**Gazing at Pripyat from East and West: a ruin of contemplation**

I travelled to Chernobyl on two separate occasions in February 2013 (1 day with tour2kiev.com) and in June 2016 (2 days with Lupine Travel), in the first instance I was invited to join a group of friends by my co-worker in Moscow; the second time the trip was organised by the Ecological History Network and involved students and academics from British, American and Ukrainian universities. While access to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is strictly regulated, its borders have been illegally penetrated almost throughout its existence (Kots and Steshin, 2006). Legally it ‘opened up’ for tourism in late 2000s - early 2010s. Currently, Chernobyl is visited by around 10 thousand tourists a year (Dyatlikovich et al., 2015), who presumably together with illegal adventure-seekers, hunter-gatherers and looters, little by little have re-shaped the contemporary urban ruins of Pripyat, satellite town of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. While Pripyat officially remains unmanaged and it is illegal to take anything out of the Zone and tour operators instruct against any vandalism, I could myself observe that compared to 2013 some things were moved, new graffiti appeared on walls, trees were removed, etc., not to mention artificial post-apocalyptic setups of dolls in gas masks that by no means could be attributed to the evacuated citizens of this town. Pripyat in short is not an abandoned ruin, it seems to have a life of its own. Yet, during my first visit, then covered in snow, the town seemed lonesome enveloped in natural decay and ruination except…

![The local dog greets foreign tourists in Pripyat. 2013.](image1)

When I came to Pripyat for the first time in February 2013, the journey to Pripyat was solemn and contemplative within our group and empty with only one ghostly blue bus encounter along the way.
I did not expect to see two other vans parked in the town’s main square spurting foreign tourists colourfully dressed in expedition gear (unlike us, a group of Russians, dressed in our everyday winter attire) with cameras heavily hanging off their necks and tripods in their hands. There was a world of difference between us, it seemed - a group of young professionals in their late 20s working mainly in energy generation (with one person working for Rosatom) and the thrill-seekers from distant places. Why were they there? I felt uneasy at their presence, I felt as I were myself part of exhibit they came to gape at. Visitation of places connected with death, disaster or suffering coined ‘dark tourism’ is often compared to some form of voyeurism, a type of morbid curiosity or *schadenfreude* (Seaton and Lennon, 2004), whose efficacy is questionable at best. Similarly, it was found in Yankovska and Hannam study (2014) that “tourists from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus who are directly or indirectly related to Chernobyl have a more emotional experience due to their personal connections with the place” (p. 934). Some explain the differences in perspective by the so called ‘length of immersion’ (Kim and Butler, 2014) in a certain area or the likeliness to dis/approve tourism development depending on the place attachment. Dual nature of Chernobyl as “a symbolic void for incommensurable loss” (Dobraszczyk, 2010) and as a morbid attraction for urban tourists and photographers searching for photogenic representations of the ‘suffering’ frozen in time attracts both kind of spectators. And which one am I?

Every time I told a Russian person (especially of the older generation) of my intent to go to the Chernobyl Zone, they responded with discontent partly because of the perceived inherent risks of the exposure (a young woman who is yet to bear children) but partly, I presume, also because of the imminent disrespect to those who suffered and died there (like going to the cemetery, they said).

For many Chernobyl Exclusion Zone remains a place of tragedy, a ‘cemetery’ (also see Alexievich, 1999). So you are faced with a moral challenge even before you made a decision to go to Chernobyl. It is interesting that same attitudes have been echoed in the aftermath of 9/11 where the opening of the viewing platform to tourists met with the opposition from New York residents and relatives of the victims who saw it as a form of ‘ghoulish tourism’ (Lisle, 2004).

It is clear that whatever the reasons people find for themselves to go to Chernobyl, there is a wall of perceptual difference between those who are historically and emotionally connected to the place and those who come to places of disaster such as Chernobyl to immerse in the ‘reality’ of what had happened, be they foreigners or a young generation of gamers (i.e. video game S.T.A.L.K.E.R. based in Pripyat). The place itself attracts visitors actively pursuing their goal whatever they might be looking for in Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and whether or not they find it.

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1 Irina Kiseleva: “People come to the zone as they do to a cemetery. It’s not just their house that is buried there, but an entire era. An era of faith. Of science. In a just social ideal.” (Alexievich, 1999, p. 174).
During my second trip, I found the Zone much busier with construction work and busy traffic within the 30km area. This time I joined the ‘foreign’ van and tried to understand in our informal conversations as we walked through Pripyat what my fellow-visitors made of it, did they see what I saw? We spoke of the concept and the values behind the town and the tragedy of its sudden abandonment and ruination - Pripyat had everything, schools, cinemas, swimming pools, furthermore it still does - the buildings are still there standing, even after 30 years of neglect. The further we went, the more the town seemed like a continuing and shared history and less like a point contained in time. We talked about socialism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and how all of what we saw could have been different if not for the skull of the block four looming in the distance. Yet, a teddy bear in a gas mask or neatly arranged cots in the maternity ward would still inexplicably create queues of ‘photographers’. Everything was captured on camera - bottles of dusty medicine, books, Soviet slogans, everything - things that had meaning and those that just looked odd, emblematic, poignant or somber.

It was curious to know how mine and my fellow-foreigners’ experience would compare - were we seeing the same Pripyat? It was refreshing to see that their initial alertness change and somewhat level at mindful and curious contemplation of an impressive urban space and reflection of the ideas behind it (the Soviet dream city). And standing at the top of the high-riser and observing the 360 degrees of forest scenery, some of us expressed that it would not have been such a bad place to live. Yet, it was not a place anyone wanted to stay.

From apprehensive voyeurism to empathetic contemplation, we saw not only a place of the worst nuclear disaster but a place before it, too. From the worst technological disaster and the extent of human footprint on the Earth to nature resilience to advances in containment technology to a contemporary political situation in Ukraine to the Soviet urban planning to the collapse of the Soviet Union - Chernobyl is a place of multiple topology and everyone experienced it differently. To quote Davies, “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””. The sources of this ‘retrospective utopia’ are plenty and vary from personal - nostalgia, mourning, place loyalty, to superimposed - anti-nuclear attitude, pro-nuclear attitude, humanity hubris, nature resilience, fall of the communist empire, long-lasting human footprint, deindustrialisation, etc. In some way, Chernobyl is all of these joint together and fixed in space and time and the gaze of a viewer. As for us, some of us came to see radiation, some - nature, some - urban ruins. But the tragedy is never too far from representations and depictions of Chernobyl - it is a difficult subject to engage with.

Chernobyl is believed to be more than a technological accident, and it arguably is the contributing factor to the collapse of the Soviet socialist empire that shortly followed. The time before the calamitous 1990s is the point of bifurcation where the present as we know it is still an impossible scenario.

Pripyat brought up memories of my childhood of the late 1980s-1990s in the country that I was born in and that disappeared off the maps in 1991 before I even got to know it. What followed disconnected the perestroika generation from their history, their parents, their grandparents, and their neighbours; the Soviet republics were set in motion, industries collapsed, families were broken. Pripyat all of a sudden appeared to me as a place, probably the only one I have ever been
to since I left my hometown in 1998, that never saw and was spared from that catastrophe by the unfortunate events of 1986 - it was a place frozen in time before the storm. It appeared transcendentally home-like as, for some passing by a school, a kindergarten or a park they used to go to as children. The toys we saw in the kindergarten were the toys we played with, the cots and the pots, the slogans and pictures... things that drift in and out of your memory as you are growing up. The hospital and the flats, the school with the textbooks scattered on the floor the same as we carried in our backpacks to our school, even the gas masks which we, too, had to put on during the safety drills and that are ‘artistically’ piled up in one of the schools of Pripyat for all to ‘wow’ and take pictures. Not only the appearance of places invoked fuzzy memories of home, it was the meaning, the authenticity of their designation, that validated them as true despite the often staged and artificial display. Davies wrote that the detritus of late Soviet everyday life photographed by visitors in Pripyat “not only represent(s) the failure of an industry, but also the collapse of an entire political system” (2013, p. 122). These objects in fact were soon out of production or replaced by ‘made in China’ expendables. The material world of the 1990s post-Soviet space did change, but Davies’ simplistic symbolism is symptomatic of the ‘ruin porn’ he is so eager to expose: “ruin porn” - a guilty visual process that celebrates urban decay while ignoring the tragedy that it represents” (Davies, 2013, p. 122). These objects represents fluidity and malleability of life, sometimes abrupt but always imminent. To assign them with a status of a symbol of the collapse we need to assume they were at some point the symbol of its existence. Although I had a mere glimpse into the Soviet everyday life, it seemed the Soviet culture was largely intangible - people simply had very little. Like in so many written works about Chernobyl we encounter the ‘constructed’ narratives about Chernobyl (from Christa Wolf’s Accident: A Day’s News, to Frederik Pohl’s Chernobyl: A Novel, to the myths of mutants, to S.T.A.L.K.E.R, to Darragh Mckean’s All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, to Prokhanov’s 600 Years From The Battle, to articles in Nature, etc.) that reflect a changing context or a relation of the author to the context of the accident (be it the Soviet Union, the peaceful atom, Ukraine/Belarus/Russia, growing environmentalism or radiation itself). The symbols of the Soviet Union that ceased to exist and the symbols of the collapse of the Soviet Union are hardly the same thing.

Yet, as NYC’s Ground Zero is there to remind of the radically new state of the world, Pripyat ruins ground us in the ‘reality’ of what has rather than what could have been. It filled me not with nostalgia, but lament for the suffering inflicted onto the people whose world, values, believes and investments devalued in a bat of an eye. I feel empathy rather than longing for the time before history changed its course. Yet, during my second visit, I found it more difficult to separate between what moved me and what I found myself detached from; the hiatus between the time of the Soviet Union and after resonates in us, the Russians (Ukrainians, Belarussians, etc.), as a cultural barrier
to emotional connectivity, as the historical no-go area. And I found that certain symbols of Pripyat and nearby areas were as distant from the today me as they probably were from my foreign colleagues some of whom knew more about the Soviet/Russian/Ukrainian history of that time than I did. The continuous signs of people’s presence (construction noises, workers walking, cleaners, cooks, etc.) and signs of change seen in my second visit synchronised the area with the current political and historical situation and compelled me to look through a different prism, that of me as a foreigner to this time and to this place.

Prokhanov incepted a book about the Soviet Union represented through its most avant-garde sociotechnical symbiosis, a nuclear power station, and who was in search of a dramatic element to his storyline when the accident in Chernobyl happened. In his book, *600 years from the battle* (1988) the nuclear station is seen as a microcosm of the whole state and society and the accident is compared to the inner struggles, the perestroika, the nation had to overcome. It was common to compare Chernobyl with Apocalypses, Star of Wormwood, since it is in the station’s name (Chernobyl means wormwood in Ukrainian). The second trip, especially visiting the Museum of Chernobyl, opened my eyes onto the role Chernobyl played in the collapse of the Soviet Union. After many journal articles, I stumbled upon Alexievich’s *Second Hand Time* (2015) that deals with memories of the collapse and narratives of the lost, second-hand time, hearts that broke (some literally) in the aftermath of the 1991 and 1993. The voices collected by the writer speak of loss of international ‘friendship’, the loss of skills and values, the feeling of being tricked and robbed by Gorbachev, Eltsin, Gaidar and the new ‘businessmen’ but also those of solitude of money, displacement and violence. In this light Chernobyl was as much a place of Pre-Apocalypses as of Post- - the nature thrived in 2013 and 2016 as it probably did before the accident, the city stood as it would have and Pripyat stood abandoned by people as it probably would have been anyway as a result of perestroika-induced out-migration and population decline. In this context, Chernobyl is probably a less scarier place than the 1990s that displaced more people than the radiation and saw the most dramatic demographic shock in Russia’s and Ukraine’s modern history (Eberstadt, 2010).

Some scholars argue that visiting the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is akin to dark tourism (e.g. Stone, 2013; Yankovska and Hannam, 2014) or worse, Jean Baudrillard’s catastrophe cannibalism. And that visiting such places is at best morally questionable. I would like to stress that the ‘darkness’ of the input does not often match with the that of the output of such a journey. The personal first-hand experience of Pripyat, of how it lived and functioned, of who lived and worked there, through artefacts and discussions, could be more than simply educational *schadenfreude*. Similarly to
Ground Zero tourism, Chernobyl visitors are active in their desire to see and ‘touch’ the reality of the Chernobyl disaster. While the ‘real’, its scale, scope and implications, escapes single interpretation and depends on the baggage with which the viewer came to the Zone. Tim Cole wrote that “(i)n visiting the sites of death we are afforded a degree of titillation, albeit titillation camouflaged by more “worthy” reasons for coming.” (2000, p. 114), but the reasons for going somewhere rarely reflect the fullness of the experience - the place can transform visitors by affecting them in complex ways and the ‘reality’ which they have found transcends beyond a ‘constructed’ place they thought they would see.

If Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station can be seen as wormwood star, a uranium meteorite, a straw that broke the Soviet Union, the town of Pripyat shows the human dimension of the catastrophe, whether interpreted literally or as a metaphor for the collapse of the state machine that soon followed.

References


