

ENERGY/WASTE

Approaches to the Environment
in Post-Soviet Cultures

edited by

Maria Hristova, Alyssa DeBlasio, Irina Anisimova

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Contents

Energy/Waste: Introduction	5
<i>Maria Hristova, Alyssa DeBlasio, Irina Anisimova</i>	
PART I · MAKING ENERGY/WASTE VISIBLE	
Regimes and Their Refuse: Filming Russia in Transition	20
<i>Masha Shpolberg</i>	
“Pomor’e ne pomoika”: Framing the Protest Campaign against the Landfill Project at Shies Station in Russia’s Arkhangelsk Region	42
<i>Elena Gorbacheva</i>	
PART II · REASSESSING SOVIET LEGACIES	
Post-Soviet Cinematic Depictions of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Tests	65
<i>Maria Hristova</i>	
Environmental Contamination and Postcolonial Recuperation in Late Soviet and Post-independence Kazakh Cinema	91
<i>Elena Monastireva-Ansdell</i>	
The Politics and Aesthetics of Waste in Liudmila Petrushevskiaia’s Fiction	112
<i>Irina Anisimova</i>	
PART III · THE CHORNOBYL DISASTER	
Finding Our Words: Representations of Chernobyl and the Impossibility of Language	130
<i>José Vergara</i>	

A Terrible Kaleidoscope: The Anthropocene Lyric in Chornobyl Poetry <i>Haley Laurila</i>	155
The Unknowability of Post-nuclear Landscapes in the Russian Television Series <i>Chernobyl</i> , <i>Exclusion Zone</i> <i>Irina Souch</i>	183
Contributors	205

Energy/Waste: Introduction

Maria Hristova, Alyssa DeBlasio, Irina Anisimova

THIS interdisciplinary volume addresses representations of energy and waste in post-Soviet contexts. The eight chapters of the collection tackle film, literature, poetry, and social movements from a range of perspectives—including literary studies, ecocriticism, film and media studies, and the social sciences—to examine how post-Soviet societies reinterpret and reimagine energy use and waste management, as well as Soviet legacies of large-scale environmental changes, pollution, and resource exploitation. The visualization and conceptualization of energy/waste have wide social, political, and cultural implications. As the record-high oil and gas prices resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 demonstrate, the impact of energy, and by extension waste, on cultural production and lived experiences remains painfully relevant and immediate.

Energy and waste can each be conceptualized as the inverse property of the other. If energy provides the ability to perform work—to cause change and generate heat, light, and motion—then waste is the unwanted discard of that work. By the same token, waste is an inevitable by-product of any energy-generating process; even production of renewable energy results in significant waste, such as the physical remnants of solar and wind energy infrastructures after their lifecycle's end. The interdependency of energy and waste, as well as their destructive potential, was made visible and gained global attention following the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, when a single nuclear power plant, the source of about ten percent of Ukraine's energy at the time of the meltdown, changed the lives of millions of people across multiple borders and rendered 1,000 square

miles uninhabitable for the next 20,000 years. The explosion exposed the inherent risks of nuclear power, as well as the deficiencies of Soviet technology and the inefficiency of the political system, contributing to an awakening of environmental popular consciousness in the socialist world. Moreover, the Chornobyl disaster (including its media legacy) has become synonymous for many in the public sphere with the very idea of nuclear energy, thereby leading to resistance in developing nuclear energy technology, even when studies have shown the health burdens for nuclear power to be smaller than for other forms of energy, including for electric, coal, oil, and natural gas (Markandya & Wilkinson 2007).

In the post-Soviet world, the concept of “energy” (*energiia*) shares a connection to the field of “energetics” (*energetika*), which is largely absent from Anglophone discussions of environmental studies. The word energy itself was first used by Aristotle in the fourth century BCE, but it was Thomas Young who employed it in its modern meaning in 1802. Rapid industrialization and new discoveries in physics and chemistry brought energy and its study to the forefront of Western scientific inquiry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study of the nature and production of energy became known as energetics, a term itself coined by William Rankine in 1855 as a thermodynamics concept (Rankine 1855). A number of other scientists across Europe were also exploring the nature of energy and chemical transformations and proposing various definitions of the scope and function of energetics. Most notably, in the 1890s, Wilhelm Ostwald (1896) was inspired to adapt the idea of energetics to philosophy, proposing a monist view of life as based on energy rather than matter. The varied and controversial definitions of energetics and its nature ultimately discredited the term in the West and it went out of popular usage after 1895 (Deltete 1999).

By the late nineteenth century, however, energetics, in its strictly literal understanding as the production and deployment of energy, had been introduced to and adopted by the Russian Empire. During the Soviet period, when industrialization and the need to find ways to produce energy on a large scale were a priority, the concept of energetics gained an even more prominent role. Numerous energetics institutes were established, many of them still in operation at present. Moreover, Soviet geochemist Vladimir Vernadskii (2010) proposed a vision of life as the output of energy created by solar radiation. Vernadskii himself was a proponent of nuclear energy, which initially involved the search for and excavation of

radioactive ores, and sought to harness its power for the development of humankind.

In 1954, the Obninsk nuclear power plant opened, making the Soviet Union the first country to use nuclear power to generate electricity, thereby harnessing the so-called peaceful atom. Concurrently, the military applications of nuclear power were considered just as crucial for Soviet state security. The first successful test of a Soviet atomic bomb was conducted secretly on August 29, 1949, at the Semipalatinsk Polygon in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. More than four hundred tests followed until the site's closure in 1990. The devastating effect of nuclear testing and nuclear spills on the environment and its inhabitants remains one of the most sensitive and controversial topics in post-Soviet political and cultural discourse. The issues around verbalizing, visualizing, and interpreting nuclear-caused devastation are discussed in this volume by Maria Hristova, as well as by all three authors in the third section devoted to Chernobyl: José Vergara, Haley Laurila, and Irina Souch.

In Russia, the continued significance of the energy sector, including nuclear power, is attested to by the large number of quantitative and social scientific studies of the country as a petrostate, its energy sector, and the mounting challenges it faces with waste management (Goldman 2008; Rogers 2015; Vatansver 2021; Romanov 2020). This type of investigative and scholarly work is, however, much less prevalent in the humanities. Moreover, this is a field that demands interdisciplinary analysis, as it is formed by the meeting of multiple fields of inquiry, much in the way that Vernadskii's work blends geology, radiochemistry, philosophy, and the history of science.

Compared to the notion of energy, the concepts of “waste” or “pollution” as a theoretical framework are much more recent, but they have since developed into a diverse and vibrant field of waste studies. Along with the agenda of climate change, the management of waste has an unparalleled importance for environmentalism and sustainable development. As an interdisciplinary subject, waste studies combines multiple approaches based in the natural and social sciences and the humanities. Recent publications like, *Waste Matters: Urban Margins in Contemporary Literature* (2016) by Sarah Harrison, *The Routledge Handbook of Waste Studies* (2022), edited by Zsuzsa Gille and Josh Lepawsky, and *Discard Studies* (2022) by Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky, have contributed to the further formalization of this multidisciplinary field. While waste

studies connects the social sciences and the humanities, most of its research focuses on the capitalist West or the global South and is centrally concerned with capitalist systems of social injustices and global inequalities (Yates & Gutberlet 2011).

In contrast to this approach, this volume will contribute to this topic from the perspective of socialist and post-socialist experiences. Zsuzsa Gille's *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History* (2007) first drew scholarly attention to the distinct approaches to conceptualizing waste in socialist economies. Using the example of postwar Hungary, Gille shows that socialist societies developed a cult of waste that valued reuse and recycling, thereby problematizing the long-held belief about the inherent "wastefulness" of socialist planned economies. Due to ongoing shortages and deficits, even packages and wrappers, which in market economies would be considered trash objects, could acquire material value and "added meaning" (Chapman 2013, 143). Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the socialist block led to precipitous changes in social life, such as the development of market economies and consumerist societies. These socioeconomic developments, in turn, led to dramatic changes in the production and conceptualization of waste, as well as in the replacement of environmentally beneficial recycling and recirculation practices with dumping and waste incineration (Gille 2007, 158–59).

In contemporary Russia, infrastructure for municipal waste disposal, which includes Soviet-era landfills, is often ill-equipped to deal with the post-Soviet increase of domestic and more complex waste (Josephson et al. 2013, 310). The World Bank reported in 2014 that each year Russia produces 55–60 million tons of municipal solid waste, of which only 5–7 percent is recycled or repurposed ("Waste in Russia" 2014); this situation has not significantly improved today. The contemporary crisis of waste management has recently resulted in the so-called garbage protests in many Russian regions; one such protest is discussed in Elena Gorbacheva's contribution to this volume. The practices of locating landfills in Russia's poor and distant regions stems from inequalities of a semicolonial and quasi-imperial nature that characterize the relationship between Moscow and the provinces and peripheries. In the post-Soviet era, capitalism has produced new forms of social alienation based on socioeconomic status often expressed in spatial and regional terms. These potentially harmful perceptions of an individual's value based on their

social standing can be framed through the metaphor of humans as waste. As discussed in the chapters by Irina Anisimova and Masha Shpolberg, waste can become a powerful metaphor for social processes.

Early Soviet culture often represented nature as inherently chaotic and infinitely malleable; it had to be mastered and made to work for the benefit of the new Soviet state (Gor'kii 1964; Oushakine 2004). This extractive mindset ultimately led to the ecological disasters of the late Soviet era, such as the Chornobyl nuclear plant explosion, the Aral Sea desiccation, and widespread soil degradation in Kazakhstan. Combined with perestroika's process of liberalization, these environmental problems solidified, once again (for the first time since the 1920s), a range of independent Soviet environmental movements, closely linked to famous writers and filmmakers (Ianitskii 2016; Zaharchenko 1990). And yet, as Laura Henry's work shows, it is difficult to adequately assess the effectiveness of environmental movements in Russia. Such issues as the diversity of environmental groups and their goals, their exclusion from policymaking, and the effects of the economic collapse of the 1990s make it hard to disentangle any environmental "gains" in the first post-Soviet decade from the simultaneous "severe economic recession and industrial contraction" (Henry 2010, 179; Oldfield 2005).

Despite what the Chornobyl tragedy revealed about the larger Soviet tendency of mismanaging the energy production process, and the resulting statewide protests and activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at least where Russia is concerned, not much has fundamentally changed in how the state exploits and benefits from its natural resources. In the 1990s and 2000s, environmental concerns gave way to a preoccupation with economic growth; post-Soviet Russia, it became clear, would preserve the extractive economy model of the Soviet period. Drilling for oil and gas, clearing forests for timber, and mining gold and diamonds has led to poisoned and depleted soil, air, and water (Stoecker & Shakirova 2014, 9). In today's Russia, exploitation of natural resources, water pollution, and deforestation impacts local populations including indigenous peoples. The spill of 20,000 tons of diesel in the Norilsk arctic tundra region in 2021 is just one event in a chain of long-term disasters caused by industrial pollution, according to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). Moreover, transnational production, such as the Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 integrated oil and gas projects, has caused disruption in the indigenous practices and subsistence economy of ap-

proximately 3,000 Nivkhi, Uilta, Nanai, Evenk, Chukchi, and Itelmen peoples living on Sakhalin Island (Tysiachniouk et al. 2018).¹

The unsafe disposal of tons of nuclear, chemical, and industrial waste is a growing problem. According to 2022 data from the International Energy Agency, collected before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia was the world's largest exporter of gas and second largest exporter of oil ("Why Does Russian" 2022). It ranked fourth in the world (after China, the United States, and India) in energy consumption, production of electricity, and carbon dioxide emissions from oil, gas, and coal. Combined with the progressively more uneven distribution of wealth in Russia, these statistics underscore that the energy/waste production process is not a strictly economic issue, but also a political, social, and cultural one.

The reliance on extractive economies characterizes not only Russia, but also other post-Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, where resource dependence has been linked to rising authoritarianism. Belarus and Ukraine, as crucial energy hubs, play a central role in the complex politics of energy flows between Europe, the United States, China, and Russia. This fossil fuel-based geopolitical network became acutely apparent in the days and weeks following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, making visible the world's dependence on Russian oil and gas. The introduction of renewable energy and waste management solutions across Western Europe poses a significant threat to Russia's reliance on hydrocarbon revenues. As Bouzarovski and Bassin (2011) have shown, the discourse of Russia as a great power is connected to energy production and energy geopolitics.

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the post-Soviet states that have joined the European Union, are among those to have already met, or are close to meeting, the 2020 European renewable energy targets. Three-quarters of Georgia's domestic energy production comes from hydro and biofuels/waste sources, and the country's share of renewable sources in its energy portfolio is among the world's highest (74.7 percent in 2020) ("Georgia Energy Profile" 2021). In these places, as well as in other post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, the green movements of the late Soviet period became a rallying point for reviving and politicizing national identity. Protests over the nuclear pollution at Chernobyl and Semipalatinsk, as well as such state plans as expanding the nuclear

1 Sakhalin-2 exports liquified natural gas and oil to the Asia-Pacific markets.

plant in Ignalina and building an aluminum plant in Yerevan, became equated with a desire for independence (Dawson 1996). In Kazakhstan, nuclear disarmament coincided and is often equated with a break from Soviet political control, as well as an influx of international financial aid meant to help combat the effects of radiation and nuclear pollution. Additionally, most Central Asian states advertise their willingness to support the development of renewable energy resources as a means to attract foreign investors (“Share of Renewable” 2022; Cohen 2021).

However, many of the post-Soviet states, as well as most European Union members, are still energy dependent on Russia. In Georgia, for example, natural gas and oil still make up nearly 70 percent of the country’s total national energy usage (“Georgia Energy Profile” 2021). Russia’s control of fuel exports has led in some cases to environmental regression, for instance Germany’s June 2022 decision to burn more coal in an effort to free itself from dependence on Russian natural gas. The need for cheap energy, combined with fears of a nuclear world war, has sparked a global nuclear renaissance (Nuttall 2004; Stulberg & Fuhrmann 2013). Several European Union states, as well as the United Kingdom, are considering revitalizing their nuclear energy sector (Ro 2022). With Russia’s help, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are considering building new nuclear plants to compensate for increased energy needs (“Kyrgyzstan Mulls Building” 2022; “Kazakhstan Likely to” 2022). Likewise, in Russia, the Rosatom agency has undertaken a long-term cultural campaign that presents nuclear power as a heroic Soviet achievement and a tenet of contemporary Russian national identity (Rindzevičiūtė 2022). These diverse circumstances and conflicting attitudes within the post-Soviet world vis-à-vis the energy sector further exacerbate the existing economic and political tensions and inequalities between Russia and its neighbors. In this volume, the issue of the Soviet Union’s and now Russia’s exploitative relationship with its Central Asian periphery is examined by Elena Monastireva-Ansdell.

Paradoxically, by its very nature, environmental criticism is both easy and challenging to adapt to non-Western contexts. Certain concepts, such as energy and waste, are general enough to exist on their own in a shared Eurasian-American cultural space. In fact, Lawrence Buell argues that “the environmental turn in literary studies has been more issue-driven than method or paradigm-driven,” which facilitates an ecocritical reading of non-Western literature and film (Buell 2005, 11). At the same time, the genealogy of environmental studies is markedly

different across the globe, endowing ideas about nature, humanism, and the environment with a range of different connotations. For example, the concept of sustainable development and management of resources has been a critical issue in most contemporary Western societies since the mid-1950s. However, much of the environmental public discourse and academic debates in the West remain unacknowledged in Russophone cultural production. The most comprehensive work on conceptualizing and framing the environment during the imperial Russian and Soviet periods has been done by (social) scientists rather than by writers, artists, or scholars in the humanities (Graybill 2007). Moreover, to date no comprehensive study has investigated specifically the relationship between energy and waste in the cultural sphere, nor the way that these categories are made visible for average citizens through literature, film, art, and other modes of cultural production.

While most area studies in Western academia have gradually turned their attention towards ecological and environmental themes, this process has been particularly slow in catching on within Slavic and (post-)Soviet studies. Most of the work on environmental theory and themes done by scholars of Russia and the (post-)socialist world is focused on conceptualizing and contextualizing the Anthropocene, as well as decentering the human experience. Of particular note is Jane Costlow's pioneering work, including her monograph, *Heart-Pine Russia* (2013), as well as the volumes *Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History* (2010), co-edited with Amy Nelson, and *Water in Social Imagination* (2017), co-edited with Yrjö Haila and Arja Rosenholm. Other notable examples include the volume *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia* (2018), edited by Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, as well as the special issues of *Russian Literature*, edited by Alec Brookes and Elena Fratto, *Towards a Russian Literature of the Anthropocene* (2020). There is a notable absence of a more diverse approach to environmental themes, as well as engagement with alternative theoretical frameworks that could help contextualize eco narratives in (post-)Soviet cultural production.

Book Structure

This volume is comprised of eight chapters divided into three sections. The first section, *Making Energy/Waste Visible*, focuses on the ways that energy and waste can be rendered visible in their complex interrelationship, and explores their political and politicizing nature.

“Regimes and Their Refuse: Filming Russia in Transition” by Masha Shpolberg uses film, both documentary and fictional, to examine the late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russian preoccupation with landfills and garbage. The chapter considers a wide range of works from different parts of the world, but focuses specifically on Hanna Polak’s *Something Better to Come*, El’dar Riazanov’s *Promised Heaven*, and Roman Prygunov’s *Soulless*. The author argues that filmmakers were drawn to the garbage dump during transitional moments, as a peripheral space from which to reframe major political and economic shifts at the center. Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Martha Nussbaum, John Scanlan, and Zygmunt Bauman, the chapter examines how the concept of waste was extended to include all those left behind by these changes, and how the process of so-called social progress is predicated on social exclusion. The chapter concludes by considering the unique tools cinema possesses for countering the politics of suppression and disgust, particularly through sustained attention, carefully chosen framing, and sound design. From these films the vision of the dump that emerges is of an ambivalent space, at once a kind of “zone” outside of history and a flatter, more open and democratic foil to the increasing verticality and hierarchies of the new, capitalist Russia.

An in-depth look at waste visualization strategies is found in “Pomor’è ne pomoika’: Framing the Protest Campaign against the Landfill Project at Shies Station in Russia’s Arkhangelsk Region” by Elena Gorbacheva. The chapter focuses on the 2018–2020 protests against the construction of the Shies landfill for waste from Moscow in the Arkhangelsk region, which gained support nationwide. The author probes which narrative and framing strategies of the Shies protest organizers were most successful in making their ecological concerns visible in a way that transformed their concerns from a local to a national problem. The protest, which started as a campaign against locally unwanted land use, highlighted existing environmental injustice in Russia and anti-center resentment in the regions.

The three articles in the second section, *Reassessing Soviet Legacies*, focus on how waste and pollution are reframed as sociopolitical symbols of post-Soviet transition. The first article, “Post-Soviet Cinematic Depictions of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test” by Maria Hristova, focuses on nuclear testing and its consequences as imagined in three post-Soviet films. All three films—*Leila’s Prayer* by Satybaldy Narymbetov, *A Gift for*

Stalin by Rustem Abdrashev, and *The Test* by Aleksandr Kott—show the devastating effects of atomic bombs on the surrounding world. However, the environmental turn in post-Soviet cinema is gradually shifting from an ecological focus on the global impact of radiation to more politicized and anthropocentric depictions of atomic testing.

“Environmental Contamination and Postcolonial Recuperation in Late Soviet and Post-independence Kazakh Cinema” by Elena Monastireva-Ansdell traces the development of the Kazakh ethno-national idea from the late Soviet to the contemporary period through the representation of ethnicity and landscapes in film. The chapter examines the changing perceptions of large-scale Soviet projects and the resulting environmental problems depicted in Rashid Nugmanov’s *The Needle* and Rustem Abdrashev’s *Renaissance Island* through the lens of postcolonial studies.

“The Politics and Aesthetics of Waste in Liudmila Petrushevskaiia’s Fiction” by Irina Anisimova picks up the metaphor of waste, exploring its significance and transformation in Petrushevskaiia’s prose of the late and post-Soviet periods. The chapter argues that this evolution of waste imagery is symptomatic of both the changes in Petrushevskaiia’s fiction and the sociocultural trends of late Soviet and post-Soviet society. In Petrushevskaiia’s earlier fiction, the metaphors of waste often express a social critique of Soviet life; in her later works, they acquire a democratizing function, while simultaneously losing the critical sociopolitical stance of the author’s Soviet-era fiction.

The third section, *The Chornobyl Disaster*, narrows the volume’s focus to the significance of the nuclear catastrophe. “Finding Our Words: Representations of Chornobyl and the Impossibility of Language” by José Vergara uses the concept of a “hyperobject” to probe the crisis of language affecting the post-Chornobyl world, and the range of strategies adopted by writers and directors to express the invisible devastation of nuclear contamination.

“A Terrible Kaleidoscope: The Anthropocene Lyric in Chornobyl Poetry” by Haley Laurila focuses on Ukrainian poetry both from before and after the reactor explosion. Poets like Ivan Drach, Lina Kostenko, and Oksana Zabuzhko pioneered strategies of contextualizing the Chornobyl environmental disaster as part of a wider anthropocenic moment before the term “Anthropocene” gained traction in academic circles.

Finally, “The Unknowability of Post-nuclear Landscapes in the Russian Television Series *Chornobyl, Exclusion Zone*” by Irina Souch ex-

plores the limits of humans' ability to comprehend the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. Focusing on the Exclusion Zone's contaminated landscapes,² the chapter engages with the existing visual vocabulary for depicting Chernobyl, in order to demonstrate how it evolves as a binary opposition: the contaminated area is usually depicted as a locus of either human abandonment or nature's vengeful return. The chapter further demonstrates how the series problematizes familiar historical accounts and artistic representations. By rearranging them in accordance with sci-fi aesthetics, the series seeks to render intelligible the effects of radioactive fallout, which often go beyond the boundaries of human perception.

Conclusion

This volume takes a step towards nuancing and enriching environmental approaches in scholarship on the post-Soviet world. Admittedly a contested term, the "post-Soviet" in the title of this book refers to the continued existence of shared physical infrastructures and non-material relationships between the states that used to be part of the Soviet Union. By necessity, the volume is interdisciplinary, exploring and opening up venues of analysis both for teaching the environment in the contemporary classroom and conducting further research on this topic.

While the project was conceived before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, current events highlight the urgency of reconceptualizing the links between energy and waste in post-Soviet space, as the conflict both threatens and emphasizes the Soviet-era infrastructures of energy/waste that still inextricably connect the region. In the fall of 2022, as we completed work on this volume, Russian military forces bombarded Ukraine's power grid, including threatening the security of the Soviet-era Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear stations. Ukraine's power grid crosses post-Soviet borders, meaning that outages can lead to blackouts in neighboring Moldova. At the same time, previous environmental stresses have not disappeared. For example, while the war led to a temporary stop to environmental protests in Russia, the Federation's aging Soviet-era infrastructure is likely to lead to new environmental catastrophes and protests. These are possible directions to be taken by future environmental research on the region, and we hope that our project will be an important contribution to such studies.

² The contaminated area around Chernobyl is termed an exclusion zone.

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Note on Transliteration and Names

We use the Library of Congress system of transliteration for non-English words and names. This includes proper names that are more widely known in alternative spellings, such as Petrushevskaja (Petrushevskaya) and El'tsin (Yeltsin). In instances where an individual's preferred spelling of their names is known, we opt to use that version. For place names, we use the current popular spellings preferred by the country in which the places are located, unless discussing primary sources or secondary materials that use the older Soviet spelling. This means, for instance, that while we use the Ukrainian spelling "Chornobyl" predominantly in the text, we use "Chernobyl" when referencing Soviet-era publications and also when discussing the disaster in Russian context: for instance, in Irina Souch's chapter on the Russian TV series *Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone*.

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Regimes and their Refuse: Filming Russia in Transition

Masha Shpolberg

HANNA Polak's 2014 documentary, *Something Better to Come* (*Nadejda lepsze czasy*), condenses fourteen years in the life of a girl into an hour and a half. Like Richard Linklater's fiction film *Boyhood*, released the same year, it offered audiences the pleasure of seeing a child grow into an adult, of tracing considerable changes in character and appearance. Polak's protagonist Yula, however, is no ordinary girl: for much of the film, from age ten to twenty-one, she lives with her mother on the *svalka*,¹ the largest garbage dump in Europe—located just thirteen miles from the Kremlin.² Moreover, the years the film covers are not ordinary years: they mark Vladimir Putin's ascent, from his election as president of Russia in 2000 to his consolidation of power following massive protests in 2011–2012 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Consequently, the film becomes a meditation on the first decade and a half of Putin's reign, as well as the human and environmental cost of Russia's economic upturn.

“Longitudinal documentary,” where a filmmaker returns to check up on her subject over many years, has an appropriately long history. The approach was pioneered by the East German *Children of Golzow* (*Die Kinder von Golzow*, 1961–2007) series, before being popularized by the more famous British *Up!* series (1964–2019) (Petraitis 2017, 1).³

1 In English, *svalka* translates as dump, landfill, or junkyard.

2 In transcribing Russian names, it is common to revert to the legal version, which in this case would be Iuliia. Polak chooses to approximate the diminutive form of the name in the film's promotional materials, however, and consequently gives it as Yula.

3 The fact that several of these projects were launched in the 1960s suggests a connection between more portable cameras, synchronized sound, and cheaper film

Both projects sought to trace the impact of social and political systems on participants' lives, from childhood to adulthood. The format quickly spawned imitations around the world, as well as explicit adaptations of the *Up!* series in South Africa, Russia, Japan, and the United States in the 1990s. The focus on children allowed all these projects to present the most visually engaging transformation possible while also defamiliarizing the customs of the society in question by presenting them through the eyes of a child.⁴ It is no accident, perhaps, that these projects were frequently initiated by directors and producers who themselves were outsiders to the cultures they found themselves filming.⁵ Moreover, the format allowed these series to index significant political changes. While *Children of Golzow* inadvertently captured the effects of a major geopolitical event—the fall of the Berlin wall—on participants' lives, the projects in 1990s South Africa and Russia very consciously set out to do the same.

This chapter situates Polak's film within two distinct traditions: the worldwide popularity of the longitudinal documentary, or "long doc," on the one hand and the specifically Russian interest in trash and garbage dumps on the other. This is an interest that came to the fore in Il'ia Kabakov's conceptual art of the late 1980s and peaked again recently with the 2018–2020 mass protests against a proposed landfill in Shies, between Arkhangelsk and the Komi Republic capital, Syktyvkar.⁶ Looking back specifically at the cinematic representation of garbage dumps, or *svalki*, in El'dar Riazanov's *Promised Heaven* (*Nebesa obetovannye*,

and this kind of sociological inquiry. Similarly, one could argue that the arrival of digital cameras enabled the new "boom" in longitudinal projects in the 2000s.

- 4 Hanna Polak has made children her specialty. Her first documentary, *The Children of Leningradsky* (*Dzieci z Leningradzkiego*, 2005), about homeless children living in the eponymous train station, was nominated for an Academy Award. It was the children from the film who first brought her to the dump of *Something Better to Come*.
- 5 Specifically, the filmmakers were from neighboring countries or colonial offshoots. Tim Hewat, the producer who first came up with the idea for the *Up!* series, came to the United Kingdom from Australia; Rainer Hartleb, who made *Children of Jordbro* (*Barnen från Jordbro*, 1996), came to Sweden from Germany; and Hanna Polak, originally from Poland, studied filmmaking at VGIK, the Russian national film school, before making *The Children of Leningradsky* and *Something Better to Come* in Russia.
- 6 I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of this chapter for drawing my attention both to Kabakov's engagement with refuse and to the Shies protests. Some examples of Kabakov's engagement with trash are the installations "Box with Garbage" ("Iashchik s musorom," 1981) and "The Man Who Never Throws? Anything Away" ("Chelovek, kotoryi nikogda nichego ne vybrasyvaet," 1988).

1991) and Roman Prygunov's *Soulless* (*Dukhless*, 2012), this chapter asks why this site figures so prominently in the post-Soviet Russian imaginary.⁷ Ultimately, it argues that filmmakers were drawn to the dump at transitional moments, as a peripheral space from which to reframe the major political and economic shifts at the country's center. All three films become meditations on who is included in Russia's rapid-fire transformation to a capitalist consumer society, and who is excluded, as well as who gets to partake in the feeling of progress, and who is consigned to live in a nearly ahistoric "zone."

Considering Riazanov's and Prygunov's fiction films alongside Polak's documentary allows iconographic patterns to emerge in the way the relationship between Moscow and the dump is configured. It also highlights the increasing convergence between fictional and documentary storytelling. Paradoxically, it is Riazanov's fiction film that adopts the ensemble cast characteristic of the long doc. Polak, meanwhile, chooses to focus on a single individual, much as a fiction feature would. In this particular context, however, her approach takes on additional meaning. The sustained attention Polak affords her subject becomes a way, through the filmic form, of countering the disposable aesthetics of consumer culture and insisting on the human dignity of a population likened to the trash from which they eke out a living. The "closed" format of a single film, while likely a response to the realities of the film festival circuit, also presents a stronger indictment of Putin's regime than the open-ended, ongoing approach of most long docs. In this way, Polak's film models a more ethical, less exploitative way of engaging with the representation of waste and the people who live in its midst.⁸

Geographies of Exclusion

While *Something Better to Come* draws on the well-established tradition of longitudinal docs, the period over which it was produced saw the emergence of a new cinema centered on the representation of waste, and garbage dumps in particular. For the most part, this took place in similarly slow-paced, visually striking documentaries such as Marcos Prado's *Estamira* (*Estamira*, 2004), Lucy Walker, João Jardim, and

7 Alyssa DeBlasio, one of the editors of this volume, generously drew my attention to *Soulless*.

8 This comes across even in the film's title, which refers to Maksim Gor'kii's famous assertion in *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne zhizni*, 1902) that people live for something better to come.

Karen Harley's *Waste Land* (2010), Candida Brady's *Trashed* (2012), and Jiuliang Wang's *Besieged by Waste* (*Wei Cheng La Ji*, 2011), though the animated film *Wall-E* (2008) by Andrew Stanton also stands out as an important milestone.⁹ Like *Something Better to Come*, *Estamira* focused on a single, female character, albeit in this case an older woman suffering from schizophrenia. Boris Mitić's 2003 documentary, *Pretty Dyana* (*Lijepa Dyana*), provides an interesting point of comparison within Eastern Europe: the film focuses on a Roma settlement on the outskirts of Belgrade whose residents survive by repairing dilapidated cars and using them to collect recyclable materials such as cardboard and bottles—even as they are continuously hassled by the police.¹⁰ Structurally, however, the closest comparison might be to Jiuliang Wang's *Plastic China* (2016), completed two years after Polak's film, and, like it, focusing on an exceptionally smart and resilient eleven-year-old girl.

All the attention to the problem of waste at the beginning of the twenty-first century raises the question: To what extent does *Something Better to Come* participate in a global discourse and, conversely, to what extent does it reflect a specifically Russian state of affairs?¹¹ To get at the answer, one has to follow the trash. An underlying concern in all these films is where the trash comes from: whether it is imported from wealthier nations or locally produced. This determines the scope of the film's critique: whether it is aimed at what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has termed "the new planet-wide power hierarchies," or more modestly, at local governments and power structures like the mafia (Bauman 2013, 6). This is the case, for instance, in the documentaries produced during the waste emergency Southern Italy: D'Ambrosio, Calabria and Ruggiero's *Beautiful Country* (*Biùtiful cauntri*, 2007), Rossi-Prudente's *The Baby Needs Some Fresh Air* (*La bambina deve prendere aria*, 2008), and Angrisano's *A Mountain of Lies* (*Una montagna di balle*, 2009).¹² While the majority of the early twenty-first century films position the trash as the result of global capitalism, *Something Better to Come*, like the Italian documentaries, responds primarily to a national context.

9 Michael Glawogger's documentary *Workingman's Death* (2005), which chronicles the extremely difficult jobs human beings will do to survive, also belongs to this moment, even if it does not deal with garbage dumps.

10 The scholar Alice Bardan kindly drew my attention to *Pretty Dyana*.

11 Petraitis (2017) makes the inverse point about longitudinal docs: that they are primarily used to measure social change within a single national context and are rarely compared or looked at from a transnational perspective.

12 For more on these films, as well as the crisis, see Angelone (2011) and Past (2013).

Polak makes this clear in four ways. First, the title credits play over four wide shots of the city of Moscow, the last one setting us firmly in Red Square, facing the Kremlin. Second, the opening shot of the film itself shows trucks ferrying trash from the city to the dump that implies a direct connection between the two: as the city expands so, too, does the garbage dump. Third, the dump is consistently filmed using wide shots, never close-ups that might provide clues about the nature and origins of the trash. Instead of an assortment of individual objects, it is presented as the texture of the ground underfoot and the material substance Yula and the other residents mine for a living. Finally, the radio news broadcasts that the inhabitants of the dump listen to and that Polak carefully layers on the soundtrack refer consistently to events of national (rather than international or local) significance: Putin's election and reelection, and the Moscow theater hostage crisis.¹³

Paradoxically, though it was the collapse of the Soviet Union that led to the worldwide triumph of capitalism, it is never mentioned in the film.¹⁴ This seems to be a common elision: in his book *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2013), Bauman examines the power imbalance between the "developing" and "developed" worlds. Though he comes from the former Soviet bloc himself (specifically Poland), he does not consider the possibility that the former "second world" might occupy a peculiar position between these poles—or amount to an entirely separate category. Where the formerly socialist countries fall is worth considering, however, as the shift from what Bauman terms "a society of producers" to "a society of consumers" has taken place there in a much more condensed and visible manner.

Natalya Chernyshova, Paulina Bren, and Mary Neuburger, among others, have used cinema to track this shift which, they argue, began

13 In October 2002, Chechen militants seized the Dubrovka Theater, holding some 850 people hostage and demanding an immediate end to the Second Chechen War. After four days of failed negotiations, Russian special operations forces pumped an anesthetizing gas into the theater and stormed it. All of the hostage-takers and up to 130 hostages were killed over the course of the crisis.

14 The only exception to this is when the young people at the dump listen to a slightly older man play the 1995 Chizh & Co. song "Soldier at Camp" ("Soldat na privale," 1995), which references the collapse of the USSR. We hear the lyrics: Серп и молот отправляется в зенит, / Ранний луч в пустом мозгу наводит грусть, / Матюгальник на березе голосит, / Как узбеков-латышей сплотила Русь. ("The hammer and sickle reach for the zenith / An early ray in an empty brain makes you sad / The megaphone on the birch tree proclaims / How the Uzbeks and Latvians were unified by Rus'.") (The English translation is mine.)

already in the late socialist period (Chernyshova 2011, 2013; Bren and Neuberger 2012). Due to perennial shortages, however, it played itself out largely in the ideological rather than the material sphere—Soviet consumption could never rival that of Western countries. In the early 2000s, however, the Russian economy experienced exponential growth, particularly in the retail and service sectors (Ivanov & Suvorov 2009).¹⁵

This expansion in consumption practices becomes apparent when one considers the precedents for Polak's film. Some of the most frequently cited examples of socialist consumption onscreen come from El'dar Riazanov's comedies. It is telling perhaps that the director's last Soviet comedy—and possibly the last film ever to be produced in the USSR—follows all this consumption to its logical conclusion: the garbage dump. *Promised Heaven* focuses on a group of elderly men and women who have, for a wide range of reasons, been driven out of their homes and forced to take up residence on a dump. They are politically organized, with an elected leader dubbed “the President,” and represent a microcosm of Soviet society. We are progressively introduced to opposing dyads: the Jewish violinist and his anti-Semitic neighbor, and the Party hardliner and survivors of the Gulag. They refer to themselves, however, as a unified, if simple, people (*narod*), all the while pointing out that у бедных, как у богатых, нет национальности.¹⁶ This solidarity is contrasted with the cutthroat mores of the Muscovites “out there”: we witness sons driving mothers out onto the street and young women cheating old men out of their homes. At the dump, on the contrary, a woman offers her friend “the General” a van of his own, even though he has an apartment in town and only comes to the dump to visit.

On a literal level, *Promised Heaven* reflects the wild inflation that devalued retirees' pensions, plunging them into poverty even before distinct classes of haves and have-nots emerged in the 1990s. On a more conceptual level, the film is searching for narrative and visual tools with which to process the major shift that was perestroika and that would become the collapse of the USSR. Polak's film captures the dump and the forgotten people who inhabit it at a similarly pivotal moment in Russian history. Indeed, the two films may be thought of as inverse bookends,

15 Ivanov and Suvorov provide an astounding figure: “In 2007, retail turnover in comparable prices was 244% relative to 1999” (596). They also confirm that “the fastest growth in retail turnover was registered between 2004 and 2007”—the middle years of Polak's project (569).

16 “the poor, like the rich, have no nationality.” (All film translations are mine.)

with Riazanov's film responding to the dissolution of a regime and the economic breakdown that followed, and Polak's—to the emergence of a new one, buoyed by increasing stability and prosperity. Moreover, where Riazanov crafts wickedly funny satirical fiction (albeit with a supernatural twist in this instance), Polak goes in for sincere nonfiction. Despite these differences, the filmmakers turn to the subject of the dump for the same reason: both see its value as a peripheral space from which to reframe the political and economic changes taking place in the urban center.

A somewhat unexpected additional data point is provided by Roman Prygunov's commercially successful comedy-drama, *Soulless*, produced toward the end of the period covered by Polak. The film focuses on an ambitious young banker who finds himself dissatisfied with the endless cycle of consumption that has become his life. Most of the action unfolds in the Moscow International Business Center, a neighborhood of glass towers and sanitized, seamless spaces that was being actively built up at the time of the filming, as well as restaurants and nightclubs around the city. The film is intended primarily for a domestic audience, and a large part of its appeal lies in the access it provides viewers to these elite spaces. The film is overtly critical of global capitalism, yet obviously relishes the variety and sensual pleasures it provides. Released in 2012, the film depicts the last innocent moment, as it were, as the country was transitioning from the "Medvedev years" back to Putin's control, just before the squashing of the opposition protests and the expansionist politics that would lead to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Consequently, the film feels more like a celebration of how far the country has come in the two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union than any kind of genuine critique.

The only exception to this are the opening credits, which trace a trash truck's journey from the heart of the Business Center to the dump Polak was documenting at that very moment. Only at the end of the film do we realize that Max (Danila Kozlovskii), the film's protagonist, is inside the truck. In a typically Dostoevskian plot, Max, a banker, has lost everything over the course of the film—his money, his friends, his love interest—but has reclaimed his soul. After a particularly eventful night, he passes out in the trash truck and is driven out to the city's limits. The film may thus be read as a preamble to Polak's documentary, showing where the trucks are coming from—the world of the have-it-

alls as opposed to that of her have-nots. For a film that wants to be seen as socially conscious, this opening also becomes a way of acknowledging that the spaces of global capitalism are able to remain spotless only so long as the trash is removed on schedule; that their illusion of purity and minimalism is predicated on the labor of cleaners and trash truck drivers; and, finally, that for every self-made Max in this new economy there are a thousand “losers.”

Interestingly, all three films emphasize their dumps’ proximity to downtown Moscow and the forms of transportation that tie the two together. Riazanov’s dump lies adjacent to the railroad tracks. Early on we see an American developer, who plans to build a condom factory and hotel at the site, film the territory from a railroad bridge. “It’s not too far from the center of Moscow, that’s also good,” he remarks (in English). Prygunov’s beautifully orchestrated images emphasize the trash truck’s smooth movement through Moscow. The streets and highways come to resemble arteries connecting the International Business Center, Moscow’s ravenous stomach, to the literal dumping grounds, the city’s bowels. Along the way, the truck passes through a number of check points, suggesting that capitalism is a hierarchical system whose elites are invested in gatekeeping. Finally, with every successive shot, the truck moves from narrow to ever more open spaces, so that its final arrival at the dump is paradoxically associated with a feeling of release. In this way, the credit sequence articulates the tension at the heart of the film between lust for the lifestyle and prestige afforded to those at the top of the new system (associated with the verticality of the Business Center’s skyscrapers) and the yearning for wide-open spaces (the famous Russian concept of *prostora*) and greater equality in human relations (associated with the horizontality of the dump).



Figure 1: An American developer surveys the dump in El'dar Riazanov's *Promised Heavens*



Figure 2: The trash truck moves from the narrow, vertical spaces of capitalism to the wide-open, horizontal spaces of the dump in the opening credits of Roman Prygunov's *Soulless*



Figure 3: Europe's largest garbage dump, outside Moscow, in Hanna Polak's *Something Better to Come*

Polak similarly opens her film with an image that asserts the dump's connection to the city beyond: the aforementioned wide shot of a group of children walking on the high wall-like mound marking the border of the dump, while trucks ferry garbage to and from the shimmering white apartment blocks on the horizon. Over this image, Polak's voice-over (in English) proffers the shocking information that the dump is located "only 13 miles from Red Square and Kremlin." This comment reminds viewers that this kind of high angle shot is usually associated with a position of knowledge and power. In Riazanov's film, it is the gaze of ownership—it belongs to the American developer quite literally surveying the land his company has just acquired. In Prygunov's film, it is the gaze of the film-consumer, accustomed to easily legible and beautifully composed images. And in Polak's film, it invites viewers to imagine how whatever regime may be ensconced in the Kremlin views its territory. Both Riazanov and Polak additionally set up a tension between the land's use- and exchange-value: the on-the-ground view of the dump's inhabitants and the high-angle view of the developers in Riazanov's film; the motion of the trucks and the children in opposite directions in Polak's.

Though the protagonists of both films refer to the areas they inhabit using the Russian word *svalka*, Riazanov's dump is really more of an en-

campment: an agglomeration of rusted train cars and buses converted into hovels. The space around them is strewn with paper, tires, broken crates, and other debris, but it is not the site of consistent, daily dumping. The dump Polak films ten years later is, by contrast, the largest in Europe—two miles long, one mile across and fourteen stories high. As the dump has expanded, it has become harder to escape. Riazanov's protagonists were much more mobile than Polak's. His film begins and ends at the *svalka*, but most of its duration is devoted to sketching out each of the characters' backstories. Consequently, we see them come and go at will. Polak made the choice to film her protagonists exclusively at the dump, though presumably they must leave it now and then to purchase food and other critical supplies. As Małgorzata Sadowska writes, the dump in *Something Better to Come* becomes a kind of "zone," where regular laws do not apply, as well as a totalizing space in which people "grow up, work, have children, and die" (Sadowska 2015, 83).¹⁷

Ultimately, the films are equally pessimistic. Though Riazanov's characters might move back and forth between the two worlds with ease—the regular world of the city and the world of the dump—the cyclical structure of his narrative, too, suggests there is no way out, only up: in a somewhat heavy-handed metaphor, the dump's residents escape the brutal police force by climbing back aboard an engine car inhabited by a Bolshevik old-timer—a symbolic train of history—and being lifted into the air by friendly aliens who promise to take them to a place где можно жить, как люди.¹⁸ In Polak's film, the lack of an outside reproduces the protagonists' sense of claustrophobia and inescapable dread. The film makes it clear that Yula's happy ending is an exception. What lingers long after the film concludes is a young man's assertion that волосы дыбом встают на голове, когда думаю о том, что я здесь проживу всю жизнь,¹⁹ and Yula's own description of it as болото, которое засасывает.²⁰ It is a far cry from the romanticized release suggested by Prygunov's opening credits.

The only major difference between Riazanov's and Polak's visions concerns the presence of the state. In Riazanov's film, institutions might

17 "Tu się dorasta, pracuje, rodzi dzieci, umiera." (All English translations of Sadowska in this chapter are mine.)

18 "where they can live like people"

19 "it freaks me out when I come to think that I might be spending my whole life here"

20 "a swamp that sucks you in"

be falling apart, but they still exist.²¹ The dump residents' shenanigans land them first in prison and then in a home for the elderly. It quickly becomes clear that the only alternative to life at the dump is an institutionalized life—or no life at all. When asked what will become of them, the translator working for the Americans responds that some of them will be sent to the home for the elderly and some to a home for the insane. Except for a brief hospital scene, there is no sense of this institutional landscape in *Something Better to Come*, only an ever-present fear of the police, who beat up the residents and burn their hovels, and a generalized mistrust of authorities. Russia's economic miracle appears to have been accompanied by a retraction, or at least a reinvigorated hostility of the state, towards its most vulnerable citizens. If, in Riazanov's film, the trouble was selling out to the West, at least the enemy was, to some extent, external. In Polak's film, it has become internal.

Expendable People

Although *Something Better to Come* features fascinating views of the dump, it is unapologetically anthropocentric: Polak's concern lies with the people she encounters first and foremost.²² Like the *Up!* series and most other long docs, the film begins as ethnography, interested in capturing the day-to-day details of life on the dump and, as time goes on, morphs into biography—a chronicle of the more significant episodes in the protagonist's life. Early shots illustrate how residents survive by building huts from construction pellets and felt, boiling snow in the winter to get water, and frying potatoes for most of their meals, as well as how they have fun—they sing, play, dye their hair, and generally style themselves, even at the dump. As Yula grows, the focus shifts away from her lively group of friends and on to her exclusively. The tone grows somber. The camera is there when Yula's mother tells her she has been raped and, later, follows Yula's emotional state attentively when she finds herself pregnant at age sixteen, desperately searching for a place to live and raise her baby. She ultimately realizes the impossibility of the

21 When Efimiia, the artist, asks a prison guard for sheets, he affirms that she is entitled to them, but indicates there is a shortage.

22 Some of this is circumstantial. In an interview for *Film Quarterly*, Polak admitted that “this is also where I made a mistake. I was so concentrated on the life of the people that I didn't shoot enough in the surrounding environment. [...] From the garbage dump where I was shooting, you could very clearly see the city [...] In the editing I was looking for more of this kind of footage of how vast the dump was and how close it was to Moscow, but I didn't have it” (Shpolberg 2016, 71).

task; in the film's most heartbreaking moment, we see her walk away, leaving the baby behind at the hospital. The drama surrounding this moment points to the core ethical problem at the heart of the project: How to film people who have been deemed superfluous from society's point of view?

For Bauman, the problem of "human waste and wasted humans" is inseparable from the process of modernization (Bauman 2013, 6). In *Wasted Lives*, he argues that modernization has generated not only material, but also human waste. For centuries, colonial territories both supplied imperial powers with raw materials and served as "dumping grounds" for excess population (Bauman 2013, 5). This process of extraction and dumping continued unabated until the colonies themselves modernized, broke away, and became independent nations. The world, according to Bauman, is now "full": there is no place for the "refugees, the displaced, asylum seekers [and] migrants" to go—they have become "the waste of globalization" (Bauman 2013, 58).

Russia never had extensive overseas colonies, and its imperial expansion looked very different. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of Riazanov's and Polak's films as responses to a not-too-dissimilar but much more rapid process of resource extraction and monetization that took place in two stages: in the 1990s, with the privatization of previously state-owned assets and means of industrial production, and the 2000s, with the explosion in demand for consumer goods and services. Riazanov's film was produced just as the Soviet space was beginning to enter the free market economy; Prygunov's—as the success of the global banking system seemed guaranteed; and Polak's—at the same time that the term "Capitalocene" gained worldwide traction. Unlike the more general "Anthropocene," Capitalocene suggested that the dire, ongoing changes to the environment were the result of a specific economic order rather than human activity as such (Moore 2016). Both films point to the fact that these transitions—first to a market and then to a consumer economy—could not take place without rendering a whole layer of the population unnecessary, or obsolete. The shimmering city on the horizon could not grow without the dump growing in turn.

Moreover, each party—the city and the dump—relies for its self-definition on the other. In *Purity and Danger* (2002), anthropologist Mary Douglas argued for a dialectical relationship between order and dirt. "There is no such thing as absolute dirt," she wrote. "It exists in the

eye of the beholder. [...] Dirt offends against order” yet is “a by-product of the creation of [that very] order” (Douglas 2002, 2, 198). The film does not linger on this, but the repeated wide shots featuring the dump in the foreground and housing blocks in the background suggest that Moscow’s new bourgeoisie both produces and sets itself against this new underclass. We get a glimmer of this dynamic in another heartbreaking moment, when a weary woman exclaims: В автобусе едешь, а на нас смотрят как на вшей, на блох, на тараканов. А чё, мы не люди? А куда нам деваться? А если у меня нет ни дома... Всё, нет ничего... Почему я должна пропадать? Я же тоже человек. [...] Я живу. Я же не могу пойти просто и умереть.²³

The film’s *raison d’être* is to move the viewer from a reaction of disgust like the one the woman describes to one of compassion. Yet it is worth pausing on why exactly this might be necessary. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva identified something she called the abject—that which precedes signification and forces us to confront our own animality and, therefore, mortality in the most direct way possible. “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death,” she wrote. “In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup and masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 1982, 3). Societies deal with the abject by casting it out or purifying it through religion and art. In *Upheavals of Thought* (2003) and *Hiding from Humanity* (2006), Martha Nussbaum takes this argument a step further, studying the way disgust may be mobilized as a political emotion. She notes that disgust is not one of the built-in emotions. Children know only distaste; disgust develops as they grow older, making it a socially learned emotion (Nussbaum 2003, 200). Over time, Nussbaum hypothesizes, we learn to be disgusted by bodily fluids and functions because they remind us of our “animal body” and, consequently, “our vulnerability to decay and to becoming waste products ourselves” (Nussbaum 2003, 203). She writes: “So powerful is the desire to cordon ourselves off from our animality that we often don’t stop at feces, cockroaches, and slimy animals. We need a group of humans to bound ourselves against, who will come to exemplify the 23 “When we ride the bus, people look at us as if we’re lice, fleas, roaches. Aren’t we human? Where are we to go? What if I have no home... I have nothing... Why am I supposed to vanish? I am also a person [...] I am alive. I can’t just go and die.”

boundary line between the truly human and the basely animal” (Nussbaum 2006, 107). Disgust thus plays an important role in constructing people of a difference race, ethnicity, gender, or class as “Other” by suggesting that they are unclean and not fully human (Nussbaum 2003, 347). This is why conservatives appeal to disgust (and shame) in their attempts to preserve hierarchies and contain social elements they perceive as threatening—and why Nussbaum finds it to be an “inherently problematic” emotion, “an enemy of the ideals of liberal democracy” (Nussbaum 2006, 88, 206, 102).

Both Riazanov’s and Polak’s films stage the process of othering by people who themselves have been brutally othered. The anti-Semite, in attacking his Jewish neighbor, condenses the discourse of Soviet state anti-Semitism into one monologue. Polak, in turn, judiciously includes a scene showing a teenage boy shaving another teenage boy’s head on the dump. The latter, we learn, is hoping to join the army and take part in the ongoing war in Chechnya. He indulges in daydreams about how he would treat his Chechen prisoners of war and shares his belief that на войне, в Чечне, например, вырастешь, будешь настоящим, крепким мужиком.²⁴ Later, the film returns to the conflict in a striking way when Polak interpolates footage she herself had shot of the Moscow theater hostage crisis, specifically the bodies of the dead being brought outside. In a rare interventionist move in an otherwise observational documentary, she then prompts the children at the dump to talk about the event. Their responses are fragmentary and focused on the mechanics of what took place rather than the meaning of the crisis, demonstrating that, unlike the older boy, they have not yet succumbed to the desire to elevate themselves by debasing others.

In his article on “garbage aesthetics,” Robert Stam notes that the term was pioneered in the Latin American context in order to “revalorize by inversion what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonialist discourse,” and is defined by its “constitutive hybridity” (Stam 1999, 59). In Riazanov’s film, this hybridity emerges in the characters’ understanding of Soviet slogans as obsolete, “trash,” and their ability to mix and swap ideological positions at a moment’s notice—usually to great comic effect. Thus Efimiia, the artist begging in the street, asks passersby to give to a former first pioneer and a victim of Stalin’s re-

24 “while at war in Chechnya, for example, you will grow up, become a real, strong man”

pressions in the same breath. By the time Polak was filming, all trace of these ideological positions has disappeared, replaced by a much more banal and universal mistrust of government. The only ideological discourse that remains is that of ethnic hatred and strife. Within this logic, it makes sense that the last reference to historic time in the film is to the war in the Donbas, implicitly positioned as the new Chechnya.

Divergent Temporalities

Time and again, *Something Better to Come* reminds us just how expendable the lives of its protagonists are. The young men who drive the trucks delivering and compressing the trash brandish their toughness by casually counting the number of times they have driven over people without realizing it. The residents themselves complain of the police burning down their hovels with people still inside. At one point, Polak makes a radical choice: as one of the drivers explains, *бабка в коричневом пальто, представляешь? Слилась с мусором и её не видно*,²⁵ Polak cuts to a wide shot that holds longer than usual: in the midst of the textured, trash-strewn landscape, we realize with horror, we can see a burnt body. This shocking image recalls another dialectic: the one Giorgio Agamben draws between an obscure figure of Roman law known as the *homo sacer* and the sovereign or *basileus*. The *homo sacer* was someone declared to be outside the law and who thus could be killed with impunity (Agamben 2015). Both the *homo sacer* and the *basileus* exist in a state of exception with regard to the law, but with one possessing all the power and the other—none of it. The people in Polak's film may be thought of as occupying the opposite pole from the government for the same reason: their powerlessness highlights the state's growing omnipotence.

Though Polak is, for the most part, committed to a non-interventionist, observational aesthetic, she allows for much more manipulation on the soundtrack. Much of the music we hear in the film is diegetically anchored and features contemporary rock bands. On top of the music, Polak carefully layers snippets from radio programs referring to Putin or featuring speeches by him. The result is a sense of two divergent temporalities: the cyclical time of the dump, where nothing happens, and the linear, political time of Putin's rise.

25 "the woman was in a brown coat, can you imagine? She merged with the trash and you couldn't see her"

As many of the residents point out, the most horrific part of their experience is its duration: how long they have been at the dump, the feeling of sameness every day, and lack of any indication that things will change in the future. As Sadowska writes: “If not for Yula’s changing face and the succession of hair colors, there would be no way to know that years have passed, for on that largest European garbage dump nothing gives us an indication of concrete time” (Sadowska 2015, 83).²⁶ Polak reinforces this impression by including a shot of two young men burning a rolodex calendar in a fire, one day at a time, as well as a scene in which a younger boy asks Yula to tell a story and she responds, У меня в жизни вообще нет никаких историй.²⁷ Yula, again, refers to the dump as a swamp; Sadowska calls it a “zone” (Sadowska 2015, 83); and another dump resident calls it a polygon (a military testing ground). These terms all imply stagnation, isolation from the world, and a post-apocalyptic or post-nuclear atmosphere that draws attention to the invisible toxicity of the site.

The radio broadcasts, by contrast, give the impression of things moving steadily ahead for Putin after his election as president. As the years pass, however, his speeches come to sound increasingly cruel layered over images of the dump. In one speech, he says: Одна чрезвычайно важная тема, это то, как мы живём и где мы живём, каждый из нас, представьте себе, даже я. У меня тоже иногда ржавая вода из труб идет.²⁸ In another scene, shot on New Year’s Eve, we see a group of dump residents, one holding a baby, listening to Putin’s speech on the radio. He says: Особенно приятно, что за уходящий год у нас родилось больше новых российских граждан чем в прошлом. Это - хороший знак. Это значит, что люди в нашей стране увереннее смотрят в будущее. Пусть будут наполнены уютом ваши дома. Счастья вам. С новым годом!²⁹ In this environment, Putin’s words resound with bitter irony: they assume a world in which this particular

26 “Gdyby nie zmieniająca się twarz Juli i kolejne kolory farby na jej włosach, nie sposób byłoby dostrzec, że mijają lata, bo na tym największym europejskim śmietniku nic nas nie odsyła do konkretnych czasów.”

27 “In my life, there are absolutely no stories.”

28 “One extremely important issue is how we live and where we live, each one of us, even I. Just imagine, sometimes rusty water comes out of my pipes, too.”

29 “One particularly pleasing fact is that more people were born this year as compared to last year. This is a good sign. It means people in our country are looking to the future with confidence. I hope your homes will be filled with comfort. I wish you happiness. Happy New Year.”

audience simply does not exist. As Susan Signe Morrison powerfully puts it: “wasted humans—disdained, ignored, and made invisible—are ontologically non-existent” (Morrison 2015, 97).

Conclusion

Scholars concur on two points: that attending to waste makes possible a particularly trenchant critique of modernity and presupposes an ethical orientation toward the world. Zygmunt Bauman, Gay Hawkins, Susan Signe Morrison, and John Scanlan all point out the ways in which trash can be subversive, “sticky,” insurgent (Bauman 2013; Scanlan 2005; Hawkins 2006; Morrison 2013, 2015). *Something Better to Come*, produced over the course of the same decade and a half as their studies, provides a compelling case in point. Polak, like Riazanov, is a humanist: her mission first and foremost is to restore dignity to a population that has been othered, treated with disgust, and made invisible—in other words, likened to the trash they depend on to survive. At the same time, she does not romanticize her subjects, acknowledging the ways in which some of them perpetuate violence, othering people on the basis of ethnicity in the same way they themselves have been othered on the basis of class.

Along the way, she discovers, in Douglas’s words, that “there is energy in the margins and unstructured areas” (Douglas 2002, 141). As the opening credits of the film make clear, she uses the peripheral status of the dump much like Riazanov had before her—to provide a subtle critique of events taking place in the center. She does this through the ironic juxtaposition of image and sound, the voice of the *basileus* and the faces of the *homo sacer*. The two films also share an intuition about how filmic form specifically might, in Susan Signe Morrison’s words, offer “restitution” (Morrison 2013, 464). Riazanov already in 1991 sensed that the way to counter consumer aesthetics was through sustained attention. The backstories he provides for each of his characters can be thought of as a prototype for Polak’s continuous observation of Yula. Amidst the wave of “dump” documentaries, Polak’s longitudinal approach seems to offer an ethical and elegant solution to the cycle of commodification, consumption, and waste that even cinema cannot escape.

Considering Polak’s documentary in light of Riazanov’s fiction film also illustrates the extent to which the production context influences the form. The humor of Riazanov’s films relied on a deep familiarity with Soviet culture, and they were always produced with a domestic audience

in mind. The straight *vérité* style of Polak's documentary, in turn, has to do with the fact that it was intended from the outset for the international film festival circuit. This is, in part, why the irony Polak deploys differs substantially from the comedy Riazanov became known for: its goal is to mark the depth of the cleavage between the powerful and the powerless rather than to restore community through laughter. It is also why the film works so hard to balance the national-context-specific brunt of its critique with the universality of its story.

The film's originality, however, lies in its rethinking of scale. Many of the documentaries produced on garbage dumps use the particular affordances of cinema—zooms, crane shots—to shock viewers into realizing the extent of the problem. *Something Better to Come*, in contrast, is not particularly invested in this. It is almost as if the film's ambitions regarding scale have been displaced from the spatial to the temporal plane. Instead of telling us what we already know—that the comforts of modernity come at the price of vast swaths of land surrendered to waste—the film challenges us to stick with it and, through our presence of mind, to redeem at least one person.

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“Pomor’e ne Pomoika”: Framing the Protest Campaign against the Landfill Project at Shies Station in Russia’s Arkhangelsk Region

Elena Gorbacheva

THIS chapter explores the protest movement *Pomor’e ne pomoika*, which took on the construction of the Shies landfill in Arkhangelsk region.¹ The movement began in 2018 and lasted about two years, becoming one of the most visible Russian environmental protests of the last decade (“Kak protestuiut rossiiane” 2020). This reaction to the use of unoccupied land—specifically, the creation of a giant “ecotechnopark,” which was more a dump for waste from Moscow than a modern and sustainable waste utilization project—started at the local level, but quickly attracted regional and even national attention. Rallies and pickets in support of the Shies protesters were organized from Kaliningrad to Novosibirsk, and even abroad, in Oslo and Cologne (Iadroshnikov 2018).

Despite the authoritarian system of government in Russia, protests of various scope are in fact common. Between 2007 and 2016, around 9.5 percent of all protests had an environmental agenda (Lankina and Tertychnaya 2020). Usually, these protests remained localized (Wu and Martus 2021). What is peculiar about the Shies protest is that a seemingly local issue attracted massive, countrywide support. In this chapter, I analyze how protest coordinators and activists framed their opposition in order to better understand what allowed the Shies campaign to resonate on the national level, attract thousands of supporters,

1 “Pomor’e is not a dump.” (All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.) Pomor’e is a territory along the White Sea in Russia’s European North.

and achieve its main goal: termination of the project.² While many factors are responsible for the campaign's success, I focus on the frame alignment—in my view, the crucial factor. By frame alignment, I mean a process defined by Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford as “the linkage of individual and SMO [social movement organization] interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford 1986, 464).

My research question is the following: Which frames helped the coordinators of *Pomor'e ne pomoika* succeed in elevating the protest to the national level? To answer this question, I use the method of frame analysis. My analysis is based on the data that I gathered during fieldwork in Arkhangelsk in October 2019, a year after the first protests in Arkhangelsk. I conducted interviews with *Pomor'e ne pomoika* protest activists and coordinators. I recruited my informants via three methods: 1) writing to protest coordinators and arranging interviews; 2) talking with participants of *bessrochka*, a permanent protest in the center of Arkhangelsk; and 3) the snowball technique. Altogether I conducted twenty-five interviews. I decided to conduct my fieldwork in Arkhangelsk, as some of the largest rallies of the campaign were held there. In addition, the main coordinators of the *Pomor'e ne pomoika* movement—the largest protest group within the Shies campaign—lived in Arkhangelsk. I supplement the interviews with materials from newspapers and social media, written by journalists as well as activists who took part in the protests. I also analyze the posters and resolutions published after most of the protest rallies in the Arkhangelsk region.

I have chosen to use frame analysis because it focuses on grievances, their articulation and interpretation, and on the way in which ideas, images, and culture in general are used to construct an understanding of an issue and formulate a call to action (Lindekilde 2014). Shies was not the first protest in the region, or the first protest against an anti-waste facility in Russia. However, as I argue, the frames with which the protesters articulated their grievances made this protest stand out.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I provide background on the landfill and the conflict that followed after construction plans were revealed. I then contextualize the Shies protests vis-à-vis similar

2 The project's termination was announced in June 2020 and went into effect in October 2020 (“Osnovnoi ob”em rabot” 2020).

waste-related protests in the Russian Federation. Next, I analyze the frames used by the *Pomor'e ne pomoika* movement, providing my explanation for how the scale shift in mobilization was achieved. In conclusion, I explain why the Shies campaign was so successful, arguing that efficient use of framing by protest coordinators helped them avoid being labelled as a selfish Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) marginal group.

Background

At the end of July 2018, residents of Urdoma, a settlement close to Shies in the Lenskii district of Arkhangelsk region, noticed that a forest by the Shies railway station had been cut down. They heard a rumor that some sort of a dump was being constructed at Shies. They tried to find out what was going on and soon discovered that a new gigantic landfill was scheduled to be built, and that the first trains with waste from Moscow were scheduled to arrive the next month, in August 2018. Although equipment and machines had already been dispatched to the site that summer, the project was only officially presented to the residents in October. During the autumn, the description of the project changed several times; the final plan was to create EcoTechnoPark Shies—a place for storing briquettes of shredded and then sorted Moscow waste, transported by rail. Local municipal authorities were against the project from the start, but in November new amendments initiated by the regional governor, Igor' Orlov, were passed, shifting the right to create and change master plans concerning land use from municipalities to the regional government (Mikusheva 2018).

In the proposed plan, the construction company Technopark claimed that similar waste management technology had been used for more than thirty years in Europe (“Ekotekhnopark Shies” 2019). The company also claimed that the plot of land in Shies was perfect for such construction, due to its low population density, good transport connection, suitable weather conditions, lack of bodies of water, and distance from residential areas. According to EcoTechnoPark documents, no suitable plots were found in Moscow region, and thus an alternative place to dispose of Moscow's waste had to be found. The project was undertaken together with the Government of Moscow, which offered to send six billion rubles (the equivalent of 6 percent of the Arkhangelsk regional budget in 2018) to Lenskii district, to be earmarked for cleaning up illegal dumps, building new and reconstructing old roads, re-

pairing schools, and buying new buses. Alongside this, EcoTechnoPark would have created five hundred jobs with an average monthly salary of 44,000 rubles (around 570 euros in October 2018).

The governor at that time, Igor' Orlov, stated that those who protest against такого важного, перспективного для региона проекта are either ill-informed and unintelligent or political speculators (Kuznetsova 2018).³ Here Orlov cast the protesters as a typical NIMBY opposition: they had selfish interests and lacked knowledge of the subject (Kraft & Clary 1993, 96). Orlov also stressed that while the project was not yet officially approved, he viewed its investment potential as desirable for the region and pointed out that the project included not only waste storage, but also recycling, both of which were on the federal agenda (Loichenko 2018).

The first protests against the Shies project were organized in August 2018 by the residents of the Urdomskoe municipality, who had formed an organization called Chistaia Urdoma.⁴ In December 2018, the activists began to keep watch at the construction site, and in spring 2019 they set up a permanent encampment. In October 2018, the first protests against the Shies landfill were held in Arkhangelsk, the regional capital, and Severodvinsk—cities hundreds of kilometers from the construction site. The protests in Arkhangelsk were organized by the newly created *Pomor'e ne pomoika* movement. *Pomor'e ne pomoika* also initiated a series of “all-Russia” protest days. These were daily demonstrations across the region and Russia as a whole, and sometimes even abroad, and the first was organized on December 2, 2018. As the coordinators stated, they wanted to maximize the publicity of the Shies protests; after the experience of the anti-pension reform protests initiated by Aleksei Naval'nyi's network on September 9, 2018, they felt that a single day of protest would generate better media coverage than earlier uncoordinated local protests. This idea worked well—thirty thousand people took to the streets of Arkhangelsk region during the first all-Russia protest day. There were five such days in total and numerous other events, all of which attracted thousands of people across the region.

According to a survey organized in August 2019 in Arkhangelsk region, 98.3 percent of the population did not support the construction at Shies (“Sotsial'naia situatsiia” 2019). Moreover, 51.3 percent of respond-

3 “such an important and promising project for the region”

4 Clean Urdoma. Urdoma is an urban locality in the Arkhangelsk Region.

ents said that they had taken part in the protests. Before the protests, Arkhangelsk region was considered to be relatively quiet politically (Chuvashova 2011; “Rost protestnoi aktivnosti” 2018; Kynev, Petrov, and Titkov 2018). This makes the Shies case even more remarkable.

After months of protests, the construction at Shies officially ceased in June 2019, until further examination of the site so as to ensure the safety of the project. When asked about Shies in May 2019, President Vladimir Putin said that he did not understand why a landfill should be built close to residential areas. The population’s opinion, Putin continued, should be taken into account. Scientists and scholars, including prominent members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, criticized the project itself, the lack of transparency, and the place chosen for its construction (Kantor 2019). In the latest version of the city of Moscow’s territorial scheme for waste management, published at the end of 2019, there was no mention of the Shies landfill (Podobedova & Lindell 2019). In January 2020, a court ruled that the buildings built for the project were illegal and had to be demolished (Vasil’eva 2020). On April 2, 2020, the governors of Arkhangelsk region and Komi Republic—the two regions with the largest anti-Shies protests—announced their resignation (Pertsev 2020). Their replacements stated that they did not support the Shies project (“Novye glavy Komi” 2020). In June 2020, EcoTechnoPark Shies was excluded from the list of priority investment projects of the Arkhangelsk region by the regional government (“Proekt ‘Ekotekhnopark “Shies” iskliuchen” 2020). The regional authorities promised that the land damaged at Shies would be rehabilitated by 2031 (Karpovich 2020).

A similar landfill for Moscow waste is EcoTechnoPark Mikhali, located in northern Kaluga region. Yet unlike the Shies project, the Mikhali landfill was actually built; construction began in 2017 and was completed in February 2020. The governor of Kaluga region at the time, Anatolii Artamonov, actively supported construction. Regional authorities, including Artamonov and Aleksandr Surkov, vice-head of the district where Mikhali is located, claimed that locals actually wanted the project and needed an investor (Pavlova 2017). Simultaneously, they asserted that Muscovites who owned dachas in the area did not want new infrastructure, and the related new jobs, in the district (Ivanova 2017). Since 2018, residents of Mikhali and other Kaluga settlements joined rallies and pickets against the landfill, but never more than several hun-

dred people took part. The new governor of Kaluga region, Vladislav Shapsha, has expressed his support for the EcoTechnoPark.

In sum, the Shies protest is a unique example of a successful mobilization against a project that was already underway, and initiated by Moscow and supported by regional authorities. Yet how might the victory of the Shies protests be explained? In the interviews, the coordinators of *Pomor'e ne pomoika* cited several reasons why regional protests were successful: 1) over the centuries, residents in this sparsely populated and frigid region had grown accustomed to helping one another; 2) the highly coordinated nature of the campaign; and 3) widespread resentment over how unfairly resources are allocated among Russia's regions. These factors certainly played a role determining the outcome, but the scope of my research does not allow for detailed analysis of all of them. Instead, I use frame analysis to examine how *Pomor'e ne pomoika* succeeded in elevating the protest against the landfill to the national level.

Protesting in Russia

Rootes and Nulman define an environmental movement “as a loose, non-institutionalized network of informal interactions that includes, as well as individuals and groups who have no organizational affiliation, organizations of varying degrees of formality, and is engaged in collective action motivated by shared identity or concern about environmental issues” (Rootes & Nulman 2015, 730). The history of environmental movements in the Soviet Union includes notable campaigns such as the protection of Lake Baikal and the thwarting of river diversion (Weiner 1999). In the late Soviet era, social movements with an environmental agenda were the most successful. However, despite the liberties of the 1990s, environmental protest declined in post-Soviet Russia (Henry 2010).

All protest in non-democratic states such as Russia faces significant barriers, including an undeveloped civil society, high costs to protest, state-controlled media and Internet, tightened anti-protest regulation, and so on. Protest against the Shies landfill faced an additional obstacle: it was a business project supported by officials in Moscow and the Arkhangelsk region. As Alfred Evans Jr. has explained, “an alliance between key government officials and wealthy corporations can create a formidable barrier to the goals of highly motivated social activists, even

when those activists have substantial support from the public” (Evans Jr. 2012, 239).

At the same time, because they address universal values such as the well-being of children and populations in general, environmental movements are more tolerated by nondemocratic governments (Rootes and Nulman 2015). In China, there have been several successful movements against incinerator construction and factory pollution in recent years. According to Lang and Xu, protesters succeeded when they had “prominent allies among scientists, officials, and journalists in local and national media,” the size of mass mobilization “overwhelmed the capacity of the local government to repress it,” or protesters engaged in a violent confrontation with police and fought until the government conceded (Lang & Xu 2013, 842–43).

Currently, research on environmental movements in authoritarian regimes focuses mostly on China, while the Russian context has been understudied (Wu and Martus 2021). Scholarship on waste protests in Russia is only just emerging, with a few exemplary studies of state and civil society relations as regards the “Rubbish Riots” in Moscow region (Wu and Martus 2021), as well as of the politicization of environmental discourse in the Shies case (Chmel', Klimova & Mitrokhina 2020).

Initial protests at Shies strongly resembled NIMBY activism. Anti-waste protests against landfills, incinerators, and so on, are usually examples of NIMBY-type activism—actions of locals opposing unwanted projects in their neighborhoods (Johnson and Scicchitano 2012). However, within a few months of the first messages about the planned landfill at Shies, protests spread across the region as well as the neighboring Komi Republic. The organization of all-Russia protest days allowed the campaign to extend its reach beyond Arkhangelsk region and Komi: on the second all-Russia protest day, February 3, 2019, protests were held in dozens of regions (Gordeev & Romanov 2019). Therefore, in the case of the Shies protests, we can speak of an *upward scale shift*—a moving of collective action to a higher level, for example, from local to regional and national (Tarrow 2010, 215).

Diffusion of a protest movement across new geographies or social groups is especially complicated if the grievance against which the contention occurs is of a local nature or the contenders' claim is too narrow. Social movements frame their claims, create bridges between these frames and others, and facilitate production of collective identi-

ties among the participants of social actions (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001). Below, I explain how *Pomor'e ne pomoika* succeeded in shifting the scale of the movement by efficiently framing its claims.

Frame Analysis

To analyze the frames constructed by *Pomor'e ne pomoika* coordinators and participants, and to reveal the mechanisms through which frame expansion ensued, I divide the frames that I identified based on their tasks. Snow and Benford (1988) suggest that framing has three core tasks: 1) diagnostic—characterization of some social phenomenon as problematic and in need of repair; 2) prognostic—offering a solution to the said problem; and 3) motivational—calling others to join in collective action in order to solve the problem.

Waste as an Issue

The first task, *diagnostic framing*, aims to identify the problem, its source, and its “victims” (Benford & Snow 2000). The problem—the construction of the landfill at Shies—has two aspects, both of which were present in resolutions, speeches, and placards during the mobilization. The first aspect is the landfill itself. The storing of municipal solid waste, especially unsorted, was deemed problematic by the protesters and they criticized this inefficient mode of waste management (Chuprova 2018). While the construction company concentrated on the fact that this would be a landfill for briquettes of municipal solid waste, protesters spoke of мусор, дерьмо, помой⁵ being brought to their land (Gorbacheva 2019a).

One of the activists' biggest concerns was that the proposed site was located in a swamp, at the source of several rivers. Any leakage at the landfill would poison not only the surrounding area, but also the Northern Dvina River, which flows into the Arctic Ocean and thus could pollute the whole Barents region. They likened the consequent risk to a genocide against the Russian nation. Natural resources—including clean water, mushrooms, and berries—underpin the livelihoods of locals, who feel that their environment is already endangered by the Plesetsk spaceport, a nuclear test site at Novaia zemlia, and several industrial enterprises (“Arkhangel'skie pisateli” 2018). The protesters argued that no environmental assessment of the landfill had been conducted, and

5 “trash, shit, slop”

that the project and its execution violate the 42nd article of the Russian Constitution, which states: Каждый имеет право на благоприятную окружающую среду, достоверную информацию о ее состоянии и на возмещение ущерба, причиненного его здоровью или имуществу экологическим правонарушением (“Stat’ia 42 Konstitutsii” 1993).⁶ For these and other reasons, attendees expressed no confidence in the leaders of the Lenskii district of Arkhangelsk region and demanded their resignation at the first large rally, on August 26. The authorities were also criticized for concealing and falsifying information about the construction process.

The second aspect of the Shies project that aroused anger was that it was planned for waste from Moscow. Residents of Arkhangelsk region described feeling disrespected and even humiliated by the project, and posed the question of why they were being treated worse than Muscovites. The protesters complained that мы им еще алмазы отправляем, а они нам отправляют свое дерьмо (Gorbacheva 2019b).⁷ They also wondered why the capital, given all of the taxes it received from the regions, could not afford to store its own waste (or better, recycle and process it).

The participants of the anti-Shies campaign spoke of internal colonization in Russia; Moscow, the idea went, treated them as a colony. The poster below voiced a popular sentiment: Москва—не метрополия, Архангельская область—не колония!⁸ On the map, one can see how small Moscow is compared to Arkhangelsk region and Russia as a whole. Yet it was the capital that dictated its will to everyone else.

6 “Everyone should have the right to a favorable environment, reliable information about its state, and for a restitution of damage inflicted on their health and property by ecological transgressions” (“Constitution of the Russian Federation” 1993).

7 “We are even sending them diamonds, and they send their crap to us.”

8 “Moscow is not a metropole, and Arkhangelsk region is not a colony!”



Figure 1: Rally in Arkhangelsk, May 19, 2019. Photograph by Kirill Iuras (used with permission)

Who Is to Blame and How to Help?

The protesters came up with a number of strategies for fighting the construction, as observed in the *prognostic framing* category. The activists believed that a large and geographically wide mobilization against the landfill would reach federal media and thus lead the authorities to reconsider the project. This was their reason for organizing all-Russia protest days in 2018–2020. At every step, the coordinators of the protests actively engaged with journalists from all over Russia and even abroad, and took every chance to publicize their movement. For example, when a prominent activist, Andrei Borovikov, was prosecuted in September 2019, he gave many interviews to the domestic as well as the

foreign press, which he believed would help to promote the movement.⁹

In October 2019, a year after the first protests in Severodvinsk and Arkhangelsk, the goals of the protesters included not only the termination of the Shies project and the import of waste from other regions, but also a ban on all interregional shipment of unsorted waste. In addition, they demanded a new approach to waste management at the federal level. Here we see the expansion of the protesters' goals from the local and regional to the national level.

Resolutions passed at protests across the region usually called for the resignation of Governor Orlov as well as others in positions of local power. However, *Pomor'e ne pomoika* intentionally avoided taking on the central authorities, in order to include larger groups of the population in the protests, who might be frightened or reluctant to directly oppose the country's leaders. Additionally, the resolutions demanded investigation of regional bureaucrats and organizations responsible for initiating the construction. After almost a year of protests, the residents of Arkhangelsk region spoke out against the repression of protesters. They called for an investigation into conflicts between private security guards and Shies observers, and for those responsible for the violence to be held accountable. After the start of the waste reform,¹⁰ an increasing number of posters criticized its execution.

According to activists, regional authorities had approved construction because they did not in fact represent the interests of residents—a result of the absence of fair elections at the municipal and regional (to say nothing of the federal) level. The activists tried to solve this problem by electing their own governor. Businessman and protester Oleg Mandrykin was selected as the Stop Shies candidate. Yet, in the end, he

9 Borovikov was charged under the so-called Dadin article, or Article 212.1 of the Criminal Code, named after the activist Il'dar Dadin, who had repeatedly violated established procedure for holding public events, becoming the first person to whom the article had been applied, in 2015. Borovikov became the third person to be charged under this article.

10 On January 1, 2019, a waste reform began in Russia. By this time, all regions with the exception of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Russian-occupied Sevastopol, were required to formulate a regional waste management scheme and select a regional operator, who would be responsible for waste management in the region, including the creation of new waste infrastructure. The waste reform did not start on time and most regions did not have enough resources to build the necessary infrastructure. Thus, waste tariffs increased significantly, causing widespread dissatisfaction among the population.

did not appear on the ballot given the formidable barriers to registering opposition candidates.

Especially in the first year of the protests, activists appealed directly to Putin to cancel the project. Indeed, in the past, the Russian president had personally ordered the closing of landfills in response to public pleas (“Putin rasporiadilsia” 2017). However, over the course of the protests, many of the people with whom I spoke became disillusioned with Putin and the political system as a whole. Their faith in Putin decreased as they became more familiar with the attitude of the local and federal authorities. Finally, the protesters believed that cancelling one landfill project would not solve the overall problem of waste management. Thus, they demanded change of the entire system, including separate waste collection and recycling not only in the region but across the country.

Protest Growth

The last core framing task, *motivational framing*, deals with the images and words that activists use to encourage others to join a protest. Here I identify three frequently used and powerful images: homeland, future generations, and the Great Patriotic War. The most frequent frame is that the North, and Shies in particular, are *наша земля*,¹¹ which needs to be defended (Ekologicheskoe dvizhenie 42 2020). Another common protest slogan refers to protecting the land and air for future generations.

It is notable how frequently Shies protesters employed Second World War symbols. For example, the protesters’ camp at the construction site was called Leningrad, and one of the activists’ checkpoints nearby—the Brest Fortress (Nevskaia 2019). Moreover, when protesters realized that the original name for their movement, Svobodnyi sever (Free North), would be abbreviated as ss (Cyrillic СС) (which also stands for the ss, or Schutzstaffel, the Nazi paramilitary organization), they adopted a new name: *Pomor’e ne pomoika*. The activists often called Shies *наш Сталинград*¹² and compared the environmental costs of the landfill with the bombing of Hiroshima (Ekologicheskoe dvizhenie 42 2020). They also claimed that it was their duty to protect their land just as their fathers had during the war (see fig. 2 below). The poster includes the

¹¹ “our land”

¹² “our Stalingrad”

phrase *родиной не торгую*,¹³ repeating the famous words of General Karbyshev in the Second World War. In the case of Shies, use of the war trope meant that the protesters had higher morals than those who had signed the construction agreement.



Figure 2: Rally in Severodvinsk, September 22, 2019. Photograph by Aleksandr Bobylev (used with permission)

These images indeed invoked strong feelings and reminded people of the values that were under threat because of the Shies project. The coordinators spoke of these frames in the interviews, but they are more prevalent in interviews with activists and are visible on protest placards. In these images, we see the crystallization of the amplification mechanism—an increase in the salience of core values and/or beliefs of the movement (Snow et al. 1986; Snow, Vliegthart & Ketelaars 2019). However, I find that the main motivating mechanism the coordinators used was frame extension, including issues that could attract wider audiences (Snow et al. 1986; Snow, Vliegthart & Ketelaars 2019). In the next section, I discuss how this frame extension resulted in the protest's elevation to the national level.

13 “I don’t trade my Motherland”

Frame Expansion

Research on environmental movements has established that to shift from a local portrayal of an environmental issue, activists must move away from NIMBYism and make their grievance relatable for the wider population (Leonard 2011). In a study of anti-incineration campaigns in the United States, Walsh, Warland, and Smith (1993, 1997) conclude that local campaigns managed to grow to a nationwide movement through successful bridging of anti-incineration and different frames. In addition, early frame extension that could engage a broader cross section of a population was found to be of the utmost importance for the success of an environmental movement.

Protest coordinators and activists not only showed how the Shies landfill affected the whole Barents region and criticized the national waste management system; they also focused on regional inequality. In so doing, *Pomor'e ne pomoika* coordinators appealed to all residents of Arkhangelsk region, and of more regions besides, thus making the movement more visible and, they believed, more likely that they would achieve their goal and stop construction at Shies. They resorted to the use of the environmental injustice frame. They worked on transforming the issue of a locally unwanted landfill into a structural problem—the unjust distribution of environmental grievances in the Russian Federation.

Environmental (In)justice

The environmental injustice frame is often used by researchers to explain mobilization against phenomena that have negative environmental consequences (Sherman 2011; Rootes 2009; Walker 2012). In fact, the environmental justice movement first started as a reaction to the waste problem: the term “environmental justice” was coined when it was revealed that Black communities in the United States were often discriminated against during the selection of sites for hazardous or locally unwanted facilities such as landfills (Sherman 2011).

In general, residents of Arkhangelsk region found the decision to construct a landfill for Moscow waste at Shies station to be unjust (Chmel', Klimova & Mitrokhina 2020). Coordinators and activists whom I interviewed all claimed that they would have protested even if the landfill was for Arkhangelsk regional waste, but acknowledged that the fact that the site was for Moscow refuse only increased their an-

ger. During my fieldwork, people often spoke of a gorged Russian capital that did not really care about the regions, the North in particular. Thus, it can be argued that people in Pomor'e felt relatively neglected. Summing up recent developments in relative deprivation theory, van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears (2008) point out that individual-based deprivation is not sufficient for collective action, but when one group develops the sense that they are being discriminated against, they may mobilize against this unfairness. In the case of Shies, the protesters experienced environmental injustice when policies and practices related to environmental decision-making, distribution of benefits, and negative effects were implemented on the basis of socioeconomic factors, geography, and so on (Newton 2009). Shies protesters said that while Moscow received environmental benefits, the regions were forced to carry the environmental and social burdens of the center's excessive consumption. Environmental justice is one of the few master frames of social movements (Benford & Snow 2000), and this frame is visible in the Shies protest. The protests started just after construction of the landfill began—right after the first trees were cut to make way for the project. Thus, the Shies case is an example of prospective environmental injustice, a concept proposed by Irina Velicu (2020).

The frame of opposition to landfilling was successfully conflated with the environmental injustice frame—the frame that appealed to a wider cross section of the region's population. In the case of Shies, all three concepts of justice were present (Walker 2012). First, *distributive justice* is evident in mentions of tax revenues sent by the region to the federal center, as well as of what it gets in return. Second, *justice as recognition* is also relevant here, as Arkhangelsk residents express a feeling of disrespect and humiliation given that a landfill for Moscow waste was planned for their community. Third, *procedural justice* arises when protesters claim that residents of the region were not consulted before construction started, and that the hearings that were conducted were falsified.

To summarize previous research, George Towers (2000) found three explanations of why local activists opposing land-use projects employed the concept of environmental justice: 1) the historical record, exemplified by U.S. social rights movements; 2) the personal transformative experience of activists, who realize by way of their campaigns that environmental grievances stem from a structural lack of democracy; and

3) networking with other groups fighting for similar causes. Towers then adds an original explanation: in some cases, use of the environmental justice frame is dictated by activists' strategic response to existing siting procedures. Towers suggests that movement coordinators should tailor their framings to the geographical scale at which a given contest occurs, and that limiting a movement to a single scale negatively affects the chances of success. This way, for example, proponents of a contested construction might cast their opponents as selfish and concerned only about their immediate surroundings, and thus label them NIMBY. In contrast, the use of environmental justice can counter allegations of NIMBYISM and widen support for a given movement by expanding its geographic focus.

The second explanation can also be applied to the *Pomor'e ne pomoi-ka* movement. As they revealed to me, the coordinators hoped that by participating in the movement, residents would gradually evolve from passive to active citizens, who fought for their civil and political rights. However, they felt that an openly oppositional agenda that blamed the Russian political regime for Shies would only alienate most of their potential supporters, who might not be ready for an anti-regime agenda. Therefore, the coordinators opted for a more organic approach, and strategically chose the frame of environmental injustice to attract residents of other regions, showing their solidarity with the protesters and thus elevating the issue to the national level.

Conclusion

The Shies campaign could have remained a NIMBY protest. However, NIMBY activism usually remains localized; opponents may easily defend themselves against the claims of such protesters, by claiming that the activists ignore the greater good of the region and instead pursue selfish interests. In the case of Shies, the coordinators and activists succeeded in countering the NIMBY frame with an environmental injustice frame. They argued that the project endangered not only nearby residents, but potentially the whole Barents region and even beyond. They also argued that Shies was the result of an unequal relationship between center and periphery, and used anti-Moscow sentiment in the regions to their advantage. What is more, their demands were not limited to closing the Shies project alone; they targeted Russia's entire system of waste management and welcomed additional environmental solutions

to the waste-management problem. The slogans and images used by the protesters seemed to resonate with the population's values and beliefs, which resulted in unprecedented turnout at rallies and demonstrations across the region. Shies itself became a resonant frame: it is now not only a railway station in the Russian North, but a social phenomenon—and it is spreading widely. For example, a Shies-2 tent camp was organized in Kazan' in late 2019, where activists began a protest against construction of an incinerator (Bakin 2019).

Naturally, the victory at Shies was the result of many factors. The coordinators have argued that a number of phenomena, including center-region relations and regional social capital, were responsible for their success. We might also point to different levels of democracy among Russia's regions and other regional specifics (Remington 2010) when explaining why, for example, the Mikhali protest in Kaluga region was small-scale and unsuccessful while the Shies movement succeeded. It should be noted that all of the coordinators of *Pomor'e ne pomoika* worked for—or used to work for—Naval'nyi's headquarters in Arkhangelsk. They stated that their experience with Naval'nyi was invaluable, having taught them a great deal about protest organization, public relations (including with the police and media), and legal issues. Some explained that they had wanted to start the *Pomor'e ne pomoika* movement because they were worried about the landfill and knew that they had enough resources and knowledge to organize a large movement. Perhaps equally important was that the coordinators had a firm belief from the very beginning that they would win; in the interviews, they expressed the importance of this conviction for the protest's success. They suggested that what distinguished their campaign from its counterpart in Kaluga region was their belief in eventual victory, a belief that Kaluga activists lacked.

In this chapter, I have tried to show what distinguished the Shies protests from similar campaigns. Well-chosen frames played an important role in participants' mobilization and eventual success; the environmental (in)justice frame is especially crucial in this regard. Shies was not the first landfill project against which people in Arkhangelsk region protested. In 2017, citizens of Severodvinsk and nearby areas mobilized against the Rikasikha landfill, which was to be created for the inter-municipal waste of Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, Novodvinsk, and two municipal districts. The first rally against construction of the

landfill was organized in July 2018 (Varenik 2018) by the same organizer who later would become a founder of *Pomor'e ne pomoika*. After a series of protests, petitions, and public hearings—on the wave of the anti-Shies campaign—the authorities decided to build the landfill elsewhere (“Aleksi Alsuf'ev: ‘mezhmunitsipal'nogo’” 2019). However, the campaign against Rikasikha was confined to the north of Arkhangelsk region and in general was smaller than the protests against Shies.

As regards the success of *Pomor'e ne pomoika*, it could be that the people of Arkhangelsk are an anomaly, and will not tolerate injustice. When I asked the activists why they thought the Shies protests were so successful, they told me that Northerners have always been free. They had not lived under the Mongol yoke, had never experienced serfdom, and during the Soviet era, political prisoners exiled to labor camps and special settlements in the North often remained in Pomor'e after release. Still, it is clear that the anti-Shies movement understood the importance of utilizing social capital, anti-center resentment, and the sense of relative deprivation in the northern regions. In so doing, the movement skillfully framed the campaign in a way that created a large coalition, and *Pomor'e ne pomoika* succeeded as a result.

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Post-Soviet Filmic Depictions of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Tests

Maria Hristova

“CHERNOBYL is a household word. Why have so few people heard of Hanford and Maiak? How could these sites of slow-motion disaster be considered by their residents to be so lovely and desirable?” (Brown 2013, 3). These are the driving questions in Kate Brown’s book *Plutopia*, a comparative study of the centers of plutonium production in the United States and the Soviet Union in the post–World War II period. The author’s query may be extended to include all nuclear-related industries and testing sites, especially in the former Soviet Union, such as the Semipalatinsk (Semei) region, where 456 nuclear bombs were tested between 1949 and 1989.¹ While a great deal of post-Stalinist fiction and non-fiction was devoted to natural resource management and preservation, Semipalatinsk was absent from the Soviet cultural landscape until the founding of the Nevada–Semipalatinsk Anti–Nuclear Movement in 1989.² As a result of the movement’s efforts, the Semipalatinsk testing site was shut down in 1991 and the region quickly faded into international obscurity once again, even though radioactive waste will continue to

1 The term *nuclear* as well as *atomic* refers to the development of atomic fission and fusion in the post–World War II period. As Paul Williams explains, *atomic* was more widely used until the 1950s, after which *nuclear* became the preferred term, as nuclear weapons were being developed that were not atomic in nature; an example is the hydrogen bomb (Williams 2011, 20). For the purposes of this paper, however, I use the terms *atomic* and *nuclear* interchangeably, as the initial detonations between 1949 and 1953 in the Semipalatinsk region were atomic bomb tests.

2 When referring to sites such as Semipalatinsk and Chernobyl, I have chosen to use the Soviet/Russian names, as this chapter is devoted to an analysis of films set in the Soviet period and cites critical texts that use these names.

affect the area and its population for thousands of years.³

To better understand how post-Soviet cultures engage with environmental themes in general and nuclear pollution in particular, this chapter examines three post-2000 films that deal with the destructive impact of state-approved nuclear testing: Satybaldy Narymbetov's *Leila's Prayer* (*Kyz zhylagan*, 2002), Rustem Abdrashev's *A Gift for Stalin* (*Podarok Stalinu*, 2008), and Aleksandr Kott's *The Test* (*Ispytanie*, 2014). While all three works are set at roughly the same time—during the early testing at Semipalatinsk—their treatments of the nuclear theme differ significantly.

To gauge the extent to which these works can be seen as part of a global environmental turn in culture, I use Vladimir Kaganskii's (1999) work, which conceptualizes environmental art as discourse disruption. Based on this definition, I argue that the nuclear theme in post-Soviet film is gradually moving from the late Soviet environmental turn toward a more anthropocentric worldview. Narymbetov's *Leila's Prayer* engages the most explicitly with nuclear testing's devastating effect on the environment through extensive use of atomic bomb stock footage. The documentary shots are inserted throughout the film, disrupting both the narrative and visual continuity. Abdrashev's *A Gift for Stalin* moves away from the environmental implications of nuclear testing by placing the atomic bomb scene at the very end. While it is also a montage of stock footage, the scene's timing and larger scene sequence present the explosion as a symbol of state failure that impacts the human characters above all. Finally, Kott's *The Test* turns away from both the political and environmental implications of nuclear testing by using highly aestheticized special effects that render the atomic bomb a cataclysmic event beyond human understanding, akin to an exploding sun.

Framing Nuclear Power and Its Representation on Screen

Until the Chernobyl disaster, most Soviet citizens were unaware of the full extent of the dangers associated with working in the nuclear industry and of the insufficient safety measures at atomic and plutonium plants. Any such knowledge was limited to a small number of people, usually in top administrative positions, and most medical study results

3 The waning of anti-nuclear activism in the post-Soviet period is examined in detail by Dawson (1996).

on radiation exposure were skewed or never publicized.⁴ Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, combined with the global impact of the Chernobyl explosion, opened up a discursive space where public figures, politicians, writers, and film directors could redefine their relationship to the surrounding world. The Nevada–Semipalatinsk Anti–Nuclear Movement, in particular, initiated in Kazakhstan by the poet Olzhas Suleimenov, inspired a number of environmentally themed works across the former Soviet Union by writers and poets such as Bakhtyzhn Kanapianov, Liubov' Sirota, and Nobel-prize winner Svetlana Aleksievich. However, after the successful closure of the so-called Polygon and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, attention to the long-term consequences of nuclear waste, including radiation, has virtually disappeared. The one exception is the Chernobyl disaster, which periodically reappears in both post-Soviet and Western popular culture, as evidenced by the recent eponymous HBO series and its Russian feature film equivalent produced by Danila Kozlovskii.

To better understand the significance and paradoxical invisibility of the nuclear theme in post-Soviet cultures, it is important to keep in mind the largely anthropocentric Soviet attitude towards nature, shaped in the 1920s and 1930s by such influential thinkers as Maksim Gor'kii.⁵ For most of the Soviet period, the surrounding world was depicted as a beautiful, resource-rich, but often hostile environment, meant to be transformed into a paradise on Earth through human labor.⁶ Such

4 As Brown demonstrates in *Plutopia*, most funds allocated to the production of plutonium were diverted to creating an elite closed community rather than to improving safety measures or limiting pollution. Moreover, doctors studied exposure effects only in those workers who were often the most protected from toxic substances (Brown 2013). Similarly, the inhabitants of the Semipalatinsk region were not informed about what exactly was taking place, becoming aware of long-term health consequences only during glasnost' in the late 1980s. Any studies of nuclear testing's effects on humans and livestock were highly classified and even now are almost impossible to obtain (Toptayeva 2018; Werner & Purvis-Roberts 2007).

5 Maksim Gor'kii had a deeply ambivalent attitude towards nature. He admired the beauty of the natural world; at the same time, however, he resented its power over human life and believed in the need to harness the natural elements for the benefit of humanity. Some of his most influential pronouncements about nature include such phrases as "praise of nature is praise of a despot" (Gor'kii 1953, 180).

6 The depiction of nature in the Soviet period extends and builds on existing nineteenth-century themes. The works of such writers as Mikhail Prishvin, Konstantin Paustovskii, Efim Dorosh, and Valentin Rasputin echo in many ways the poetic visions of Sergei Aksakov, Ivan Turgenev, and Leo Tolstoi. However, overall, Soviet authors did not often deviate from a fundamentally anthropocentric worldview in

thinking was also embodied in industrial and agricultural policies that encouraged human-driven transformation of the natural world with little regard for their long-term environmental impact.⁷ While a heightened awareness of environmental problems developed gradually in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, preservation efforts were still habitually framed in an anthropocentric way, emphasizing the industrial cost of such issues as deforestation and water pollution.⁸

This attitude towards the surrounding world as the passive background for social development extended to the nuclear program. It was further compounded by the government's disregard for people's health and livelihood in areas where nuclear pollution was likely to occur. Due to the nuclear industry's secret status, very little theoretical work has been done in assessing how atomic testing was represented in the cultural sphere. Iurii Kagramanov's (1988) monograph was one of the few Soviet works that touched on the subject. His analysis, however, was limited to what he perceived as Western eschatological culture driving contemporary nuclearism. More recently, Maksim Kaziuchitz (2020) has explored how Soviet scientists were represented onscreen in the 1960s and 1970s, including in several films that examine the difficult moral choices facing nuclear physicists.

In contrast, in Western scholarship, a plethora of works focus on nuclear bomb film representation. Specifically, a number of scholars examine the relationship between trauma, politics, colonialism, and the atomic bomb in Japanese film (Shibata 2018; Edwards 2015; Broderick 1991, 1996; Shapiro 2001). As regards American culture, scholars analyze the so-called A-bomb films for ideological messages, as well as through the lens of critical race theory (Biskind 1983; Lifton and Mitchell 1995; Williams 2011). To summarize, the majority of critical works by Japanese and American scholars focus on the bomb as a weapon of war or on post-apocalyptic scenarios.

which the human being's duty was to exploit natural resources, albeit responsibly.

- 7 Khrushchev's wide-ranging agricultural reforms, especially the 1954 Virgin Lands campaign, resulted in environmental disasters such as widespread soil erosion. For a more general and detailed overview of Soviet environmental policies and attitudes towards the natural world, see Brain (2010), Bolotova (2004), Ziegler (1987), and Pryde (1972).
- 8 One famous example of Soviet environmentalism couched in terms of industrial and human losses is the Lake Baikal campaign. For a detailed account, see Breyfogle (2015).

The representation of nuclear bombs in post-Soviet cultures, however, is distinct from its Western counterparts and calls for a different scholarly approach. It is more appropriate to talk about films and literature that focus on atomic testing rather than on the actual atomic bomb as a foreign weapon of destruction. This difference partially explains the dearth of both primary works and critical texts in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. There is a similar lack of Western cultural production dedicated to discussing nuclear testing conducted by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom in the post-World War II period.

The works examined in this article deal with Soviet domestic nuclear testing and its consequences rather than with foreign threats, industrial pollution, or other forms of radioactivity. Since the testing at Semipalatinsk was state mandated rather than the result of a foreign invasion or accident, this topic has emerged in the post-Soviet period as deeply contentious. Open acknowledgement of the devastating effects of radiation on the general population would require a form of recompense, presumably from Russia. In this context, Kazakhstan's position aligns to an extent with that of the Pacific Island nations unknowingly subjected to American, British, and French atomic testing. Conversely, Russia's role—inherited from the Soviet Union—is akin to that of the imperial powers that initiated such testing. Tellingly, a recent Russian television series, *The Bomb (Bomba, 2020)*, drawing on the book *Russia's Atomic Heart (Atomnoe serdtse Rossii)*, details the history of the Soviet atomic industry in an overwhelmingly positive light (Entiaikov, Nosach & Novoselov 2014). The series focuses on the initial stages of the Soviet nuclear program and the heroic self-sacrifice of the scientists who worked on developing the bomb. The need for nuclear military power is presented as the only defense against the horrors visited on Japan by the United States. The final scene shows the first atomic detonation in Semipalatinsk from the point of view of Russian scientists and political elites, who rejoice at their success. In contrast, a recent television series produced in Kazakhstan, *Polygon (Poligon 2020)*, focuses on the last days of the nuclear testing program, highlighting ethnic Kazakhs' heroic efforts to fight against the soulless Russians in charge of the program. These competing views of the program highlight nuclear testing's politicized role. For the Russian Federation, the atomic bomb symbolizes national sovereignty for Russia, the Soviet Union's de facto heir. At present, nucle-

ar-related public discourse is overwhelmingly positive, focusing on the so-called peaceful atom and framing nuclear energy as environmentally cleaner than fossil fuel.⁹ Nuclear power has also recently become a bargaining chip in international conflicts.¹⁰ In Kazakhstan, public discussions of nuclear power are more nuanced, often questioning the need for new nuclear plants, doubting Russia's motivations for offering to help with the development of nuclear technologies, and evoking negative memories of the Soviet period, particularly the long-lasting harm caused by atomic bomb testing.¹¹

Environmental Crisis

Before I turn to the three case studies, let me clarify the terms and frameworks I use to analyze representations of nuclear bombs on screen. In this chapter, I use the terms *environmentalism*, *ecologism*, and their derivatives interchangeably. My interpretation of these words is based on Baxter (1999) and Smith (1998), who suggest these concepts decenter human viewpoints and focus on the nonhuman world. In other words, I differentiate among the films under discussion based on their degrees of anthropocentricity: the less attention a work dedicates to the environmental effects of nuclear power, the more anthropocentric it is.

When discussing the environmental nature of a film my analysis is informed by Vladimir Kaganskii's work. Echoing Felix Guattari's idea that "ecological crisis can be traced to a more general crisis of the social, political and existential" (Guattari 1995, 119), Kaganskii defines environmental crisis as a cultural phenomenon. In his essay "Ecological Crisis: Cultural Phenomenon and Myth," Kaganskii states that население реагирует не на общее состояние окружающей среды и его изменения, но на ситуацию несоответствия между некоторым представлением (образом) об особом, маркированном состоянии

9 In 2010, Vladimir Putin proclaimed nuclear energy as the only alternative to oil and gas ("Putin: iadernaia energetika" 2010). In 2021, he also approved an increase in financing the development of nuclear technologies ("Putin odobril ideiu" 2021).

10 Shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin announced his intention to mobilize Russia's nuclear weapons (Aksenov 2022).

11 Forced to seek alternative energy sources, the Kazakhstani president, as well as a number of experts, echoed Vladimir Putin's idea that nuclear energy is the only source of predictably cheap electricity (Liapunov 2021; Turysbekova 2022). However, in Kazakhstan, the proposal to build a nuclear plant on Lake Balkash has met with some resistance, sparking public debates (Alkhabaev 2021; Turysbekova 2022).

окружающей среды и диссонирующей с ним реальностью (Kagan-skii 1999).¹² In other words, according to Kagan-skii, the idea of an ecological crisis is a culturally shaped perception, independent of the actual state of the surrounding world. He emphasizes that the people most concerned with the environment are usually those in rich or relatively well-to-do societies, whereas those who suffer the most from pollution or the destruction of their environment, such as farmers in the former Soviet republics, are relatively indifferent to ecological concerns. What is more, the “ecological ideal,” or the conception of what the environment should be like, is not homogeneous or universal. The very idea of environmental crisis is, in fact, a clash of cultural norms.

Building on Kagan-skii’s idea, I suggest that the depiction of ecological crisis is a means of opening up a discursive space to question the status quo. The importance of narrative for identifying, framing, and representing environmental crisis has already been recognized in such works as *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*, where Dipesh Chakrabarty claims that “success in developing a globally concerted response to the climate crisis [...] will depend on the degree to which we can tell stories that we can all agree on” (Chakrabarty 2015, xiv). Following this paradigm, I examine *Leila’s Prayer, A Gift to Stalin*, and *The Test* based on their ability to create a narrative disruption showcasing environmental problems independently from human suffering.

Atomic Bombs as Narrative Disruptions: Leila’s Prayer

One of the earliest post-Soviet depictions of nuclear testing is the 2002 Kazakh film *Leila’s Prayer* by director Satybaldy Narymbetov. The film’s beginning, its dedication to Oraz Rimzhanov, and use of stock footage highlight the connection between *Leila’s Prayer* and the nuclear testing cinema of the transition period.¹³ The script is based on Roza Mukanova’s story and eponymous play, “Angel with a Devil’s Face” (“Mangilik bala beine,” 1997).¹⁴ In *Leila’s Prayer*, Narymbetov builds on the universal

12 “The population reacts not to the general environmental conditions and their changes, but to a certain dissonance between a marked image of the surrounding world and reality.” (All English translations are mine.)

13 Oraz Rymzhanov (1946–2001) was a prominent director and public figure who shot several documentaries about Semipalatinsk in the late 1980s and early 1990s, often in collaboration with Sergei Shafir. Their best-known work of that period is *The Polygon (Poligon, 1991)*, which received Kazakhstan’s State Award in 1992.

14 Mukanova’s short story is titled “Angel with a Devil’s Face” and was inspired by a

message of the Nevada–Semipalatinsk Anti–Nuclear Movement, whose platform emphasized the global danger of nuclear pollution.¹⁵ He blends local and Western cultural elements to emphasize how interconnected the world is. Moreover, Narymbetov creates narrative dissonance, both on the visual and plot levels, by inserting stock black-and-white explosion footage throughout the film.

Leila's Prayer takes place in a small village, located close to the testing site. In the early 1960s, the locals have no understanding of what is happening next door and how it impacts their lives. Despite the earthquakes, physical disabilities, sickness and death, the villagers continue living their lives, shaped by love, ambition, jealousy, and rage, not realizing how little time they have left. At the film's beginning, Leila, an orphan girl, is fourteen and lives with her aunt. Leila is very beautiful, but lame and known as a "holy fool." She is in love with a local young man, Kumar, who presumably takes advantage of her before going off to the army. A few months later, Leila finds out she is pregnant and attempts suicide. She is saved by a local handicapped man, who is in love with her, but in her grief and anger Leila calls him "an abomination," prompting his own failed attempt at drowning. Soon after, the girl's aunt, along with many other villagers, dies from a "mysterious" illness, so Leila ends up completely alone and a single mother at fifteen. The film ends with Leila holding her son and praying for all of humanity.

The village in this movie is very much ethnically Kazakh: the people speak mostly in Kazakh, an old woman prays all day long, a young girl practices traditional dancing, a local man plays traditional music. Modernity and Soviet power come in the shape of the military who are there to covertly examine the population or relocate it to a safer place during the actual testing, but without revealing what is really going on. In this way, the Russian-speaking Soviet authorities are implicated in

newspaper photograph of a fourteen-year-old girl who looked to be seven. In 1996, an eponymous play was first performed at the Kazakh Academic Theatre. The film significantly departs from the original work, in which Leila's beauty is destroyed by radiation, but she is still loved and respected by the male protagonist, Kumar. Additionally, in the story she dies, whereas in the film she becomes a mother. In an interview, Mukanova claims that Narymbetov prefers metaphors and sharper conflicts than she does, and that Leila's humiliation in the film is symbolic of the destruction wrought by the Polygon on the land. According to Mukanova, the film's parting message is one of hope for rebirth and resurrection ("Roza Mukanova" 2008).

15 For an overview of the movement and its message, see Toptayeva (2018) and Schatz (2011).

the gradual destruction of the Kazakh communities in Semipalatinsk.

There are two nuclear explosions shown in the film. They are visually distinct from the rest of the movie due to being stock documentary footage. These two scenes are juxtaposed to the poetic depiction of nature in the rest of the film. The first explosion (see Fig. 1) is followed by an idyllic scene by the river where Leila innocently plays, surrounded by pristine nature (see Fig. 2). This montage warns that the peaceful life taking place in the Semipalatinsk region will soon disappear. The use of this type of montage in the middle of the film also signifies the disruption and destruction created by the testing, both at the visual and narrative levels. The color scenes are interrupted by black and white footage, mirroring the way that the villagers' lives are disrupted and eventually ended by the atomic bombs.

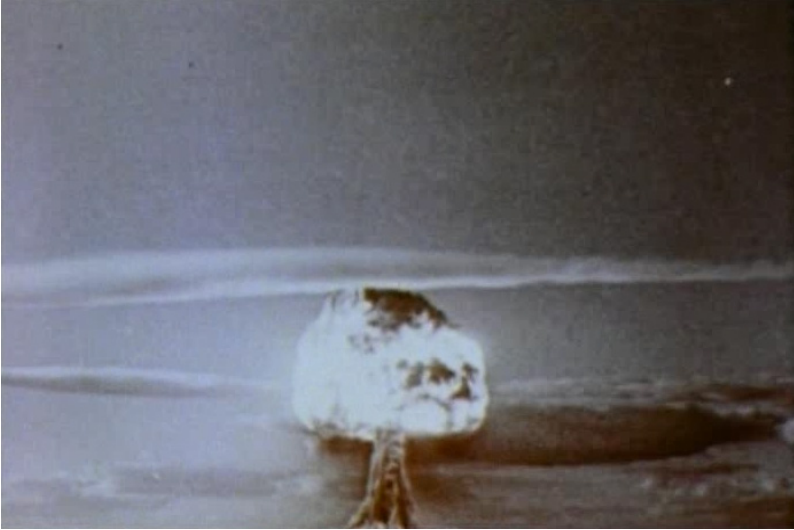


Figure 1: An atomic bomb explosion in *Leila's Prayer*



Figure 2: An idyllic scene in *Leila's Prayer*

A second explosion is shown in the last quarter of the film, also as low-quality black-and-white documentary footage. The “mushroom” is accompanied with shots of broken trees, ailing or dead animals, and burning fields. In the space of a few moments the beautiful steppe turns from Paradise into Hades. This technique creates a crisis of awareness, as hypothesized by Kaganskii. The documentary black-and-white shots remind the audience that these are real-life events, creating a sense of uneasiness and horror.

Sacrifice Areas

In her essay “Let Them Drown,” about the historic social and economic inequity underpinning environmental pollution, Naomi Klein brings up the fact that in the post-World War II period American scientists openly referred to certain parts of the country damaged by large-scale human activity as “national sacrifice areas” (Klein 2016). In the 1970s, this term was applied both to nuclear testing fallout areas and to coal mines, as a way of indicating a perceived need to destroy certain zones in the name of advancing national interests. Klein, additionally, highlights the connection between such places and specific social classes or ethnic groups. Discussing the coal industry in the Appalachians, she

theorizes that “turning all that coal into electricity required another layer of othering too [...]. In North America, these are overwhelmingly communities of colour [...] forced to carry the toxic burden of our collective addiction to fossil fuels, with markedly higher rates of respiratory illnesses and cancers” (Klein 2016). Klein’s idea of othering echoes such similar concepts as “disposable people” and “dispensable citizens,” describing the experiences of underprivileged groups in India, France, and the United States, whose interests and voices are disregarded in favor of institutional or corporate interests.¹⁶ In other words, regardless of their nationality, certain groups are deemed disposable based on their ethnicity, gender, or social status.

Similarly, race and ethnicity played a key role in the Soviet state’s negative attitude towards certain groups, especially during World War II, such as the Volga Germans, the Crimean Tatars, and the Chechens. However, the way the Soviet population at large was (mis)managed did not always depend on their identity, but rather on their geographic location or economic status. The dekulakization and anti-religion campaigns largely disregarded race and focused on cultural and socioeconomic standing. Similarly, the areas around large industrial complexes or the sites of agricultural campaigns became de facto sacrificial areas meant to benefit the nation as a whole, albeit at the cost of the local people’s quality of life.¹⁷ Overall, the way Soviet authorities habitually disregarded the human cost of advancing the state’s agenda, whether in purging “enemies” of the state or building factories and plants, parallels the idea of sacrificial groups.

At the beginning, *Leila’s Prayer* depicts the Soviet countryside as an idyllic backdrop to the human-centered village life. This is in line with the nineteenth-century and socialist realist artistic traditions of using beautiful landscapes as a painting’s setting. However, in the airplane shooting scene, Narymbetov decenters the anthropocentric worldview and raises the idea of a sacrifice. When Leila is being flown to the hospi-

16 Kevin Bales uses the term “disposable people” when discussing the victims of various contemporary systems of slavery around the world (1999). Annu Jalais examines how Indian villagers are perceived as disposable when their interests conflict with those of the protected Bengal tigers (2004).

17 In addition to Chernobyl and Semipalatinsk, most large industrial sites and plants eventually led to the creation of sacrificial zones around them. See, for example, the cities of Norilsk, Russia’s largest nickel and copper producer, and Dzerzhinsk, the largest chemical production center.

tal by the local general, she witnesses the Russian soldiers shooting at a herd of animals from the airplane for no other reason than destructive pleasure. This is a pointless hunt, as the airplane will not land to collect the bodies. The meaningless sacrifice of the local wildlife symbolically represents the equally irresponsible and needless sacrifice of the local population ordered by the Moscow authorities. Eventually, the Russian general orders one of his soldiers, whose appearance marks him as non-Slavic, to also shoot at the animals (see Fig. 3). This scene highlights how disconnected those serving the state are from their environment, which explains their willingness to destroy it. The soldiers are both literally and metaphorically out of touch with the land.



Figure 3: Military men shooting at animals from an airplane in *Leila's Prayer*

Narymbetov further underlines the idea of sacrifice by documenting the slow decline of Leila's village. One by one, the villagers become sick and die. This idea is further overlaid with the Christian motifs of repentance, forgiveness, and resurrection. The film ends with the image of Leila holding her newborn baby, which alludes to the Western tradition of depicting the Madonna and child.¹⁸ The image is superimposed over an atomic "mushroom," with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's famous

18 Some of the most famous examples include works by Leonardo Da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Giulio Romano, as well as numerous Eastern Orthodox icons.

“Requiem in D minor” (1791) playing in the background (see Fig. 4). This collection of disparate cultural and visual elements is contextualized by Leila’s prayer, which is *сохрани жителей всей земли. Амин.*¹⁹ Through this final sequence, Narymbetov condemns nuclear testing, but frames it as an environmental concern, having global impact both on human lives and the surrounding world.



Figure 4: The closing scene from *Leila's Prayer*

A Gift to Stalin: The Atomic Bomb as State Failure

When discussing representations of atomic bomb testing in post-Soviet film, it is worth mentioning Rustem Abdrashev’s *A Gift to Stalin*, the second film produced in Kazakhstan featuring a scene of atomic bomb testing. Despite being chosen to open the Pusan International Film Festival in South Korea in 2008, the film has received mixed reviews (Miller 2009). Abdrashev is better known for his later works, such as the film series about Nursultan Nazarbaev’s life *The Leader’s Way* (*Koshasshy zholy*, 2011–14) as well as the television series *The Kazakh Khanate* (*Kazak eli*, 2017–).

A number of elements in *A Gift to Stalin* echo *Leila’s Prayer*, such as the montage of stock bomb footage, idyllic landscapes, and the allusion to the Mother of God iconography. Unlike *Leila’s Prayer*, however,

¹⁹ “Save all people on earth. Amen.”

Abdrashev's film minimizes the theme of environmental destruction caused by atomic testing, focusing almost exclusively on human suffering and death. Moreover, the film emphasizes national and ethnic identities, rather than atomic testing. The nuclear theme serves to frame the narrative and highlight state failure, rather than functioning as a central motif or driving the plot. This shift in focus marks a turn in Kazakh atomic bomb film representation away from transnational environmental consequences and closer towards an anthropocentric reading of nuclear testing as a denouncement of the foreign and destructive Soviet project.

The underrepresentation of environmental concerns in *A Gift to Stalin* can partially be explained with structural issues. In 2005, the Kazakhfilm studios underwent fundamental reorganization and became a joint-stock company with the government as the biggest shareholder. Scholars such as Rico Isaacs (2018) and Marlene Laruelle (2014, 2015) argue that the increased interest and investment in cinema and television on the part of the government comes, partially, as a response to a more aggressive Russian foreign policy and signals a clear distancing from the Soviet past and its legacies. According to Laruelle (2014), the post-Soviet Kazakh identity is partially based on the idea of being a globalized Eurasian culture that welcomes outsiders. *A Gift to Stalin* is one of the first films produced within the new studio structure and is an excellent illustration of this identity model. While the title alludes to the nuclear program's establishment in time for Stalin's seventieth anniversary, the film focuses primarily on the forced deportation of minorities to Kazakhstan, showcasing how hospitable and accepting local Kazakhs are to all newcomers. Nuclear bomb testing is alluded to several times, but appears directly only at the very end.

The film script is based on Israeli writer David Markish's reminiscences of his family's deportation to and life in Kazakhstan during the Stalinist period. Markish is also the narrator and plays the role of the adult Sabyr or Sasha, who is at the plot's center. In 1949, Sasha is deported with his grandfather to Kazakhstan. The old man dies on the way, while the boy is miraculously saved by Kasym, a local Kazakh railroad employee. Kasym informally adopts him and Sasha begins a new life in a small village, where deportees from all over the Soviet Union coexist peacefully together. Amidst the idyllic steppe, the boy witnesses institutional misuse of power, in the shape of the local Russian and Kazakh

military and militia, as well as the initial stages of the Semipalatinsk Polygon setup. Sasha is taken care of collectively by the villagers, including Vera, a Russian woman, and Ezhik, a Polish doctor. On the day of Vera and Ezhik's wedding, the local militia man kills the doctor. He, in turn, is murdered in revenge. Knowing reprisal is unavoidable, Kasym sends Sasha away to Odessa. Eventually, the boy finds his way to Israel where he grows up into an adult. At the film's end, he finds out that the villagers were killed by the atomic bomb tests.

Like in *Leila's Prayer*, the bomb detonation is taken from stock footage (see Fig. 5). It is different in color and resolution from the rest of the film, bringing attention to its documentary nature. Unlike in Narymbetov's film, however, the explosion is almost an afterthought. It serves as a final condemnation of the Stalinist regime, highlighting how it sacrificed the very people that helped build it.



Figure 5: The atomic bomb detonation at the end of *A Gift To Stalin*

The idea of sacrifice is central to the film both as a concept and as a practice. The local Muslim villagers practice ritual sacrifice of animals; Sasha sacrifices his beloved pet goat in the hopes of bringing back his parents; Vera sacrifices her body for others. And, ultimately, the state sacrifices the village itself. While observing the Polygon being gradually created through Sasha's eyes, the narrator remarks, *какое невиданное и страшное жертвоприношение готовится здесь*.²⁰ This phrase ech-

²⁰ "What an unprecedented and terrible sacrifice is being prepared here."

oes Klein's concept of sacrifice groups or marginalized populations inhabiting sacrifice areas. Moreover, the selfless or ritual acts of individual sacrifice performed by the villagers in order to survive or protect others are juxtaposed to the state's disregard for human life.

Slow Violence

In addition to the idea of sacrifice, *A Gift to Stalin* also illustrates Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon argues that while invading a country without provocation with traditional weapons is considered a crime, "advocating invading [...] with mass forms of slow-motion toxicity [...] requires rethinking our accepted assumptions of violence to include slow violence" (Nixon 2011, 3). One of the book's driving questions is "how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?" (Nixon 2011, 3). This question is central to *A Gift to Stalin*. The film's long chronological span, from the late Stalinist era to the present day, attempts to make visible the slow violence of sacrificing the area around Semipalatinsk to the Soviet goals of winning the nuclear arms race. The protagonist revisits the village several decades later to find all its inhabitants dead and buried, presumably because of the direct impact of the bomb and the slow-acting side effects of radiation. However, this central moment comes at the film's end and is overshadowed by the rest of the narrative. The atomic bomb in the film does not draw attention to its slow violence or environmental implications, but rather takes on a symbolic significance. The aftermath of nuclear testing is only hinted at by a shot of the village graveyard, where all the remaining inhabitants are interred. The environment in which the plot takes place is of little significance, except as an idyllic setting meant to highlight the contrast with the less-than-perfect human existence. The focus is on Stalin's betrayal of his people and the inherently corrupt and dehumanizing Soviet system.

The Bomb as Equalizer: The Test

Aleksandr Kott's *The Test* is the most recent Russian feature film about the nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk site.²¹ At the time of its release

21 *The Test* was originally a coproduction with Kazakhstan and was to be directed

in 2014, it offered a first, post-Soviet Russian look at the Semipalatinsk Polygon. Despite receiving several international awards, as well as the 2014 Kinotavr grand prize, *The Test* did not attain wide international fame, comparable to the films of other “festival” directors, such as Andrei Zviagintsev and Kantemir Balagov.²² Kott himself is better known for such blockbusters as *The Brest Fortress* (*Brestskaia krepost'*, 2010) and several of the *Six Degrees of Celebration* (*Elki*, 2011–) films. However, Kott’s film did not spark public debate in Russia, either because of or despite its sensitive topic, and only a few critics reviewed the feature in any depth.²³ Tellingly, most critics discuss the movie’s poetic style and Kott’s depiction of the steppe, rather than any potential political implications in relation to nuclear testing. In fact, one critic notes that the lack of political content detracts from the film (Stishova 2014). Moreover, only eighteen theaters contracted the film for public showings, as distribution companies apparently did not believe it a profitable investment (Dolin 2014).

The Test features a father and daughter living in a dilapidated homestead in the middle of the Kazakh steppe.²⁴ The man uses an old truck to go to work every day, while his adolescent daughter remains behind alone, taking care of the chores around the house. Little is known about the pair, but the father’s ability to fly an airplane and his veneration of Soviet cultural symbols suggest that he is a World War II veteran, fully loyal to the state. One day, a bus of Russians, presumably scientists or photographers, breaks down not far from the homestead and the handsome, young, blond driver comes seeking water. The two young people meet, fall in love, and begin seeing each other secretly. One day,

by Pavel Chukhrai, but the project was stalled. When Kott agreed to pick it up, he changed the casting, as well as the script, and moved the shooting to Crimea (Maliukova 2014).

22 In 2014, the film was awarded the best contribution award at the International Film Festival in Tokyo, the best international feature award at the Golden Orange Film Festival in Turkey, and the special jury prize in Abu Dhabi. In 2015, it won the Nika best music award, as well as the Russian Guild of Cinematographers’ best composer and best cinematography prizes, and the FIPRESCI award at the Transylvania International Film Festival.

23 The short list of significant reviews can be found on <https://kritikanstvo.ru/movies/ispytanie/>.

24 As the film is non-verbal, it is possible to interpret the main protagonists’ relationship as that of siblings. However, based on the initial screenplay, it appears they are meant to be father and daughter (Maliukova 2014).

the father falls sick and leaves, presumably for the hospital, while the young girl remains all alone. The film implies that he has been exposed to high levels of radiation. Eventually, he comes back, but only to die on his own land, as it turns out. Left all alone, the young woman faces an uncertain future. A local young man, whom she sometimes encounters in the steppe, sends his family to her to set up a wedding in the traditional Kazakh style. The woman, however, chooses the Russian, symbolically cutting off her hair and rejecting the traditional Kazakh ornaments. The lovers are reunited, but as they sit outside, an atomic explosion takes place nearby. The zone of destruction includes all three young people and everything around them.

The film is nonverbal (no dialogue), though not silent. The setting, camera work, and music fulfill the function of speech. In fact, the lack of dialogue highlights the film's poetic qualities. However, it can also be interpreted ambiguously. On the one hand, the Russian director does not impose his own words on a non-Slavic population, effectively avoiding one of the main problems of colonial art. Sattarova argues that this move towards silence is a "liberating gesture" (Sattarova 2020, 66). Moreover, as Stishova (2014) suggests, the fact that no one gets to use language, except official sources such as the radio and the newspaper, highlights the suppression of information and the silencing experienced by the majority of Soviet citizens regardless of their geographical location.

On the other hand, when paired with the lack of historical context, the absence of conversation in the film serves to hide the fundamental differences and inequalities in the young lovers' respective positions. It is true that a large number of ethnic Russians lived and continue to live in Kazakhstan. However, the majority of the Slavic community historically inhabits urban spaces, which were not as directly impacted by radiation, while the population surrounding the Polygon was largely rural and non-Slavic, subsisting on its own locally produced food. Consequently, there is a socio-ethnic disparity in who suffered the most from atomic testing. Additionally, the decisions on how, where, and when to conduct nuclear tests were taken in Moscow, even if there were local officials who embraced the Soviet project and workers and scientists who were employed at the testing site. Thus, the seemingly equal

footing of the main protagonists is fundamentally illusory.²⁵

The other element serving as an equalizer in the film—the atomic bomb—is just as problematic. There are two explosion scenes, at the film's end, presented as a common problem affecting everyone equally. Paradoxically, the detonation does not necessarily disrupt the poetic mode of representation that characterizes the film. The action takes place in the summer and the colors are vivid and harmonious. The camera functions as a painting frame, depicting the steppe as a beautiful backdrop, devoid of its own agency or role, similar to a Romantic landscape. The explosion appears in the same spot where the sun would normally be visible. The explosion's shock wave and dark clouds are shot in slow motion and high resolution, highlighting small details, such as pieces of the roof coming apart or the dry soil being upturned. Combined with the sound effects of explosions and wind howling, paradoxically, this scene sequence makes the bomb detonation seem less real, in contrast to the one in *Leila's Prayer*, which is low-resolution and black-and-white. The detonation scene, and subsequent destruction, is as pleasurable to watch as that of a car crash or a building explosion in a high-budget Hollywood action movie. Furthermore, the atomic eruption is partially personified, cast in the role of a kind of monster. The young Kazakh man rides towards it shouting as if it were a human enemy army (see Fig. 6). Moreover, the couple is shown as tiny figures, dwarfed by the explosion chimney towering over them (see Fig. 7). The camera's perspective brings to mind scenes from monster films, such as *Godzilla (Gojira, 1954)* and *King Kong (1933)*, where the human protagonists are dwarfed by the giant creatures they face. Such a technique creates further distance between the detonation and the human hand that presumably caused it.

25 Sattarova (2020) suggests that the choice of a non-verbal format is most likely artistically motivated by the director's well-documented interest in silent cinema, rather than by a conscious political stance. However, when making a film about such a controversial topic, even a purportedly non-political stand becomes politicized. Even without words, Kott creates a continuous narrative through careful scene sequence montage, framing the film's events in a particular way, understood by the director to be correct. Ultimately, it may be impossible to "give" a voice to the subaltern in a way that empowers the subject, at least in a traditional poetic mode of filmmaking.



Figure 6: The young Kazakh man facing off the explosion cloud in *The Test*



Figure 7: The two lovers dwarfed by the bomb's "mushroom" in *The Test*

Unlike in *Leila's Prayer* or *A Gift to Stalin*, the explosion scene in *The Test* does not read as a straightforward indictment of Soviet nuclear testing. It inspires regret for the loss of a potential happy ending, but even the lovers' death is not overly tragic, since the romantic conflict is already resolved without lingering sickness or physical disability. Furthermore, visually, the film's ending is just as beautiful, in a way, as the rest of the movie. For example, a second nuclear explosion at the very end is poetically depicted as a false sun rising, the only difference being that the light goes back down, instead of rising further up as a real sun would. The detonations do not disrupt the film's aesthetic, but are inscribed within it.

The lack of speech and the high-end special effects in *The Test* help depict the nuclear disaster as removed from social and political events. From the perspective of the steppe and its inhabitants, a nuclear explo-

sion is presented as similar to a tornado or some other natural disaster. The detonation simply happens and no one is implicated in its occurrence. Kott focuses on the individual human tragedy, aestheticizing a destructive occurrence to the degree that it calls to mind Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), as noted by a number of critics.²⁶ Additionally, the radiation impact is hinted at but not depicted: there is no physical suffering or disability shown on screen.

The scene where the interethnic couple faces the explosion together could be read as a critique of the indiscriminate effect of nuclear testing. This interpretation aligns with T.J. Demos's argument in *Against the Anthropocene* (2017) that the very concept of "Anthropocene" is too broad to be useful. It can obscure the social, geographical, and gender differences that separate various groups of people. Pollution is not produced equally by everyone; likewise, it is not experienced equally by everyone. Similarly, Kott's film obscures certain inequalities, such as who are the people in charge, who is informed vs. uninformed about the testing, who is there by choice and who—by necessity. None of these key questions are either voiced or answered in the film, resulting in a beautiful story of love and death, uncomplicated by narrative or aesthetic disruptions as in the case of *Leila's Prayer* and *The Gift to Stalin*.

Conclusion

Despite a long tradition of both nature and environmental writing and art, as well as ecological activism in Soviet culture, post-Soviet cinemas are becoming progressively more reluctant to engage with ecological concerns on their own merit, albeit for different reasons. The nuclear theme, in particular, is almost invisible on screen in the post-1990 period, even if Soviet censorship no longer precludes public discussions of nuclear bomb testing. One possible explanation for this is the inherently political and politicizing dimension of eco-narratives and their frequent linkage to such unspoken of and unpopular themes as social inequity, discrimination, and disability. Additionally, any discussion of problems connected to the Soviet past are fraught, as they would require acknowledging the ideological and economic reasons behind them.

26 In addition to von Trier's film, the other two movies cited most often as visual and aesthetic precursors to *The Test* are Mikhail Kalatozishvili's *Wild Field* (*Dikoe pole*, 2008) and Andrei Tarkovskii's *Sacrifice* (*Zhertvoprinoshenie*, 1986) (Maliukova 2014).

Thus, Russian public discourse on nuclear power remains unapologetically positive and atomic testing is traditionally framed as the only way to counteract the American threat during the Cold War. In contrast, for many post-Soviet republics, such as the Baltic states, Ukraine, and the Central Asian countries, the Soviet project is presented as foreign, imperialistic, and harmful to local interests.²⁷ In Kazakhstan, in particular, national independence and the Anti-Nuclear Movement are often framed as synonymous at present.²⁸ Consequently, post-Soviet filmic responses to environmental problems are diverse and complex by necessity. Satybaldy Narymbetov, for example, perceives nuclear pollution as an expression of a deeper, global problem—that of a mindset that does not value the environment, and by extension the human life dependent on it, as anything more than a source of labor and raw material. For Abdrashev, the bomb is both a devastating force and a symbol of sacrifice, but its political implications overshadow the environmental consequences. Finally, Aleksandr Kott, while depicting the atomic bomb as a suprahuman tragedy affecting everyone equally, does not visualize political implications of nuclear testing logistics. While three films from two different countries are not enough to serve as empirical evidence, they gesture towards the fact that post-Soviet film in general is moving away from a preoccupation with environmental concerns toward a more anthropocentric and politicized depiction of atomic bomb testing. With the addition of the recent television series, mentioned earlier, it seems this trend will continue to develop in the future, obscuring from popular discourse the very real, contemporary environmental problems that still impact human lives, regardless of ethnicity and nationality.

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27 For an overview of how anti-Soviet sentiments overlapped with environmental activism in the late Soviet period, see Dawson (1996).

28 For example, the *Polygon* series mentioned earlier has garnered a wide media response. For the most part, both critics and academics seem willing to treat it as historical truth (Babish 2020).

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Environmental Contamination and Postcolonial Recuperation in Late Soviet and Post-independence Kazakhstani Cinema

Elena Monastireva-Ansdell

IN his seminal study of the cultural and psychological effects of colonization, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Franz Fanon stressed the importance of the land for the physical and spiritual sustenance of a colonized people, highlighting that imperialism “sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds” (Fanon 2004, 181). Even though the Soviet project was ideologically distinct from European colonialisms, most obviously in its adherence to “scientific socialism” (Spivak et al. 2006, 829), it produced profound and enduring changes not only in the Kazakh economy, society, and culture, but also in the land—leading to environmental degradation and contamination. In this article, I analyze images of environmental pollution, caused by the desiccation of the Aral Sea as well as by Soviet space and nuclear testing programs, in Rashid Nugmanov’s *The Needle (Igla, 1988)* and Rustem Abdrashev’s *Renaissance Island (A Girl from the City)* (Kaladan kelgen kyz / Ostrov vozrozhdeniia, 2004).¹ I trace these images’ role in constructing a postcolonial national identity in Kazakhstan, one that recovers ethnic Kazakh traditions but is mindful of the country’s multiethnic population, a legacy of Soviet-era mass migration to the republic due to war, Stalinist repressions, and deporta-

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- 1 The film’s name in Kazakh translates literally to *A Girl from the City*. From here on I use the English translation of the Russian version of the title, *Renaissance Island*.

tions of entire “enemy” peoples. Examining the films in their historical settings, I demonstrate how they use Kazakh “ancestral” landscapes and relations with nature as a “decolonizing tool” to help the viewer understand “the impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress” (DeLoughrey & Handley 2011, 4). I argue that Kazakhstani cinematic discourse about nature grows in postcolonial awareness as it evolves from a perestroika-era universal anti-totalitarian critique, with environmental and moral degradation treated as strictly social issues, to an interrogation of the detrimental impact that the Soviet project had on the ethnic Kazakh landscape, culture, and psyche. Finally, I investigate how in conceptualizing the land as a “source of physical and spiritual sustenance,” these films create a productive tension between what Rico Isaacs calls the “ethnic Kazakh” and “civic Kazakhstani” narratives in Kazakhstani cinema, in which the place and contributions of ethnic minorities are actively negotiated (Fanon 2004, 9; Isaacs 2018).

I am sensitive to the ambivalent relationship between Soviet and indigenous values in these filmmakers’ attempts “to break down colonial binaries (East/West, civilized/native, etc.) to create a counter-discourse about modernity that resonates with local understandings” (Adams 2008, 5). Using as a starting point the pioneering work of scholars who have examined the unique nature of Soviet colonialism, I investigate how these filmmakers place their narratives on a spectrum. On the one hand, the USSR was an “anti-imperialist empire” that “subsidiz[ed] republican economies, indigeniz[ed] regional party structures, and foster[ed] national cultures,” thereby cultivating national republican elites (Spivak et al. 2006, 832). It recruited local supporters through such modernizing endeavors as construction of factories, hospitals, and schools, and liberation of women (Moore 2001, 122). On the other hand, the Soviet project was a violent, centralizing force that transformed nature by building gigantic dams and canals; polluted the environment with industrial, military, and nuclear waste; and devastated indigenous traditions and ways of relating to nature and the environment (Moore 2001; Josephson 2013, 275). Nugmanov’s and Abdrashev’s explorations of the tensions between these two sides of the Soviet project take place within what Homi Bhabha (1988) calls the “Third Space,” an in-between creative terrain in which the filmmakers negotiate not only their characters’ hybrid Soviet, ethnic Kazakh, and civic Kazakhstani identities, but also the Soviet environmental paradigm, indigenous Kazakh relations

with nature, the Soviet legacy of sharing the land with non-Kazakh settlers, and the need to integrate into new global energy/waste patterns.

Soviet developers, based on extensive use of natural resources, searched constantly for new areas for economic expansion with little regard for environmental preservation or sustainability. Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature and Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign called for an "assault on nature" aimed at "conquering" the elements and channeling them to serve the needs of industrialization and collectivized agriculture. A wide system of railways cut through indigenous lands to support Stalin's and Khrushchev's projects. Starting in the 1960s, policies of aggressive modernization were scrutinized by intellectual elites. Most notably, the Russian "village prose" writers cast the attack on nature as destructive of the traditional way of life, preserved in the rapidly disappearing villages. In Soviet titular republics, environmental concerns were similarly "intermeshed with nationalist ones" (Josephson 2013, 279). In the final decades of Soviet rule, the authorities saw the environment as a "safe" and "politically neutral" issue (Jones Luong 1999, 1267; Josephson 2013, 269). This allowed non-Russian activists to use environmental concerns to mobilize popular opposition to Soviet colonialist policies, since they often saw environmental degradation as "both a systemic fault of socialism and a direct result of Moscow's desire to weaken a particular nation by destroying its natural base, exploiting its resources, and poisoning its people while preserving Russia for the Russians" (Josephson 2013, 279).

Similar to village prose writers in Russia, writers in Central Asia often led the charge against environmental degradation as part of a larger struggle against cultural imperialism. In 1989, the Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov organized the Nevada-Semipalatinsk environmental movement, raising awareness of ecological damage in eastern Kazakhstan and advocating for a ban on nuclear weapons testing (Jones Luong and Weinthal 1999, 1269; Josephson 2013, 283). The Karakalpak writer Tulepbergen Kaipbergenov protested the catastrophic shrinking of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan due to extensive water withdrawals for irrigation in one of perestroika's first expository documentaries, Lennauchfilm's 1987 *Computer Games (Komp'iuternye igr)*. In the segment "Where the Amu-Darya Ends" ("*tam, gde konchaetsia Amu-Dar'ia*"), Kaipbergenov asserts the importance of the Amu-Darya River and the Aral Sea for the indigenous people's spirituality and sense of identity. In so doing,

he went beyond the environmental, health, and economic concerns raised in the film by Karakalpak officials and residents. Referring to the Аму-Дарыа as a кровавая артерия, которая подарила жизнь всему нашему региону and the Aral Sea as a large cauldron that fed the people, Kaipbergenov stands in the desert left in their stead, lamenting that only fairy tales and legends remain of his people's natural treasures.² It is important to note that while the postcolonial component is an important part of perestroika-era discourse on the environment, in most cases it is tightly interlinked with the environmental disasters caused by Soviet development; the social issue critique of this systemic fault drives the activism aimed at both repairing the environmental damage and "restructuring" the system rather than toppling it. Thus, a Karakalpak official in *Computer Games* says that indigenous residents have not left their villages because they "have faith in Soviet power" to bring the Aral Sea waters back (Mouratov 1992, 9).

Exposing Contamination: Demythologized National Landscape and the Need for Healing in 'The Needle'

Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle*, set both in the Soviet Kazakh capital of Alma-Ata and at the Aral Sea, has often been presented as an innovative social-problem film creating a new, neoromantic hero and subversively experimenting with form (Horton and Brashinsky 1992; Lawton 2007). The enigmatic protagonist Moro (Viktor Tsoi) returns to Alma-Ata to collect a debt. When he learns of his ex-girlfriend Dina's (Marina Smirnova) morphine addiction, he takes on the local drug mafia and tries to help Dina fight her addiction by taking her to the Aral Sea, where they "once felt good." He ultimately fails and is stabbed by a mafioso, but the film is ambiguous about whether he survives.

Because *The Needle* was shot in Russian and deals with more general issues of modernity, Soviet audiences failed to consider the film to be about Kazakhstan and decolonization. Nor did the filmmaker set out to make a "Kazakh" movie. A postcolonial reading, however, unearths the film's latent anti-colonial messages and implications. Even though the perestroika-era themes of drug addiction, youth counterculture, and Soviet ideological indoctrination take center stage in *The Needle*, the film also dismantles optimistic Soviet representations of Kazakh

2 "a blood artery that gave life to our whole region." (All translations from Russian to English in this article are mine.)

national space through its focus on environmental degradation, and imagines a more authentic, even if heavily scarred and russified, national landscape. Vida Johnson defines this process as деконструкци[я] и демифологизаци[я] единого Советского Союза, реконструкци[я] и ре-мифологизаци[я] идентичных русских, казахских, узбекских, латвийских и так далее национальных пространств (2001, 21).³

Contemporary Soviet and Western film critics predominantly interpret Moro, played by the Russian-Korean rock idol Viktor Tsoi, as an ethnically unmarked neoromantic, countercultural hero “free from all the ties, material and psychological, a lone wanderer possessing innate dignity, honesty and unerring sense of justice” (Lawton 2007, 204). The Russian-speaking Kazakh director working at the national Kazakhfilm Studio likewise stated that the protagonist’s ethnicity was not important (Nugmanov n.d.). Other scholars, while acknowledging the film’s setting, note “the virtual absence of Kazakhstan itself except as a metaphorical space within which the human condition is allowed to work itself out as a cautionary allegory,” or discuss it as a geographical location that gave a name to the Kazakh New Wave (Padunov 2004; Horton and Brashinsky 1992, 239). In the overall spirit of perestroika-era social critique, the film appears to address the more universal flaws of the Soviet system rather than focus on strictly ethnic grievances in a postcolonial context.

Kazakh film scholars offer a more nuanced view of *The Needle’s* Asian hero and setting. They see both the hero and setting as decolonizing tools that expose sovietization’s devastating effects on the Kazakh way of life. Baubek Nogerbek argues that by demythologizing the Kazakh national space as constructed in Soviet cinema, Nugmanov creates “an entirely new, unfamiliar Kazakhstan, with a dried-up sea” and a “strange hero,” a world “where there is no place for living people, for full-blooded, national life” (2004). At the same time, Nogerbek acknowledges that the problems raised by Nugmanov are “cosmic ones,” “not attached to any concrete national space” (2004). Gulnara Abikeeva hails the fact that the “new hero” of perestroika has “an Asian face.” She welcomes the stylistic revolution of the Kazakh New Wave, seeing this “westernization of Kazakh cinema” as a “protest of a colonized coun-

3 “deconstruction and demythologization of the unified Soviet Union [and] reconstruction and remythologization of identical Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Latvian, and so forth national spaces.”

try against Sovietization” (Abikeeva 2004b). Abikeeva interprets this Western turn as consistent with the ethnic Kazakh national character, because as nomads “living in the region of the intersection of the West and the East,” Kazakhs historically “have been very adaptive to various cultural influences” (2004a).

In more recent Western analyses, writing about generic and ethnic indeterminacy in *The Needle*, Angelina Karpovich observes that even though “the film’s narrative does not directly address issues of national or ethnic identity,” Moro’s Asianness is “clearly symbolic, perhaps even metonymic” (Karpovich 2011, 173). She connects this symbolism to Viktor Tsoi’s Korean heritage, which “makes visible an ethnic minority which had not been represented onscreen before” (Karpovich 2011, 175). Although Karpovich admits that Moro’s ethnicity is most likely incidental (i.e., Tsoi was chosen first and foremost because of his cult status) and was not acknowledged by contemporary film critics, she argues that the film nonetheless raises the taboo issue of the Stalin-era deportations of Soviet Koreans to Kazakhstan, thus adding it to the list of other previously unrecognized topics, such as rock music and the environmental catastrophe of the Aral Sea (Karpovich 2011, 175). Even if Nugmanov did not intend to refer to the relocation of Soviet Koreans, Karpovich correctly identifies the importance of the protagonist’s non-Russian ethnicity, as the theme foreshadows the explicit inclusion of the topic of ethnic deportations to Kazakhstan in post-Soviet Kazakhstani narratives of decolonization.

Alec Brookes similarly ascribes key importance to Moro’s Asianness. In his Marxian analysis of the Soviet ecology in three Soviet films set on the Aral Sea, Brookes traces the roots of the Aral Sea catastrophe to the Soviet assault on “the ecological relations between the native and the land” (Brookes 2020, 42). Brookes demonstrates consistent alienation of producers from the land in both Grigorii Chukhrai’s *The Forty-First* (*Sorok pervyi*, 1956) and Viktor Turin’s *Turksib* (*Turksib*, 1929). He goes on to argue that in choosing a half-Korean to play the protagonist in *The Needle*, Nugmanov “suggests a film language that returns Asian bodies to Asian land,” thereby promising “collective, more-than-human recuperation” to Kazakh land and the Aral Sea (Brookes 2020, 45).

Taking a cue from the scholars who highlight *The Needle*’s Asian hero and setting, I approach the film as a postcolonial text with an ethnically marked protagonist acting in a reconfigured national space.

Nugmanov also foregrounds late-Soviet Kazakhstan's hybrid national identity via the ambiguous ethnicity of other key characters: the female protagonist, Dina, is played by a Russian actress, but has a typical Kazakh name, while the presumably Russian drug-peddling doctor, Artur Iusupovich, played by the Russian rock musician Petr Mamonov, has a Western first name and a Central Asian patronymic. The film's most poignant scenes are set at the site of one of the world's largest environmental disasters, the dried-up bed of the Aral Sea in southwestern Kazakhstan. It would be important to delve deeper into the significance of Kazakhstan's landscape and other Asian imagery to unlock the film's postcolonial dimension. Nugmanov encourages such an approach by emphasizing what he calls *пустое действие*⁴ as a structuring principle: Я старался максимально освободить фильм (сцены, диалоги, сюжет) от какой-либо символики, сделать его наподобие пустого сосуда, который каждый зритель мог бы заполнить собственной интерпретацией (Nugmanov n.d.).⁵

A postcolonial reading of the film's "empty action" would place the emphasis on Moro as a hybrid Russian/Korean/Kazakh/and more generally Asian warrior battling Soviet colonial influences with Asian indigenous knowledge, searching for an authentic identity in his ancestral land. While the Soviet Friendship-of-the-Peoples discourse portrayed Central Asians as little brothers,⁶ Tsoi's small-framed Moro defies Soviet stereotypes of Central Asians as childlike, unmodern, and requiring guidance and protection. A skilled karate fighter who single-handedly takes on a gang of drug dealers, Moro challenges the dominant Soviet ideology, visualized in the proliferation of television sets or in soundtracks, and synonymous with drug addiction given its effect on Dina.⁷ He does so with the philosophy of *внутренняя мощь*

4 "empty action"

5 "I tried to free the film (scenes, dialogues, plot) as much as possible from any symbolism, to make it like an empty vessel that each viewer could fill with their own interpretation."

6 A February 1, 1936, *Pravda* editorial established the Russian people as "the first among equals" and "a model for other Soviet peoples" (Martin 2001, 452). Seen as the USSR's most "backward" nations by Soviet ideologists, Central Asians were consistently portrayed in Soviet cinema as "little brothers" with diminutive physiques. Thus, in Mikhail Chiaureli's *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padenie Berlina*, 1949), the bear-like Russian soldier Alesha effortlessly carries the wounded Central Asian Iusup in his arms as if he were a child.

7 As noted by Zhukova, curing Dina of her addiction requires removing her from

and крепкий характер⁸ inherent in Asian martial arts (Tarmasinov 2020). Tsoi greatly admired Bruce Lee, whose characters' physical and spiritual strength had wide appeal in the USSR. As a compelling учение единства силы и духа, karate attracted Soviet youth more than тухлая коммунистическая идеология⁹ and was banned in 1984 (Khripun 2019). Despite the briefness of the karate fight in *The Needle*, the fact that Moro's guiding philosophy is based in the precepts of the martial arts defines him as an Asian superhero, as captured by the lyrics of the opening and closing songs, which Tsoi wrote specifically for the film. The songs, "The Star Named Sun" ("Zvezda po imeni solntse," 1989) and "Blood Type" ("Gruppa krovi," 1988), depict a world at war; a morally steadfast protagonist fights ideological oppression and conformism. He rejects physical violence but is ready to sacrifice himself for higher ideals. At the same time, Tsoi's (Moro's) ethnic indeterminacy suggests a Kazakhstani civic identity that is modern, multiethnic, and hybrid.

The Soviet colonialism that Moro fights is made visible through its corrosive effects on the indigenous landscape. Excessively optimistic, fakely cosmopolitan, and borderline absurd, late-Soviet ideology inundates the capital of Alma-Ata through the pervasive television soundtrack that drowns out reflection and critical thinking. Thus, ecstatic Italian-language skits not only mock ordinary Soviet citizens' inability to travel to the West, but also provide bizarre commentary on Moro's pursuit of Artur. The Soviet soundtrack invades the private space of Dina's apartment via three television sets, the new "Holy Trinity" that epitomizes the "shrine-like quality that the 'little black box' had taken on as a portal to the Soviet people's newly appointed deity" (Zhukova 2016, 173). The couple's journey to the Aral Sea extracts Dina from Alma-Ata's toxic environment. Even though the landscape has become a desert, it nonetheless sustains Dina's recovery. The film connects this capacity for healing to the Kazakh land and culture, as this is the only place in the film where Kazakh is spoken by a Kazakh elder, the last remaining resident of the abandoned fishing village who welcomes the visitors with fresh milk. Other references indicate that Moro fulfills the function of a doctor for Dina (Zhukova 2016, 182), thereby connecting

Alma-Ata's heavily televised environment, just as her return to the city results in a relapse (Zhukova 2016, 183–84).

8 "inner strength" and "strong character"

9 "teaching of the unity of physical strength and human spirit"; "rotten Communist ideology"

him to the indigenous Kazakh world of healing and contrasting him to Dina's false mentor, a corrupt Russian doctor who feeds her addiction for his own profit.

Signs of Soviet civilization abound in the desert left in the formerly fertile Aral Sea, and link the source of environmental devastation to the USSR's colonial projects. They include an abandoned railroad built for an unsustainable agricultural enterprise, and airplanes circling in the sky in place of diverse species of sea birds and indicative of proximity to a military base. At the end of the Aral Sea sequence the Aral desert becomes a wider signifier for the damage inflicted on the Kazakh land at military, biological, and nuclear testing facilities. As Moro and Dina walk further away into the parched seabed in search of the vanished sea, Tsoi's instrumental music gives way to a disquieting sound resembling an emergency alarm, followed by the machine-gun "fire" of a rapidly fast-forwarding digital clock taking us back to Alma-Ata. Nugmanov originally planned to end the sequence with a missile launch but gave up due to technological limitations (Nugmanov n.d.). This interconnect-edness of Soviet ideological and military colonialism, drug addiction, and the degradation of Kazakh land unveils the meaning of the film's opening credits, in which Nugmanov drew a needle and a missile next to the title followed by an animation of the missile's explosion.

Yet Nugmanov's concept of "empty action" allows for an alternative interpretation of the missile in the opening credits. Indeed, it can be seen as a spaceship. Many Kazakhs, including Olzhas Suleimenov in his poem *Earth, Bow Down to Man!* (*Zemlia, poklonis' cheloveku! Poema*, 1961), were proud of the fact that the Kazakh land was the site of man's first launch into space. The ideal of "striving for the stars" is also captured in the lyrics of "The Star Named Sun." Interpreted in this key, the needle and the spaceship alongside the film's title suggest a wider field of negotiation between Kazakhs' ownership of Soviet scientific conquests and their rejection of Soviet colonization.

The russified Alma-Ata, ruled from Moscow via television and "colonized" by the corrupt Russian doctor, enjoys environmental amenities of which the indigenous landscape has been stripped. Thus, the hospital in which Dina works as a nurse for Artur boasts a luscious indoor tropical garden; and Artur relaxes by himself in a swimming pool in the city baths. This artificial urban paradise for the privileged is a poor imitation of the fertile garden that Soviet planners promised to cultivate

on the irrigated shores of the Aral Sea. Moro finds Dina at the hospital and interrogates her about her exploitative relationship with Artur; later he exposes the doctor as a fraud by draining the water in his swimming pool and leaving him at the bottom with nowhere to hide. Moro, on the other hand, is associated with natural water, such as the snow that starts falling at the end of the film and transforms the streets of Alma-Ata into a clean white sheet. Moro starts writing a new story for his land as he rises from his knees after a stabbing by one of Artur's thugs, leaving fresh footprints on the virginal snow to the beats and lyrics of "Blood Group." The lyrics call on Soviet citizens to leave their warm places in front of omnipresent TVs and follow the protagonist on his search for a "high star" that would prompt them to think and act on their own.

In the context of Kazakhstan's despoiled landscape, the snow in the final scene contrasts with the snow-like salt and toxic agricultural runoff covering the bed of the desiccated Aral Sea, on which Moro and Dina walk earlier. The snow promises a regeneration of the Kazakh land, able to nurture its multiethnic population. For the viewer focused on Moro's role as a rock-and-roll and martial arts countercultural superhero, the snow symbolizes the spiritual component of these cultures' strength and their moral superiority over Soviet ideology. For those proud of Kazakhstan as the site of the first manned-spaceflight, the snow finds a parallel in the "star dust" on the protagonist's boots in the closing song, as he sets out on a journey to his "high star," thereby redeeming the Soviet space project. In opening the film to a variety of interpretations, Nugmanov's concept of "empty action" acts as Homi Bhabha's Third Space, in which the USSR's multiethnic audiences can negotiate their specific cultural, national, and personal aspirations within the context of the larger Soviet system.

Assessing Contamination: Resilience and Postcolonial Recuperation in 'Renaissance Island'

Where Nugmanov's apocalyptic desertscape exposes Soviet modernity's devastating effects on "full-blooded national life," Rustem Abdrashev's *Renaissance Island* assesses the resilience of his land and culture and their ability to bounce back from the damage. He weaves his ancestral landscape on the northern shores of the Aral Sea into the very fabric of Soviet Kazakhstan's multiethnic society in 1960–1961, when the environmental harm from diverting water for agriculture was barely visible

and when his father, the prominent Kazakh poet Zharaskan Abdrashev, was coming of age, experiencing first love, and discovering his poetic calling. The film sets out to capture these interconnected events, suffusing its often-impressionistic narrative with Abdrashev senior's original compositions. The Kazakh title of the film is based on Zharaskan Abdrashev's poem "A Girl from the City" ("Kaladan kelgen kyz") and develops the theme of tension between Soviet urban and Kazakh rural spaces, as raised in *The Needle*. In *Renaissance Island*, the city produces sovietized political elites, while the country surreptitiously nurtures indigenous poets and harbors the USSR's ethnically diverse deportees and political exiles who have found a new home on the shores of the Aral Sea, even as metastasized Soviet prison camps and military testing sites invade Kazakhstan's innermost natural sanctuaries.

The eponymous girl from the city is Zhibek. When her father, a new Party boss from Alma-Ata, moves his family to Zharas's fishing village, Zharas and Zhibek fall in love. The Soviet establishment, comprised of political administrators and school authorities, do not approve of this love and pressure Zharas into renouncing it. Crushed by this betrayal, Zharas leaves his childhood paradise and embarks on an adult life as a Kazakh poet in a Soviet world. Earlier in the film, young Zharas has a prophetic flashforward to the Aral's desiccated seabed, which is inspired by "Gray Soil" ("Sortopyrak," 2001), a tragic poem written by Zharaskan Abdrashev shortly before his death.¹⁰ This vision symbolizes a Kazakh national catastrophe and establishes the poet-seer as the conscience of the nation, responsible both to his ancestors and to his descendants for the preservation of their ancestral land and culture.

Renaissance Island reflects the changes that took place in post-Soviet states following independence, when "various nation-building and geopolitical priorities—economic growth, security, independence—that have so often dominated emerging national ideologies pushed environmental concerns into the background" (Josephson 2013, 283). In the early years of Kazakh sovereignty, President Nursultan Nazarbaev closed down the nuclear testing site in Semipalatinsk, declaring Kazakhstan a non-nuclear state. In 2001–2005, the Kazakh government, with financial support from the World Bank, made successful efforts at remediating some of the damage to the Northern Aral Sea with the construction

10 I am grateful to Fatima Moldashova for translating the poem from Kazakh to English for me.

of the Kok-Aral Dam. At the same time, Kazakhstan's government, in cooperation with Western oil companies, created new environmental risks associated with the exploitation of the Caspian Basin oil reserves. This most recent environmentally damaging venture has raised fewer concerns among Kazakhstani citizens, who see it as critical for the economic development of their region from which they expect to benefit as opposed to Soviet-era environmental projects that were perceived as "promot[ing] outside (i.e., Moscow's) interests" (Jones Luong & Weinthal 1999, 1277). Abdrashev's film does not set as its primary goal to raise awareness about environmental issues in Kazakhstan; instead, it engages in nation building and a search for a Kazakh(stani) national identity, in which the devastated indigenous environment represents "a primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability and dignity" (Fanon as summarized in DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 3) in a more explicit and deliberate way than in *The Needle*. The Soviet "seeds of decay" that Abdrashev aims to "root out" from his land and his people's minds are clearly identified as hindering the development of both ethnic Kazakh and Kazakhstani national identity.

While Soviet ideas and practices fully dominate national life in *The Needle*, Rustem Abdrashev more intentionally differentiates between two kinds of discreet ideological space: the "Soviet world" and the "Kazakh world," which, as Gulnara Abikeeva has shown, emerged in Kazakh cinema in the 1960s (Abikeeva 2004a, 64–65). Following Abikeeva, Rico Isaacs identifies this distinction as becoming central during the Thaw, because it allowed for a more authentic expression of the national identity of Kazakhs and provided a "subtle form of dissent against Soviet ideology" (Isaacs 2018, 75–76). Within the Soviet world, he further distinguishes between external (Moscow) authority and local (Kazakh) elites, who embrace and implement central Soviet policies (Isaacs 2018, 168).

The new Kazakh party boss arrives in the village with a brand-new television set that represents his ideological connection to the external authority in the Kremlin.¹¹ The boss introduces an ambitious fish-harvesting plan passed down from the center, thereby condoning the unsustainable practices of Soviet agriculture that carelessly strip indige-

11 Zhukova emphasizes the role of the new medium as a "mouthpiece of the Party" and an ideological transmission belt in the USSR starting in the late 1950s (2016, 172).

nous terrain of natural resources. Although the film clearly portrays the party boss as an opportunist rather than an earnest believer in Soviet modernity, this porous boundary between the local Kazakh and external Soviet authority is illustrative of the contested nature of the Soviet project in Central Asia, where “representatives of indigenous peoples supported the advance of modernity that did not treat natural resources with care” (Obertreis 2018, 129). Similar to *The Needle*, *Renaissance Island* depicts the ideology and policies emanating from the “Soviet world” as invading the “Kazakh world” of the Aral fishing village; but Abdrashev shows the resilience of Kazakh land and culture in both repelling and creatively absorbing Soviet assaults. The totalitarian Soviet regime as external authority is mentioned only indirectly, through a children’s poem about the Moscow Kremlin. However, it is literally embedded in the Kazakh land, desecrating it with moral and physical contagion by colonizing it with Soviet penal camps and repressive policies; appropriating indigenous territories for secret military facilities; and practicing reckless stewardship of the Kazakh land through unsustainable agriculture and nature-transformation projects.

The legacy of Soviet military colonization is shown to have a deep and lasting impact environmentally. The fish in the Aral Sea are unhealthy and stressed, which local fishermen connect to the appearance of Soviet soldiers on the sea’s islands, but the Party boss suppresses these concerns, forbidding any references to the military. Soviet decay has penetrated the most secluded sanctuaries of the Aral Sea. This includes Renaissance Island, which the traveling Kazakh shoe repairman Omar-agai describes as “the very heart of the Aral Sea where souls are born and dreams are buried.” That is where Renata Isakovna, a teacher of Russian literature from St. Petersburg, traces the disappearance of her father, repressed in the Stalinist purges. In 1924–1926, Renaissance Island hosted a special-purpose Soviet prison, and in 1948 this former hunting and fishing paradise was closed off to indigenous people, becoming a top-secret site for a Soviet bioweapons-testing facility. Periodic accidents killed local fishermen and multitudes of natural life. With the evacuation of the lab in 1991, deadly pathogens remained in the island’s soil and in the abandoned equipment (Gorvett 2017). The film implies that some of the scientists in the lab were political prisoners, such as Renata Isakovna’s missing father. A close-up of suffocating fish, as if “imprisoned” behind metal bars in an overloaded boat, comments on

the physical and ideological contamination of the Kazakh land and sea by both toxic military pollutants and the deadly web of Gulag camps.

The village has also absorbed the shockwaves of Stalinist repressions, most notably, the pre-war and wartime wholesale deportations of “enemy” ethnicities. The film opens with village children playing hide-and-seek among a bountiful harvest of watermelons in a kolkhoz field, where one of the old cattle cars that transported human cargo now serves as a makeshift shelter for field workers. A rusty bed without bedding in the shed, along with a broken watermelon that one child used to imitate a pregnant belly, indicate the deadly impact of Soviet colonial policies on people forcefully displaced from their homes elsewhere in the Soviet empire. Although scars like this pepper the Kazakh landscape, the film also highlights the hospitality and the healing that the generous Kazakh land has extended to the victims of various Soviet repressions, as if modeling a grassroots, non-imperial version of the Soviet Friendship-of-the-Peoples policy. Embraced as inherently auspicious, the policy continues to shape independent Kazakhstan’s multiethnic citizenry.

Despite the environmental and moral degradation caused by Soviet authority, the film highlights the Kazakh land’s resilience, which comes less from ethnic Kazakhs’ hybrid identities as Soviet citizens than from their traditional hospitality cultivated in the boundless steppe, where nomadic settlements offered long-distance travelers vitally needed shelter; openness to other cultures fostered by the location on the Silk Road; and indigenous ways of relating to history and the environment nurtured by pastoral nomadism. The multiethnic village that has opened its doors to “enemy” ethnicities represents a microcosm of Kazakhstani society in the transformative aftermath of Stalinist deportations. The film suggests that it was not the restrictive and colonial Soviet ideology, but indigenous Kazakh knowledges, hospitality, and cultural open-mindedness that cultivated authentic citizens and secured peace and prosperity in multiethnic Kazakhstan.

Zharas’s prophetic dream set in the drained bed of the Aral Sea epitomizes the external Soviet authority’s physical and moral abuse of the Kazakh land and people in its arrogant nature-transformation project, allegedly building a Communist paradise on earth.¹² Traditionally

12 The project envisioned diverting water from the rivers flowing into the Aral Sea to create cotton farms on the newly irrigated parts of the surrounding desert and on the lands “conquered away from the sea” (Sidel’nikov 1987).

nomadic Kazakhs have closely associated their culture and their land, and Kazakh bards have sanctified the Kazakh steppe and the freedom it represents. In Soviet times, “the sacred land of Abai and Mukhtar,” two of the most revered Kazakh poets, has become a nuclear testing ground, while its most prized “natural pearl,” the formerly abundant Aral Sea, the main source of livelihood for the native people, has turned into a toxic desert laden with carcinogenic pesticides from agricultural water run-offs and studded with ghost-like rusted ships (Kulbarak 2016). The source of the disaster transpires in the visual mosaic of Zharas’s dream, in which footage of the dried-up Aral seabed is interspliced with flashing images of villagers walking under a convoy and wearing gas masks, as well as with Zharas’s family photo taken with alabaster statues of Lenin and young pioneers from the village school.

Abdrashev gives Zharas insight into the future of his land by bringing him into contact with the spirits (aruakh) of his dead ancestors and the souls of the children destined to remain unborn due to the contaminated Aral’s lethal hazards. Zharas appears in the dream in national dress, riding a white camel and holding a dombra, a traditional Kazakh instrument used to accompany recitations of poetry and national epos. This positions the fledgling poet Zharas, like it does the established poet Zharaskan Abdrashev, the author of “Gray Soil,” on which the dream is based, as a seer and leader of his nation akin to the prominent Kazakh zhyrau (a philosopher-poet “marked by god”) and influential adviser to Kazakh khans, Asan Kaigy (“Asan Kaigy—*uiti*” 2017). Living at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, during the period of Kazakh tribes’ migration to new lands, Asan Kaigy (the sad Asan), traveled the steppe on his white camel in search of the Promised Land for his people, место счастья и равноправия людей (Abdrashev in Nurseitova 2012).¹³ The dream therefore contrasts the Soviet and traditional Kazakh visions for Paradise on Earth. In bringing Zharas in touch with his ancestors’ hopes for their common land, the dream reveals the colonial exploitation and subjugation that takes place in the Soviet world.

Despite its critique of Soviet political and economic imperialism, *Renaissance Island* negotiates a hybrid Russo-Kazakh cultural identity that selectively appropriates humanistic masterpieces of Russian literature into the Kazakh national heritage. Renata Isakovna, the Russian literature teacher hailing from Russia’s “cultural capital,” acts as one of

13 “a place of people’s happiness and equality”

the two mentors who introduce young Zharas to non-Soviet knowledges about the world. When students in Renata's class cheerfully and loudly recite paeans to the Soviet soldier protecting the peace and happiness of the multinational Soviet Family, or to the Kremlin stars extending their light to the farthest corners of the USSR, she calls for "quieter," more "grownup" verses that "come from the heart," offering them lyric poetry by Anna Akhmatova and Aleksandr Pushkin. Zharas avidly absorbs this Russian poetic wisdom, just as Zharaskan Abdrashev made the poetry of Pushkin and Aleksandr Blok a part of his people's intellectual horizon by translating it into Kazakh. Zhibek too makes Pushkin's art her own, reciting his love lyrics "To Kern" ("K Kern... ia pomniu chudnoe mgnoven'e," 1827), which resonate with her feelings for Zharas, in her native tongue. Zharas's Kazakh mentor, Omar-agai, hands the budding poet a collection of verses by Kazakh poet Magzhan Zhumabaev, promising that the book will provide answers to many questions that Zharas has not yet had a chance to ponder. Zhumabaev (1893–1938) perished in the Stalinist repressions and his banned love lyrics and poetic confessions of love to unprepossessing Kazakh nature symbolize indigenous knowledge, which the film depicts as vital for proper emotional and moral maturation, but which the Soviet system suppresses because it threatens its ideological dominance.

Similar to *The Needle*, the battle of Soviet and indigenous world-views plays out on the soundtrack, which overflows with recitations of poetry—some Soviet, but mostly Kazakh, prerevolutionary Russian, and ancient Persian (a philosophical quatrain by Omar Khayyam). Lyric poetry by Zharaskan Abdrashev and Magzhan Zhumabaev merges the young protagonists' budding romantic feelings with their awareness of their native land, as they flee their school's ideologically saturated Soviet space to be alone and free in nature. Extended poetry-voiceover sequences depict Zharas and Zhibek walking on flowing sand banks next to the gently shimmering Aral, with Zhibek's silk scarf catching the sea breeze like a sail. Abdrashev emotively inscribes the indigenous lyrical poetry and young protagonists' beautiful bodies in the Aral landscape; poetry seems to emanate from the land itself as if it were the expression of its soul. The pristine, sandy Kazakh land supports the fledgling poet: it both cradles Zharas in its soft indents and provides a quiet, contemplative environment for writing poetry. By contrast, the ideologically violent space of the Soviet school tarnishes the purity of Zharas's and

Zhibek's feelings with crude insinuations, barging into their emerging private worlds and imposing a ban on their thoughts and emotions.

The battle of the Soviet and indigenous visual- and sound-tracks is perhaps most complex in the censure scene in the school principal's office, in which Zharas, in a coming-of-age moment, must face and process the imposed Soviet part of his identity. For the first time an external voice of Soviet authority speaks directly, over the radio, but the ambiguity of its exact source of origin creates ambivalence about Kazakh ownership of the Soviet project. The announcement of the "good news" about man's pioneering flight into space comes in right after school administrators and teachers denounce Magzhan Zhumabaev's love lyrics as pornographic and force Zharas to renounce his love for Zhibek. External Soviet authority further belittles Zharas's indigenous trauma, when everyone abandons him at the height of his emotional crisis and rushes to the radio to hear "the important message" from Moscow. Contrary to viewers' expectations, however, we hear the message not in the principal's office, a temple of Soviet ideology, but in the open steppe freshly dusted with snow and sparkling underneath a brilliant blue sky, a visual shrine to Tengriism, Kazakhs' traditional pre-Islamic religion that "centers on the relationship between humankind and nature, sanctifying humans' relationship with the sky" (Isaacs 2018, 177). The camera pans over the bright snowy expanse as we hear the sounds of the radio transmission, as if the Kazakh land itself is communicating with the sky and the universe. This is one of the few color sequences in the black-and-white film, and despite the noticeable switch from the summery seascape to the snow-white steppe, the official announcement of Iurii Gagarin's message, followed by the live broadcast of his greetings from space, just like Kazakh poetry in previous scenes, resounds over the Kazakh land.

This ambiguous portrayal of a Soviet nature-conquering project as both indifferent to indigenous traumas and connected to indigenous land and its ancient spirituality may indicate the filmmaker's sense of conflicting ownership of the Soviet space program. The message that the external Soviet authority appropriates via the usual broadcast preamble of "Moscow is speaking" (*Govorit Moskva*) in fact originates from outside the Soviet Union and the earth, from Gagarin's spaceship, launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome near the Aral Sea. This symbolic event seems to inspire Zharas, launching him on his own journey away from

his shattered childhood “paradise” into the “boundless sea” of life as a new Kazakh poet (Abdrashev in Galkina 2004). Unlike other Soviet projects shown to affect the Kazakh land and nature, the film does not raise the issue of the environmental impact of the Soviet space program on the indigenous landscape.

Renaissance Island moves beyond *The Needle* in identifying the ancestral Kazakh landscape not only as a healing space, but also as the locus of Kazakh indigenous values and knowledge that have survived the devastating impact of Soviet repressive policies, ambitious nature-transformation projects, and reckless stewardship of the Kazakh land. Nugmanov’s vaguely Asian superhero gives place to an ethnically Kazakh protagonist firmly grounded in his indigenous land and culture, but also open to cross-cultural exchanges outside of the dominant Soviet ideology. Like Nugmanov’s Moro, the hybridity of Abdrashev’s protagonist comes mostly from non-Soviet influences, but Soviet ideology nonetheless leaves both positive and negative imprints on his psyche. More deliberate than Nugmanov and his concept of “empty action,” Abdrashev still allows for some degree of negotiation between his protagonist’s Kazakh and Soviet identities. The Soviet Friendship-of-the-Peoples ideal finds its true realization in the Kazakhs’ tradition of hospitality, as they open their ancestral lands to political exiles and repressed “enemy” ethnicities to forge a multiethnic civic nation in Kazakhstan. Abdrashev’s vision of the Aral Sea catastrophe becomes synonymous with a national disaster and a genocide, in which environmental degradation figures as a metaphor for the Soviet colonial impact on the health, land, culture, and the very ancestral identity of the Kazakh people. Abdrashev, however, seems to be less concerned than Nugmanov with the environmental impact of the Soviet space program, demonstrating a less ambivalent ownership of this scheme to conquer nature. In reclaiming humanity’s first flight into space from Soviet colonial authorities and linking it instead with the Kazakh land and its indigenous nature-centric religion and native poetry, Abdrashev offers it as an inspiration for his indigenous protagonist to dream and create freely. *Renaissance Island* thus reflects the early post-independence era’s priorities of nation building, as it uses Soviet-caused environmental decay for the purposes of decolonization rather than a comprehensive critique of Soviet ecological practices that have been perpetuated in nature-exploitation projects in independent Kazakhstan. In the evolving

contexts of capitalism, globalization, and climate change, more recent Kazakhstani cinema, such as Ermek Tursunov's Tengriist narratives, has increasingly engaged in global discussions on the environment, answering the call for a more fundamental rethinking of humans' exploitative relationship with nature in the Anthropocene.

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The Politics and Aesthetics of Waste in Liudmila Petrushevskaja's Fiction

Irina Anisimova

THIS chapter examines the fiction of the Soviet/Russian writer Liudmila Petrushevskaja with a particular focus on her use of waste metaphors.¹ I argue that images of waste in late Soviet and post-Soviet culture can function as important symbolic markers of Soviet and post-Soviet society in the process of its sociocultural transition. Petrushevskaja's fiction is especially interesting and representative in this respect, since waste in its literal and figurative meanings reappear in her works belonging to different periods and often acquires additional symbolic significance.² Therefore, I examine Petrushevskaja's works belonging to different periods—the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s—to understand the ways this evolution of waste imagery sheds light on both the changes in her fiction and the sociocultural trends of late Soviet and post-Soviet society. In Petrushevskaja's earlier fiction, the metaphors of waste often express a social critique of Soviet life. In her later works, the metaphors of waste become connected to post-Soviet popular culture, or suggest a potential for artistic creativity and transformation, while simultaneously losing a clear sociopolitical stance. Moreover, Petrushevskaja's changing imagery of waste reflects the evolving cultural contexts of the post-Soviet transition—the move from a situation in which the state exercises control over culture to one in which the authors have to consider the

- 1 In this chapter, I use terms such as “waste,” “trash,” “rubbish,” and “garbage” interchangeably. At the same time, the term “waste” has a more generalized meaning than the other words.
- 2 This chapter is not meant to be an all-inclusive survey of Petrushevskaja's fiction. Instead, it examines works with significant presence of waste imagery. Works where waste is a marginal element are not investigated.

influence of a globalized cultural market.

My approach to Petrushevskaiia's works draws primarily on the interdisciplinary field of waste studies, which examines "the multivalent significance of rubbish, filth, toxins and remains across a wide range of contexts" and from a variety of perspectives (Harrison 2017, 4). The category of "waste" is important for cultural studies since its material dimensions are inseparable from its figurative significance (Harrison 2017, 4).³ As a literal substance, waste is closely connected to our physical and social environments. At the same time, images of waste can serve as broader metaphors for social problems, social anxieties, and, more disturbingly, entire social groups. Yet the topic of waste's meaning has not received much attention in scholarship on Soviet and post-Soviet culture. An important exception is a discussion of the imagery of trash in Mark Lipovetsky's study of Russian postmodernism, *Paralogii (Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistkogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov*, 2008). According to Lipovetsky, in Russian postmodernism, trash (*musor*) represents the manifestation of "the maximally lowered transcendental theme," such as life after death and presence after absence (58). Furthermore, the landfill (*svalka*) and trash represent a number of "explosive aporias," such as "unofficial culture and Soviet society," "the beautiful and the monstrous," and "memory and forgetting" (Lipovetskii 2008, 59–65).

Whereas Lipovetsky's approach focuses on the philosophical or even metaphysical aspects of waste imagery in Russian postmodern art, this chapter emphasizes the ways in which metaphors of waste are linked to the material transformations of Soviet and post-Soviet culture. Petrushevskaiia's fiction well illustrates the permutations of waste imagery, since her work includes examples of both naturalistic realism and postmodernism. As Svetlana Boym (1999) argues in her discussion of the trash installations by Soviet and post-Soviet conceptualist artist Il'ia Kabakov, the imagery of trash represented a central taboo of Soviet society, that of the banal and the ordinary.⁴ In the Soviet context, the con-

3 Waste studies is a relatively new yet vibrant field; publications on the topic from a variety of perspectives have multiplied in the last two decades (Gille and Lepawsky 2022, 1). As an interdisciplinary field, waste studies combines multiple methods and approaches. For a comprehensive view from the social sciences, see, for example, Gille & Lepawsky (2022). For approaches based in the humanities, see, for example, Morrison (2015) and Harrison (2017).

4 Il'ia Kabakov's trash installations became popular in the 1990s. Some examples of

cept of “consumerist popular culture” was largely replaced by state-controlled “mass culture.” Among Western modernist artists such as the Cubists, Italian Futurists, and Dadaists, the interest in popular culture had led to fascination with the processes of consumption and concomitant waste. Similarly, camp and kitsch styles or the “trashy tastes” of the masses became a source of fascination for postmodernist artistic movements such as Pop Art. For example, for such American modernist and postmodernist poets as Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Goldsmith, “waste becomes a source of creative play, innovation, and textured, often eroticized, pleasure” (Schmidt 2014, xii). In contrast, for their Soviet counterparts, waste belonged to the realm of censored expression. The use of waste metaphors, therefore, historically has been confined to nonconformist Soviet art, appearing, for example, in the fiction of Andrei Platonov or the conceptualist art of Kabakov. Petrushevskaia’s works can also be interpreted as nonconformist, since they are invested in social and artistic disruptions, breaking social and cultural taboos.

From Soviet to Post-Soviet Materiality in Petrushevskaia’s Fiction

Comparing the lives of objects in the capitalist West with those in the USSR, Boym points out the paradoxes of Soviet approaches to material culture: “In Soviet Russia, the experience of material scarcity for the majority of the population and the official critique of bourgeois commodities (combined with thinly disguised social inequalities) endows private objects with a different cultural significance” (Boym 1994, 159). As a result, Soviet and post-Soviet culture could be characterized by a particular materiality, where objects acquired cultural and symbolic meanings distinct from those in capitalist countries.

For example, due to ongoing shortages and deficits plaguing socialist economies, material objects obtained a surplus value. Liviu Chelcea claims that consumer items in socialist economies had additional significance: “Goods that would have been commodities in a market economy acquired the features of gifts or rarities” (Chelcea 2002, 20). Furthermore, even packages and wrappers, which in market economies would be considered trash objects, could have material value. As a re-

his engagement with trash are the installations “Box with Garbage” (“Iashchik s musorom,” 1981) and “The Man Who Never Throws Anything Away” (“Chelovek, kotoryi nikogda nichego ne vybrasyvaet,” 1988).

sult, in Soviet culture, objects received emotional and even fantastic qualities. Andrew Chapman describes Soviet sacralization of objects as “the practices in which scarce items or even their remnants, such as wrappers and empty boxes, take on added meaning” (Chapman 2013, 143). Due to this persistent condition of scarcity, individuals often tried to extend the lives of material objects by reusing and recycling. While in many respects socialist states had a problematic attitude to natural environment,⁵ they implemented recycling programs for select materials. These programs incorporated the whole of society, and included the gathering and recycling of paper, metal, glass bottles, and jars (Gille 2007, 3).⁶

Social attitudes to material and consumer objects were not static. They changed from early to late socialism, and shifted further during perestroika and the post-Soviet period. Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to precipitous changes in social and material life—the move from a planned economy, characterized by deficit and scarcity, to a market economy and conspicuous consumption. This dramatic sociocultural shift had significant ramifications for the country’s approach to material objects and waste. Specifically, the socioeconomic shift resulted in a dramatic increase in waste production. In the 1990s, the Soviet recycling systems were dismantled and, to date, have not been replaced by alternative methods of utilization.⁷ Moreover, the shift to a consumer society gradually led to the appearance of a “throwaway” culture. The problem of recycling and waste storage plagues post-Soviet Russia and has become even more severe in recent years.

In the sphere of cultural production, the disruptive transition from a Soviet to a post-Soviet society reversed earlier social and cultural norms and broke social taboos. Upon entering the postindustrial economy, post-Soviet literature followed the rules of the global literary market rather than state mandates or rules of an artistic underground. In the early 1990s, “the Russian book market began to take on the familiar

5 William Wheeler (2021) argues that Soviet modernity treated nature as a resource to be mastered to serve human progress. This violent reordering of the environment often led to environmental degradation.

6 Of course, these programs were limited to wastes that were considered important by the state; other types of waste were usually excluded.

7 Municipal waste disposal infrastructure and Soviet-era landfills are often ill equipped to deal with the post-Soviet increase of domestic and more complex waste (Josephson et al. 2013, 310).

contours of a capitalist market,” and works of literature followed the logic of the international cultural scene (Gorski 2020, 614). One of the ways that the post-Soviet literary scene differs from its Soviet predecessor is the popularity of genre literature and taboo subjects. Reflecting these changes in popular tastes, Petrushevskaia's fiction also underwent significant changes between the late 1970s/1980s and the 1990s and 2000s. It shifted from the prevalence of dark naturalistic prose to the predominance of popular and fantastic genres such as dystopia, horror story, postmodernist novel, and adult fairytale.⁸ Petrushevskaia is an extremely versatile author, who over the years wrote in a variety of literary genres, such as prose, poetry, drama, short stories, novels, and fairytales for both children and adults. Despite this diversity in form and style, the prevalence of taboo subjects, especially waste imagery, remains a persistent feature of Petrushevskaia's fiction. Since the 1990s, reception of Petrushevskaia's works has shifted from rejection by Soviet literary censors to critical acclaim by the post-Soviet literary establishment—a shift that reflects the changing cultural scene.

Petrushevskaia's Soviet Metaphors of Waste

The late 1980s and early 1990s became a time of social disruption. Due to glasnost, taboo topics that were previously rarely discussed in the USSR, such as criminality, sexuality, and dark aspects of the Soviet past, began to appear in literature, cinema, and the press. One such taboo-breaking style was the perestroika-era aesthetic of *chernukha*,⁹ coming from the Russian word for black (*chernyi*), it represented a kind of kitchen sink realism. This aesthetic transgressed the limitations of Soviet culture by focusing on negative aspects of reality. Chernukha cinema and literature combined aesthetic and thematic concerns to represent the previously silenced negative aspects of Soviet life. On the thematic level, these works were usually concerned with underprivileged or marginal social groups, depicting grim social problems. The works offered almost no solutions and emphasized “physicality and natural-

8 According to Lesley Milne, half of Petrushevskaia's five-volume collected works published in 1996 already consisted of fantastical prose of various genres (Milne 2000, 270). The number of such works has only increased since the mid-1990s.

9 The popularity of this aesthetic is illustrated by the sudden rise to visibility of the figure of currency prostitute (*valiutnaia prostitutka*)—someone who targeted foreigners in order to receive currency rather than Soviet rubles. The best-known example can be found in Petr Todorovskii's film *Intergirl* (*Interdevochka*, 1988).

ism” (Graham 2000, 9). One of the reasons for the popularity of the mode was its parodic inversion of the rules of socialist realism (Graham 2000, 13). In opposition to socialist realist works with their tendency for varnishing reality, chernukha focused on crime and violence, poverty, psychological problems, environmental degradation, drug and alcohol abuse, and illicit sexuality.

The style of Petrushevskaja’s prose exhibited features of the chernukha mode even before this style became prevalent in late perestroika fiction and film. An important characteristic of Petrushevskaja’s late Soviet prose is that it “deflates and parodies the euphemism of Soviet literature by depicting the human body and its needs grotesquely and minutely, in every conceivable detail” (Ivanova 2015, 29). This aspect of Petrushevskaja’s fiction broke the long-standing taboo on depicting sexuality and physicality, which Soviet culture rejected in favor of the ideological and the ideal. Similarly, Petrushevskaja’s fiction challenges late Soviet culture by emphasizing the banality of the dark aspects of Soviet everyday life. Her iconic works of the late 1980s and early 1990s further reflect this aesthetic. For example, her short novel *The Time: Night* (*Vremia noch*’, 1992) tells the story of a poet, Anna Andrianovna, who has trouble publishing and lives in poverty in the late 1980s. The novel focuses not on the poet’s literary career but on her dysfunctional family, consisting of three generations of single women: a deranged grandmother, the protagonist herself, and her young daughter. Their lives are circumscribed by poverty and cramped and uncomfortable living conditions.

In *The Time: Night*, the lives of the protagonists contradict the Soviet narratives of prosperity and equality. Indeed, they appear to have no value. The women are dehumanized and become equated with their inhospitable environment:

О обманщица природа! О великая! Зачем-то ей нужны эти страдания, этот ужас, кровь, вонь, пот, слезы, судороги, любовь, насилие, боль, бессонные ночи, тяжелый труд, вроде чтобы все было хорошо! АН нет, и все плохо опять. (2013c, 448)¹⁰

By connecting nature with waste and excretion, such as stench, sweat,

10 “Oh, deceiver nature! Oh, great! For some reason, she needs this suffering, this horror, blood, stench, sweat, mucus, convulsions, love, violence, pain, sleepless nights,

and slime, the novel presents human life as eternal suffering, with a particular focus on women's sexuality, family, and motherhood. For Boym (1999), banality and ordinariness are among the taboos of Soviet culture. Petrushevskaja exaggerates the banality of her characters and their familial stories by adding the taboo of the dysfunctional Soviet family. The protagonist of *The Time: Night* takes a particularly ambivalent view of her family: she questions her children's choices, especially her daughter's, and appears unaware of the fact that her daughter's life seems to replicate her own, as well as that of her elderly mother. This ambivalent view of motherhood and female sexuality challenges Soviet cultural norms. According to Lynne Attwood, starting from Stalinist times, Soviet culture celebrated motherhood (Attwood 2001, 162). An ideal Soviet family had to be productive both at work and at home. In contrast, Petrushevskaja presents a femininity that is productive in a rather anti-Soviet way. Thus, the protagonist writes poetry and diaries that cannot be published, and her daughter gives birth to illegitimate children. Connecting unacceptable forms of authorship and motherhood, Petrushevskaja shows both as a kind of refuse rejected by official Soviet culture. Thus, family life leads to unhappiness and dysfunction rather than to enjoyment and happiness. Social institutions similarly appear absent or inadequate as sources of support for her female characters, leading to a sense of wasted lives. Even more disturbingly, women characters internalize Soviet norms and restrictions, oppressing their own families. Thus, Anna becomes what Helena Goscilo terms "the totalitarian Petrushevskian mother [who] mirrors the totalitarian Soviet state" (Goscilo 1995, 105).

In other instances, the novel offers a more direct critique of Soviet society through the use of trash metaphors. For example, the protagonist is terrified of the fact that her mother will be sent to a mental institution far from Moscow, but she cannot take her in, because she is already housing her young daughter and her three young children. The housing shortage—a common theme in Soviet-era literature—becomes absolutely intractable in Petrushevskaja's prose.¹¹ These circumstances force the protagonist to finally allow her mother to be moved to a far-

hard work? Presumably to make things right, but everything is bad again." (All translations of Petrushevskaja in this chapter are my own.)

11 The "apartment question" had been addressed by Soviet writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov and Mikhail Zoshchenko.

way mental institution, which she will be unable to visit, thus symbolically expunging her mother from her life. Once the protagonist makes this decision, she throws all of her mother's belongings into the nearest garbage dump: У ближайшего мусорного контейнера я разгрузила свой чемодан, выбросила пахнущие хлоркой пеленки, остро воняющую клеенку, квач и утку, свои сокровища периода надежд. Туда же пошли рваные простыни, я оставила только ком ваты (Petrushevskaia 2013c, 492).¹²

The discarded possessions represent the prolonged hospitalization and speak of humiliation and discomfort. Soviet institutions of care for the elderly and mentally ill thus appear especially dehumanizing and are symbolically linked to waste. This moment illustrates how Soviet society created hierarchies and exclusionary practices in direct contradiction with the stated emphasis on social equality and progress. While Soviet culture gave additional value to material objects, it also created the means for social distinction based on proximity to valuable goods (Chapman 2017). Focusing on the problems of Soviet women, such as economic insecurities and family fragmentation, Petrushevskaia's prose is especially suggestive of the gendered nature of these social exclusions. In her works, mundane aspects of everyday life such as family, housing, and comforts are associated with forms of distinction that are unattainable for most of her characters. Soviet citizens' distinction was taking place in parallel with the processes of social exclusion and disregard. Consequently, these systems of distinction and exclusion led to the production of wasted lives—a process similar but not equivalent to that of capitalist societies. Whereas globalization and capitalism produce wasted lives through social hierarchies based on economic exploitation (Bauman 2003), Soviet society created wasted lives through limitations of access to material goods, as well as through processes of social division based on a rigid interpretation of social class.

Throughout its history, Soviet society often undervalued entire social groups, turning them into outcasts, such as enemies of the people (*vragi naroda*) during Stalinism or the dispossessed (*lishentsy*) during the 1920s. These social exclusions persisted throughout the Soviet era, since the loss of social status and capital could not be fully recovered

12 "At the nearest dumpster, I unloaded my suitcase, threw out the smelly bleached diapers, pungent oilcloth, potty, these treasures of the times of hope. There went the torn sheets; I left for myself only a clod of cotton."

during the partial rehabilitations of the 1960s. The reality of social distinctions further contradicted the discourses of Soviet equality. This tendency to waste human lives appears in Petrushevskaiia's 2004 autobiographical novel, *Girl from the Metropol* (*Devochka iz Metropolia*), which tells of the experiences of Petrushevskaiia's family in the Stalinist 1930s and 1940s. One of the signs of the family's social status was their apartment in the Metropol Hotel in Moscow, home to some of the most privileged members of the Soviet nomenklatura. However, in the 1930s, her relatives were pronounced enemies of the people and arrested or exiled from the capital. Together with her mother, grandmother, and aunt, young Petrushevskaiia had to leave for Samara, and the family was reduced to abject poverty. In the early 1940s, Petrushevskaiia lived almost as if she were homeless, often running away from home and begging for food on the streets of Samara.

This dramatic change in her family's fortunes reflected the insecurity of Soviet life. Under Stalin, a privileged family could lose its fortunes overnight and be imprisoned or exiled. Thus, the processes of social exclusion acquired an unpredictable or seemingly random quality. Petrushevskaiia describes in detail the deprivation experienced by the families pronounced enemies of the people. For example, her grandmother and aunt had to scavenge their neighbors' trash for food (2013a, 418). Under these conditions, trash turns into a symbol of both possibility and humiliation, appearing, for example, in the image of the dolls that young Petrushevskaiia finds in the neighbors' bins.

Но тут я как замерла. Я ничего не могла с собой поделывать. Выброшенные куклы лежали, а я не верила своему счастью. Я знала, что у нас нет будущего, что я не имею права и помечтать о том, чтобы сшить им платья и где найти лоскутики, я не смела даже думать, куда их положу и какую жизнь мы могли бы прожить вместе! (418)¹³

Symbolic of a traditional girlhood that was denied to many Soviet girls, the dolls symbolize what Boym calls the "precarious objects and

13 "But here I froze. I couldn't help myself. The discarded dolls lay there, and I did not believe my luck. I knew that we had no future, that I had no right to even dream about sewing dresses for them, and where would I even find cloth pieces, I didn't even dare to think where I would put them, and what kind of life we could live together!"

marginalized domesticity” of Soviet culture (Boym 1994, 160). Significantly, the girl is unable to imagine even the discarded dolls as her potential possession; we later learn that the neighbor’s mother took the dolls back. While this autobiographical work replicates the darkness of Petrushevskaiia’s earlier prose, it is nevertheless lighter given its focus on a lively child, as well as the child’s eventual return to Moscow and reentry into a more or less normal Soviet childhood.

Fantastical Waste and Its Post-Soviet Transformations

Many of Petrushevskaiia’s works of the 2000s belong to the genres of fantastic and subversive short stories and fairytales. For example, her collection *Sea Garbage Stories* (*Morskie pomoinnye rasskazy*, 2001) consists of absurdist fairytales, which contain linguistic games and bizarre situations. This playful and humorous collection depicts both sea creatures and trash floating in the sea as fictional human-like characters; it does not distinguish between animate and inanimate objects. The collection is a satire of post-Soviet society, of its youth culture, new forms of consumption, and environmental degradation. The collection draws attention to the pieces of trash commonly found at seaside resorts, such as plastic bags, condoms, and plastic bottles, and its humor derives from the fact that these objects become the stories’ main characters:

В воде все было нормально: плавали пустые пластиковые бутылки, громко смеясь. Три помятых презерватива обсуждали вчерашний футбольный матч, отмахиваясь от назойливых мальков. Мимо проплыла знакомая резиновая подошва, которая весело воскликнула:

— Уай! Кого я вижу типа! (Petrushevskaiia 2001)¹⁴

The stories rely on the readers’ knowledge of environmental problems, since almost everyone has probably encountered a plastic bag or plastic bottle floating in the sea or lying on the beach. At the same time, this pollution represents the post-Soviet transition, since it draws attention to the appearance of new types of packaging and new consumer goods.¹⁵

14 “Everything was normal in the water: empty plastic bottles floated, laughing loudly. Three crumpled condoms were discussing yesterday’s football match, brushing off annoying fry. A familiar rubber sole swam past, exclaiming cheerfully:—Wow! Who do I see, like!”

15 Robert Argenbright (2021) points out that, in the 1980s, the USSR was inundated

Thus, in the 1990s, plastic bottles replaced Soviet glass ones, contraception became more readily available, and Western goods came together with new types of packaging.

While environmental problems appear to be at the center of this collection, it treats post-Soviet pollution parodically. Rather than depicting trash as an environmental and social problem, Petrushevskaia presents it as an artistic challenge: How might an item of waste be turned into a fictional character? Like modernist artists such as the Cubists, Italian Futurists, and Dadaists, who “assembled work from constituent elements rather than painting, drawing, or sculpting” (Surak 2016, 533), Petrushevskaia treats trash in a way that challenges notions of value and decorum by giving objects once considered garbage a new parodic consideration. The author emphasizes the vitality of these objects rather than their destructive or unseemly nature.

Maite Zubiaurre suggests that discarded objects are “more powerfully ‘animated’ than ‘useful’ ones. Suddenly void of desirability and functionality, the discarded object transcends its utilitarian meaning and adopts an identity of its own” (Zubiaurre 2017, 324). Bearing the traces of their former owners, trash objects speak to our imagination. Petrushevskaia’s trash characters similarly speak of the pleasures of life in a resort town. To symbolize the new post-Soviet reality, both animate and inanimate inhabitants of the sea behave as a motley crowd of post-Soviet citizens and represent distinct social types: Как-то раз одна медуза не вписалась в поворот и задела пластиковый пакет. Пакет тут же облепил медузу с трех сторон и стал говорить всякие слова про царапину на боку, поврежденный борт и про евроремонт за большие баксы.¹⁶ The jellyfish represents the new post-Soviet generation that came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In other stories in the collection, she behaves as a typical young person of that era, attending night clubs and engaging in parodic online chats with her boyfriend. Similarly, the plastic bag appears to stand in for a bandit or a shady businessman, who seems to engage in racketeering and speaks in a contemporary slang. Thus, to extort money from the jellyfish, the

with garbage, much of which “consisted of previously unseen materials such as polyethylene and polystyrene foam.”

16 “Once, one jellyfish did not fit into the turn and touched a plastic bag. The bag immediately stuck around the jellyfish on three sides and began to say all sorts of words about a scratch on the side, a damaged body and about a European-style renovation for big bucks.”

plastic bag mentions *evroremont*,¹⁷ a fashionable new term of the 1990s and 2000s. As with Petrushevskaiia's other absurd fairytales, the language games are important for the collection; they rely on slang and popular culture idioms of the time. Petrushevskaiia uses the slang not to criticize the "immorality" and "linguistic impurity" of the post-Soviet generation, but to emphasize the democratizing and artistic potential of these new idioms. Similarly, Petrushevskaiia's use of trash imagery is subversive not because of its social critique of the new capitalist society with its wasteful production and consumption, but because of its artistic reversal of social boundaries and taboos.¹⁸ Alexandra Smith argues that in the 1990s Petrushevskaiia's fiction seemed to move away "from the realistic or sociological mode towards subversion and anarchy" (Smith 1997, 108). This tendency has become even more pronounced in Petrushevskaiia's fiction of the 2000s and 2010s.

Like other postmodernist artists, Petrushevskaiia seems to be simultaneously fascinated and troubled by post-Soviet popular culture, associated with new consumer goods and the concomitant "trashy" production of both consumer and cultural products. For example, her short novel *Little Sorceress* (*Malen'kaia volsheb'nitsa: kukol'nyi roman*, 1996) features a Barbie doll as the protagonist, cast as kind and helpful despite its iconic status as a Western consumer good. Moreover, television shows play a central role in *Little Sorceress* and some of Petrushevskaiia's other short stories and fairytales. In the fairytale "The City of Light" ("Gorod sveta," 2005), the evil sorcerer uses a television show to ensnare viewers with the allure of an affluent life. However, the show turns out to be a magical illusion. When the show ends, the sets and the prizes turn into a pile of trash.

Reality TV and game shows represent both the illusory nature of contemporary life and the superficiality of popular culture. The appearance of reality TV and game shows were an important feature of the 1990s and 2000s and represent the transition from socialist mass culture to consumerist popular culture. Postmodernist works such as Viktor Pelevin's *Generation P* (*Pokolenie P*, 1999) and Vladimir Sorokin's "White Square" ("Belyi kvadrat," 2020) focused on this sim-

17 "European style renovation"

18 In this respect, Petrushevskaiia's approach is markedly different from most contemporary trash art with its preoccupation with social critique of capitalist wastefulness and throwaway culture (Surak 2016, 534).

ulative aspect of post-Soviet society. However, whereas popular culture usually acquires dark and dystopian meanings in Sorokin's and Pelevin's fiction, it is presented with more ambivalence in Petrushevskaiia's works. For example, in *Little Sorceress*, the television show leads to the complete and positive transformation of reality. Petrushevskaiia's stories criticize popular culture for its creation of illusive and empty reality for the masses, but also celebrate it for its vitality and popular appeal. In this way, Petrushevskaiia's fiction challenges the traditional elitism of Russian high culture; it "invites us to reassess our perception of popular culture as something threatening and vulgar" (Smith 1997, 122). While Petrushevskaiia's work lacks some of the critique of capitalism present in Pelevin's and Sorokin's fiction, she also avoids the potential elitism of such representations.

Artistic Transformations of Chernukha

Petrushevskaiia's adult fairytale "Seven O'clock" ("Sem' chasov," first published in 2010) relies on but also reverses many elements of her own earlier dark naturalistic works. The story features a typical character and situation from Petrushevskaiia's earlier chernukha prose—a teenage girl who becomes a single mother after an encounter with a man she hardly knows. "Seven O'clock" tells the story of a young artist named Aia. As a sixteen-year-old girl, Aia visits a seaside resort town and meets a young man. She falls in love and spends four nights with him, even though she does not know his name. Scared of this unexpected romance, Aia's parents quickly force their daughter to leave the town. The only thing Aia remembers about her lover is his broken gold watch that appeared to always read seven o'clock. Despite her family's efforts, Aia becomes pregnant and gives birth to a girl. Later, she finishes an art college and becomes a multimedia artist. The focus on young people and their uncontrolled sexuality is a popular topic in chernukha fiction and film.¹⁹ However, in "Seven O'clock," Petrushevskaiia turns the dark plot of works such as *The Time: Night* into a story of eternal and romantic love. She also focuses on the redemptive power of art. Thus, the tale depicts a young woman who becomes not only a teenage mother but also an artist, and who eventually finds her lover and the father of her child.

The story's setting provides the first clue of the reversal of the chernukha themes. The setting is a seaside town with a temple dedicated to

19 A well-known example is Vasilii Pichul's *Little Vera* (*Malen'kaia Vera*, 1988).

the ancient Christian saint, the young girl Eufimiia. The fictional town is reminiscent of ancient Mediterranean or Crimean towns. Similarly, Aia's name and life details are somewhat difficult to place historically, even though signs of contemporary post-Soviet life appear in the story. As a result, the work acquires a timeless and universal quality.

Significantly for Petrushevskaiia's aesthetics, the story also reimagines trash as an artistic object. Ten years later Aia returns to the seaside town with her daughter. She combines a holiday with her artistic work. Among her other artistic techniques is the making of collages out of the assembled objects she finds in her environment, essentially items of trash: Приехав в свой любимый городок, Ая забросила краски и кисти, вместо того она собирала по побережью выкинутые морем деревяшки, обрывки сетей, пузырьки тряпки, и все это приклеивала, а что и приколачивала гвоздями близко друг к другу, чтобы получилась какая-то общая пестрая картина, память о море (Petrushevskaiia 2013b, 349).²⁰ It is through this collage that the story reaches its happy ending. One of the objects that the protagonist finds is the glass from her lover's watch. She uses the glass fragment as a message to her lost lover, incorporating the object into her collage.

Ая тут же сделала свою лучшую работу—как обычно, она приклеила к деревянной дощечке несколько простых камешков, прядку сухих водорослей—и накрепко, мелким гвоздиком, прибила между ними две стрелки, указывающие на недостающем циферблате семь часов, а сверху, тоже с помощью крепчайшего клея, уместила стеклышко, сверкающее, как огромная слеза [...] (Petrushevskaiia 2013b, 350).²¹

The story has a self-referential quality, since like Petrushevskaiia herself, Aia practices a collage art that helps her transform reality. Avoiding direct social critique, the story emphasizes the possibility of positive

20 "Arriving in her beloved town, Aia threw away paints and brushes; instead of that she collected pieces of wood thrown out by the sea, scraps of nets, small bottles along the coast, and rags, and glued all of this, and what she nailed close to each other, to get a general motley picture, the memory of the sea."

21 "Aia immediately made her best work ever. As usual, she glued a few simple pebbles, a strand of dry seaweed to a wooden plank—and firmly, with some small nails, nailed two arrows between them, indicating seven o'clock on the missing watch dial, and on top, also with the help of the strongest glue, placed a glass sparkling like a huge tear [...]"

change and reversal. The reuse of trash objects functions here as a mnemonic device that connects nature and the past to personal memories.

Conclusion

The evolution of waste imagery in Petrushevskaiia's prose sheds light on both the changes in her fiction and the sociocultural trends of the late Soviet and post-Soviet transitions. It demonstrates that metaphors of waste connect the politics of representation to the politics of everyday life, raising a variety of social and even ethical questions relating to contemporary society. In Petrushevskaiia's earlier fiction, the metaphors of waste often express a social critique of Soviet life. Thus, in *The Time: Night* and other works from the 1980s and early 1990s, Petrushevskaiia shows Soviet society's propensity for wasting human lives. These depictions acquire a renewed importance in the context of the current nostalgic romanticization of the Soviet era, which has even acquired political and geopolitical significance (Boele, Noordenbos & Robbe 2020, 1). Additionally, her use of waste metaphors illustrates the changing materiality of late Soviet and post-Soviet society in their shift from late Soviet scarcity to the consumerism and popular culture of the post-Soviet period. Like other post-Soviet liberal writers of an older generation, Petrushevskaiia appears to be much more critical of Soviet society and its legacy than of the post-Soviet period.²² In her works of the 2000s and 2010s, the metaphors of waste become connected to post-Soviet popular culture, or suggest a potential for artistic vitality and transformation, while simultaneously becoming less invested in direct social critique. The evolution of waste symbolism in Petrushevskaiia's prose thus reflects the political and aesthetic changes of the transitional period with its growing interest in popular culture and taboo topics. Unlike other artists who use waste imagery, Petrushevskaiia seems less interested in serious engagement with the questions of capitalism, consumption, or environmental problems, responding to these challenges in an ironic and parodic manner. The political significance of Petrushevskaiia's post-Soviet prose can instead be seen in its democratizing, anti-elitist, and anti-authoritarian tendencies.

22 See, for example, the works and interviews of writers such as Vladimir Sharov, Vladimir Makanin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Olga Slavnikova.

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

José Vergara

FOR a book made up almost exclusively of the memories of Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl *is*. As Sergei Sobolev, deputy head of the Executive Committee of the Shield of Chernobyl Association, puts it: А событие все равно выше нас, любого комментария... Однажды я услышал или прочел, что проблема

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” (Aleksievich 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 Chernobyl 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. Chernobyl's reach is wide, but one feature of its representation lies in this struggle to verbalize Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl disaster to emphasize how this feature of some works about Chernobyl crosses linguistic boundaries. As Hundorova writes, "Chernobyl, 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl, we deal with radiation and a time scale that we cannot fully conceive of individually. We can have trouble comprehending it, the ever-expanding Chernobyl 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 Chernobylian Hyperobject

Before turning to some Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl, 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, yields 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 out-scale 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 Chernobyl

The problem begins, most broadly, with how to define Chernobyl. According to the various authors, filmmakers, poets, and scholars who have taken on the subject of Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl *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 Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl 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). Chernobyl 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 Plokyh, 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, Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Plokyh, 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 Chernobyl *is*, on the one hand, and Chernobyl *as*, on the other. Seeing Chernobyl, 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 Chernobyl. Chernobyl *as* allows for the development of its metaphoric meanings to take shape across time. This is what writers and artists who take up the Chernobyl theme do in their art, and, as will be demonstrated below, they often do so by interrogating how language can function in the post-Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl-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 extra-terrestrial 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 Strugatskii's 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 Hunderova (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.

откликнулся батя, очень похоже, так же длинно и скрипуче, только еще с каким-то клочкотанием (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 Iavoriv'skyi'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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl. 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 Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobylian hyperobject at large. Conceived as a collaboration that pairs Marder's philosophical musings on Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl. 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 Chernobyl and modernity thrust upon us, to accept Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl 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:

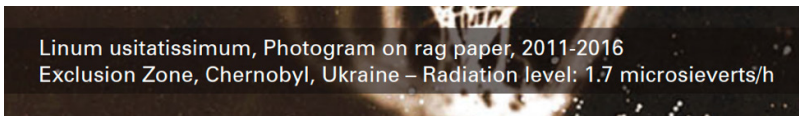


Figure 1: Caption from photogram (Marder 2013, 13)

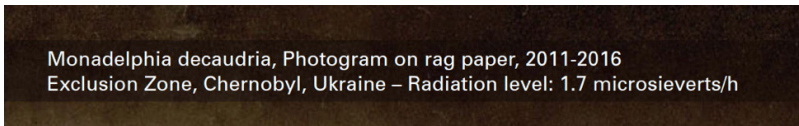


Figure 2: Caption from photogram (Marder 2013, 15)

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 Chernobyl 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-Chernobyl *Roadside Picnic*

and the competing discourses of the *Herbarium* and an American science-fiction novel all speak to a shared struggle to sufficiently represent Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl'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 Chernobyl'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 amnesiac trauma of Chernobyl. 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 Chernobyl cannot be fully articulated.

The play also highlights strikingly how the meaning of specific words has shifted, thus changing how we can talk about Chernobyl 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*

Plochy (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 Chernobyl, 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, Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl 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 Chernobyl *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 Chernobyl—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*

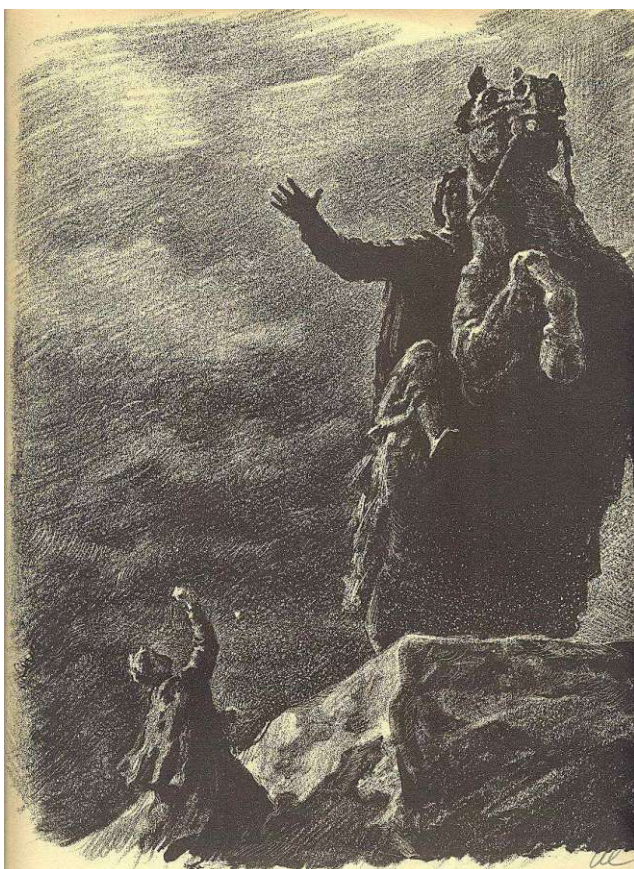


Figure 11: Igor' Ershov's 1947 etching, "A.S. Pushkin's 'Bronze Horseman'" ("Mednyi vsadnik' A.S. Pushkina")

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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A Terrible Kaleidoscope: The Anthropocene Lyric in Chornobyl Poetry

Haley Laurila

THE development of nuclear power in the Soviet Union reached its apex in the 1970s and 1980s, when Soviet science was at the forefront of nuclear technology. Model cities, called *atomogrody*,¹ were constructed as visions of a techno-scientific utopia promising a bright future. The explosion at Chornobyl in 1986 exposed not only the fallibility of the Soviet nuclear project, but also the fallacy that humankind controls nuclear power.² Chornobyl became not just a local but a global catastrophe, underscoring the precarity of a shared future on this planet. Although countries such as Ukraine have experienced the consequences of nuclear disaster most acutely, the “millennial futures” of radioactive waste affect us all (Hecht 2018, 111). The Anthropocenic dimensions of nuclear disaster found vivid expression in Ukrainian Chornobyl poetry, the authors of which discovered “creative and instructive ways of placing the human at the scene of ecological breakdown” to expose uncomfortable truths about nuclear power (Bristow 2015, 108). In anticipating an apocalyptic future, these poets locate nuclear disaster within a larger context of man-made ecological destruction. Chornobyl poetry “conjures the peculiarly wrought (and fraught) intimacies of the Anthropocene” through an awareness of deep time in which “teleological temporality” becomes “more pliable and open,” and where personal and geologic

1 atomic cities

2 The Ukrainian spelling of “Chornobyl” is used predominantly in keeping with requests by the Ukrainian government to restore original spellings upon gaining independence. References may still use the Russian spelling of “Chernobyl.” The same applies for “Kyiv” and “Prypiat.”

memory collapse and thicken temporal experience (Farrier 2019, 8, 25). This article examines the poetry of Ivan Drach, Lina Kostenko, and Oksana Zabuzhko to show how their representations of Chornobyl engage with the Anthropocene *avant la lettre* to describe humanity's precarity in this epoch.

Anthropocene Debates

The “Anthropocene,” a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, refers to the current geological epoch marked by distinct man-made changes (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, 17–18). The Anthropocene is presented as an apocalypse of intensifying environmental devastation. Anthropocene time and space are vast and thick, and its catastrophes are entangled and immense, embodying what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” of invisible and gradual environmental crises (Nixon 2011, 2). While the beginnings of the epoch are still debated, several scholars trace the Anthropocene to the Atomic Age due to the planetary impact of radiation (Waters et al. 2016).³ Soviet versions of the concept circulated in scientific circles but had limited influence given the “hyperbolic Promethean (and utopian) tradition in Russian and Soviet science” (Brookes & Fratto 2020, 9).⁴ What the precursors demonstrate is that the Soviet Union (and imperial Russia before it) was a place where “thinking on the Anthropocene was done,” where thoughts about the long-term effects of human activity were conceived (Brookes & Fratto 2020, 12). It is important to note, as Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald explain, that what differentiates the Anthropocene is its urgency and alarm—it is a rupture, and previous scientists could never have anticipated the extreme scale of environmental harm that we now face (Hamilton & Grinevald 2015, 61–62). Yet the term “Anthropocene” has not penetrated Slavic culture as thoroughly as it has the West. Vladimir Vuletić and Eni Buljubasić note that even two decades after its introduction, the term does not circulate widely in academic communities in

3 For the context of this discussion, I consider the Anthropocene to begin in the Atomic Age and the development of the atomic bomb.

4 Aleksei Pavlov used the term *antropogen* in 1922 to describe the dominance of human activity on earth, and his colleague Vladimir Vernadskii proposed the idea of the *biosfera* (later altered to *noosfera*), to denote the geological impact of humankind on earth (Brookes & Fratto 2020). However, as Hamilton and Grinevald point out, the scientific foundations of pre-Anthropocene thought on this subject expanded toward an optimistic metaphysics whereas the Anthropocene is concerned with abrupt and irrevocable change (Hamilton & Grinevald 2015, 66).

Eastern Europe. They also report that coverage of the Anthropocene in the media, with few exceptions, is largely neutral due to a “lack of interest” in issues that may potentially impede economic and industrial development (Vuletić and Buljubašić 2021, 141). Many of these countries are still navigating old and new traumas and conflicts in the post-Soviet world.

Detractors of the “Anthropocene” take issue with the imprecision of the term. For historian T.J. Demos, the term “makes us all complicit” and erroneously negates the contributions of military, corporate, and state enterprises to ecological crises (Demos 2017, 17). Eileen Crist warns that the Anthropocene recreates a narcissistic narrative of progress in its projections of a utopian techno-scientific future in which we forge ahead bravely to solve all climate change woes (Crist 2013, 140). Similarly, environmental historian Jason W. Moore argues for the term “Capitalocene” as a means of accounting for the transformation of the environment into “Cheap Natures” for exploitation under capitalism (Moore 2017, 611). Gabrielle Hecht acknowledges that although these perspectives animate the conversation, alternative terms are unlikely to displace “Anthropocene” in any authoritative way (Hecht 2018, 111). For Hecht, the term “offers a way of signaling human responsibility” rather than control (Hecht 111). There is a need to address the Anthropocene from multiple perspectives in order to temper some of its narcissistic excess, but the term is malleable enough to accommodate the “many stories to tell, and many ways of telling them,” necessary to adequately articulate the challenges we face as a global community (Hecht 112). The poets in this article envision the disaster not only as an accident but, as Kate Brown suggests, “as an acceleration on a time [*sic*] line of destruction or an explanation point in a chain of toxic exposures that restructured the landscape, bodies, and politics” (Brown 2019, 142).

In the poetry of Drach, Kostenko, and Zabuzhko, the nuclear imaginary unleashes a new Anthropocenic one. All three belong to a strong tradition of state criticism within Ukrainian poetry and are united in their resistance to the power of the Soviet state: “They were innovators practicing pure poetics, searching to discover new artistic values in the context of the national theme in particular” (Kharkhun 2019, 175). All three poets recognized Chornobyl’s significance for Ukrainian independence, and as observers of life and witnesses to the misuse of state power, they were acutely aware of the catastrophic consequences. Given

the popularity of poetry in Ukraine, Drach, Kostenko, and Zabuzhko use their cultural status to articulate painful revelations about our ecological future.

Ivan Drach and the Nuclear Ode

The development of nuclear power in the Soviet Union was neither linear nor monolithic, but much of the debate and anxiety around the Soviet nuclear project was not fully elucidated for the public as it was considered a state secret. Instead, Soviet citizens were inundated with visions of a Soviet technological utopia centered around the idea of *mirnyi atom*.⁵ Art and literature projected these utopian fantasies under the direction of socialist realism, a state-mandated mode of cultural production. Profiles of Soviet physicists and histories of Soviet science circulated in the media, and “the cult of the atom had resulted in songs, poems, novels, cartoons, and films with nuclear science as a theme” (Fraser 2019, 135). In an interview with Svetlana Aleksievich, Valentin Borisevich, the former head of the Belarusian Laboratory of the Institute of Nuclear Energy, recalls that *Физики-ядерщики... Элита... Все в восторге перед будущим* (Aleksievich 2013, 111).⁶ In the 1970s, the censorship and cultural repression of the post-Khrushchev era helped to ensure that the “cult of the atom” and its promise of utopia was not compromised.

The poetry of Ivan Drach offers a compelling example of the shift that occurred between Soviet and post-Soviet attitudes toward nuclear power in poetry. Drach was a well-known poet and screenwriter who rose to prominence during the Khrushchev era and was at the forefront of the dissident writers movement, the *shistesiatniki*.⁷ He was an outspoken critic of repressive cultural mandates that limited individual

5 “the peaceful atom.” Promotion of the peaceful atom elided a long history of Soviet nuclear accidents, atomic bomb testing, and lax public health monitoring in contaminated areas, all of which would be uncovered in the years after the Chernobyl disaster.

6 “Nuclear physicists... Elites... Everyone is excited about the future.” (All translations are my own.)

7 “sixtiers.” This was an informal dissident group of anti-totalitarian Ukrainian writers who emerged in the Thaw period. Many of them had their works banned or were themselves imprisoned or killed. Drach was outspoken about the arrests of his fellow poets and colleagues. After Chernobyl, the criticism leveled at the state echoed similar struggles of the 1960s. However, the sixtiers’ relationship to Soviet power is more complicated (Onyshkevych 1993, 365).

expression and lyric experimentation. His poetry is intense and complex: “The whole universe takes up its abode in the poet’s heart. He tries to understand the tragic contradictions of the epoch that gave birth to great hopes, great accomplishments and, at the same time, spawned fascism and the atomic bomb’s threat of destruction” (Kolinko 1977, 58). Drach’s 1974 collection, *The Root and the Crown* (*Korin’ i krona*), featured a cycle of poems entitled “Breath of the Atomic Power Station” (“Podikh atomnoi”) dedicated to the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, its builders, and communities around Prypiat. Ironically, these rural communities became by default “expendable places that can be forfeited for the sake of sustaining developed-world lifestyles” (Farrier 2019, 11). The villages around Prypiat unwittingly shouldered the risks inherent to life next to a nuclear power plant. After being persuaded that nuclear development would benefit them, these communities—where families had been tending the land for generations—lost everything. The infallibility of the atomic-powered future presented in Drach’s poetry precluded the possibility of catastrophe. Chornobyl undermined the promises of a bright, atomic-powered Communist future.

Drach’s cycle of poems reconciles technology and nature in a familiar socialist realist style.⁸ “The Legend of Polisia” (“Poliska Lehenda”) personifies the relationship between nuclear power and the environment in a marriage between the anthropomorphized Prypiat River and Atom. Young Prypiat figures as a nature sprite of history, born from *Де все стугонить історією, де кожна билинка—пече нам* (Drach 1974, 26).⁹ The *ріка-наречена* turns all other suitors away except Atom.¹⁰ However, she must also calm the worries of the birds and fish (Nature) who fear the power of the Atom (Drach 1974, 26). Atom, promising prosperity, is a Promethean figure, recalling both the hubris embodied in the original Greek myth and the ambitions of Soviet science. Prypiat tells them not to worry, that Atom’s love for her will ensure that their concerns will not have been in vain, for his reactors are secure, where *нього мільйон замків*¹¹ are testament to the power of his *непохитні атомні трони*

8 Drach’s relationship with socialist realism is complicated. At times he was criticized for departing from official tenets, so this cycle of poems, which won him the coveted Shevchenko National Prize in 1976, may be more representative of his conformity in the face of pressure from the state.

9 “Where everything groans with history, where every epic spurns us”

10 “river-bride”

11 “his million locks”

(Drach 1974, 27).¹² The young river-bride will give herself in marriage to Atom to serve her people: Хай Дніпрові й Донбасові Атом мій допомагає! (Drach 1974, 27).¹³ Her sacrifice resembles the duty expected of all Soviet citizens working to build a bright Communist future. These poems are not particularly memorable, but they do demonstrate how poetry helped to construct the Soviet nuclear imaginary. The fact that Soviet citizens had to be persuaded to accept the intrusion of dangerous technologies indicates that there was an ecological, pre-Anthropocene awareness that had to be overcome. The vanity of this cycle eventually gave way to pointed antagonism against the Soviet state and its nuclear legacy after Drach's son was exposed to high levels of radiation while treating the first Chornobyl patients in Kyiv. Drach later acknowledged that the disaster demonstrated that all along "we were on the edge of a precipice, an abyss, and that all our cultural efforts were a vanity of vanities, a waste of effort, a rose under a bulldozer" (Plokyh 2018, 293).

Drach's regrets are expressed most ominously in his post-Chornobyl narrative poem "The Madonna of Chornobyl" ("Chornobil'ska madonna," 1988). In Ukraine, the Madonna encompasses both the pagan adoration of fecund Mother Earth and the religious solemnity linked to her role as the Mother of God. Through the different incarnations of Madonna as mother, the poem presents a multilayered moral and philosophical reflection on the disaster. Except, as Sarah Phillips explains, Drach "inverts the archetypal representation of 'mother with child,' substituting it with a 'mother with no-child,'" underscoring the generational devastation in Ukrainian society (Drach 2004, 169). Similarly, for Inna Sukhenko, Drach's poem is a "cry made by the author himself, by the suffering environment, Ukraine, each human, humanity" (Sukhenko 2018, 239). The appeals to nature and descriptions of flora and fauna interwoven throughout the poem, invoke strong ties to nature and a "pre-Soviet tradition of environmental respect" that resonate deeply through Ukrainian cultural memory (Sukhenko 2014, 127).¹⁴ The close relationship to the land that had been so crucial to

12 "steadfast atomic thrones"

13 "Let my Atom help the Dnieper and Donbas."

14 Sukhenko explains that the pre-Christian "fundamental love and adoration toward nature is a central feature of the Ukrainian mentality," one that was perverted somewhat with the anthropocentric perspective of Christianity but is detectable in a wide body of Ukrainian literature. For Ukrainians, the earth has always been about life (Sukhenko 2014, 122).

Ukrainian experience was fractured by technological and industrial progress. Mykola Tkachuk confirms that a deep connection with nature unites Ukrainian writers of Chernobyl literature and poetry: їх об'єднує трагічний образ природи, яка, як жива істота, волає про допомогу, застерігаючи майбутні покоління від нерозважливості, будить громадську свідомість (Tkachuk 2011, 56).¹⁵ Tkachuk's assessment naturally gestures toward the Anthropocene. The radiation from Chernobyl penetrated bodies and spread into unintended spaces, proving that our man-made temporal and spatial boundaries are artificial and porous.

The fragmented, episodic structure of the poem reflects the traumatic shattering of reality, as well as the impossibility of fully explicating the disaster's unwieldy dimensions. At several points, Drach's lyric subject laments this lack of words: Я заздрю всім, у кого є слова. Немає в мене слів.¹⁶ As is custom, the poet does find the words, but Drach's invocation of the topos of silence speaks to the inadequacy of language for expressing trauma. Poets felt themselves without the language to fully articulate this new post-Chernobyl reality and its Anthropocenic horrors. In Drach's poem, guilt suffuses the tragic presentation of the various Madonnas, where each is a "suffering victim" and yet also guilty, according to Larissa Zaleska Onyshkevych (Onyshkevych 1990, 283). Onyshkevych identifies a pronounced "need to blame oneself and one's own people for the disaster" in early Ukrainian Chernobyl poetry that is not found in the poetry of non-Ukrainian writers (Onyshkevych 284). Through epithets of other Chernobyl poems and the voices and other incarnations that constitute "The Madonna of Chernobyl," Drach presents a kaleidoscopically refracted portrait of guilt and blame that is leveled at scientists, sons, and the Ukrainian nation.

The compulsion to speak combined with the religious context invites a reading of the poem in terms of Walter Brueggemann's definition of lament. Brueggemann defines lament in opposition to a genre of praise that "legitimizes present power arrangements" and marginalizes those struggling against that power (Brueggemann 2008, 223). He highlights the political and social dimensions of lament, which "in its very utterance, is an act of resistance" against "officially legitimated truth

15 "they are united by a tragic image of nature, which, like a living being, cries for help, protecting future generations from recklessness, to awaken public consciousness."

16 "I envy those who have words. There are no words in me."

claims” (Brueggemann 2008, 223). More than an expression of grief, the pain and anger felt by those who experience nuclear disaster offers a powerful critique of the teleological pursuit of progress marked by environmental exploitation. Drach is no stranger to resistance, having been a member of the *shistdesiatniki*, but his poetic resistance became explicitly political in the post-Chornobyl era. In 1989, he helped found “Rukh,” the People’s Movement of Ukraine, which demanded Ukrainian independence, the total divestment from nuclear power, and health monitoring for Chornobyl’s victims (Plokhly 2018, 304). The need to chronicle Chornobyl’s devastation and speak its uncomfortable truths incited meaningful civic action as the legacy of Soviet exploitation became apparent. This impulse finds nuanced expression in the Chornobyl poetry of Lina Kostenko and Oksana Zabuzhko.

Lina Kostenko’s Poetic Activism

Lina Kostenko is one of the most renowned and beloved Ukrainian poets and a fellow member of the *shistdesiatniki* alongside Drach. She values lyric freedom and individual experience in opposition to the repressive constraints of Soviet ideology, a perspective reflected in her poetry, which Michael Naydan describes as “the poetry of natural language, free from pretensions” and that “reveal[s] the deeper personal level of experience” (Naydan 1977, 139). She was banned from publishing until 1977 because of her anti-totalitarian opinions. In her Chornobyl poetry, Kostenko’s civic and lyric mission are united, much like in Drach’s poetry. Unlike Drach, Kostenko emphasizes the global dimensions of environmental disaster. Tetiana Filat explains that тема Чорнобілля у творах поетеси іноді становить основу й центр ліричного переживання (Filat 2018, 186).¹⁷ Kostenko’s poetry employs images of nature and Ukrainian folklore alongside her personal experiences, emotions, and memories. She writes widely on Chornobyl, from whole poems dedicated to the disaster to explosive fragments scattered through larger works. Kostenko began visiting the Zone in the years after the disaster as part of a cultural preservation initiative. Her Chornobyl poetry serves as a record of those impressions, meetings, and observations, all of which further strengthened the poet’s resolve to chart the devastation of the Anthropocene.

17 “the theme of Chornobyl in the works of the poetess sometimes constitutes the foundation and center of the lyrical experience.”

We can see this concern explicitly referenced in Kostenko's poem "Flying Quatrains" ("Letiuchi katreny," 1989). The poem reflects on the spiritual, historical, and symbolic impacts that humans have had on the environment, while also questioning the role of the poet. In the opening lines, the lyric subject asks, *Що за поет як піввіку лякався? / Звикли до правди мої вуста* (Kostenko 1989a, 260).¹⁸ A truth-teller by profession, she asks if she has any right to speak the truth given that so many poets and artists, including Kostenko, were silenced during the repressive cultural environment of the Soviet era. Her hesitancy to speak reflects the guilt over her own, albeit imposed, complicity. However, she does find a voice, and her criticism of nuclear power is unambiguous and striking:

Ми—атомні заложники прогресу,
вже в нас нема ні лісу,
ні небес.
Так і живем—
од стресу і до стресу.
Абетку смерті маємо—
А Е С. (Kostenko 1989a, 260)¹⁹

The use of the word *zalozhniki*²⁰ emphasizes the lack of agency people and communities had over energy decisions, as well as the power differential involved in the growth and expansion of the nuclear industry, where big decisions decide the fate of entire populations. In this stanza, atomic progress is also associated with the disappearance of forests and of heaven, an apocalyptic image that is particularly evocative in the Ukrainian context where a respect for nature is culturally ingrained. When we forsake the responsibility given to us to respect the environment, local and global communities become vulnerable and will be unable to shoulder the burdens of nuclear risk and further environmental degradation. The "АЕС" in the last line focuses the blame directly on the creation of the nuclear power plant.

Kostenko approaches Chernobyl with a new understanding ini-

18 "What kind of poet is frightened for half a century? / My lips are used to the truth."

19 "We are the atomic hostages of progress, / no longer have we forests, / nor heaven. / So we live—/ from stress to stress. / We have the alphabet of death—/ N P P."

20 "hostages"

tiated by the apocalyptic repercussions and fractured precarity of the Anthropocene epoch. The next quatrain poses several questions: Куди йдемо? Який лишаєм слід? Хто пам'ять змив як дощик акварельку? (Kostenko 1989a, 260).²¹ This rhetorical questioning demands that we remember the past to envision the future in the face of increasing existential uncertainty. The poet, as a chronicler of the age, writes using the perception offered by the soul: Тривожними уважними очима моя душа подивиться на все, including the фатальні наслідки й причини²² associated with events such as Chornobyl (Kostenko 1989a, 262). The perspective of the soul is in opposition to other intellectualized modes of perception and explanation, against Всілякі «ізми» і всілякі «нео»,²³ that are not only unhelpful in their abstraction but also suspect for their advancement of many policies and practices that have accelerated and intensified the human impacts on the environment (Kostenko 1989a, 263). In Kostenko's poem, the poet is charged with an impossible task of serving as a "biographer of the people," with a difficult biography of her own: Поети—це біографи народу / а в нього біографія тяжка (Kostenko 1989a, 268).²⁴ This comment echoes an earlier statement about the possibility of speaking from a place of trauma: Поети чи згвалтована душа / спроможна вільно вимовити слово? (Kostenko 1989a, 261).²⁵ "Flying Quatrains," then, lays out Kostenko's conception of a poet's responsibility in the Anthropocene while grappling with her own personal emotions, exhibiting a "humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature" that is often associated with ecopoetry (Bryson 2002, 6).

In "Flying Quatrains," Kostenko consistently condemns history for its role in heralding the arrival of the Anthropocene. History figures as a plow tearing up the land, implicitly recalling the destruction wrought by the Soviet industrialization of agriculture: Як страшно оре історичний плуг! (Kostenko 1989a, 263).²⁶ The poem's engagement with postmodernism "manifests as a disappointment with the great im-

21 "Where are we going? What trace do we leave? Who washed away memory like watercolors?"

22 "With anxious attentive eyes my soul will look at everything"; "fatal consequences and reasons"

23 "all sorts of 'isms' and all sorts of 'neo'"

24 "Poets—biographers of the people / but he has a difficult biography"

25 "Are poets or a raped soul / capable of uttering a word freely?"

26 "How terribly the historical plough plows!"

perial and totalitarian narratives of history along with a romantic mythologizing of the national history” (Hundorova 2019, 75). The destruction of earth is akin to the elision of not only the recent past, but also the deep past from where we came. The riches contained there have been lost, possibly irrevocably: Які скарби були були і зникли! (Kostenko 1989a, 264).²⁷ Blame is leveled on the scientists and institutions of power for loving progress над усе (Kostenko 1989a, 264).²⁸ The lyric subject also laments, Уроків історії не вчимо, and wonders, Це снилось людству чи таки було? (Kostenko 1989a, 264).²⁹ The guilt is implicit, but the irony is clear, because humankind did indeed dream of grand scientific and technological advancements while failing to account for its consequences. Irony is also used to point out the nightmarish inversion of those grand dreams. For Kostenko, irony—це блискавка ума / котра освітить всі глибини смислу and provokes deep contemplation (Kostenko 1989a, 267).³⁰ The image of lightning recalls the flash of light associated with the atomic bomb but also with notions of vision and revelation. Referencing air pollution, Kostenko comments ironically on spiritual contamination: Душа—єдина на землі держава / де є свобода чиста як озон (Kostenko 1989a, 261).³¹ Like radiation, air pollution also permeates space without prejudice and causes illness, cancer, and genetic damage.

In “Flying Quatrains,” Kostenko maps environmental and cultural breakdown throughout the poem as she details what Tamara Hundorova identifies as a “profound uncertainty and distrust” of the recent totalitarian past (Hundorova 2019, 75). Using humility and irony, Kostenko challenges the teleological narratives promoted by the Soviet regime through the “de-heroization of its heroic narrative” (Hundorova 2019, 66). For Kostenko, there are no heroes. Her presentation of a post-apocalyptic landscape undercuts any ideas of victory surrounding Chernobyl, because any victory of containment is not only misleading, but also contaminated with “something unconscious, sensuous, and primordially frightening” brought on by the failure of modernity and its catastrophic “after” (Hundorova 2019, 75). In Kostenko’s poem, it is

27 “What treasures were there and vanished!”

28 “above everything”

29 “We don’t teach history”; “Is this mankind’s dream?”

30 “lightning of the mind which illuminates all the depths of thought”

31 “The soul is the only state on earth where freedom is as pure as ozone.”

the Anthropocene that is “primordially frightening” in its refusal to be contained either geologically or semantically.

The memory of Chernobyl and other disasters prompts us to engage with a constellation of violence and catastrophe inflicted by humankind’s drive for progress. At one point, Kostenko, comments sardonically, *Мені б курінь на острові Борнео*, implying a kind of naive escape from impending ecological catastrophe away from states з поглядом Горгон (Kostenko 1989a, 263).³² However, there is no escape, because the island is already a полігон, a testing ground or proving ground, often used for nuclear weapons testing (Kostenko 1989a, 263).³³ Such devastation is often concealed, as Kostenko notes ironically, *Скільки років землі— / і мільярд / і мільйон / а яка вона й досі ще гарна!* (Kostenko 1989a, 266).³⁴ What makes Anthropocene disasters so threatening is how insidiously they infiltrate even the most private and remote spaces. Kostenko includes public health crises and chemical poisoning: *І смог і СНІД і чорний дим Бхопала* (Kostenko 1989a, 266).³⁵ A few lines later, she remarks: *Не бійтеся ліси / ще не все пропало / Останній вільний зубр / ще ходить по землі* (Kostenko 1989a, 266).³⁶ The “last free bison” reminds readers of the threat of mass species extinction. Kostenko also prompts readers to remember the generational trauma inflicted by Chernobyl: *Летить лелека над Чорнобилем / нікому діток не несе* (Kostenko 1989a, 266).³⁷ Future generations will inherit not only the increased burdens of environmental instability but also a fraught genetic legacy. Radiation carries its own genetic risks, but genetic memory is also affected by large-scale catastrophes, in the form of chemicals, pollutants, and toxic substances that disrupt both ecosystems and bodily systems. Kostenko’s reading of Chernobyl recasts the Anthropocene as a moral and ethical imperative. The destruction of the

32 “I would have a hut on the island of Borneo”; “with a view of Gorgons” (a monstrous view)

33 The former Soviet nuclear testing site in Kazakhstan is commonly referred to as the “Polygon.” During the Soviet period, nearby communities were purposefully kept ignorant of the nuclear tests taking place there and were exposed to radiation for decades.

34 “How many years of earth— / a billion / a million / and how beautiful she still is!”

35 “And smog and AIDS and the black smoke of Bhopal”; Bhopal refers to a 1984 accident at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in India that released thirty tons of methyl isocyanate, a highly toxic gas, onto villages.

36 “Don’t fear the forest / not all is gone / The last free bison still walks the earth.”

37 “A stork flying over Chernobyl is not carrying a child to anyone.”

earth is equated with the devastation of the soul and if we continue to rely on nuclear power, Kostenko writes that even *Дозиметром не виміряєш дози / тотального спустошення душі* (Kostenko 1989a, 263).³⁸

Still, Kostenko's deep love of nature is apparent in the delicate images of her poetry. She finds beauty in the Zone's resurgence of wildlife, documented through her own ecological expeditions into the Zone. In the poem "The Rain Is like a Shower. This Day Is So Tender" ("Tsei doshch—iak dush. Tsei den' takyi laskavyi," 2015), she marvels at the rain, the wildlife, and wild gardens. We know the Zone is being described: *Чорнобиль. Зона. Двадцять перший вік* (Kostenko 2015, 259).³⁹ Filat reads the poem's layered descriptions as part of the Chornobyl chronotope in which time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981, 84; Filat 191). The thickening of time and history in Kostenko's poetry captures the eerie contradictions of the Exclusion Zone as a radioactive space in which the flora and fauna are flourishing in the shadow of a nuclear disaster. The ruins of the past coexist with an apocalyptic landscape that projects a peopleless future; both intrude in our present moment to destabilize our experience of history. Kostenko describes the rhythms of the Zone, where lilacs bloom, *проламують тини*, and pike swim like submarines, *немов підводний човен*, and geese return every *щовесни* (Kostenko 2015, 259).⁴⁰ The routines of nature continue, deceiving us with their normalcy. Part of what the Chornobyl chronotope reveals is that this resurgence of nature is connected to the absence of people. The effects of low-level radiation do not manifest so acutely in animals, so for them, humans are the detrimental variable. Still, while the Earth is beautiful, Kostenko reminds readers that not all is "safe," particularly for humans: *Жив-був народ над Прип'яттю—і зник. / В Рудому лісі виросли поганки, / і ходить Смерть, єдиний тут грибник* (Kostenko 2015, 259).⁴¹ Kostenko's "place-making" encompasses the non-human, making the Zone feel simultaneously familiar and alien as it morphs into a place unfit for man and with a life of its own. Tom Bristow explains that this

38 "With a dosimeter you cannot measure the total devastation of the soul."

39 "Chornobyl. Zone. Twenty-first century."

40 "break through the mud"; "like submarines"; "every spring"

41 "People once lived over Prypiat—and disappeared. / In the Red Forest, toadstools grew, / and Death, the only mushroom picker, walks here..."

is characteristic of the “place perception” of Anthropocene lyricism, where “place is felt as it is encountered as being lived out by others, by more than ourselves” (Kostenko 2015, 7).

The poem “There Are Lakes in a Handful of Valleys” (“Stoiat’ ozera v prygorshchakh dolyn,” 1989) continues this theme with a haunting image of invisible danger: *Малина спіє... І на все, на все / Лягає пил чорнобильської траси / Роса—як смертний піт на травах, на горіхах* (Kostenko 1989c, 544).⁴² The houses—найбільше стронцію—у стріхах—are also contaminated (544).⁴³ *Хто це казав, що стріхи—традиційні?* she adds sarcastically (Kostenko 1989c, 544).⁴⁴ The next lines present a contrasting scene of idyllic paradise: *Ріка. Палатка. Озеро. Курінь. / Аборигени острова Надії. / Босоніж дітки бігають малі* (Kostenko 1989c, 545).⁴⁵ The distance between an irradiated village and carefree children playing in the sun feels safe, but any hope is undercut in the next lines: *А де тепер не зона на землі? / І де межа між зоною й не зоною?* (Kostenko 1989c, 545).⁴⁶ The barbed wire marking Chornobyl’s Zone of Exclusion is a useless barrier that imparts a false sense of security. Our long experiment with nuclear power has meant that radiation from our nuclear legacy has already left its mark. We just do not always see it. Kostenko harnesses poetry’s illustrative potential to make radiation visible. In the poem, human perception, so limited and conditioned to blindness, becomes sensitive to Anthropocene hazards. From this displaced position, we “best witness the fragility, beauty and indifference of flora and fauna, climate and season—the more-than-human world” (Bristow 2015, 7).

Kostenko frequently challenges the idea of containment in her poetry, in her refusal to compromise her poetic vision and in the presentation of the Anthropocene. In her poetry the various crises, often spatially and temporally separate, collide in creative montages that help us see a catastrophic expanse that we have been conditioned to ignore. “A Terrible Kaleidoscope” (“Strashnyi kaleidoskop,” 1989), perhaps Ko-

42 “Raspberries sing... and on everything, on everything / the dust of Chornobyl’s traces falls / like deadly sweat on the herbs and nuts.”

43 “the most strontium is in the roofs”

44 “Who said the roofs are traditional?”

45 “River. Tent. Lake. Hut. / Aborigines of the island of Hope. / Small children run barefoot.”

46 “And where isn’t the zone on earth now? / Where is the boundary between the zone and not the zone?”

stenko's most Anthropocene-aware poem, encompasses a wide variety of catastrophic elements, creating a kaleidoscopic view of disaster. Kostenko mirrors different types of disaster against one another, reflecting on the varied forms of catastrophe that mark history and the planet, delineating an alarming pattern of Anthropocene violence.

Страшний калейдоскоп:
в цю мить десть хтось загинув.
В цю мить. В цю саму мить. У кожну із хвилин.
Розбився корабель. Горять Галапагоси.
І сходить над Дніпром гірка зоря-полин.
Десть вибух. (Kostenko 1989b, 7)⁴⁷

Chornobyl is placed alongside volcanoes, ruins, the shooting of a weapon, and a flying comet. Many of these imagistic fragments are associated with explosion and light, confirming Naydan's claims of Kostenko's concern with illumination, mentioned earlier. While the world seems to be exploding, life goes on: Бавиться дитя. / Цвітуть обличчя, острахом не степті (Kostenko 1989b 7).⁴⁸ Poetry, in its capacity to condense and expand time, reconceptualizes modes of perception to assist readers in understanding the scale of the Anthropocene, which "exceeds both personal experience and intergenerational memory" (Farrier 2019, 5). The disaster forced poets to confront not only the immediate consequences of nuclear power's fallibility, but also the far-reaching consequences of nuclear disaster that alert us to the impossibility of containment. Tracing the ecocritical themes in Kostenko's poetry makes it possible to see more clearly the unfolding catastrophes of the Anthropocene that Chornobyl revealed to be there all along.

Oksana Zabuzhko's Anthropocenic Intimacies

Oksana Zabuzhko is one of the most celebrated and widely translated Ukrainian writers of the post-Soviet era. Her work frequently dissects the many layers of Ukrainian historical memory and confronts the new complexities of human and environmental interactions revealed by

47 "A terrible kaleidoscope: / In this moment somewhere someone died. / In this moment. In this very moment. Every single minute. / A ship crashes. The Galapagos burns. / And over the Dnipro a bitter wormwood-star rises. / Somewhere an explosion."

48 "A child is having fun / Faces bloom, unerasd by fear."

Chornobyl. Part of the *vos'midesiatniki*,⁴⁹ Zabuzhko belongs to a generation of Soviet writers who made their writing debuts “under its disintegrating system” and unlike Drach and Kostenko, with significantly more freedom (Wallo 2019, 4). Hundorova cites Zabuzhko’s highly successful novella *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* (*Pol’ovy doslydzhenniia z ukrains’kogo seksu*, 2011) as an example of the “post-Chornobyl text” that confronts the carnivalesque instability of post-Soviet life. In an interview, Zabuzhko, echoing Hundorova, explains that 1986 is “the real *fin de siècle*”:

Враження було, що ми продовжуємо жити після Апокаліпсису. Світ посттехнологічної катастрофи обживає для себе реальність, непридатну до життя [...] Чорнобильська катастрофа спричинила тектонічний зсув у свідомості й у сприйнятті часу, який несамовито прискорився. (Zabuzhko 2007)⁵⁰

She chronicles this reality through a dissection of the macrocosm contained in the microcosm of everyday life, “where intimate locales register life and environmental change” (Bristow 2015, 7). Zabuzhko’s poetry is located at the intersection of the apocalyptic and ecocritical, revealing the disruptions, oclusions, and realities accompanying the awareness of the scale and severity of the Anthropocene. Zabuzhko’s poetry is more lyrical in its presentation and less accusatory than Kostenko’s, focusing instead on the more personal and embodied experiences of disaster.

For her, Chornobyl is a lens through which an individual must reevaluate their relationship to state power; the ecological damage of radiation represents the intrusion of state power into intimate spaces (Russell 2020, 10). She consequently presents an image of the precarious conditions of life in perpetual crisis through the “making strange” of the spaces, relationships, and emotions that we might typically believe to be safe from contamination but are often the most vulnerable.

Zabuzhko’s “Letter from the Dacha” (“List iz dachy,” 1996a) is a disturbing poem that chronicles the happenings at the dacha in the form

49 “eightiers”

50 “The impression was that we continue living after the Apocalypse. The world of post-technological catastrophe inhabits a reality unfit for life. [...] The Chornobyl catastrophe caused a tectonic shift in consciousness and the perception of time, which accelerated violently.”

of a letter. The title and the epistolary form already set up certain expectations as to the subject matter of the poem, but if one were expecting a languorous lyrical poem about the idyllic Ukrainian countryside, they would be disappointed. Immediately, from the first lines of the poem, the reader is confronted with an apocalyptic image:

Здрастуй, любий! У нас ізнову
по кислотних дощах заіржавів город: почорнілі цурпалки гудиння
над землею стирчать, як на згарищі спалений дріт.
(Zabuzhko 1996a, 164)⁵¹

The epistolary delivery is unsettling. The idea of someone sitting down to languidly recount the horrors of the day is strange and concerning. Idyllic images are replaced with ones of acid rain, rust, and scorched wires common to the post-Chornobyl visual lexicon. The radiation released by the accident contaminated the soil and was absorbed by plants, which reacted to the radionuclides with weakened immunity, growth suppression, and an increased occurrence of mutations. From exposure, any plants became susceptible to the growth of a rust-like fungus on their stems, and the radiation turned a forest of pine trees near the nuclear power plant a reddish-amber color. The trees died very quickly, but the area has become infamously known as the “Chervonyi lis.”⁵² This rust is a visual marker of radiation damage, one that left its indelible mark on the nuclear post-apocalyptic imagination. In the decades since the disaster, metallic artifacts that were exposed to the elements and neglected from lack of maintenance, have accumulated rust. Rust has taken on a new symbolic connotation as a marker of decay in Chornobyl’s modern ruins.

The poem’s reference to acid rain alludes to greater fears of environmental pollution. Acid rain and nuclear contamination share several of the same properties, including their invisibility, threat to health, long-term effects, and connection to the energy industry structured from “an unbridled use of technology and a fundamental lack of concern about the long-term health of mankind and stability of the environment” (Park 1989, 2). Zabuzhko’s reference to acid rain in this poem under-

51 “Hello dear. After the recent acid rains / the garden has turned rust colored again / the blackened cucumber vines / stick out of the ground, like scorched wire.”

52 “Red Forest”

scores the reality of pollution and its effects on the environment and public health, while also underscoring the role of the energy industry and technological hubris in facilitating multiple ecological crises. Traditionally, rain is part of nature's cycle of growth and rebirth, nourishing the land and preparing it for crops. When rain becomes acidic, what was once beneficial and life-giving is now toxic and destructive, and if the rain is now dangerous, what other potential dangers await us and where are we truly safe? These are the kinds of questions that we must confront in a post-Chornobyl world.

As the poem continues, the writer mentions that she is not sure that the orchard will bear fruit and that the soil is "dirty," an image that rhymes with a "mutant" birth later in the poem. She is afraid of the trees and the earth, which conceals death nearby:

як по правді, то я боюся ступати між ті дерева:
щокрок усе дужчає відчуття, ніби я наближаюсь до місця,
де у високій траві лежить піврозкладене стерво
і масною червою кишить, мов сміється на сонці.
(Zabuzhko 1996a, 164)⁵³

Death is a defining feature of the landscape in "Letter from the Dacha." The image of a rotting carcass is visceral and unnerving. The writer fears nature, which reeks of death, not only because of the carcass in her backyard, but also because death is so close to home. There is real danger in the landscape. Sarah Phillips, in her article about post-Chornobyl food consumption practices, explains that Chornobyl altered how Ukrainians relate to food, and in turn, to their own health and body (2002). She explains that because radiation is almost undetectable by the senses, it is "everywhere yet nowhere, and its consumption in food products—especially for those living near Chornobyl—is practically unavoidable" (2002, 30). Mushrooms, berries, and milk, three staples of the rural diet, absorb higher levels of radionuclides than other food products. And while efforts were made to monitor radiation levels in the environment and regulate consumption of contaminated food, institutional corruption and a lack of resources have meant that those meas-

53 "to tell you the truth, I'm afraid to walk between the trees: / with every step I feel I'm closer to the spot / where a rotting carcass lies in the tall grass / swarming with worms, grinning in the sun."

ures were soon abandoned, leaving hundreds of thousands of people unaware of lurking health risks. The fear in this poem is palpable. Our epistoler is afraid of the potential dangers lurking outside, such as an ominous tree which looks like a giant scorched bone:

Чи пам'ятаєш суху берестину, оту, що минулого літа
вцілило громом, — гігантську обвуглену кістку
Так от, мені часом здається, що це вона
верховодить над садом, і свійські дерева помалу
траплять природну тям, мов заражені сказом пси.
(Zabuzhko 1996a, 164)⁵⁴

The Chernobyl disaster fundamentally altered the relationship between humans and the land: the garden, once a place of food, life, and beauty is now a threat. Literary scholar Vitaly Chernetsky explains, “The poem renders powerfully the disturbing feeling of the post-Chernobyl’ environment that deceives the senses while turning the mind obstinately toward the apocalyptic” (Chernetsky 2007, 257). The dacha, traditionally a place of respite, is no longer a safe space. It is nightmarish, so much so that she keeps an ax nearby as protection from the trees. The disturbing descriptions offer evidence of the damage done to the earth, as well as the psychological damage of living in perilous conditions. There is no safe space anymore, and this uncertainty and vulnerability is Chernobyl’s legacy.

The nuclear imaginary has given way to a new Anthropocenic one. At one point in the poem, the writer relates the news that a neighbor has given birth to a baby born with hair and teeth already, like some kind of mutant. The days-old baby speaks prophetically with a warning:

[...] можливо, й мутант, бо вчора,
тобто маючи дев'ять днів, закричав:
“Погасить же ви врешті це небо!” —
і замовк, і більше нічого не каже [...] (Zabuzhko 1996a, 166)⁵⁵

54 “Do you remember the withered birch, that last summer / survived the thunder—a giant burnt bone / that sometimes seems as though it / lords over the garden, and the trees we planted / are slowly losing their minds, like mad dogs.”

55 “[...] maybe it’s a mutant, because yesterday, / when he was only nine days old, he cried out: ‘Extinguish the sky!’—/ then fell silent and has said nothing since [...]”

Those exposed to radiation live with their own bodily uncertainty as well as the anxiety of how future generations will be affected. The child in the poem is born with the mark of trauma upon him. He cries out, “Extinguish the sky!” as though he remembers the burning reactor and its smoke. The fact that he is now silent is disquieting, and Zabuzhko’s appraisal of this otherwise alarming occurrence with a так—цілком здоровенький is almost shocking (Zabuzhko 1996a, 166).⁵⁶ The last lines of the poem once again draw our attention back to the epistolary form and its characteristic intimacy, which “brings to the fore the personal dimension of the experience and effects of world destruction” (Dietrich 2010, 339). The tone shifts as the heroine implores her loved one to visit before nonchalantly signing off. The poisoned environment has become unexceptional. However, the final line betrays her underlying uneasiness:

[...] Якщо тобі вдасться
 вирватись і приїхати на ту неділю,
 привези мені щось до читання, найкраще—
 незнайомою мовою.
 Ті, що знаю, вже геть зжилися.
 (Zabuzhko 1996a, 166)⁵⁷

Her request for books in a different language invites multiple readings. In her isolation, perhaps she is longing for something new. It could be that language has lost its power to adequately convey her loss, anxiety, and helplessness. Maybe her words have worn out because there is no one listening. Perhaps she no longer trusts the words she knows. There is hope in her search for a new language, just as there is hope that poetry and art can inspire the radical reflection needed to reckon with the planetary breakdown we have accelerated through events such as Chernobyl.

Zabuzhko’s poem “Prypiat. Still Life” (“Pripiat’ Natiurmort,” 1996b) sets up expectations by connecting poetic form to a style of painting. Reading the poem is akin to scanning a painting. The painterly quality

56 “otherwise, he’s quite well”

57 “That’s our news. If you find time / to get away for the weekend, / bring me something to read / in a language I haven’t learned yet. / Those that I know are exhausted.”

of light in a painting helps guide the viewer's eye to various textures and objects. There is a lot of light: Це, здається, світанок—/ і світло, немов простирадла, прим'яте (Zabuzhko 1996b, 64).⁵⁸ We can imagine the kind of light breaking over this scene: it is the soft, speckled first light of day that reveals and illuminates. The element of ambiguity introduced by “it seems” (*zdaiet'sia*) means that we, like the lyric subject, are not entirely certain. The poem leaves us guessing in other ways as well. Where is this place? Who lives here? Where did he or she or they go? Throughout the poem a motif of emptiness repeats as Zabuzhko “eulogises the absent body” (Russell 2020, 10) in phrases such as “порожня кімната,” “нікого немає!,” and “пронизливо-тихо” (Zabuzhko 1996b, 64).⁵⁹ Yet someone must live here, because the poem hints at recent habitation, even telling us, Тут хтось був! (64).⁶⁰ From these signs, someone's domestic life is reconstructed: “В попільничці—недокурки,” and “Тільки в кріслі костюм, перед миттю / заповнений тілом,” as well as “ще светр недоплетений пальці чийсь пам'ятає, / І розгорнута книжка—в позначках од нігтів чийхось!,” and “надкушене яблуко, де надкус ще не взявся іржею” (Zabuzhko 1996b, 64).⁶¹ The interplay of presence and absence reminds us of our own impermanence and contrasts humankind's transitory existence against the actions that have permanently impacted life on this planet. The figurative excision of humans in this instance further underscores “the inescapable reality of our shared destiny on a destitute planet” (Bristow 2015, 2). The descriptions of emptiness evoke Chernobyl's Exclusion Zone, a site that has flourished in the absence of humans despite the lingering radiation.

The role of time in this poem is unclear. We do not know how long ago this room housed a living person, as there is “no witness.” Many details suggest that whoever is or was living here has merely stepped out for a moment: the present-tense verb usage, the phrase Ще хвилину тому,⁶² as well as the curious detail of a still-ripe apple at the very end of the poem. The occupants have left in a hurry, chased out by the radi-

58 “It seems to be dawn. / The light is like a crumpled sheet.”

59 “empty room”; “there's no one here!”; “piercing quiet”

60 “Someone was here!”

61 “In the ashtray—cigarette butts”; “In the chair lies a suit, occupied by a body before this moment”; “An unwoven sweater recalls someone's fingers”; “An open book, marked by someone's fingernails!”; “And a bitten apple, where the bite has not had time to redden”

62 “A minute ago”

ation that has breached our inadequate defenses. Russell interprets this intrusion and the absence it leaves behind as a testament to the “state’s violation of this intimacy” (Russell 2020, 10). This room is suspended in time, caught between past and present, presence and absence. We, too, become intruders into this home, but perhaps, also witnesses: Увійдіть! Увійдіть, подивіться (Zabuzhko 1996b, 64).⁶³ The use of the imperative form commands us to enter as though we are being offered an unauthorized tour of someone’s private space. The narrator’s entreaty to come and explore seems inappropriate, and we feel uneasy, knowing that we are unwelcome. Our intrusion constitutes a form of unethical spectatorship, casting us as voyeurs to an intimate tableau. Tourists entering the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone replicate a similar act of looking when they walk through the Zone’s abandoned buildings to see the decaying artifacts of Soviet life as though in a museum or an amusement park. Zabuzhko’s poem urges us to interrogate the ethics that frame our practice of looking so that ecological crisis does not become a spectacle to consume and quickly forget. The poem also asks us to feel the absence marked in the poem as though it were our own imminent future, one in which we humans have only just left. “Prypiat. Still Life” serves as a warning to readers of what is to come.

The apocalyptic theme is elucidated further in Zabuzhko’s poem “Love” (“Liubov,” 1990), which consists of a series of vivid impressions that express an overarching narrative of nuclear apocalypse distilled through the image of lovers in their final moment. The beginning of the poem implies that they are already living in a post-apocalyptic world, even as another catastrophe is imminent. The lack of descriptions of nature or other living beings is notable. The poem’s opening links the sexual entanglement of their bodies with their death-bed agonies, and that theme continues. Obliteration and orgasm are the same:

А обійми стекли, як вода,
 І нічник нашу тінь роздвоїв...
 Не офіра, не пристрасть, не дар—
 Просто спроба лишитись живою.
 Із зачумлених стронцієм міст,
 Понад їх передсмертні муки
 Палахкоче легкий поміст—

63 “Come in! Come in, look around.”

Переплетені голі руки.
 І допоки це сонце вночі,
 І допоки ці спалахи бистрі—
 Прокохай, продрижи, прокричи
 Цю—останню!—хвилину на вістрі!
 (Zabuzhko 1990, 67)⁶⁴

The sense of impending apocalypse is implied through details of sacrifice, irradiated cities, survival, screaming, and living on the edge. Apocalypse *brings to light* that which was previously hidden. Again, illumination is a central motif woven throughout the poem: нічник, палахкоче, сонце, спалахи вистрі, мертвотний відсвіт (Zabuzhko 1990, 67).⁶⁵ The flash of light is indelibly linked to the breaking of the atom and the first atomic bomb explosion. Zabuzhko's poem offers a deathly image of life penetrated fully by radiation. We are reminded of the porousness of human bodies and the truth of our own vulnerability in the Anthropocene. The apocalyptic suffuses everything, and no one is spared.

The poem's title, "Love," draws our attention to the intimate spaces of apocalypse and nuclear disaster. While the Anthropocene invokes vast geological expanses, environmental catastrophes invade personal spaces just as insidiously. The sensuality and violence of the lovers' final moments "achieves a form of knowledge in the traffic between entities" that "calls us to reflect on the parallels between planetary ruptures past and present" (Farrier 2019, 19, 48). The love depicted in the poem is harsh and desperate, as it must be in a damaged world. After the shattering of the current reality, the lovers emerge into this new post-apocalyptic world, confronted with an uninhabitable landscape:

Але з вуст, шорсткий, як зола,
 Осипається подих... [...]

Так, немов відітхнути хотів –
 А легені навиліт пробиті,

64 "The embrace flowed like water, / and a night-light cuts our shadow... / Not a sacrifice, not passion, not a gift—/ Simply an attempt to remain alive. / From cities plagued by strontium, / Over their dying agonies / Burns the flimsy scaffolding—/ Naked interlaced hands. / While the sun is at night, / And while these bright flares are rapid, / Love, quiver, and yell / Through this last minute on the edge!"

65 "night light," "burning," "sun," "quick flashes," "ghastly reflection"

Ї ціпеніють відбитки тіл
 У зім'ятім гарячім повітрі
 (Zabuzhko 1990, 67).⁶⁶

The ambiguous end represented by the last line invites the reader to imagine what comes after. While it may be too late for the lovers in the poem, it might not be too late for readers, who, in remembering, have more agency in potentially disrupting further ecological catastrophe. Zabuzhko's poetry invites us to think about how to envision the future while actively dwelling in a time of crisis by taking the reader "to a place of witness and feeling where there is no possibility of shutting down the dramatic and tense feeling of responding to the potentiality within things" (Bristow 2015, 17). The final image of our lovers peering out over a barren desert pessimistically anticipates mass extinction and total ecological collapse, but the ellipses at the end suggests unfinished thoughts. Zabuzhko's hyperbolic exercise creates a prosthetic experience of future ecological devastation that asks readers to imagine our own ending. This apocalyptic future without nature is one possibility, but it is not the only one.

Conclusion

Chornobyl poetry bears witness to the consequences of nuclear disaster by illuminating the Anthropocenic dimensions of this continually unfolding event. The fallout from Chornobyl was extensive and pervasive, affecting every facet of life, from the political, cultural, and social, to the intimate and private spaces of the body. Poets participated in a vital process of world making after the end, explaining for local audiences the disparities and grief experienced from the disaster, but also the harm that humans have inflicted on the earth. Post-Chornobyl poems are invested with a similar impulse to "address questions of truth and human morality," as Inna Sukhenko explains (2014, 118). Sukhenko continues, "Ukrainians have used Chernobyl to trigger cultural self-awareness and renewed ecological attentiveness" (Sukhenko 2014, 127–28).⁶⁷ And

66 "From the lips, coarse as ash / the breath falls... [...] / Yes, as though he wanted to breathe—but his lungs are pierced, / and the imprints of the bodies numb / In the hot, wrinkled air."

67 Sukhenko comes closest to naming the Anthropocene explicitly in relation to Ukrainian poetry. Her emphasis on the recovery of an ecological consciousness in Ukraine informs this discussion (Sukhenko 2014).

just as Chernobyl's radiation spread thousands of miles away, so too did the disaster's significance, because to describe Chernobyl's traumatic and devastating contours is to describe the Anthropocene. The devastation of Chernobyl on bodies and the environment is familiar to other kinds of environmental disasters. The disaster may not have been a world-ending event, but it is felt just as acutely and reflects the multifaceted and kaleidoscopic dimensions of ecological breakdown. The poetry of Drach, Kostenko, and Zabuzhko ensures that the disaster is not forgotten and demonstrates that Anthropocene crises cannot be so easily ignored. As new conflicts threaten to worsen the current climate crisis, it becomes paramount to return to ecocritical poetry, particularly given how nuclear power is touted as a solution to combat climate change. While reading Chernobyl poetry today might seem more prophetic than revolutionary, its affective potency proves a vital addition to emerging dialogues about the Anthropocene and our ability to reimagine a future for all life on this planet.

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The Unknowability of Post-nuclear Landscapes in the Russian Television Series *Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone*

Irina Souch

Паша: В день аварии люди с Припяти приходили вот на этот мост смотреть, как станция подыхает.

Настя: Что они, ничего не понимали?

Паша: Нет, никакой тревоги и паники. Они просто стояли на мосту, смотрели на огонь, а ветер гнал на них тонны ядерного топлива. (*Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone*, episode 3)¹

ACROSS multiple languages, the term *Chernobyl* is shorthand for a “no-man’s land,” an anthropogenic disaster “zone,” and an omen of science gone awry (Saunders 2017, 190). Echoing Jacques Rancière’s contention that “the real must be fictionalized to be thought” (Rancière 2004, 38), the Russian television series *Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone* (*Chernobyl’, Zona otchuzhdeniia*, 2014; 2017), directed by Anders Banke and Pavel Kostomarov, belongs to a gallery of cultural texts that engage with the existing visual imaginary of the Exclusion Zone: the Ukrainian territory surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant contaminated by the April 1986 meltdown.² *Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone* (CEZ)—which

1 “Pasha: On the day of the catastrophe people from Pripjat came to this bridge to watch the reactor burn.

Nastia: Didn’t they understand what was going on?

Pasha: No, there was no alarm raised and so there was no panic. They just stood on the bridge and looked at the fire while the wind blew tons of radioactive ashes at them.” (Here and below all translations from Russian are mine.)

2 In view of this essay’s engagement with a popular Russian television series, the spelling of geographic locations will be transliterated from Russian throughout.

Russia Beyond calls “a crazy mix of genres [which] positions itself as mystery, fantasy, drama, thriller, road-movie, action, disaster and even melodrama” (Egorov 2019)—comprises two seasons aired by popular online television channels. The first season was released by TNT in 2014, while the second season appeared on TV3 in 2017. The show concluded, in 2019, with a three-part feature film of the same title, which was enthusiastically received by audiences and critics alike.³

This essay analyzes the series’ first season, which consisted of eight episodes. In these episodes, set in 2013, a group of young Muscovites—Pasha (Konstantin Davidov), Lesha (Sergei Romanovich), Nastia (Valeriia Dmitrieva), Ania (Kristina Kazinskaia), and Gosha (Anvar Khalilulaev)—travel to Chernobyl to find a dodgy internet technician, Igor’ (Il’ia Sherbinin), who has stolen a large sum of money from Pasha. The journey, full of dramatic events and fantastical adventures, takes place both in 2013 and on the eve of the 1986 accident, as the young Muscovites find themselves traveling not only across space—from Moscow to Chernobyl—but also across time. Indeed, the characters travel back and forth repeatedly between the present and the pre-explosion past. In science fiction, time travel “is very much a pop-culture icon [...] mirror[ing] our desire to once and for all rid ourselves of the chains of linear time” (Jones & Flaxman 2012, 12). The characters’ travels across time in *CEZ* are of particular interest here, because each time they return to Chernobyl—whether to 1986 or 2013—they discover a reality nearly identical to the one they left, but changed to the extent that it requires narrative (re)adjustments. To this effect, the series’ epigraph, *Никто не вернётся прежним*, echoes Heraclitus’s famous adage.⁴ It appears that the Zone, monumentalized in the concrete sarcophagus that caps Reactor Number Four, the empty buildings and huge Ferris wheel in Pripyat’s deserted central square, is not dead; rather, it constantly mutates as the Muscovites move back and forth through time.

With references to real locations, *CEZ* destabilizes the historical ac-

I would also like to note that the representation of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the series will not be considered, since this topic is beyond the scope of the present analysis—the long-term environmental impact of the 1986 nuclear catastrophe.

3 On the popular site Kino-teatr.ru, for example, *CEZ* has a ranking of 7,571 (out of 420 votes) (“Otzyvy”).

4 “No one will return the same.” The quote attributed to Heraclitus goes as follows: “No man ever steps in the same river twice. For it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.”

counts, scientific reports, and artistic representations on which viewers have relied to understand the effects of radioactive contamination. This is achieved through the series' aforementioned hybrid generic makeup with, however, a strong emphasis on fantasy. In television studies, so-called telefantasy is as an umbrella term for various genres "united by their representation of the otherworldly and unreal" (Johnson 2015, 57).⁵ Many contemporary scholars see telefantasy as a potentially subversive genre (Jackson 1981; Neale 2000; Spigel 2001). Steve Neale, for one, maintains that in film (or television) verisimilitude works at two levels: the sociocultural, marking what aligns with lived reality, and the generic, defining what is plausible according to a given genre's conventions. Both levels structure viewers' expectations and understanding (Neale 2000). Through its depiction of other realities that operate according to a given set of rules, telefantasy effectively challenges sociocultural verisimilitude. Yet viewers still invest in fantastic narratives—not only because they engender the pleasure of the unexpected but also because they conform to the principle of generic verisimilitude. The creation of "a story-world that is different from the realities of our everyday world but still convincing and plausible" (Johnson 2015, 57) makes telefantasy exceptionally suitable for cultural critique as it allows imagining things that traditional realistic forms of representation cannot.

As a fantastic narrative *CEZ* remains mindful of the challenges that conventional screen media face in dealing with various environmental phenomena—phenomena that, owing to their scale or duration, overwhelm human perceptual capacities, and therefore cannot be narrativized in familiar linear time-space trajectories. The series rearranges existing interpretations and visual idioms in accordance with its sci-fi aesthetics to point to the limits of our ability to grasp Chernobyl's consequences. In what follows I focus on how these consequences (which often cannot be directly seen, felt, smelled, or heard) are rendered intelligible—but not exhaustively knowable—through engagement with the Zone's ever-evolving post-nuclear landscapes.

The Nuclear Disaster and the (Visual) Narratives of Its Aftermath

Before conducting a close reading of the series, we might turn to the existing cultural documents to consider how they envisage the Exclusion

5 According to this definition, science fiction can be considered a subcategory of telefantasy.

Zone as a location either of abandonment or nature's vengeful return. Such an overview will allow us to identify the main trends that inform CEZ's visual and narrative choices. Until today, the explosion of Reactor Number Four that took place at Chernobyl on April 26, 1986, blasting a radioactive cloud across the Soviet Union and a large swath of Europe, is commonly referred to as "the world's greatest nuclear disaster" (Lindbladh 2019, 240), accompanied by непредвиденные колоссальные политические, экономические, социальные и [...] экологические и медико-биологические последствия (Drokonova 2015, 8).⁶ Over the years, the Chernobyl tragedy has elicited multiple interpretations, growing into what Sarah Phillips has astutely termed a "polysemous symbol" (Phillips 2004, 159). As anthropologist Adriana Petryna claims, "the blinding and incomprehensible light delivered by Chernobyl [...] has become a consuming hole in the present, a rupture in historic time, systems of belief, and representation (Petryna 1995, 197). The catastrophe has been associated with the decline of the Communist order (Bryukovetska 2016; Remnick 1994; Volkogonov 1998); Ukraine's secession from the Soviet Union (Riabchuk 2009, 96); the heroism of the clean-up workers (equated with the heroism of Soviet soldiers during World War II) (Bryukovetska 2016, Johnson 2020; Marples 1993); Judgement Day (Phillips 2004, 163; Lindbladh 2019, 241); the failure of Soviet science (Saunders 2017, 200); and, more generally, "the dangers of technology and the incompatibility of science and nature" (Phillips 2004, 164). Ultimately, "Chernobyl exemplifies a moment when scientific knowability collapsed and new maps and categories of entitlement emerged" (Petryna 2004, 250). The catastrophe disrupted global atomic discourse, forcing scientific and technological utopias to give way to a mindfulness of the biopolitical effects of nuclear radiation (Petryna 2002). In the USSR, Chernobyl transformed Soviet "nuclear optimism" into post-Soviet radiophobia (Mirnyi 2009).

Shortly after the explosion, areas of northern Ukraine and Belarus were evacuated. The depopulated territory, a 30-kilometer radius known as the Exclusion Zone—or simply "the Zone"—was left to decay, becoming "a monument to the secrecy and failings of the Cold War, a warning from history of a nuclear energy utopia, and [...] a place misaligned with respect to normal or everyday practice" (Stone 2013, 79).

6 "unforeseen, colossal political, economic, social, as well as [...] ecological, medical and biological consequences."

Throughout the years, the almost total absence of human activity has transformed the space into something of a nature reserve (Mycio 2005). The post-catastrophe Zone consists of the reactor site, the satellite city of Pripyat, and the surrounding rural area populated illegally by several hundred returnees, for whom Chernobyl's "deindustrial landscape" is infused with lived experiences and memory (Davies 2013, 124).⁷ Encircled by barbed-wire fencing and controlled by border guards, the Zone is still restricted access; to enter one needs special permission. The restrictions, however, have not precluded the emergence of "dark tourism," as masses of people are attracted to the "near-mythic bleakness of this fascinating post-apocalyptic landscape" (Roalstraete 2009).⁸ Dark tourism to the site—from both Western and post-socialist countries—started in the early 2000s and reached its peak in the summer of 2019, after the release of the internationally acclaimed HBO television series *Chernobyl*.⁹ Jeff Goatcher and Viv Brunsdon argue that instead of a place, Chernobyl has become the name of an event, comparable to 9/11 (2011, 115–16). Parallel to this is the "stalker" subculture: young Ukrainian men who clandestinely visit the contaminated area to explore the wilderness.¹⁰ The most enterprising among them offer "illegal tours" to thrill-seeking visitors (Balakjian 2019).

7 Located close to the Belarusian border, Chernobyl was one of the first Ukrainian sites occupied by Russian troops on February 24, 2022. On March 31, however, it was reported that most Russian troops had withdrawn, as Russia abandoned the Kyiv offensive to focus on operations in eastern Ukraine. The "dark tourism" (see below) and archive of Chernobyl images and narratives referred to in this section concern the period prior to the current military conflict, which undeniably creates another dimension to the site.

8 In 2019, the *Chernobyl Exclusion Zone* was mentioned by *Forbes* as the year's "surprise hit tourist destination" (Madden 2019). For insight on the background and meaning of Chernobyl's "dark tourism" see, for instance, Dobraszczyk (2010), Goatcher and Brunsdon (2011), Stone (2013), Yankovska and Hannam (2014), and Hutchings and Linden (2018).

9 *Chernobyl* attracted an audience of eight million viewers within a month of its release in May 2019 and caused an increase of forty percent in tour bookings to the Zone (D'alessandro 2019). Contrary to the Russian series under discussion—which primarily focuses on the longitudinal effects of Reactor Number Four's disastrous explosion—the HBO project aimed to provide a "realist" reconstruction of events that took place before, during, and directly after the catastrophe.

10 This name clearly refers to Andrei Tarkovskii's famous 1979 film, *Stalker* (*Stalker*), based on the Strugatskii brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic* (*Piknik na obochine*, 1972), in which "stalker" is a nickname for men who illegally prospect for and smuggle alien artifacts out of the Zone.

A subject of fascination, incomprehension, and anxiety for several decades, and continuously photographed and filmed by reporters, artists, and tourists alike, the Zone's landscape is almost impossible to misrecognize.¹¹ Along with photographs and documentary footage, the area has repeatedly served as a stage for popular cinema. Two well-known Hollywood productions are *Chernobyl Diaries* by Bradley Parker (2012) and *A Good Day to Die Hard* by John Moore (2013). In the former, a group of teenagers travel to Pripyat, where they are confronted by supernatural creatures lurking in the town's ruins; in the latter, Pripyat is the setting for exposing corruption in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. There has also been a steady production of films on Chernobyl in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. These projects have been extensively discussed by Lindbladh (2019) and Bryukhovetska (2009, 2016). The most recent production is the Russian feature-length film *Chernobyl: Abyss* (*Chernobyl'*, 2021), directed by Danila Kozlovskii and available on the streaming platform Netflix.

The spectrum of Chernobyl post-disaster narratives is structured by a divide between the dystopic outlook on further use of nuclear energy, and theories about nature's ability not only to recover from but also to thrive in the face of environmental contamination (Byshniou 2006; Phillips & Ostaszewski 2012). The first tendency aligns with the representation of the Zone as a site of intangible, terrifying dangers. *The Guardian* reporter Kim Willsher, for instance, reminisces about her experience at the explosion's epicenter shortly after the event in the following way:

The first time we visited [Pripyat], it seemed post-apocalyptic. We found homes still furnished, with personal belongings lying around. [...] It looked as if [people] had just vanished into thin air. Outside, the public-address system was still playing maudlin music and the funfair, with its bumper cars and brightly-coloured ferris wheel, was beginning to rust. [...] Scientists estimate the contaminated area

11 The most prominent examples of the Zone's depictions are Nikolaus Geyrhalter's 1999 documentary *Pripyat*, Maryann DeLeo and Christophe Bisson's short documentary *White Horse* (2008), and Holly Morris and Anne Bogart's production *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* (2015). There also are extensive photographic collections by Igor Kostin, Robert Polidori, Rüdiger Lubricht, Andrej Kremetschouk, David McMillan, and Alice Miceli; and well-known conceptual art works by Kenji Yanobe.

will not be safe for 24,000 years, give or take a thousand. (Willsher 2019)

In contrast to Willsher's descriptions of the glowing "red forest," saplings "with needles growing backwards," and "mice with six toes and deformed teeth" (Willsher 2019), observers who have visited the site since its opening to the public in the early 2000s have produced stories about a seemingly jubilant natural resurgence. Thus, a participant in an illegal "stalker" expedition defines the Zone as a "natural utopia" where "every corner is brimming with life. Eagles swoop low, deer run freely, wild boar grunt, and insects bustle" (Balakjian 2019). Meanwhile, a visitor on a regular Chernobyl tour reports:

Everywhere nature can be seen to be taking back its territory. Trees have erupted through the thick concrete steps of Pripyat's central plaza, while the surrounding woods—which now provide homes for healthy populations of wolves, deer and boar—have spread over every piece of open ground. (McKie 2011)¹²

Yet, exposing the instabilities of both physical and epistemological infrastructures, each of these accounts testifies to the respective author's desire to grasp the effects of the invisible "blinding light" (Petryna 2002, 75) through identifying concrete, material markers, which by now have become recognizable visual tropes.¹³ As Daniel Bürkner rightly suggests, "iconographic indicators lend context and make visible the otherwise hidden impact of contamination" (Bürkner 2014, 24). As Chernobyl "has come to have an iconic life beyond its physical reality," articulating "cultural anxiety about technology and nuclear power in particular" (Goatcher and Brunson 2011, 115), its landscape acquires special meaning only when combined with images of the thick concrete shell that covers Reactor Number Four (the so-called sarcophagus),

12 This view of the Zone as a reemergent, ostensibly harmonic wilderness encouraged James Lovelock to champion increased use of nuclear energy. In his book *The Revenge of Gaia*, Lovelock claims rather controversially that the aftermath of the catastrophe has demonstrated nuclear waste's beneficial impact on the natural world (Lovelock 2007, 127–32).

13 Radiation's "blinding light" in Petryna's formulation echoes the international atomic science discourse of a "sunshine unit," a measure for the amount of strontium in a human organism (Orlova 2019, 90).

the empty buildings, and the remnants of the amusement park with the huge Ferris wheel in its center. These images, Bürkner argues, are necessary in order to “mark [...] the topography and its landscape as a lethal space” (Bürkner 2014, 24). Indeed, over the years the very status of Chernobyl as a geographic location has changed: suspended in time, the ruins surrounded by mutating, regenerating nature, now pertain to “the realm of the symbolic as a token of loss [...] for it is no longer, and never will be, as it once was” (Todkill 2001, 1605).

CEZ's opening sequence demonstrates the series' own rich intertextual legacy, for it reproduces the best-known images of Chernobyl's hazardous environment: a bird's-eye view of the sprawling concrete apartment buildings; littered, shadowy passages; indoor spaces with sagging floors, mildew, peeling paint, and a wall drawing of a child's silhouette carrying a butterfly net; classrooms with scattered furniture, papers, posters, broken geometric models, and toys; a blackened monumental statue of Prometheus; a playground swing; scraggly leafless trees; barbed wire wound around electricity poles; and windswept clouds of heavy smoke. The colors of the objects and environment are a murky grey, blue, and yellow. Most images in the sequence are icons of the disaster's aftermath. The next section considers how engagement with the Zone's iconography allows *CEZ* to show the many ways in which radioactive fallout manifests in the Zone's landscapes and lifeworlds.

Intertextual Imaginations of the Zone in CEZ

The introductory video Pasha and his companions watch on Igor's VKontakte page in an attempt to locate his whereabouts shows him donning a flashy white leather biker outfit.¹⁴ Smiling broadly, the thief leans against a gleaming motorbike with the famous Worker and Kolkhoz Woman monumental statue in the background. Then the video suddenly switches to a nightmarish animation reel of Chernobyl's Reactor Number Four meltdown followed again by Igor' brightly announcing that he is undertaking a journey to the Exclusion Zone and will be reporting on his adventures in a daily vlog. (*Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone*, episode 1)

14 VKontakte (VK) is a Russian social media and social networking service based in St. Petersburg.

In line with the promise that Igor' has made of a genuine, real-life experience, CEZ's page on the TNT website states that the series' central episodes were recorded on location to ensure maximum authenticity. The website also informs viewers that most scenes were shot elsewhere to mitigate the actors' exposure to ionizing radiation.¹⁵ At first glance, this is not surprising; contemporary television studies show that settings are important factors in targeting audiences and attracting tourist attention to specific areas. However, in the case of the Exclusion Zone, the claim to authenticity has an additional purpose: it prompts recollections structured by particular emotions. The Zone thus functions as a chronotope, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, for each genre a unique intersection of time and space not only defines literary narratives but also indicates how people give meaning to their real-life experiences (Bakhtin 1996). In other words, the real-life aspects of a geographic setting influence the ways in which readers or viewers make sense of the experience of place and space, be that experience actual or mediated.¹⁶ CEZ's chronotopic presentations of the Exclusion Zone attest that its factual and fictional accounts have become inseparably intertwined. Its interpretation of the Zone equally relies on the authentic fragments of cultural memory and fantastic images of mutated plant and animal life, sterile wastelands, and decaying former cities. CEZ fits perfectly within both archives by screening a variety of scenes set in "the abandoned villages and overgrown industrial graveyards of the Exclusion Zone" (Davies 2013, 116) and by offering shots of the "nature flourishing free from human effect" (Bürkner 2014, 24).

One of the texts the series draws on is a photographic diary from the "land of radiation, wolves and wormwood" started in 2004 by the Ukrainian photographer and biker Elena Filatova on her website www.kiddofspeed.com, later published as *Chernobyl Surfing* (2011).¹⁷ The series seems to reproduce Filatova's sensationalizing approach when Igor' heads for the Zone on a motorbike and extensively vlogs about his ad-

15 The series was primarily shot on sites in the vicinity of Moscow and architectonically similar to Pripyat as well as on built film sets ("Sozdanie").

16 Elaborating on Bakhtin's emphatic acknowledgement of the existence of "textual," i.e., "reflected and created" and "actual" chronotopes (Bakhtin 1996, 84), Barry Sandywell suggests the term "social chronotope" for those spatiotemporal constellations that inform "the imagining systems of whole societies" and "organize the world into space-time grammars" (Sandywell 1998, 206–207).

17 At the moment of this essay's completion Filatova's webpage was no longer online.

ventures. In pursuing Igor', the heroes drive through the checkpoint at the Russian-Ukrainian border, enter the Zone, and then move along an endless single-lane road through uncultivated land, abandoned farms, and a thick, decrepit forest. It is in this dark silent density of dead firs covered by moss and creeping ivy that they stumble upon a military bunker containing sophisticated nuclear engineering equipment, a map of the polluted area, and a time machine.

The second notable image assemblage is Pripjat. Starting with the opening sequence, the view of Chernobyl's satellite city relies on the large cinematic and photographic archive of its post-apocalyptic spaces. The series presents an overview of the spectral ruins of Pripjat's "blocky architectural Brezhnev baroque" (Stone 2013, 82)—neglected, vegetation-covered edifices; dilapidated housing; an empty central boulevard with plants growing haphazardly on the tarmac; the remnants of the amusement park with its corroding bumper cars; and the huge "catatonic with disuse" Ferris wheel (Trigg 2006, 206), with its rusty yellow gondolas amidst the thicket of young birches and cottonwood trees. One of the most photographed cities in the world, and dubbed the "modern Pompeii" (Todkill 2001, 1604), Pripjat is inconceivable without its ruins, usually portrayed in the style of so-called ruin porn. This concept, referring to the aestheticization of urban and industrial decay, has roots in the nineteenth-century aesthetic the "lower picturesque," which art theorist John Ruskin described as art that depicts charming rustic scenes marked by age, ruggedness, and decline. For Ruskin, this "heartless" picturesque indulged in a "delight in ruin," which allowed spectators to suspend concern for a scene's human implications.¹⁸ In the same vein, it has been argued that ruin porn bears a risk of creating shocking photographs only to generate a detached sense of aesthetic contemplation, obscuring suffering and complexity.¹⁹ In the case of Chernobyl, the very authenticity of its ruin porn has been seriously questioned.²⁰ Reminiscing on his visit to Pripjat, architect Will Wiles puts this in the following way:

We all felt we knew the place before we travelled. Photographers and

18 For a detailed analysis of Ruskin's theory of the picturesque, see Macarthur (1997).

19 For a comprehensive discussion of ruin porn, see Lyons (2015, 2018).

20 Photographer Darmon Richter, for one, writes about visitors at the site moving objects in order to produce a compelling shot (Richter 2014).

the urban explorers have saturated the internet with images of the city, part of a fairly recent mania for picturesque desuetude referred to as “ruin porn.” Seeing its points of interest—those must-see attractions—for oneself has an unreal sense of heightened reality that leads to a nagging case of authenticity anxiety. (Wiles 2012)

Criticism further suggests that while “the same tired photographic clichés” (Davies 2013, 122) are constantly reiterated, the wish to understand the real political, social, and environmental impact of the disaster is overshadowed by the search for a thrilling visual experience, often achieved through conscious manipulation and replication of iconic shots of the site. I am interested in this discussion because, whereas the CEZ’s makers are keen to emphasize the authenticity of shooting on location, the aesthetic employed (not least because of the series’ sci-fi qualities) appears to be (self-)conscious of its staged, artificial nature and even to delight in playfully copying clichés and invoking the widely known canon of Chernobyl-related texts.

Apart from the abovementioned examples, such artifice is most clearly seen in CEZ’s association with the award-winning multiplayer computer game series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, released by the Ukrainian studio GSC Game World.²¹ The *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* trilogy is inspired by the abovementioned Tarkovskii classic, *Stalker*, loosely based on the popular science-fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii. Tarkovskii’s film depicts a perilous journey of three men, Writer, Professor, and Stalker, to a mysterious derelict wasteland called the Zone. Although released long before the explosion of Reactor Number Four, *Stalker* has gained cult status as prophetic of the later disaster (Bryukovetska 2016; Burlacu 2015; Dalton 2018; Riley 2017; Stone 2013). Changing the setting of the unspecified “Zone” to the Chernobyl area, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* game series “merg[es] Tarkovsky’s science fiction with authentic photographs of Pripyat to create a landscape of ‘wonder and death’” (Dobraszczyk 2010, 385).²² In his discussion of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, Daniil Leiderman argues that the game’s moral is “to critique the dam-

21 Although *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is the best-known game that prominently features the Zone, the Activision 2007 video game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is also situated in Pripyat, and offers an accurate replication of the city’s iconic sites.

22 There are also narrative similarities between the game and the series in that the protagonists come across mutant zombies and other monstrous figures before they reach the centre of the Zone and confront its ghosts.

age caused by the realisation of utopian social projects” (Leiderman 2016, 22), thus situating nuclear technologies in the larger project of sociopolitical transformation. While *CEZ* indeed follows the game’s narrative clues in its engagement with the notions of violence, survival, and nostalgia for the Communist past, the series’ fascination with nature’s spectral mutations, waste, and ruins diverges from the game’s ultimate purpose of exposing the destruction inherent in the Soviet utopian experiment. Instead, it uses similar aesthetic devices once again to explore, within the obvious limitations of the genre, the structural impossibility of fully grasping the effects of radiation on different forms of life and their mutual involvements.

The Zone’s Ghostly Manifestations

Upon their arrival to Pripyat, the heroes watch the latest entry on Igor’s video blog. In it, a dirty door frame opens a view on Igor’s motorbike, parked against the background of inky, moonless skies. The camera jerkily zooms in on the blogger’s panicked, contorted face, with tears and dirt smeared over it. In a whining voice he pleads: Бензина нет. Теперь только пешком. Короче, хотите верьте, хотите нет. Я решил вернуться обратно. Еду, еду, и Припячь снова. То есть, я выехал из города, прямо еду и опять приехал в то же место. Я второй раз поехал: дорога, лес, столбы эти. Дорога прямо, не загнутая никакая. Да тут таких нет вообще. И опять Припячь. Lesha says: Чего он несёт? Типа, он уехать отсюда не может? In the blog, Igor’ continues: И ещё эта собака. Я уезжал от неё на мотоцикле, но она все время оказывается рядом. Все как бред. Помогите мне!²³

The camera briskly changes the angle to show a corner of an abandoned classroom, with crumpled, moldy papers scattered everywhere; a cluster of smashed chairs; and propped against the wall—a

23 “I have run out of petrol. I can only continue on foot. In short, believe it or not. I decided to go back. I drive, and drive, and here is Pripyat again. That is, I leave the city, I go straight but arrive at the same spot again. I go for the second time—the same road, forest, those poles. The road is straight, not curvy, there are no curvy roads here, but here it is again—Pripyat!” Lesha says: “What is he going on about? He means he can’t leave this place?” In the blog, Igor’ continues: “And there is this dog, I tried to escape from it on the motorbike, but each time it keeps reappearing right at my side. This feels like delirium. Help me!”

large “board of honor” featuring smiling young children in school uniforms. In the middle, stands an enormous, aggressive-looking dog with tangled rusty brown fur and a broken chain around its neck, snarling terrifyingly. (Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone, episode 3)

Pasha and his friends finally find Igor’ wandering in the dark woods outside Pripyat. The once cheeky thief now looks exhausted, famished, and terrified. He constantly repeats: *Зона живая! Это зона не отпускает меня. И вам уже не выбраться отсюда!*²⁴ Indeed, as the narrative unfolds further, the Muscovites realize that what they initially perceived to be the Zone’s dead and emptied-out landscape is in fact a living organism full of undefinable sounds and sinister presences. What is more, the Zone itself appears to possess a spectral agency of sorts. Having crossed its formal border, the group enter inhospitable and dangerous spaces. The atmosphere of uneasy strangeness already sets in when they start discerning, as they drive towards Pripyat, a series of memorial signs of the once vibrant but now nonexistent settlements demolished and buried as hazardous radioactive sites shortly after the explosion. Incongruent with the desolate rusty brown natural panoramas, these original place names are more than simple commemorative symbols. They are reminiscent of how these spaces, once densely populated and full of lived histories, have been pushed away by something that could be conceived as an anti-place par excellence—the demarcated abstract area of the Zone.²⁵

The journey towards Pripyat comes to a sudden halt when Gosha’s ancient Lada car unexplainably breaks down. A young man materializes to assist and direct the party to the closest auto shop. Following his advice, they pass a gloomy graveyard overhung with weeping trees, and arrive in an eerie village with a wedding party in full swing.²⁶ When the Muscovites offer the bride what they think is a present from their new

24 “The Zone is alive! It is the Zone that keeps me captured, and you too, will never get away from here!”

25 For an extensive discussion of the concept of (anti-)place in relation to ruins and decay, see Trigg (2006).

26 This episode references another real-life phenomenon, largely unacknowledged by the authorities: the inhabitation of the zone by a community of Chernobyl-affected citizens who, as Thom Davies argues, “are compelled to employ unofficial understandings of space, and enact informal activities which circumvent their bio-political status of bare life” (Davies 2015, 229).

acquaintance, she suddenly faints. After a brief scuffle with the villagers, it transpires that their helper was the woman's first fiancé, killed in a car crash some time ago. Significantly, he was buried near his father who worked as a Chernobyl ликвидатор²⁷ dealing with the consequences of the nuclear catastrophe immediately after the event.

The confrontations with the Zone's ghosts continue when, at the next stage of the expedition, the road passes through a wasteland littered with pieces of rusty scrap metal, decaying parts of forgotten agricultural machinery, and tangles of rotten wood. The wasteland, again, appears familiar given the numerous archival photographs and tourist snapshots in the genre of "toxic sublime"—an aesthetic that purports to generate "transformative" emotions, such as amazement and fascination, to make spectators aware of environmental injustice (Balayannis 2019, 574). Similar to ruin porn, the political impact of this reassemblage of representations of toxic landscapes has been interrogated for naturalizing the effects of industrial contamination (Rosenfeld et al. 2018). Yet, regardless of whether this type of photography has ecocritical potential, the series' primary concern here is merely to ensure that viewers are prepared for the next part of the adventure. The narrative is fast-paced, not pausing to contemplate the particularities of the damaged landscape. Rather, the landscape is important for setting up the next scene, in which the travelers approach a cluster of crumbling brick buildings in the middle of a field and become a target for a group of unhinged and heavily armed hunters who appear out of nowhere.

The closer the protagonists get to their destination the less the landscape is animated. At first glance, Prip'yat emanates a sense of abandonment. Yet, in its shadows, the city harbors many monsters. When the party arrives at a multistory flat, where Ania's parents and sister lived in 1986, another of the Zone's many anomalies becomes evident: the ability to produce phantoms, malign copies of people with their individual psychological and physical features.²⁸ And so, the Zone conjures phantoms of Ania, Gosha, and Nastia, who try to create a rift among the

27 "liquidator," or "cleanup worker." For a detailed history of the liquidators' role in mitigating the damage and their position in contemporary cultural memory, see Johnson (2020).

28 Before the friends set out for Chernobyl, Ania, initially not part of the group, receives a mysterious letter containing an old photograph of her sister, who disappeared on the day of the explosion. The back of the photograph contains a message "Спаси" ("Save me")—ultimately what motivates Ania to travel to the Zone.

friends, in order to imprison and, ultimately, destroy them. Although all these encounters follow classic conventions of video games, the figures of the friendly zombie, deranged shooters, and malicious phantoms do not simply present obstacles for players aiming to reach the next level; they also show that the Zone is the site of the fantastical and its emptiness is a sign of potential monstrosity.

From this vantage point, the procession of spectral apparitions is representative of the Zone's unexpected agency and influence on forms of existence. Together with images of neglect, garbage, and decay, the ghosts portray the Zone as a haunted place, the location of unspeakable cataclysmic events, of abandoned homes and forgotten buildings. The place emerges as full of recollections of, or encounters with, past events. Instead of mere objects of aesthetic appreciation, the ghostly ruins are immediate reminders of human and environmental losses. The city comes to life, frustrating the characters' (and viewers') attempts to understand or resolve spaces forever altered by nuclear disaster.

Conclusion, or the Unknowable Space/Time of the Zone

A video recording of a scientific laboratory, richly equipped and full of maps and graphs, shows a middle-aged man who introduces himself as physicist Andrei Sergeev and proceeds to explain: В Чернобыльской зоне нами обнаружена временная аномалия. Это что-то типа перемещающегося сгустка повышенной радиации. [...] Прибор, который мы собрали в этой лаборатории позволяет перемещать через эту аномалию материальные предметы. И сегодня мы поняли, что это такое. Это такой коридор. Это червоточина, которая движется во времени параллельно с нашим временем. [...] Я считаю, что через эту аномалию может пройти человек, но я не знаю, что с ним сделает Зона.²⁹

(Chernobyl, Exclusion Zone, episode 5)

The otherworldly experiences the group undergoes teach them that

29 "We have discovered a temporal anomaly in the Chernobyl Zone. It is something like a moving cluster of high radioactivity. [...] The device that we constructed in our laboratory allows to move material objects through this anomaly. And today, we finally understood what it is. It is a kind of a corridor. It is a wormhole that moves through time in a dimension parallel to the present. [...] I think a human being can get through it but I don't know what the Zone would do to them."

their sense of safety and risk does not have a stable meaning, as the dangerously pervasive nuclear agency has no respect for the borders that are supposed to define the Zone. The recurring motifs of ruin, disorder, decomposition, and wilderness suggest that the lines between the human constructions at Chernobyl and its natural surroundings are not definitive. While radiation seeps into the buildings and transforms life forms, the natural environment has also been altered by ionic charges. Thus, the wilderness takes possession of formerly domesticated locations. Without its human inhabitants, the landscape of *CEZ*'s Chernobyl creates new pictures of extinction: empty squares, vacant houses, abandoned buildings, the laughterless fairground and its corroded immobile Ferris wheel, and the empty and dusty void of a swimming pool. Each marks the invisible presence of radioactive monstrosity. The recognizable yet ungraspable landscape changes our perception of the relationship between natural and supernatural forces, thus rattling our sense of reality.

The most profound feeling of disorientation occurs when Igor', and later his pursuers, fail to exit Pripjat, because the only road leaving the city leads them back—again and again—to their point of departure. And so the characters' experience of the Zone destabilizes their understanding of time's presence in space. Given the radioactivity, the Zone's chronotope continuously frustrates the diegetic (but also the viewers' real-life) interpretation of who and what belongs not only where, but also when. This unpredictability is most clearly illustrated by the figure of Andrei Sergeev's colleague (we do not learn his name), whom the travelers find in the forest. The man is semiconscious and bleeding heavily, and a tall fir tree grows through his body because (as later revealed) of the badly synchronized location and moment of his time-travel experiment.

Time travel—thanks to the discovery of the time machine in the bunker—becomes central to *CEZ*'s second part. A question thus emerges: Can spaces affected by radioactive fallout become unstuck historically? The series poses this question by allowing the characters to return repeatedly to 1986 in an attempt to avert the explosion of Reactor Number Four. They know where they have returned, yet time and again the familiar space appears altered, thereby prompting them to find new ways of navigating it. The differences are accentuated by the contrast to the gloomy reality of the heroes' contemporary world. The pre-cat-

astrophic landscape is depicted—in cheerful pastels—as undamaged, inhabited, and sun-drenched. And so, while they are aware of the time in which they find themselves, they do not know how a given present aligns with other presents, or the past or future. This juxtaposition of bright visions of the past with the somber scenery of the post-atomic present, and of “genuine” geographical shots with digitalized and simulated landscape images, does more than augment the sense of mystery and the macabre of the fantastic genre. By creating disorienting temporal and spatial perspectives, *CEZ* allows for a chronotropic reading of Chernobyl’s spectral environments, which more realistic modes of representation might foreclose. The visual collage ultimately works to signify the collapse of scientific knowability—to recall Petryna’s claim (2004, 250)—to highlight the impossibility of fully comprehending the effects of the catastrophe, and to represent the invisible (radioactive) threats hidden in the architectural remains that have been overtaken by wastelands. Metaphorized in the petrified ruins of the Zone, the hostile forces provoke further reflection not only on the landscapes of radioactive contamination, but also on the uncertain futures of mankind’s technological advancement.

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