Finding Our Words: Representations of Chornobyl and the Impossibility of Language

José Vergara

For a book made up almost exclusively of the memories of Chornobyl survivors, Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (*Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, 1997, also translated into English as *Chernobyl Prayer*) pays a great deal of attention to how words evade speakers' intentions and meanings. *Voices*, for which the author conducted hundreds of interviews, is punctuated by her interlocutors' frustrated attempts to make sense of what they have witnessed—as survivors, as humans. While technically not the ur-text of Chornobyl's artistic tradition, the Nobel laureate's "documentary novel" has become synonymous with the disaster in many people's minds. Among the various reasons for this reception, Alexievich's complex interweaving of witnesses' perspectives stands out; the book harnesses key issues in a manner that feels both deeply personal and individual, on the one hand, and remarkably universal, on the other. Its fragmented, kaleidoscopic vision of Chornobyl grants readers insights not only into the historical and emotional realities of what happened after the explosions in reactor number four on April 26, 1986, but likewise into the struggle to put those experiences into words.

Among other things, the reader can clearly make out the voice of doubt in that polyphony. This is a multifaceted doubt—of understanding, of representation, of comprehension—when the speakers try to work through their experiences, to give shape to what Chornobyl *is*. As Sergei Sobolev, deputy head of the Executive Committee of the Shield of Chornobyl Association, puts it: А событие все равно выше нас, любого комментария… Однажды я услышал или прочел, что проблема

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Чернобыля стоит перед нами прежде всего, как проблема самопознания (Aleksievich 2019, 176).[1] Part of this problem of "self-understanding" has to do with the fact that Chornobyl's occurrence forced the world into a new relationship with language. How can we speak of such a tragedy with old words? And how can we understand ourselves with language of the world from which we have departed so suddenly? Following Tamara Hundorova's formulation, "the birth of a new language [is] among the effects of the Chornobyl narrative" (Hundorova 2019, 47).

The problem really concerns three interrelated aspects all having to do with one thing—how we talk about Chornobyl: how we *can* talk about it, how we *have* talked about it, and how we *cannot* talk about it. Of course, how we describe Chornobyl—a hyperobject par excellence in Timothy Morton's (2013) terminology—informs our responses to it, the ways in which we envision a future, whether it is a future "after" Chornobyl or "with" Chornobyl. The present analysis considers a representative selection of texts from various media—fiction, nonfiction, photography, drama, film—to demonstrate how some artists have wrestled with this core tension of Chornobyl: its inexpressibility and the way it has broken down attempts at communication. It addresses a particular trend in art related to Chornobyl, not characteristic of *all* Chornobyl texts, of course, but present in quite a few. These works have different foci, whether they are history or science, monstrous terrors or more mundane ones, but what they all share is the imprint of language that has become inadequate following Chornobyl and a desire to comprehend a disaster's effects through language in the face of the sublime.[2]

A number of texts concerning the nuclear disaster foreground this difficulty of verbal representation or framing through fascinating meth-

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1 "But the event is still beyond any philosophical description… Someone said to me, or maybe I read it, that the problem of Chernobyl presents itself first of all as a problem of self-understanding" (Alexievich 2006, 129). (Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.)

2 See Mathias (2020), for example, which explores the intersections of disaster cinema and the aesthetic sublime.

ods, and they do so not necessarily based on an author's aesthetic choice, but because of a pressing linguistic inability. This tension between wanting to understand the foundational causes of Chornobyl and seeking to piece together a coherent narrative that considers various subjectivities can be found across a range of texts that both predate and postdate the nuclear disaster. Examples may be found in high and low art, in science fiction, in pop culture, in poetry, in film, in music—indeed, everywhere. Chornobyl's reach is wide, but one feature of its representation lies in this struggle to verbalize Chornobyl and what it has left in its wake, both literally and metaphorically, in art. I have intentionally selected a range of texts from different traditions and different eras in the thirty-year history of the Chornobyl disaster to emphasize how this feature of some works about Chornobyl crosses linguistic boundaries. As Hundorova writes, "Chornobyl, a catastrophe that was perhaps for the first time on a worldwide scale, evidences how catastrophism becomes an object of reproduction" (Hundorova 2019, 41). The case studies featured below illustrate how this same obsession with language recurs in texts about Chornobyl despite the authors' multifarious backgrounds, motivations, and positionalities. They generate certain resonances among works that on the surface have little in common, at least stylistically, beyond their shared theme.

In short, in the absence of a metalanguage to discuss the disaster, our understanding and communication are pulled apart in unusual ways. In the texts this breakdown happens in the characters' speech and dialogue but operates on a conceptual level as well. When talking about Chornobyl, we deal with radiation and a time scale that we cannot fully conceive of individually. We can have trouble comprehending it, the ever-expanding Chornobyl Zone, without being defined by it, as we have a difficult time discussing it from within. Everything caught inside—our relationships to others, familiar objects, the natural world, our histories—all appear different in this reshaped space and must likewise be rendered differently in language. The process, furthermore, is ongoing.

The Chornobylian Hyperobject

Before turning to some Chornobyl texts that embody this theme of language challenged by the nuclear event, it would be worth considering Morton's theory of hyperobjects in some detail, particularly because the more we attempt to define Chornobyl, the more we exclude from

the picture. While the concept runs the risk of spinning out and incorporating all sorts of phenomena, truly "hyper" and otherwise, it can be useful when approaching Chornobyl's physical and cultural reach. Morton unsurprisingly deploys Chornobyl as an example several times in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Morton 2013, 33, 38, 136, 142–43, 176). As a hyperobject, Chornobyl demands we see it as a way of being, a way of storytelling, a way of making sense.

Morton defines hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" and attributes several main properties to them, including but not limited to viscosity ("they 'stick' to beings that are involved with them") and nonlocality ("any 'local' manifestation of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject") (Morton 2013, 1). That is, a hyperobject such as Chornobyl tends to adhere to anything it contacts—in this case both physically and conceptually. Of course, radioactivity is operative with particles penetrating and clinging to what they touch, but the idea goes further. Chornobyl generates its obsessives and expands across many borders. It has metamorphosed into all kinds of symbols in art and politics.[3] Likewise, concerning nonlocality, any "local" instance of Chornobyl—for instance, its effects on a single person or village—can never fully encapsulate its totality; it remains a small portion and, thus, represents only a fragment of a much bigger, dangerous reality. Of course, before turning into a hyperobject and hypertext of different narratives, Chornobyl left its imprint on those who experienced the immediate disaster and died as a result from radiation sickness. It became one of the first "global event[s]" in Hundorova's formulation (2019, 14), and the horror of the documented reality a cause of the unspeakable dilemma, as people worked to find the right words to articulate what they were witnessing.[4]

A few other features of hyperobjects seem apposite. Facing a hy-

3 The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the occupation of the Chornobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants only further underscore this point and Chornobyl's symbolic weight. It is clear that Chornobyl, beyond the nuclear threat it continues to pose, wields immense value to this day, a fact not lost on Volodymyr Zelens'kyi, who tweeted on February 24, 2022: "Russian occupation forces are trying to seize the #Chornobyl_NPP. Our defenders are giving their lives so that the tragedy of 1986 will not be repeated. Reported this to @SwedishPM. This is a declaration of war against the whole of Europe" (2022). Chornobyl now becomes a site of last resistance, the final barrier between Russia's looming nuclear threat and the very safety of Europe—and beyond.

4 There are many studies of Chornobyl's transnational reach. See, for example, Kalmbach (2013), Kalmbach (2021), and Stephens (1995).

perobject, the individual loses balance, and language is challenged, "scooped out" in Morton's terminology (2013, 6). This is not to suggest that we cannot understand radiation poisoning, for instance. Rather, it means that we, individually and generationally, can never know the complete future of Chornobyl's radioactive effects. The best we can do is try to label and narrativize the pieces we encounter or read about. As Morton puts it, just as we can never perceive raindrops in themselves, only their interaction with our bodies, "because they so massively outscale us, hyperobjects have magnified the weirdness of things for our inspection: things are themselves, but we can't point to them directly" (Morton 2013, 12). There is no way to "sum up" Chornobyl, and so we can only ever speak of it in parts and pieces, fits and starts. This development becomes quite evident in representations of Chornobyl, and in fact, was readily apparent from the start as Alexievich's *Prayer* demonstrates: Я задумался: почему о Чернобыле мало пишут? Наши писатели продолжают писать о войне, о сталинских лагерях, а тут молчат. […] Думаете, случайность? Событие до сих пор ещё вне культуры. Травма культуры. И единственный наш ответ—молчание. […] Из будущего выглядывает что-то, и оно несоразмерно нашим чувствам (Aleksievich 2019, 106).[5] Language therefore fails in Chornobyl's linguistic labyrinth.

The issue seems to be that we cannot consider Chornobyl, radiation, and other hyperobjects, as Morton argues, "poised on the edge of the abyss, contemplating its vastness," but rather find ourselves "already falling inside the abyss, [which is] not pure empty space, but instead the fiery interior of a hyperobject" (Morton 2013, 160). Because of these changed circumstances, art "becomes an attunement to […] the demonic force coming from the nonhuman and permeating us: as we all know[,] we have […] been strafed by radiation" (Morton 2013, 175). Even as we struggle to understand the decades-old nuclear abyss into which we have been thrust, art, broadly understood, becomes a reflection of these pieces of the Chornobylian artistic kaleidoscope and of the way it forces us to think of language anew.

5 "I began to think: Why is so little written about Chornobyl? Our writers continue to write about the war, about Stalin's camps, but here they're silent. […] Do you think it's a coincidence? The event is still beyond culture. The trauma of culture. And our only answer is silence. […] Something peeks through from the future, and it's completely disproportionate to our feelings."

Defining Chornobyl

The problem begins, most broadly, with how to define Chornobyl. According to the various authors, filmmakers, poets, and scholars who have taken on the subject of Chornobyl since 1986, it *is* or can be *seen as*, among many other things, a nuclear disaster, acceleration, sarcophagus, silence/sound, communication breakdown, conspiracy, ghost, Z/zone, process, event, home, the end of the Soviet Union, a disruption of the scientific process, a/the future, a monster/mutant, myth, tourist site, heterotopia, plot device, photographic double exposure, corruption, and apocalypse. It takes these many forms depending on the author's needs, which are shaped by the story they tell.

To say or think Chornobyl is a discrete historic event, even one with significant, lasting repercussions, means to define it concretely within, for instance, the scope of 1986 and the few years after. To think Chornobyl *is* (only) a nuclear disaster implies that it has a definable root cause with relevant historical players and boundaries. To take a recent example, Serhii Plokhy frames his engrossing *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* as follows: "This book is a work of history—in fact, it is the first comprehensive history of the Chernobyl disaster from the explosion of the nuclear reactor to the closing of the plant in December 2000 and the final stages in the completion of the new shelter over the damaged reactor in May 2018" (Plokhy 2018, xiv). The subtitle emphasizes this totalizing view: The [author's emphasis] *History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*.[6] Throughout the book, Plokhy examines Chornobyl's key players, political contexts, the role of nuclear energy in the Soviet Union, and other topics. He suggests that the "further we move in time from the disaster, the more it seems like a myth—and the more difficult it becomes to grasp its real-life roots and consequences" (Plokhy 2018, xv). While the facts should be recuperated for the historical record, this "myth" must also be excavated, for it reveals just as much about what Chornobyl meant, means, and will come to mean to those who experienced it, as well as those who respond to it artistically. In fact, as Kate Brown has pointed out in a review of *Chernobyl*, Plokhy uses Alexievich's hybrid text as a source, despite the fact that the Nobel laureate's "books are not history but literature with composite characters drawn from dozens of interview subjects" (Brown 2019b, 1028). Chornobyl has

6 The first English translation of Alexievich's book deploys the same strategy, likely implemented by the publisher, to claim authority: The [author's emphasis] *Oral History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* (2006).

come to represent a great deal more than simply a mid-1980s nuclear accident, and its cultural fallout tells us much about how people all around the world have attempted to grapple with its many meanings.

Taking a different approach than Plokhy, Brown in *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (2019a) sees the nuclear disaster *as* an acceleration—a piece of broader technogenic and existential concerns. As an acceleration, Chornobyl becomes a process with a velocity and a long future ahead of it:

> Calling Chernobyl an "accident" is a broom that sweeps away the larger story. Conceiving of the events that contaminated the Pripyat Marshes as discrete occurrences blurs the fact that they are connected. Instead of an accident, Chernobyl might better be conceived of as an acceleration on a time line of destruction or as an exclamation point in a chain of toxic exposures that restructured the landscape, bodies, and politics. (Brown 2019a, 142)

This approach asks us to consider Chornobyl within a wide scope of intertwining issues without clear boundaries: technology, politics, ongoing health concerns, waste, global mid-century nuclear testing, and so on. To be sure, plenty of historical accounts, including that of Plokhy, do take this intersectional approach, but the framing is substantively different.

For all these reasons, I would like to suggest that we draw a firm line between Chornobyl *is*, on the one hand, and Chornobyl *as*, on the other. Seeing Chornobyl, for example, *as* a kaleidoscope or *as* a labyrinth (as Sarah Phillips has called it on her syllabus devoted to the disaster) strikes me as much more productive when giving shape to this *thing* known as Chornobyl. Chornobyl *as* allows for the development of its metaphoric meanings to take shape across time. This is what writers and artists who take up the Chornobyl theme do in their art, and, as will be demonstrated below, they often do so by interrogating how language can function in the post-Chornobyl world. What it represents, both retroactively as part of Brown's acceleration and post facto as a metaphor for people's experiences, comes into shape from this perspective and brings us insights into how and why a number of Chornobyl-related texts engage with the theme of a language struggling to make sense of how words function in these new circumstances.

The Detritus of Language in 'Roadside Picnic'

Curiously, one of Chornobyl's key pre-texts, the Strugatskii Brothers' *Roadside Picnic* (*Piknik na obochine*, 1972), demonstrates that this tendency took shape long before 1986. It might also explain why—beyond the shared Zone concept—their novel has been so firmly attached to the Chornobyl myth. *Roadside Picnic* deals with the aftermath of an extraterrestrial visit that leaves six strange Zones around the world. Each of these spaces is littered with often dangerous alien artifacts and areas of varying size that defy physics. The protagonist, Redrick "Red" Schuhart, is a stalker, a man who plunders a Zone in Canada to sell artifacts he finds (what some suspect to be the aliens' trash), making a dangerous living on the black market. The novel details some of his journeys into the Zone, the politics of this world, and the existential questions the Visit raises. One of the more remarkable phenomena, however, is the way the dead, buried in cemeteries there, begin returning to their homes. One such zombie is Red's father, who resides in their apartment along with Red's wife and his daughter, who is nicknamed Monkey for her animal-like appearance—yet another unexplained consequence of the aliens' visit. What happens in the Zone is bizarre, but how the space creeps out into the world is just as fascinating. In this way, it echoes Chornobyl's effects. Physical boundaries such as the so-called sarcophagus that encapsulates the ruined reactor at Chornobyl and the Exclusion Zone (also translated as the Zone of Alienation) prove just as permeable as the words used to describe them; the Zone resists both physical and linguistic containment despite our best efforts.[7] Clearly the most resonant connection between the Strugatskiis' novel and Chornobyl (as well as Andrei Tarkovskii's 1982 adaptation, *Stalker* [*Stalker*]) is the concept of the Zone, but the symbolic resonances run deeper.[8]

Most significant for the present discussion is how the relationship between Monkey, Red, and his father in *Roadside Picnic* foregrounds the rupture of language after a catastrophe on the scale of the Visit or, indeed, Chornobyl. In the middle of the night, after hearing a strange noise during one of his journeys into the Zone, Red проснулся от такого же звука, тоскливого и длинного, обмирая, как во сне. Только это был не сон. Это кричала Мартышка […] а с другого конца дома

7 Consider Hundorova (2019, 44–45) on the subject of such distortions in the meanings of words post-Chornobyl.

8 The term зона (zone) also refers to prison camp spaces.

откликался батя, очень похоже, так же длинно и скрипуче, только еще с каким-то клокотанием (Strugatskie 2018,215–16).[9] In Red's mind, the two noises are inextricably connected, as the Zone seeps out into the rest of the world and infects his family unit: his collection of alien waste has led to his daughter's unfathomable mutation and his father's ghastly half-resurrection. In other words, the horror and mystery of the Zone's interior expands into his home. At the same time, Red cannot help but transport images and memories of his domestic sphere into the Zone when he recalls them on his expeditions, as in this scene where the two spaces intertwine. Red therefore comes to be trapped between two damaged generations, who have been transformed by the Zone, and between two equally transformed spaces; he furthermore lacks the ability to mediate between them with a common language, and he recognizes the difficulty with which he tries to recognize his own life: Господи, да где же слова-то, мысли мои где? (Strugatskie 2018, 252).[10] The Zone not only changes relationships between close relatives; it defines, complicates, and inhibits communication between them. Here, the family unit with its unintelligible noises made by the daughter and father represents a terrible symptom of the catastrophic, Zone-induced linguistic collapse, one which we see in other representations and accounts of Chornobyl proper, such as those gathered by Alexievich. The grandfather-corpse and the child-mutant scream at/to each other in the broken language of the Visit's aftermath, and Red, much like the reader and the post-Chornobyl subject, lacks the means of communication to understand it all or to respond in a manner that feels appropriate.

This impossibility of language—that is, the challenge of understanding and representing what happened after the Visit without a metalanguage that articulates the relationship between the catastrophe and the communities it affects—is likewise emblematic of the Chornobyl disaster. It is no wonder, then, that the Strugatskiis' novel, which predates Chornobyl by some fourteen years, has become such a fundamental component of its cultural impact: People—neither in the novel nor in the post-Chornobyl world—can speak of the Zone without recogniz-

9 "He'd been awakened, horror-struck, by the same sound, mournful and drawn out, as if from a dream. Except that it wasn't a dream. It was the Monkey screaming […] and his father was responding from the other side of the house—very similarly, with creaking drawn-out cries, but with some kind of added gurgle" (Strugatsky 2012, 163).

10 "My Lord, where are my words, where are my thoughts?" (Strugatsky 2012, 191).

ing that they are part of it, part of a world that has been contaminated to differing degrees by radionuclides on a massive scale. This, in turn, can lead to the rupture of language, as there is no attaining the global perspective necessary to speak about it from without. The characters in *Roadside Picnic*, as with Chornobyl's survivors and artists, suffer from an inability to put into language, among much else, how their relationships to themselves and to others have been reshaped by the Zone. Like Chornobyl, the Visit's detritus breaks down previous modes of communication. Because of this new reality, new health, new physics, new timescale, and, through its constant presence that prevents distance, it hampers the possibility of finding new, healthy forms of expression. In turn, artistic or linguistic representation becomes challenging, and numerous responses to the Zone, both in the Strugatskiis' novel and in our so-called post-Chornobyl world, are rendered as part of a cycle of linguistic rupture with often competing narratives. We see this dynamic play out in, for example, the heroic perspectives of Danila Kozlovskii's 2021 film *Chernobyl: Abyss* (*Chernobyl'*) and Craig Mazin's 2019 HBO limited series, the folklore-infused children's book *Radiant Girl* (2008) by Andrea White, and Volodymyr Iavorivs'kyi's Ukrainian novel *Maria and Wormwood at the End of the Century* (Mariia z polynom u kintsi stolittia, 1987), or the poetry of Lina Kostenko, Natalka Bilotserkivets, and Liubov' Sirota.[11]

The Meltdown of Language in Chornobyl Texts

In certain texts devoted to Chornobyl, this complication manifests itself in a variety of ways. One key element seen in very different genres and texts is the tension between, on the one hand, representing Chornobyl as a metaphor and, on the other, presenting it in the precise languages of science and history.[12] Take Mike Kraus's *Prip'Yat: The Beast of Chernobyl* (2013), an American military sci-fi-horror novella about two Russian spetsnaz officers and two Ukrainian teenagers' encounter with a radioactive monster in the area surrounding the Chornobyl power plant. While Kraus's primary intent, apparently, is to entertain with

11 On the subject of folklore as it relates to Chornobyl, see Fialkova (2001).

12 This tension, of course, is also present in Ukrainian literature, as Hundorova's book ably demonstrates. See Hundorova (2019, 46) for specific examples, but also the entire section on "Chornobyl and Postmodernism" for a general picture (1–47). For another excellent overview of Chornobyl's impact on Ukrainian literature, see Onyshkevych (1989).

this patently ridiculous story, there is a competing discourse that runs through the book. For instance, in the narrator's introduction, a passage devoted to the historical record is set alongside a subsequent passage that blurs fact, fantasy, and rumor:

> On April 26, 1986, at approximately 1:23 a.m. Moscow time, reactor number four of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded. The explosion was devastating enough that it utterly destroyed the reactor casing and caused chains of explosions throughout the building, decimating all hopes of containment. When compared with the radioactive material released by the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, the explosion at Chernobyl released four hundred times more radioactive material into the atmosphere. (Kraus 2013, i)

> Unofficially, rumors are still spoken about the monsters of Prip'Yat that supposedly roam the streets at night, preying on the few unfortunates who dare trespass on their domain. Of the few vagabonds and miscreants who have entered the city under the cover of darkness to steal what valuables still remain, few ever make a second trip. Their stories are not easily extracted, and they spend the rest of their days living in mortal fear of the darkness. (Kraus 2013, ii)

Such opposing, parallel passages are common in the book: Kraus's narrator dutifully informs the reader about the history of Chornobyl or of the soldiers' guns, only to follow these scientific and historical accounts with a story involving rumors, violence, limbs torn off a Russian military officer, an international conspiracy, and a migrating beast who feeds on radioactive waste left at nuclear stations around the world.

This novella is, of course, on the one hand, simply a storytelling device. On the other hand, it bespeaks the broader pull between wanting to view Chornobyl as a historical event and as a pliable metaphor. The monster is massive and shapeless, more of a shadow than a substance. Though not consistently, the narrator emphasizes how the radioactive beast often silently stalks its prey, as if embodying not only the radiation that has claimed so many lives but also the cover-up that followed. The monster represents a different way of knowing, of thinking about Chornobyl. If we set aside the horror-action clichés and appropriation of the disaster—perhaps a tall order given the stakes—this silence also speaks

to the eventual drop in attention to Chornobyl's victims, the sense of loss and displacement experienced by its survivors, the ever-present but unseen nature of the radiation. This absurd story still reveals important aspects of Chornobyl's reception, as well as how it is represented through language. The story does so precisely by emphasizing the limits of linguistic resources, the silences that reverberate around Chornobyl because words often do not suffice.

A similar process is at work in Michael Marder and Anaïs Tondeur's *Chernobyl Herbarium: Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness* (2016), an ambitious project of a very different nature. This time the creators are interested in the natural-scientific rather than historical record; despite this difference, the reader still witnesses how language struggles to function within the Chornobylian hyperobject at large. Conceived as a collaboration that pairs Marder's philosophical musings on Chornobyl and Tondeur's photograms of plants taken in the Zone, the *Herbarium* aims to "think the unthinkable and represent the unrepresentable," because "the trauma of Chernobyl has not been worked through in the absence of a consciousness appropriate to the task of representing it" (Marder 2016, 11). Marder offers "fragments" of a "consciousness" in his meditations on climate, radiation, his personal encounter with Chornobyl as a child, and related topics, while Tondeur's art, produced by placing radioactive plant matter from the Exclusion Zone onto light-sensitive paper, "liberates luminescent traces without violence, avoiding the repetition of the first, invisible event of Chernobyl and, at the same time, capturing something of it" (Marder 14). Put differently, the photograms are meant to speak to what happened to nature surrounding the nuclear site—and beyond—without needing to use the violent language that we often see in depictions of Chornobyl. This occurs by virtue of the fact that Tondeur allows nature to stand for itself, at least in theory. There are no descriptions here that speak of the explosions at the plant, or the radiation poisoning that wreaked havoc on people's bodies or made a woodland into the infamous Red Forest.[13] The overall goal, then, is to overcome the linguistic difficulties that Chornobyl and modernity thrust upon us, to accept Chornobyl's disruptions by turning to plant life and allowing it to speak for itself via the medium of the photogram, getting away from the human:

13 The area surrounding Chornobyl was nicknamed the Red Forest after the pine trees there absorbed massive levels of radiation and turned a burnt red color.

> Plants' living forms are *their* semantic structures. The human production of meaning is inevitably belated, supplementary, superadded to whatever we interpret, though, from our perspective, it stands out as the essential (in effect, the only) semantic construction. [...] There is also, in Tondeur's plants, an excess of meaning, untethered to cultural, scientific, or other human constructions and related, instead, to the history of their growth in radioactive soil. (Marder 2013, 20)

In other words, the plants are supposed to offer their own "language," a discourse unavailable to humans. And yet, that familiar tension arises:

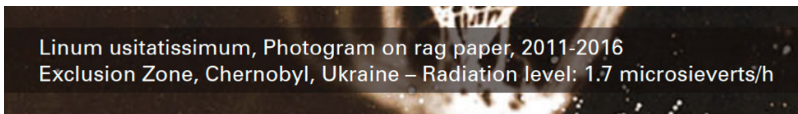

Figure 1: Caption from photogram (Marder 2013, 13)

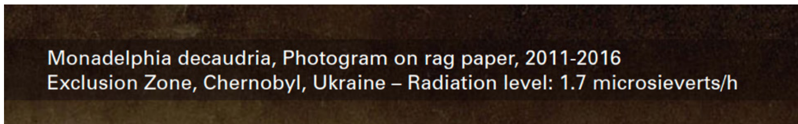

Figure 2: Caption from photogram (Marder 2013, 15)

The plants and their speaking, meaningful silence are meant to stand alone, but each image nonetheless bears a tag with the plant's scientific name, origin, and radiation level. The impulse to catalog, to identify, to understand in anthropocentric terms is, it seems, too great to overcome even in this well-intended and otherwise successful project. It thus represents a combination of *three* competing discourses: Marder's philosophy, Tondeur's cameraless photography, and the scientific language of Linnaeus, layered atop the vegetation. Like Kraus's historicizing, this labelling of the plants is at odds with the *Herbarium*'s stated purpose, and in this sense, at least, it embodies a clash of languages in this attempt to make sense of the disaster. It becomes another effort to pin down and capture the essence of Chornobyl and its timeline in a way that will be familiar. Marder's choice is all the more ironic since in his *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* he offers a critique of the taxonomic method's reduction of plants to names and places in a system (Marder 2013, 4–5).

The Zone-inflected screams of the pre-Chornobyl *Roadside Picnic*

and the competing discourses of the *Herbarium* and an American science-fiction novel all speak to a shared struggle to sufficiently represent Chornobyl's disastrous consequences and realities through language. Of course, writers and filmmakers have also undertaken similar explorations closer to the source. For instance, Sergei Kurginian's play *Compensation: A Liturgy of Fact* (*Kompensatsiia: liturgiia fakta*, 1987) considers how language was immediately reshaped after April 26, 1986, by virtue of both the shocking nature of the disaster itself and the concomitant state media control. *Compensation* was never actually published in the original Russian, but its immediacy grants it more significance in the history of Chornobyl's mythology and cultural reception.[14] As Kurginian writes in the prologue, "My acquaintance with [Moscow psychologist Adol'ph Uli'ianovich] Kharash's materials and conversations with him became the stimulus to write this play, this collage [...]. The speeches, the words of the characters are authentic documents and have deliberately not been subjected to artistic interpretation" (Kurginian 1995, 340). Like Iurii Scherbak's *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story* (*Chornobyl'*, 1987), *Compensation* is a precursor to Alexievich's *Voices* in its blending of various narratives derived from interviews with survivors. This "collage" approach, which varies in these authors' hands, might also speak to the attempt to attain meaning by gathering as many tongues and perspectives as possible.[15]

The cast is made up of the Voice on the Radio (played by Kurginian in its original run), a Psychologist, and six liquidators, that is, people somehow associated with Chornobyl's clean-up. There is no plot to speak of, only scenes joined together by characters, voices, recurring

14 According to Marina Volchkova, an actress at Kurginian's Moscow theater, the play was never printed in Russian, and the manuscript is housed in the theater's archives (personal communication, April 20, 2020). Theater scholar Attilo Favorini explains: "I came across Alma Law's review of *Compensation* at the time my administrative assistant's collegiate daughter, Carolyn [Kelson], was in Moscow working on her undergraduate Slavic Studies degree. It seemed to be a win-win situation: Carolyn had found a worthy capstone project for her research and my book would benefit from a classy inclusion, her translation of *Compensation*. As it turned out, Carolyn was in need of help to bring the translation up to the necessary standards, help provided by a pair of Pitt graduate students, Alex and Helen Prokhorov, who were duly credited in the publication. Kurginian was delighted" (personal communication to Manon van de Water, September 17, 2020).

15 See Lenart-Cheng's (2020) examination of Alexievich's use of individual and collective memories in her work within the context of debates regarding historical memory in the post-Soviet world.

motifs, and an austere atmosphere. The characters, each in their own way, are in shock, struggling to express their thoughts clearly. The play is divided up into a prologue and seventeen episodes with conversations that are cut up as topics shift unexpectedly. The Voice occupies a strange role: it is tied to the idea of propaganda in the Soviet Union through its association with media control, and yet it seems to know and express just as little as the Liquidators; at times it even supports them in their disclosure of the so-called "truth."

Here, too, is the second communicative breakdown—the amnesiatic trauma of Chornobyl. The horror of the accident has rendered memory either broken or too difficult to recall, so there is little hope of piecing together the narrative in words. Furthermore, another device of the play has the Voice prompting and generating the Liquidators' lines: "inform you? [...] You could say that, inform. [...] I am sorry that I am crying, I don't even know myself, why I'm telling you all this... [...] Yes, gaps... in memory... I wanted to say something important... [...] Was too shocked? [...] Yes, shocked" (Kurginian 1995, 346–47). Language, as in *Roadside Picnic*, becomes fragmented and their utterances only copies of what others say; an authority figure feeds them these words. If the characters, allegedly based on real people, cannot recall exactly what has happened to them, then how can this "Liturgy of Fact" ever be successful? In these ways, the experience of Chornobyl cannot be fully articulated.

The play also highlights strikingly how the meaning of specific words has shifted, thus changing how we can talk about Chornobyl using an existing language. After the Voice's brief introductory remarks come several references to the works of Thomas Mann, Dante Alighieri, Fedor Dostoevskii and Walt Whitman:

> PSYCHOLOGIST: The Child asked, "What is grass?"
> VOICE ON THE RADIO: Walt Whitman.
> PSYCHOLOGIST: What could I answer the child?... What could I answer the child?
> VOICE ON THE RADIO: So, well said?
> *Music.*
> FIRST: The child asked, "What is grass? And brought me his hand-

> fuls of grass. What could I answer the child? (Kurginian 1995, 341)[16]

These lines, of course, come from the sixth part of Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Later, bits of the poem are interspersed throughout the play, as the First Liquidator, among others, becomes fixated on Whitman's words and repeats them periodically, as if trying to recuperate a lost language and culture: "Or maybe it is a handkerchief from God" (Kurginian 145). The primary reason may be obvious, but it is worth stating: Post-Chornobyl grass is no longer grass. What grass is, means, represents cannot be the same after it has absorbed all that radiation, so the child's simple question is completely transformed, turned inside out. In these circumstances, what was once explained—if certainly complicated by Whitman's questions in *Song of Myself*—gains greater, darker valency. Language is not up to the challenge, as the everyday, the natural turns horrific. This thought remains inexpressible, because it is so novel, because it is so shocking, because we are not able to describe Chornobyl in such terms, and, most importantly, because who would *want* to talk about the terror of grass to a child? The radiated grass—a symptom of the Chornobylian hyperobject—is right in front of us, but the First Liquidator can no longer express its new essence.

Conclusion

For one final case study, I turn to some scenes from the 2011 film *Innocent Saturday* (*V subbotu*, 2011) by Aleksandr Mindadze. The challenge of language after Chornobyl, after all, is not limited to literary texts and photography, but also manifests itself in other media. The film, which could not be more different from the recent HBO miniseries or Kozlovskii's heroics-focused dramatization, essentially begins as an action movie with the minor Party member Valerii's desperate attempts to flee Prypiat with his ex-girlfriend, Vera, after the explosions at the plant.[17] However, a number of events prevent them from leaving and, much to the viewer's frustration, Valerii winds up at a wedding where his former band is performing.[18] There, the plot becomes mired, and

16 Compare part six of Whitman's *Song of Myself*: "A child said *What is the grass*? Fetching it to me with full hands; / How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he" (Whitman 2004, 8).

17 For a consideration of the film as an "existential action movie," see Lindbladh (2012).

18 Several weddings took place in the area on April 26, 1986. For more details, see

Mindadze focuses on his characters' relationships and interactions for the remainder of the film. On a symbolic level, Valerii's unwillingness to act, complicated by his being a Party member, is related to the inability of overcoming the Soviet past. Lingering traumas provide no models for how to behave or speak; he responds only with silence, frustration, and resignation before state power—here embodied by the ruined nuclear plant.

As with the grass in *Compensation*, everything is being rewritten before Valerii's eyes in real time: his relationships, his life, his job. Everything gains new meaning and, thus, must be expressed differently. But he is not prepared to do so. All he can manage at this point, swept up in a dance line, is a primal scream, an expression of his inability (or unwillingness) to communicate the gravity of the situation to those present but unaware. He is compelled to join the guests in their celebration, and he can only sway violently, because his desperation and anger cannot find another outlet, least of all a verbal one. He glances back at his friends, as if wishing to communicate something meaningful, but no words emerge from his lips.

Figure 3: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

Plokhy (2018, 60, 127, 135, 153), Aleksievich (2019, 87, 206), Medvedev (1992, 144), and Shcherbak (1990, 73).

Figure 4: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

The wedding scenes all feature this carnivalesque atmosphere, embodied by the cut-up shots of the guests' legs and the lyrics to the band's accompanying song, which include lines such as, Время идет только вперед / Нашей любви навстречу / В чем дело? В чем дело? В чем дело? Объясни![19]

Figure 5: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

19 "Time only moves forward to meet our love! What's the deal? What's the deal? What's the deal? Explain!" The band here performs a cover of the Soviet band Bravo's "What's the Deal" ("V chem delo," 1987) released after 1986, making the appearance of the song in the film an anachronism.

Figure 6: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

Unfortunately, no explanations are forthcoming from Valerii. Much of the second half of the film depicts his failure to communicate. He and his friends struggle to address what is really on their minds—their relationships, Valerii's association with the Party, what to do amid the radiation—even after they learn the details of the explosion from Valerii. They bumble around the most important subjects, focusing instead on money and their individual problems with one another. The dancing feet in the wedding scenes mimic their language—cut up, chaotic—as they fail to say anything meaningful. The presence of Chornobyl, however, only exacerbates the situation. Even when the groom, an old friend, brings Valerii to the ground, Valerii cannot find the words to explain what is happening around them, at least not until later.

Figure 7: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

The bride complains that her husband's kisses taste metallic (a symptom of the radiation), yet Valerii remains short on words. They lie in the green grass, a visual reference to Whitman's poem, with only Valerii and the audience aware of its new substance. Instead of offering guidance, Mindadze's hero silently glares at his friends.

Время идет is the operative phrase in Vera's song.[20] Early in the film, after being shown the wreckage at the plant by a superior, Valerii flees the site, and a long tracking shot follows him:

Figure 8: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

It is all framed in such a way that it seems he cannot escape the threatening nuclear plant. No matter how fast he flees, the plant looms behind him as if time and space have been frozen. Looking at it *as* a hyperobject, as a contaminant that goes far beyond any local time and place, Chornobyl devours Valerii's life, and he cannot express this shift in words to those closest to him. At the end of the film, too, we see this dynamic play out as the action returns to this setting. Mindadze cuts unexpectedly from a scene where Valerii dances despondently with the bride and groom to one where he wakes up on a boat, perhaps expecting to be heading to safety, but his face registers the shock of seeing the plant's smoking tower above him instead:

20 "Time moves."

Figure 9: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

Amid his bandmates' hysterical laughter, he lifts his tiny fist to Chornobyl in a clear allusion to Aleksandr Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyi vsadnik*, 1833), in which the hero, Evgenii, a *malen'kii chelovek*,[21] curses the famed statue of Peter the Great in St. Petersburg in a fit of rage after a flood sweeps away his beloved. In response, the statue seems to come to life, chases Evgenii through the empty city, and causes him to go mad. For Mindadze, we must read and view Chornobyl *as* power: a threat that is at once political, existential, and ecological, and that in each case requires a new language to combat or represent it, but which evades Valerii. He can only make a futile gesture of protest against Chornobyl—the new monumental symbol of state hubris. Mindadze's ending suggests that just as Evgenii represented the sacrifice of the "little people" in building St. Petersburg and the costs of Peter's imperial ambitions, so, too, does Valerii stand for the sacrifice of Soviet people to state power.

21 "A little person"—a character type that appears in Russian realist literature in the nineteenth century. The term describes someone of low social status without any heroic or other remarkable characteristics.

Figure 10: Scene from *Innocent Saturday*

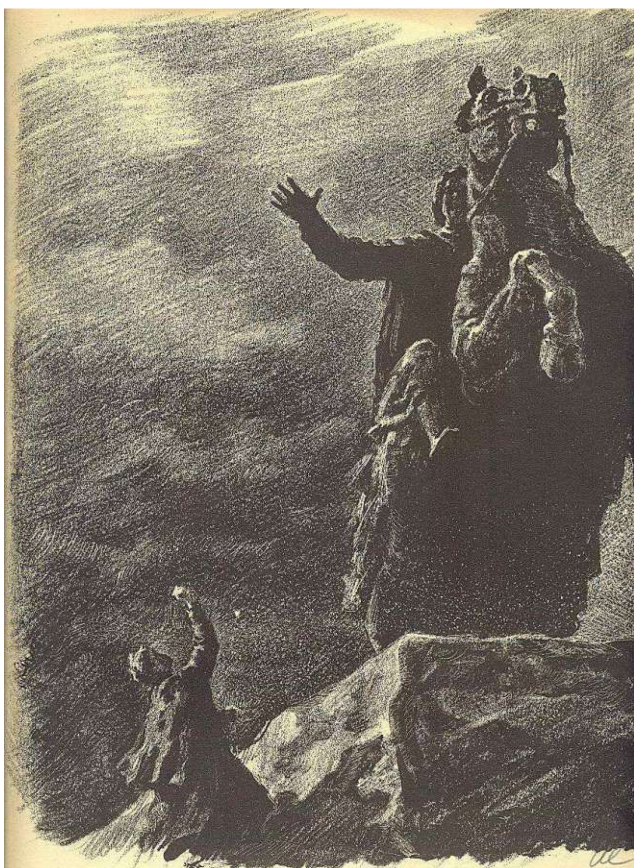

Figure 11: Igor' Ershov's 1947 etching, "A.S. Pushkin's 'Bronze Horseman'" ("'Mednyi vsadnik' A.S. Pushkina")

How do we then escape, or at the very least understand, the Chornobyl labyrinth? Morton would suggest that we cannot, not really. There is no getting beyond the hyperobject, something in which we are trapped and which far exceeds our usual timescales. Rather, Chornobyl's multivalence implies that we might instead strip away the belief that Chornobyl *is* a single event capable of being encapsulated by any single "is" definition. Instead, its weight lies in its conceptual power and flexibility, which have clearly generated massive effects and harm on so many people. As a shifting process, as a metaphor, its contours and effects begin to take shape before us. The kaleidoscopic view opens up new vistas and can account for the broken language after Chornobyl, if there can be an "after Chornobyl" at all. Valerii's tower, the plant, the wreckage—they are all inescapable, but there is also something to be said for exploring Chornobyl's mythology in process and from within the beast itself, even if, as these artists reveal, language sometimes falls short.

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