfies-in-chernobyl-nuclear-death-zone/news-story/e6e1f69fdcad82ce3ff5563ac8e61597>, for example.

which did not seem to be the case for my informants who visited once there was a form of tourist infrastructure:

“We had a British guide (that was a surprise) who tended to skip over the political issues mainly because we had a Ukrainian “minder.” He laid out the sequence of events quite well but downplayed the human impact a little. The tour group was multinational and it appears very well informed as to the incident. Interesting to consider if the guide’s approach was condition by his visitors (older, serious) and/or his cultural background (ie British, unplaying most things). Thinking again the group asked “difficult” questions and were very thoughtful about the whole thing.”

I was not sure what to expect in terms of Ukrainian guides: I had anticipated that they would either be critical of Soviet authorities and their role in the disaster and attempted cover-up or, conversely, want to minimize what transpired so as not to risk potentially poor perception of Ukraine that could affect its economy from tourism. The former was the case in my virtual tour, with Yulia speaking sternly on how the government handled the disaster itself, yet she emphasized that the radiation levels were safe. When asked by one of my fellow tour participants how long one can safely stay in the Exclusion Zone, she replied “Definitely if you stay a few days it will be fine!” It seems that none of my informants had a tour guide who was defensive about the disaster; the variation in their presentation of the facts was in how they represented the elements of danger, and relatedly, the degree of freedom in movement they accorded to members of their tour groups. As there is no true consensus on just how dangerous it is to be at Chernobyl, this was an expected finding.

Did You Have Any Expectations of the Chernobyl Experience Prior to Visiting? If

So, Did it Meet Your Expectations?

“The tour as imagined” was relevant to both official and unofficial visitors, and my responses were evenly divided between expectations being met or exceeded. For those on official tours, the respondents’ preconceptions of Chernobyl that reflected their greatest uncertainty about their experiences once there concerned the element of danger:

“I was apprehensive at first and questioned myself several times because of the risks involved, but I talked myself into it each time. In the end I was also excited for the bragging rights as Day 1 in Chernobyl was my 32nd Birthday. Being in Chernobyl was surreal and I definitely would like to go back again on a private tour. What was funny is that our guide asked our group of 10 on the last day which of us had told any family or friends that we were going to Chernobyl. My husband and I were the only ones who said yes. When told, my MIL immediately asked if we went if we could still have kids.”

“We thought it would be more dangerous than we've expected. While staying there long is still not healthy, (with all respect) they tend make it sound more dangerous than it is”

“The radiation levels are "low" enough to stay up for a month in the Zone. You mostly have to watch out for falling, slipping and tetanus.”

“Besides the dangers, I expected to see more animals.”

Danger was a possibility that many had accounted for in their decision to visit Chernobyl, then, but the majority of my informants were unprepared for the extent to which they would be surprised by the “unexpected experiential paths” (Bittner 2011:149) that would result; their diction was reminiscent of those of the TripAdvisor guided tours reviews I analyzed during the first stage of my fieldwork, with “shock,” “awe,” and “surreal” used frequently across the questionnaires. Once again, then, I encountered terms of the Gothic and the sublime in association with Chernobyl in ethnographic data. My informants also underestimated their emotional responses from seeing the site, which were significant

enough for some of them to include in their responses separately of their answers to my question specifically about their emotional reactions:

“It exceeded my expectations in terms of how it felt to be there. I didn't think it'd have such a strong emotional impact.”

“It was even more unique and moving than what I could have imagined.”

My Stalker informants' preconceptions of their experiences within the Exclusion Zone were heavily informed by those of their Stalker predecessors and were focused less on radiation and more on the difficulty of infiltration and other logistics. As roJla_Cpaka explained:

“I thought it would be much harder to get into/out of the Zone unspotted, but it was much easier than I thought. Also it was not that hard to move inside the Zone. I have realized that after returning from the Zone I was exhausted because of walking and Sprite (we made over 100 miles in 7 days with backpacks on) so I couldn't get focused on my emotional side of the trip.”

Given the nature of an illegal visit, it is logical that their dominating thoughts would be survivalist in nature. Yet, this is not to say that illegal visits are devoid of emotion for Stalkers. As Richter (2020) described his first illegal excursion:

“now we are immersed in it, breathing it in -- as well as high on adrenaline from the constant fear of being caught. Our quest to reach Pripyat, against the ever lurking threat of capture or contamination, takes on mythical dimensions in my head...These feelings of awe and mania intensify when we catch sight of our next destination (120).

Here, again, we see terms associated with the sublime (“awe,” “mania”) and an embodiment of Lyotard's (1994) “quest for intense effects” (252).

Emotional Reactions/ How Chernobyl Alters Perspectives on the Nature of Death and Disaster

My informants reacted strongly when parsing the emotions visiting Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone evoked. Even those who considered themselves to be “very familiar” with the events associated with the disaster or had been exposed to the hyperreality of Chernobyl through mass media representations or folk narratives still had a visceral response during the “tour as lived” and the “tour as experienced,” as transmitted to me through “the tour as told.” All were in accord that, as with their preconceptions of the visit itself, their emotions exceeded all expectations. One informant succinctly told me, *“I’d say mostly a ‘Holy shit’ reaction, since it was hard to grasp the magnitude of the disaster.”* As well as shock and awe, “sorrow” and its variants was an emotion many referenced, which dovetailed with the overarching nature of the Chernobyl experience as the sublime, as with Richter’s (2020) assertion that “The Zone possesses a humbling power that’s hard to describe” (120). Visiting enabled my informants to harness a deeper empathy for those who had suffered, and their abandoned material goods and the shells of buildings were widely referenced as the most impactful objects of the tours: *“I think when walking through people’s abandoned homes, you can’t help but feel sorrow, knowing that the former residents were given only a few hours to pack up their things, never to return.”*

“It was fascinating to see so many things almost as if they were frozen in time, but also incredibly sad knowing how many lives were uprooted and how many families were suddenly grieving loved ones who got sick or died due to radiation poisoning.”

“When I cast a look on the abandoned decaying city of Pripjat it was a moment I felt sorrow and despair because it was so unusual to observe a completely empty and quiet city. It made me feel like the world is gonna end soon and I’m the only who’s gonna witness that. It was like staring into the void of inevitable eternity that awaits us in the distant (???) future.”

A general disquiet and sense of hauntology pervaded my informants’ time while visiting, whether as an official or unofficial visitor:

“I remember it being very dark and eerie due to seeing streets with all of these buildings but with no lights on.”

“We all felt unease in visiting the flats as it was invading someone’s home and by common consent left fairly quickly. Walking across scattered books in the school library was another unnerving experience for those of us who revered books; ie all of us.”

“Unease when being alone.”

“Eerie, the whole zone is simply eerie.”

“Hope that we won’t repeat this in the future, unfortunately history repeats itself.”

As for the degree to which my informants felt themselves to be in danger, this varied by the individual and was influenced by the tour guides and how they staged the tours. In contrast to an episode of the show *Dark Tourist* I watched in which a tour group visited Fukushima and grew so uncomfortable with the rapidly rising numbers on their dosimeters that they requested to leave, none of my informants perceived themselves as being in serious peril. One respondent explained to me, *“When we visited one of the dumps where they stored the old vehicles we were told we had 10 minutes and to ‘run, not walk - run back to the bus when it was shouted that our time was up, because of the radiation,”* but he speculated that the tour guide might have been doing this for

performative effect. Some guides were strict with the instructions they imparted to their groups to not wander off or touch anything; others were more willing to allow certain behaviors from their charges, such as petting animals or climbing on objects to pose for photos.

“There were a number of sweet friendly dogs at the hotel and the memorial, but I remember being told not to touch them as their hairs could have radiation on them. The guides all pet them but I still kept my distance.”

Tied in with their self-perception of danger was the extent to which tour guides emphasized to their groups that their experience was a sacralized and privileged one, to return to Rush-Cooper’s (2013) guide describing his group as “...visitors to a very special place, a restricted place” (1); this phenomenon is reinforced by tour groups tending to avoid overlapping at all, giving the impression that one truly does have valorized access---to the extent that some visitors feel they are trespassing:

“Putting on the white robes and hats, and then being given gloves and masks for later in the tour was really something else. A lot of the time I felt as though I was breaking some rules by being in the plant because of what happened there. I was constantly checking my meter because of our close proximity to the reactor, but on average we stayed at .24 or below for most of the plant. The scariest part was standing next to the concrete barrier that separated us from Reactor 4 since our dosimeters were going off and we were told to walk quickly to limit exposure.”

Of course, no visitor to Chernobyl is truly alone with their group. As per Richter (2020),

“There could be fifty people here. Stalkers are always here, hiding everywhere” (134).

For Stalkers, who truly are trespassing, any sense of danger is inextricable from the act of illegal visitation itself. One Stalker explained, *“I felt unease almost all the time in the Zone since we were afraid of patrols, we stayed on high alert first 4-5 days.”* Patrols are

the least of their problems with encountering other humans in the Zone, however.

roJla_Cpaka detailed to me a harrowing moment during one of his visits when he and his companion nearly stumbled into a scrap thieves' camp and backed away as quietly as they could, then ran away. *"What would they do to you if they had seen you?"* I asked. *"Kill us,"* he replied.

Mortality and my respondents' contemplation of it within the context of their visits was of especial curiosity to me (though I was not anticipating any of them would find themselves in such a situation as above in which they were directly confronting it!). After all, mortality is a core theme of dark tourism conceptually, and my findings reinforced this fact. My informants were "humbled" by the scale of the disaster and the fleeting nature of life, and their resulting emotional responses led them to reflect on the nature of life and death, yes, but also on disaster wrought by humans:

"Being there in person, you see and feel the consequences of when harnessing the power of the atom goes awry."

"It gave me a chance to witness that everything's dust on the wind and we all live in illusion that we can control something in this world."

"It really puts things in perspective seeing how something so small could destroy and poison something that big."

Yet many non-American respondents came away from their time in Chernobyl and the Exclusion Zone, regardless of their prior fears and anxieties about radiation, with a surprisingly positive view of nuclear power:

"It certainly altered my perspective on nuclear power, of which I am now a proponent. This may seem contradictory, but after visiting I read a lot about it, about the science and

effects of it, and this made me see that the matter is so much more complex than one may think at first sight after hearing about a terrible disaster.”

“I also get annoyed when I see Chernobyl portrayed as completely dangerous, negative, and radioactive (such as in Amazon's Radioactive about the life of Marie Curie). I think it is an important place to see because nuclear energy is relatively safe and is a great resource, it just needs to be maintained with proper security and safety protocols.”

“You come away understanding the good that nuclear energy can bring us when utilized correctly.”

Additionally, as I explored previously, my respondents remarked on what one described as the “*persistence of nature*,” and in concert with an altered perspective on nuclear power, their visit to Chernobyl helped mediate some of the anxieties with which they had grappled beforehand. Even though they did experience negative emotions associated with dark tourism, such as sorrow and unease, and found the overall experience to be sobering, they contrasted it with visiting a concentration camp, which nearly all agreed was profoundly different as a tourist site and ‘dark’ in a way they did not find Chernobyl to be:

“A concentration camp is more related to pure evil. In a sense, Chernobyl was an accident related to ignorance which doesn't carry the same emotional stress.”

“I have also been to Dachau and Auschwitz and the sites are not comparable at all beyond serving as memorials to lives lost. Seeing Auschwitz literally made me sick and I have never wanted to leave a place so quickly due to the systematic and prolonged atrocities that were committed there against other human people solely for their religion, nationality, political beliefs, or mental/physical state.”

“While many died or got cancer as a result of the tragic Chernobyl disaster, the disaster itself and the aftermath it caused was not intentional Chernobyl brought a lot of good things to Ukraine/USSR at the time- jobs, housing, national pride, energy. It was the mistakes of several individuals and the paranoia/secretcy of the Soviet state that together caused the explosion.”

“Places like concentration camps show us the hatred of people to other people and the

Zone shows us that we can't tame the forces of nature and the nature will prevail at the end."

Within this context, then, one can understand why not one of my respondents assessed themselves to be a dark tourist as defined within their self-understanding of the term. They considered themselves to have been privileged to have had the experience, but to them a dark tourist was someone whose *intentionality* was 'dark,' more in keeping with Seaton's (1996) "travel to a location wholly, or partly motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death" (240) than their embodiment, through their narratives, of Martini and Buda's (2018) an "affective socio-spatial encounter" (1).

Performing the Chernobyl Tour/Authenticity

How did my informants 'perform' their visits to a recognized site of dark tourism even if they did not see themselves as dark tourists? Although all of them hastened to assure me that they comported themselves utterly respectfully, some admitted that the salient way they would describe their "tour as lived" was as an adventure. This was, of course, especially true of Stalkers, but also for some of my official visitors; the example "*The trip to Chernobyl felt like an adventure to me, a unique one but still an adventure*" being characteristic of the types of responses I received. The Lithuanian Stalker was conscious of his visit "*as a performance for my own benefit and for my friends,*" an immersive role-playing experience akin to the actions of S.T.A.L.K.E.R.s acting out their video games of choice. Richter (2020) also invoked video games when describing the adrenaline-inducing elements of his illegal visits: "Dodging tour buses and police patrols on a grid of tight city streets feels a lot like playing a video game" (134). The degree to

which my informants perceived their time to be an adventure seemed to be proportionate to how much freedom they were given by their guides to explore (or in the case of the Stalkers, how long they were able to spend in the Zone). Those on loosely structured tours, especially chronologically early ones dating back to when tourism first was sanctioned, were able to wander in and out of apartments in Pripyat at will. One informant explained, *“Our bus driver dropped us off and told us to meet him back there in 8 hours. It felt like the greatest adventure I ever had. We didn’t see another soul and pretended we were the last people on earth.”*

In addition to describing themselves as “respectful,” many were critical of the behaviors of others in their tour group who they deemed “disrespectful” in some fashion, whether laughing or taking selfies---thus not adhering to the “unreflexive, embodied, shared assumptions about appropriate behaviour in particular contexts” (Edensor 2001: 60)--even if the guides did not remark on these behaviors. As one respondent complained:

“I saw a girl taking a photo of herself sitting in one of the buckets on the Ferris Wheel. I thought she was stupid and entitled for several reasons- the structure is not sound after sitting and rusting for 30 years, they tell you not to touch metals because they are more radioactive, and it reminded me of how many people go to Chernobyl just for social media purposes instead of learning and reflecting from the experience.”

The other phenomenon that most of my participants had strong opinions about was that of staged authenticity amongst the ruins and discarded artifacts. Prior visitors have made found art displays that especially make use of discarded dolls and other children’s toys, but also gas masks, school books, magazines, and clothing, often carefully arranged to convey the impression that they were abruptly abandoned and frozen in a ‘moment in

time,' or else ominously displayed, seemingly to enhance the creepiness of the atmosphere. No one copped to staging photos themselves; some expressed outright disgust at how it impacted the "authenticity" of their experience, while still others acknowledged that they were troubled by seeing these fabrications but took photos of the tableaux regardless. MacCannell (1973) describes why the authentic is so elusive in the tourist experience using Erving Goffman's dichotomy of front-back spaces, which delineates that "front" spaces are those easily accessible and intended for tourist interaction, such as a museum exhibit, and "back" spaces are the restricted areas closed off to their access, such as the storage rooms of the museum, which are the more 'authentic' for being inaccessible:

Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences, and the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to tell for sure if the experience is authentic in fact. It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation (597).

The official visitors to Chernobyl sought the "back region" experience---and were encouraged to view themselves as having this by their guides----and resented the simulation of the front as a proxy for the back when entering a 'restricted' space like someone's former home and finding staged objects on display. As one informant on a guided tour explained, *"I disagree with the people who restore schoolrooms and apartments in Pripyat. The results are generally fine and I admire their passion but I don't want to the zone to turn into one big museum diorama."*

Of course, as is widely acknowledged by scholars of folklore, "authenticity is not given in the event but is a social construction" (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1992: 303). To

that point, several of my informants took photos of other group members photographing the staged displays as a type of *mise-en-scène*, acknowledging that part of the experience for them was to watch others interact---and perform---within it and, as several explained, ensuring that they did not “*come across as typical bad American tourists.*” My respondents setting their touristic performance apart from other group members is in keeping with Gillespie’s (2006) assertion that “tourists usually claim, at a discursive level, a position that is superior to that of the ‘average tourist’ or ‘typical tourist’” (362). The act of photography in a touristic context can be seen as “a form of performance on the part of the tourist that involves ambivalent relationships between home and away, oneself and other tourists, and (real or perceived) possibilities and restraints” (McCarthy 2016: 171). Their act of tourism was, for them, a dynamic and enacted experience with performative displays as currency, guided by the behaviors of others who were displaying (in)appropriate behaviors and attempting to avoid the negative associations. They navigated the perceived exceptions of their guides and the group members even as they navigated the physical space. Although my ethnographic findings did not turn up anyone outside of the Stalkers---who admitted to manipulating objects and reading books they found, if not actively staging a site---Richter (2020) experienced his guided tour group “wade through the ruins, cameras in hand, constantly rearranging the artefacts to make new and original compositions” (54) and discussed the way in which authenticity becomes almost irrelevant within this context of repurposed materials:

The place is filled with the usual staged clutter: dolls, bears, and tricycles. Wayne is seeing this for the first time and as we plough through the decorative debris, he muses on the way these items have lost their original purpose, instead becoming building blocks in the expression of new ideas -- raw material for making art, or shrines. 'The ontological

cages have sprung open. Everything is pure materiality,' he says... 'It's like a cargo cult turned inside out (133-134).



Figure 3. Staged display of gas masks in a schoolroom, Pripyat. Used with permission from gytizzz.



Figure 4. Dolls with gas masks are a common example of staged displays throughout the Exclusion Zone. Used with permission from gytizzz.

Images such as the ones above are so well known to visitors to Chernobyl that one can argue that the act of photographing them is a proof of visitation. For those who are unaware of this staging phenomenon, photos of the objects can lend a sense of hyperreality to the onlooker. When I was presenting on dark tourism to Chernobyl at a

conference, I remember an audible gasp from audience members when I put up a slide featuring some examples of this type of staging before I was able to explain their context.

With the caveat that the notion of the authentic is a construct, I was nonetheless curious as to whether my informants considered their visits to have been ‘authentic.’ Most of them felt that they had, though defined what authentic meant to them very differently. For some, group size, amount of area traversed, and the length of stay were the determining factors:

“Yes, we specifically went with Chernobyl Welcome because they had smaller groups, included the power plant, and offered the overnight stay in Chernobyl.”

“Yes, but it was far too short and I only saw the Belarusian side of the zone very briefly. Am also not sure you can ever fully comprehend Chernobyl in its entirety given its size, uniqueness and the constant changes there - both natural and manmade. But every visit shows you another side of its beauty and mystery.”

Others cited staged authenticity displays as the only element that jarred an otherwise authentic experience: *“it was mostly authentic. Except for dolls but guides told it's because previous tourists wanted to make a photo and made those arrangements.”*

One respondent saw through my intent and wrote:

“Define authentic experience. I many ways no tourist activity is authentic as it has been manufactured for your entertainment.”

Not only did my informants not describe themselves as dark tourists, but they were very reluctant to even use the word “tourist” in reference to themselves. Most used “traveler,” in keeping with Bruner (2005): “even tourists themselves belittle tourism as it connotes something commercial, tacky, and superficial” (7). Their preferred term instead connotes that they “consider themselves more culturally aware, sensitive, and savvy than their

boorish tourist cousins” (McCarthy 2016: 175). In their responses to this question, the Stalkers highlighted to me that they were travelers and “adventurers,” and defined authenticity within the rubric of the Stalker legendarium. As the Lithuanian Stalker explained to me, “*The illegal visit itself is the authentic Stalker experience.*”

Bruner (2005) writes, “Experience may be the ultimate tourist commodity...but in itself, experience is inchoate without an ordering narrative, for it is the story, the telling, that makes sense of it all, and the story is how people interpret their journey and their lives” (20). One day I will go to Chernobyl. I will experience a litany of emotions much like my informants did, and marvel at nature, and it will also be an adventure whether or not I find myself hiding from patrols in long grass with newfound Stalker friends, hoping not to put to the test roJla_Cpaka’s confident assertion in our Reddit chat that I will be “totally fine” if caught because I am an American. My respondents did not consider themselves to be dark tourists, even where this contradicts the scholarly definitions, but I still define myself as that. I find no shame in gravitating to dark sites which can inform a better self-knowledge, especially during a particularly harrowing era that I, like the rest of the world, have experienced and still struggle to mediate and understand. My ultimate goal in visiting will be, as roJla_Cpaka predicted, to realize “the tragedy on a whole new level.” Perhaps in sites of dark tourism and their narratives there is a certain paradoxical comfort to be attained, a sense of “this, too, shall pass” that can be extrapolated to one’s own life for “those who, themselves, might one day face annihilation,” the lines from the Liubov Sirota (2016) poem “To Pripyat” that I used as the title for my thesis. But Sirota Bruner writes of a “calamity not shared” and urges the reader “But when you fly

off/don't forget us, grounded in the field!/And no matter to what joyful faraway
lands/your happy wings bear you/may our charred wings/protect you from carelessness.”
I will not forget.

CONCLUSION: CHERNOBYL AS THE FUTURE

We need to know that, if we feel that we must disturb a visible or invisible landscape for some reason, we should consider very carefully what we are doing before we act: the consequences on many levels may be grave and, ultimately, not worth it; the many losses may well outweigh the gains (Ryden 1993: 292).

"Tourism in Chernobyl, as it exists today, is simply not sustainable" (Richter 2020: 100).

There is one salient question that remains in my discussion of tourism and Chernobyl: should people even travel there? There are numerous angles to consider when posing this question, which in turn generate even more questions. Is it truly safe? How is tourism affecting the environment of the Exclusion Zone, which has been in the process of recovery precisely because there were few people treading there for so long? From an ethical perspective, is it wrong to visit such a dark and somber site of death and destruction? Does the educational value of such visits outweigh Chernobyl's rapid commodification as a site of the touristic gaze? To what extent is one 'owed' access to a heritage site? Should the locals and resettlers be given more consideration instead of being incorporated into some of the guided tours as 'local color', or should we support their newfound economy that has developed as a result? Are unofficial visits ultimately less harmful than the sanctioned tours?

I of course cannot provide conclusive answers to these questions, only attempt to tease out some possibilities and weigh both sides. Perhaps there is no definitive answer to

be found. These questions are vital and relevant not only when considering Chernobyl, though, but other sites of dark and toxic tourism, and I would be remiss not to conclude a project on Chernobyl that opened with a discussion of tourist motivation without examining some of the potential reasons that tourists plausibly should *not* visit.

Chief among these are some of the objectively dangerous consequences that the nuclear disaster has wrought not only in local populations but extending to some of northern Ukraine's more immediate geographical neighbors (especially Belarus and the Russian Federation) and across Europe as a whole. The radiation—and its physiological and psychological harms—abided by no borders. A 2005 report from the World Health Organization details some of the epidemiological phenomena that can be traced directly to the disaster, including thyroid diseases, cancers, complications of internal organs, and cardiovascular diseases. Zablotska (2016) adds that “mental health effects were the most significant public health consequences of the accident” in “the three most contaminated countries:” Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (410). Measures and policies have been proposed and enacted to mitigate adverse health effects of the Chernobyl event (see Marino and Nunziata 2018: 835), but, in many respects, the damage has been done.

We know now that the general lack of human activity in the Exclusion Zone has led to a sort of environmental renaissance both in the Zone and in the areas immediately surrounding it (see Mousseau and Møller 2017). Some of my informants remarked on this, as well as Yulia, my virtual tour guide. One of them, to recall, was grieved by “the fact that radiation is less harmful to [wildlife] than humans.” As I learned, a chance to glimpse this natural abundance is a motivating factor for some tourists; animal life has

indeed figured into some of the folk narratives I was told during the course of this project. However, the draw of tourists to Chernobyl can create potentially adverse consequences for this recent environmental upsurge. For example, roJla_Cpaka told me about a new experience that the official tourism industries was offering: a drive through the streams and forests surrounding Chernobyl in all-terrain vehicles. “There’s a lot of birds that breed on the paths they go on,” he explained, further detailing that these tours will likely kill many of these nesting birds and embitteredly contrasting the official tours and their harms with the ways of the Stalkers.

Apart from the impacts on health that the disaster has caused, and the possibly negative effects on the environment that tourism can impart, the ethical question of engaging with Chernobyl as a touristic site is of great importance. In a somewhat ironic twist of fate, this intended testament to Soviet ingenuity has, since the nuclear event, been subjected to the whims of capitalistic production systems, especially apparent in popular cultural media forms like movies, television, and video games. Chernobyl, or rather, what happened there 35 years ago, has been commodified into a network of stories and symbols that influence perceptions and meanings; it exists in the hyperreal, a condition that motivates and accompanies tourists when they visit. For locals, people who lived through the events of the disaster and suffered its most direct consequences, Chernobyl “is not an isolated event in [their] memories but a continuation of trauma,” ongoing since at least the beginning of the 20th century (Davies 2013: 125-6) and manifesting in famine, war crimes, and failures of political institutions. Davies (2013) argues, through the lens of photography, that the marginalized local populations surrounding Chernobyl have

suffered from a double exposure—to radiation and to a “state that failed (and continues to fail) to provide necessary help or protection” (129). The state renders locals invisible, erases their histories, in order to promote a particular ‘image’ or ‘narrative’ of Chernobyl, encapsulated in the photographic phenomenon of “ruin pornography,” that which “dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit or transform them,” (123). Locals subvert this hierarchy through unofficial knowledge and illegal economic activities (like foraging for mushrooms in the Exclusion Zone), but also through photographs of family members who died as a result of the disaster or of life before the accident. “Photography and memory are closely intertwined,” writes Davies (2013: 125), and allow locals to make the past more tangible, more visible in the face of the process of being made invisible through institutional apparatuses or external commodification. Photographs, then, link the past to the present and imbue it with emotion, where they exist simultaneously, to celebrate memories that also retain tragedy while subverting institutional representations and narratives of Chernobyl by making the past more tangible. As such, photographs are physical conduits of hauntology at the local level.

Stalkers as a folk group complicate the notion of local as applied to Chernobyl. The ones that I spoke with are not from the area, and one was not even from Ukraine. They engage in similar activities as locals, such as illegally entering the Zone, but seem to be motivated by very different reasons. roJla_Cpaka explained to me that, by his understanding, “*a tour to the Zone is the only thing that brings joy in their [the “Stalker community’s”] lives.*” These illegal tours can involve copious amounts of alcohol and destructive behavior that comes with intoxication: “*They behave like pigs in abandoned*

huts and apartments,” lamented. Such behavior is common in instances of legend-tripping (see Ellis 2018), and Stalkers, as I have discussed, possess a large corpus of legends that expands with each illegal trip to the Zone. Through practice, Stalkers are weaving themselves into the narrative fabric of their community in its ongoing thread of stories that constitute their version of Chernobyl. Legends reflect the social values of Stalkers, mostly in that they fantastically capture the essence of Stalker self-understanding and self-significance: subversion of institutional authority over Chernobyl, both spatial and narratively.

Valk and Sävborg (2018) explain that “place-lore has the power to unite people, to protect them, and to move them to action in their endeavours of protecting remarkable places in their locality...places are empowered by narratives” (10) circulated amongst particular folk groups. Places have gravitational pulls that in turn radiate outwards in narratives. As such, “relationship with place is both reciprocal and dynamic,” (Valk and Sävborg 2018: 8). Stalkers reciprocate the significance of Chernobyl through legends and behavior in which they view themselves as protectors of the site from further corporatization, a result of the site becoming safer for visitation (Richter 2020: 98-114).

For Stalkers, then, legend-tripping is not exclusively about enacting and reenacting the plots of different legends, though these narratives certainly ‘live’ with Stalkers as they enter the Zone. Instead, legend-tripping in this context is also an act of social and individual actualization through the contestation of authority by viewing themselves as Chernobyl’s true protectors. roJla_Cpaka told me about a recent illness he contracted acquired by wading through the Uzh River and, soon after, “*lying on the cold*

soil hiding from patrols for 30 minutes.” Hiding from the police in this setting makes logistical sense, even if roJla_Cpaka and the Stalkers he was traveling with sacrificed their own health to do so. But hiding from the patrols is what Stalkers do. It is encoded into their narratives, an act of the subversion of power. As opposed to locals, hiding is a self-imposition of invisibility, an invisibility that similarly ‘sticks it to the Man’ but for very different social reasons. Invisibility, here, does not completely negate that Chernobyl is a site of tragedy, but there is more to the picture than a blind acceptance of or a desire for the site to be a necropolis. Darmon Richter (2020) spoke to a Stalker named Alina that stressed the fact that “everywhere they write that it’s a dead city, but Pripjat is alive. It has its own strange law, soul, and quirks. Only there am I truly calm,” (112). For Stalkers like Alina and roJla_Cpaka, their behavior—if sometimes outright destructive—and their narratives are agentic reclamations of Chernobyl, wresting their beloved, living site from its ongoing death at the joint hand of the institutional and the touristic gaze.

Chernobyl and the Ethics of Dark Tourism:

Is dark tourism a subordination of the ethical in favor of aesthetic indulgence? In many respects, this is a question that has haunted dark tourism studies since its inception (see Roberts and Stone 2014). Chernobyl is no exception to this, and, as the site continues to be commodified, as more and more tourists flock to visit it, this question’s looming significance will, too, be amplified (Shrader-Frechette 2003; McKenzie 2018). Chernobyl remains a site of personal and collective tragedy, especially for locals. Many of them lost family members to the accident, their homes and lifestyles, and, as Zhukova (2016)

argues, the ontological security that Soviet ideologies afforded, a sense of security that has since evolved into cultural trauma. As such, Chernobyl as it exists in the local sphere elicits a wide array of emotions and memories, encapsulated not only in photographs or narratives, but in the place itself.

For outside dark tourists and other observers, generally speaking, Chernobyl cannot represent much more than an alluring site of disaster and death, a “Soviet Pompeii,” as Richter (2020: 88) calls it. It is a permanent, stark reminder to the rest of the world of the potential dangers of nuclear energy. In Germany, for example, Chernobyl is a “fairly uncontested site of memory” that is referenced to justify a lack of investment in nuclear power because it is understood within “interpretive schema that are accepted by nearly the entire population and reach across class, regional, and ideological boundaries” (Kalmbach 2013: 147-8). This collective memory of Chernobyl has even infected our lexical systems and semantic frameworks. When we speak of “Chernobyl,” we are most likely referring to the disaster, perpetuating its reputation as a place that makes death and tragedy fascinating. The site, of course, cannot be divorced from the disaster; its history cannot be excised, but is it ethical to continuously associate Chernobyl *only* with this one element of its past and to remove local experiences out of the touristic equation entirely? Probably not, but, at this point, is it already too late?

Perhaps these questions are too black and white, not nuanced enough for folkloristic analysis. What I mean to suggest, though, is that Chernobyl has, as a result of its portrayal in popular culture and its understanding at various levels of communication, cultural memory, and discourse, acquired a particular aura. Regina Bendix (2002)

borrows this term from Walter Benjamin, who associated it “with the originality inherent to the work of art,” (473). She applies aura, however, to the alluring notion of an authentic travel experience, where tourists can “experience what has never been experienced before” and capture their experiences in photographs or material reminders of the trip, e.g., souvenirs to commemorate the authentic (473-5). Travel experiences, even the most harrowing ones, are mediated through narratives, but it is equally important to recognize the narratives (or the Narrative) that constitute Chernobyl as a place, or, more appropriately, that constitute its aura, magnetizing tourists toward it.

What, exactly, is the aura that shrouds Chernobyl, that which attracts so many dark tourists? Popular culture has and has had a substantial role in the ongoing development of this aura, commodifying Chernobyl and its history to the point of hyperreality. Some of my informants directly credited HBO’s miniseries or video games with their decision to visit. The aura that popular cultural representations of Chernobyl contribute to is one of death and destruction, human hubris and human folly preserved for eternity. Such representations bleed into how dark tourists perceive the site and formulate its meanings in the pursuit of the authentic, further corporealizing the aura of Chernobyl in subsequent personal experience narratives or in concurrent performances of staging authenticity, left in place for future visitors.

Another factor to consider lies more in the realm of anti-Soviet ideology and its impact on memory and aesthetic ideation in terms of what the remains of the plant represent. For locals, Chernobyl ‘lives;’ it is a tactile, economic, interactive, visual, personally and socially affective memorial. These conditions come from living in the

area, accompanied by its (literally) solidified history and its impact on their present, whereas the “USSR is something that is now invisible, it is just a concept...Chernobyl is everything” (Davies 2013: 126-7). To outside tourists, Chernobyl is also a physical reminder for what once was, a petrified metaphor of the implosion of the Soviet Union that, in some respects, can be attributed to the accident. Part of the heterotopic aura surrounding Chernobyl is the desire to experience the death knell of the Soviet Union for oneself and to articulate it later through narratives or capture it through photographs, whether in ruin pornography or selfies (Davies 2013: 123). As Tonnaer (2008) describes it, photography is a “theatre where tourists perform various scripts, roles, technologies, relations and places to and for themselves and for a future audience (116; quoted in McCarthy 2016: 186), but this theatre is dyed in hues of death and tragedy.

Chernobyl is a composite of stories that inevitably vary in structure, meaning, and form from culture to culture, a characteristic trait of place-lore in general (Valk and Sävborg 2018: 9). If, for outside visitors, dark tourism is indeed a subordination of ethics to bask in and absorb the ‘dark,’ commodified aesthetic experience of Chernobyl, to say merely that one has been there for the sake of being there, where do locals fit in? Would Stalkers not be doing the same thing, albeit with oppositional motivations, principles, and behavior? Stalkers potentially fit the model of the post-tourist, a term used to “refer to a new breed of travellers, those who eschew common tourist ‘hotspots’ and opt for a more unconventional experience, immersing themselves in ‘local culture’ for an extended period of time,” (Lyons 2015). The primary distinguishing criterion for the tourist and the post-tourist is a craving of authentic experiences. But authenticity is not intrinsically

determined by one experience over another. Thus, the tourist and the post-tourist, as Lyons (2015) argues, are not so very different. Nevertheless, no matter the visitor, the locals remain local, and, as such, must figure into the narratives that comprise Chernobyl.

Return to Yulia

Since the Ukrainian government officially opened Chernobyl for tourism in 2011, the industry has invigorated the economy at local and national scales. Some locals are employed as tour guides, like Yulia, who led me and a small group on my own virtual tour. Normally, she conducts tours in person, but the pandemic has forced her and the tour agency she works for to adapt a digital model. Locals like Yulia authenticate the touristic gaze simply by being local, her mediation of the Chernobyl experience legitimizing my views, my perceptions and, to some degree, my expectations of Chernobyl. Her father was (and still is) a firefighter, as I mentioned previously, one of the first responders to the initial explosion; she even showed us the station where he worked. The influence of popular culture and memory on Chernobyl—its narrativized darkness--though, was inescapable. I desperately wanted to see Reactor 4, the nexus of all of the trauma, its core only safe for humans to enter for 5 minutes while wearing protective gear. I could make it out (or, rather, the sarcophagus that contains it) in fragmentary views, hidden behind the branches of bare trees and the skeletal networks of metallic infrastructure. Yulia pointed it out only once in relation to its past, focusing instead on the future of Chernobyl, in terms of its ecological boom; foreign investments that intent on harnessing Chernobyl for pursuits in energy alternatives; and showing us laborers who work on the other reactors still in operation, insisting that it was safe to do so. Chernobyl

lives. However, even in Yulia's extolling Chernobyl's bright present and future, it is haunted by its past, locally and internationally, and likely always will be. For dark tourists, the past as it is projected into and interacted with/conceptualized in Chernobyl's present is the driving factor for visitation. History and the trauma it affords and has afforded is continuously commodified into the touristic gaze. Locals, too, are filtered into this dynamic, particularly in the constant pursuit of authenticity.

This does not mean that locals do not have their own perspectives, of course, and not limited to the site itself. Alexievich (2005 [1997]: 219) includes one oral history, from Natalya Arsenyevna Roslova, that ponders how locals are perceived by the rest of Europe as well as their mutual relationship with Chernobyl following its symbolic presaging of the collapse of the Soviet Union. "I'm afraid to say it, but we love Chernobyl. It's become the meaning of our lives. The meaning of our suffering...the world found out about our existence after Chernobyl. It was our window to Europe. We're its victims, but also its priests." The local experience of Chernobyl is highly nuanced, then. There are dimensions beyond that of the dominant aesthetic that drives touristic aspirations, dimensions with consequences that likewise impact locals in more complex ways. As is demonstrated in the quotation, there is an almost spiritual element to Chernobyl for locals, radiating out implications of ideologies, ontologies and hauntologies, memories, and emotions in addition to more external elements pertaining to economic and political realities. All of these factors contribute, however, to the wide web of meanings and narratives that constitute Chernobyl.

“Chernobyl is not dead; it is just set in stone,” (Davies 2013: 123). The first part of Davies’ assertion (borrowed from Stone 2013) is correct, and can be directly observed in behavior at the site and in narratives about it. However, the second part does seem to connote an air of rigidity to Chernobyl as a place of interaction and meaning-making. Chernobyl can be set in stone, but the inscriptions that tourists, locals, Stalkers, and other groups carve onto it are just as important in its comprehension. Prior to our tour, Yulia had asked our group to show our faces on our corresponding Zoom screens. Not one person did, and hers was the only visage visible. Initially, I was disappointed by this. How was I to ascertain the effects of the Chernobyl experience on my fellow tourists if I could not see or hear them? Eventually, though, I found this an apt metaphor for the dark touristic gaze as centered on Chernobyl. Who knows what inspired the individuals comprising this faceless entity to join the tour? From popular culture to educational value to morbid curiosity, any motivation to engage in the tour—and yet none definitively—can be applied to something faceless. However, the facelessness was centered on Chernobyl, and from here a myriad of possibilities in terms of meaning-making and narratives can emerge. The facelessness of the touristic gaze is reciprocated by the amorphous nature of Chernobyl as a site of darkness; the one depends on the other. As such, Chernobyl can never really ‘die,’ and nor is it entirely calcified. It breathes and grows with each interpretation, each experience, while it remains tethered not only to its past, but also to the people that give it meaning through narratives and representations, though the obverse is true, too. Chernobyl is, indeed, an ongoing process, enacted by

human contact with it. An irony, then, given what made its name so memorable in the first place.

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BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Rose Birns received her Bachelor of Arts in English, minor in Art History from Wells College in 2006 and went on to obtain her Master of Arts in Publishing from University College London in 2009. She has worked in the publishing field ever since as a senior editor, and decided to simultaneously pursue a Master of Art in Folklore Studies at George Mason University beginning in 2016 and graduating in the spring of 2021. During her time at GMU, she participated in two field schools for ethnographic research, one in West Virginia and the other in Ireland; interned at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage; served as the president of the student Folklore Roundtable group; and presented her research at domestic and international conferences. Aside from dark tourism, her academic interests include occupational folklore, particularly sea shanties; folklore theory; and literary folklore.