

Dreams of Post(nuclear)nature in Photography of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone: A Case Study

The Chernobyl exclusion zone, a closed-off area created by the Soviet government in response to the nuclear disaster in 1986, has been undergoing a radical reevaluation in public perception. It has evolved from a nuclear wasteland into a thriving wildlife reserve since tourist numbers were on the rise. Photography has played a major role in this process. This raises questions not only about the political work photography does in the remediation of the zone (there are recent plans to turn part of the exclusion zone into a nature reserve), but also about the alarming ease with which current photographic practices seem to accommodate post-nuclear ecologies in romanticised imaginings of pristine and wild nature.

Rather than pointing out the open-ended nature of nuclear disaster, it appears to me that most photography of the exclusion zone narrates Chernobyl in the past tense by framing it as a predestined episode in a divine plot of redemption. As nature returns to the zone, so the story goes, it redeems the guilt of modern Man by erasing his traces, thus restoring the balance that the conquest of the atom in the 20th century turned upside down. To understand the implications of this story, one has only to listen to the Ukrainian Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources, Igor Shevchenko, for whom turning the zone into a nature reserve means to «forget about this problem for 100 years».¹ I am not suggesting that images have the power to produce political decrees. Rather, following art historian William J. T. Mitchell, I suggest that images never really speak on their own, but are «invited to speak».² What Mitchell means by this is that we have to come to terms with our attitude to images in order to understand what they do, or better, what we grant them to do. He chooses the model of the subaltern to make his point: «If the power of images is like the power of the weak that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong, to make up for their actual impotence. We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them.»³ The question thus shifts «from what pictures do to what they want, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern».⁴ To approach images of the exclusion zone as subalterns means to ask how they respond to our desire to narrate the post-nuclear ecology of the exclusion zone within a discourse of purity, that is, to demonstrate a «return of nature» instead of engaging with the many uncertainties that this new post(nuclear)nature involves.

In this essay, I focus on a genre very popular among both amateurs and professionals: ruin photography. Visions of industrial ruins can function, according to the cultural geographer Tim Edensor, as «symbols through which ideologically loaded versions of progress [...] can be critiqued».⁵ However, as the architectural historian Paul Dobraszcyk observes, «[d]espite the sheer abundance and variety of photographic representations of Chernobyl and Pripjat [the two largest settlements in



1 Jane and Louise Wilson, *Atomgrad 4 (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)*, 2010, C-print, Diasec mounted with aluminum and Perspex, ca. 228 x 180 cm.

the exclusion zone], very few offer any reflection on the role of photography in the representation of the site and the difficulties of «seeing» it as a tourist». ⁶ As a result, the critique offered in ruin photography remains on a level of abstraction that forestalls any concrete engagement with the zone.

In what follows, I offer a reading of *Atomgrad (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)*, 2010, a photo series by the British artists Jane and Louise Wilson that has been read unanimously in terms of natural reclamation. With this case study, I hope to provide insight into the role of photography in the zone's revaluation.

Atomgrad consists of eight large photo prints that show a selection of ruinous interiors of Pripyat, the now abandoned «atom city» or «atomgrad» that was built in the 1970s to service the construction and running of the Chernobyl nuclear power station. The sites that the Wilsons have chosen for *Atomgrad* include some of the most photographed places in Pripyat like the indoor swimming pool named Azure (Ill. 1) and the lecture hall of the Palace of Culture (Ill. 2). All the pictures are taken from a straight vantage point from the shorter side or corner of a room, generating a heightened depth of space. Its reticent documentary style largely steps back behind aesthetic considerations. The images invite the viewer to relish the rich textures of crumbling paint, strewn floor bands, and plants creeping in through broken windowpanes. The carefully balanced composition of colour and light matches hues of rusty brown and warm white with colder hues of green and blue, and strips of golden sunlight with shadowy hallways and corners. The pleasure connected to seeing this scene of ruination, which is enhanced by the size of the



2 Jane and Louise Wilson, *Atomgrad 7 (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)*, 2010, C-print, Diasec mounted with aluminum and Perspex, ca. 180 x 228 cm.

prints (1.8 x 2.2 meters) and their glossy finish, qualifies *Atomgrad* as «ruin porn»—a colloquialism attributed to writer and photographer James Griffioen that describes the aestheticisation and romanticisation of urban decay.⁷

Despite this tendency to spectacle, the series is lauded in art criticism as a «memento mori», a «historical testament to the dangers of atomic energy» that demonstrates the «fragility of human life and civilisation».⁸ This investment of critical potential is mainly triggered by a little object hidden in each picture: a yardstick. Leaning discretely against a doorframe, lying on the floor, or tracing the outline of an object, it symbolises a system that has become obsolete, like the «imperial measure» it represents, because it promises, as the critic and art historian Media Farzin puts it, «(scientific) accuracy and scale without actually delivering».⁹ Since radioactivity remains invisible to the camera lens, the main protagonist in this morality tale is nature: Pripjat, Farzin concludes, is «being gloriously reclaimed by nature».¹⁰

Let us consider how the pictures comment on this idea: *Atomgrad 4* (Ill. 1) offers a view into the now-abandoned indoor swimming pool Azure. The image is taken at the short end of the hall from a springboard that extends from the lower edge one-third into the photograph. The image is divided into two distinct realms: the nearly empty, geometrical space of the swimming pool dominated by hues of brown and white, and the vegetation outside that appears in vivid hues of green. With its dense texture of leaves and small branches, this latter realm creates an opacity that clearly sets itself apart from the openness of the pool. While borders and thresholds are accentuated (by the markedly white supports of the window façade for instance), the strips of insulation material hanging from the ceiling and the paint



3 Jane and Louise Wilson, *Atomgrad 3 (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)*, 2010, C-print, Diasac mounted with aluminum and Perspex, ca. 228 x 180 cm.

crumbling from the walls seem to indicate that nature, here associated with disorder and density, slowly disintegrates the ordered symmetry of architecture.

In this image the tension between order and disorder remains subtle due to the absence of larger pieces of litter, yet other images deliberately play with the motif of disintegrating order. *Atomgrad 3* (Ill. 3) is the most «chaotic» image of the series. The photograph shows a former classroom littered with books, toppled bookshelves, newspapers and strips of wallpaper. Here the geometry of the room almost dissolves into a sea of crossing lines and a variety of different textures.

It is not, as one might assume, the presence of plants, but the *absence of humans* which is cited as the indicator for the return of nature: «windows broken, floor-

boards strewn about, everything rusted, dusty»—these are, according to Farzin, the «chaotic effects of nature».¹¹ As this negative qualification indicates, the image of nature constructed here is not quite the «active, dark, wild, turbulent, and uncontrollable» power over humans that the ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant had in mind when promoting a revival of nature, but perhaps more a contained «garden wilderness» that takes root only after humans have left.¹² Moreover, the link drawn between ruination and nature is flawed in this case. The broken windows and strewn floorboards are, like many other signs of destruction in the photographs, most likely the result of systematic looting rather than of technological failure or the «effects of nature».¹³ Mary Mycio, an American journalist with Ukrainian roots, reports in her book-length investigation into the zone's «natural history» about two men having been arrested for robbing Pripjat apartments just six months after the accident. Besides looting, scrap metal scavengers and poachers are the greatest crime problem in the zone.¹⁴ According to these sources, Pripjat's ruination is hence clearly a product of human rather than nonhuman agency.

It would be easy to blame such an obvious misreading of the situation on a poorly informed critic like Farzin. Given the unique temporality of the photographic image, however, I think that there is more to it than a simple fact check could correct. It is a result of inviting a picture, in this case a photograph, to speak without reflecting on its medium-specific way of speaking. To conclude that the ruination depicted in the image is the result of nature means to suggest a causal relation between at least two events that the photograph does not and cannot depict. Although photography is considered a spatial medium (in contrast to film or music), its narrative capacity has been subjected to discussion time and again. The art critic John Berger, for instance, argues that a photograph gains meaning only «insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and future».¹⁵ The narrative that evolves from this operation is hence evoked rather than told and depends on the context the viewer introduces to the image. It relies on cues based on which most of the time we «make confident determinations about the incident, without», as the art historian and photographer Max Kozloff concedes, «being aware that they're conjectural».¹⁶ It is photography's supposed inability to form a coherent narrative on its own that led the writer and activist Susan Sontag, ten years before Kozloff, to her dismissive remark that photography would merely create an «illusion of understanding» while, «strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph».¹⁷ Instead, Sontag observes a problematic empowerment of the beholder: «To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power».¹⁸ To speak through Mitchell's model of the subaltern: the power that the picture desires, becomes the illusive power of the beholder.

Hereby, it seems to matter little that the assumed knowledge is anchored in fictional rather than historical narratives. With its gothic aesthetics, *Atomgrad* evokes sceneries of abandoned settlements like those in the 1979 movie *Stalker* by the Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, or the barren landscapes of the video game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (2007–2009), which were modelled on photographs of the Chernobyl exclusion zone. As the sociologist Philip Stone shows in his research on dark tourism, image practices like the one discussed here turn Chernobyl into a heterotopia with the result that it becomes increasingly fictionalised, or at least set

apart from everyday reality, as if it belongs to a different world (perhaps Sontag's «image-world»¹⁹). This separation is consolidated in the place that the photograph assigns to the beholder.

In *Atomgrad* 4, the view of the indoor swimming pool, the photographer stands on a springboard, creating an elevated viewpoint from which the beholder has a good overview of the place. At the same time, it fixes the beholder on the spot assigned to her. The yardstick accentuates the end of the springboard, as if marking the threshold into a different world that lies beyond her reach. There is a similar operation in the other images of this series where broken, bent up floorboards leave no space for walking. The large format and static, repetitive composition of the prints turn this formal operation into an almost corporeal experience of being excluded from the world that extends inside the picture frame. Similarly, there are no other humans or traces of recent human activity visible in the image. The physical emptiness of the ruinous spaces we encounter in *Atomgrad* is thus a constituent part of the image experience. Jane and Louise Wilson have consciously avoided rooms littered with children's gas masks, dolls or Soviet paintings in order to forestall stories of ideology, personal loss, attachment, or sentiment.²⁰ Moreover, the viewpoint from which the image was taken skillfully conceals the abundance of colorful graffiti that decorates the basin. The resultant empty space is accentuated by the sharp division between inside and outside that I mentioned earlier. In the other pictures of this series windows are either outside the image cadre, blind, or overgrown by an impenetrable wall of bushes and trees. *Atomgrad* thus prompts the beholder to engage with the absence of human beings in the image.

I took this absence as an invitation to delve deeper into the history of Pripjat. As a result, I encountered a triviality at the basis of this absence that belies both the morbid beauty of the photographs, and their assumed criticism of technological progress. From a historical perspective, Pripjat bypasses any logic of a higher struggle between Man and Nature. The empty rooms portrayed in *Atomgrad* testify to the absence of the people for whom these buildings served as recreation centers, schoolrooms, gyms etc. The public buildings in Pripjat were built for a specific purpose—to serve the workers of the nuclear power station located a few kilometers further. When the nuclear power plant was shut down, these buildings were abandoned. The swimming pool Azure is a good example. A photograph by the artist David McMillan, who frequently visited the zone over a period of more than 20 years, shows that in 1996 the swimming pool was still in use for the workers of the Chernobyl nuclear power station. The remaining reactors two and three were shut down only in 2001 due to political pressure from the international community. Seen in this light the exuberant symbolism projected on Pripjat seems simply ignorant of the place's history. It is important to remember that Pripjat, unlike the surrounding villages in the Polesia region, was a city built solely for the nuclear power station and populated by specialised personnel from all over the Soviet empire. As the historian Anna Veronika Wendland explains, atom cities «were urban structures which emerged from «nothing», in other words in landscapes where there had been almost no form of urbanity before».²¹ It appears to me misleading to mythicise this nomadic absence of humans as a struggle between Man and Nature. The ruins of Pripjat simply bypass this logic.

Strictly speaking, humans have never truly left the place. Numerous graffiti demonstrate that locals and non-locals are appropriating the ruinous city. More-

over, buses drive tourists in and out daily. In April 2016, at the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the German magazine *Spiegel Online* published a graph based on numbers by the State Agency of Ukraine for the Exclusion Zone Management that shows a steady increase in tourist numbers. In the years 2013 and 2015 it exceeded 15.000 and Pripjat is one of the main tourist destinations in the zone.²² Moreover, the immense monetary and personnel effort that is still being put into the maintenance and monitoring of the zone and the reactor ruin should not be underestimated either. In 2015, the geographer Thom Davies and the sociologist Abel Polese quoted a number as high as 5–8% of Ukraine's annual state budget that is still «being dedicated to post-Chernobyl management».²³ Writing the human actively out of the frame by banning these activities that mark Chernobyl as an ongoing event from the image, *Atomgrad* is not a *historical* statement, as one of the critics would have it, but a *nostalgic* one.

The literary scholar Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia: the restorative and the reflective. While restorative nostalgia thinks of itself as «truth and tradition», reflective nostalgia «dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity».²⁴ Boym suggests that ruins would generate reflective nostalgia, because they spatialise the passage of time and therefore engage with the possibility of development.²⁵ While this applies in principle to *Atomgrad*, any critical potential of nostalgia is rendered impotent by deferring the specific conflicts around which the space of the zone is produced to a higher level of abstraction. The zone is reduced to an allegory illustrating the supposedly universal antagonism between Man and Nature. Any emancipatory or critical potential is thereby transformed into a restorative nostalgia, a longing for a pre-political state that is readily answered, it seems, by the lushness of the zone's wildlife. While the viewer is granted an excellent view of this romanticised post-nuclear world in ruins, humans inhabiting this world are actively written out of the frame, consolidating the image of a pure and antagonistic nature reclaiming this show-town of Soviet modernism. Here, nostalgia does not work as intermediary between individual and cultural memory as Boym suggests, because individual traces are purposely cut out. Humanity does not consist of agents, individuals or groups, which could be held accountable, but is abstracted into «Man» standing over against «Nature».

To conclude, *Atomgrad* tends, as most of ruin and wildlife photography of the zone, to erase traces that place Chernobyl as an ongoing event in human history. Aesthetic strategies of the kind employed in *Atomgrad* generate a «Natur(T)raum» to quote the title of this issue—a dream space of nature—instead of finding (or reflecting on the difficulties of finding) new forms of expression to capture the expanding, living, breathing, mutating ecology that Chernobyl has become. This ecology does not only encompass wildlife roaming inside the space that is demarcated as the exclusion zone, but also economic, social, and mental spheres that reach far beyond the zone. It is an ecology that demands considerable monetary and personnel attention and will continue to do so for an undefined period. The proposition that I want to close this article with, then, is that we need more photographic practices that express photography's «weakness» and, thus, confront the viewer's investment of power with a reflection on the difficulties of seeing post(nuclear)nature.

To give an example within the field of documentary photography, we could think of the Canadian photographer Donald Weber, whose online series *Post Atomic* features different contaminated places in Ukraine and Japan. What is so remarkable

is that it focuses on the people who live in these places. Let me highlight some aspects that would qualify as a demonstration of photographic weakness. I focus hereby on the first of this five-part series that shows a rural community inside the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Weber visited this community between 2005 and 2006, eager to find out what «daily life [was] actually like, in a post-nuclear world».²⁶ The result is a collection of snapshot-like images of a poverty-stricken community that not only expands the semantic field of «Chernobyl», but prompts the viewer to reflect on what a photographic image can tell.

Weber avoids obvious references to radioactivity; a blurry vision of a teenage girl without hair and a portrait of a boy with a long scar going down his chest are the most suggestive clues that we get and they are oblique. It is the title that Weber gave to this part of the series, *Bastard Eden, Our Chernobyl* that reminds the viewer what s/he is looking at. The post atomic condition, then, does not qualify through unique appearances, something one could capture in a photograph. However, it is not random either. As Mycio reminds us, «Chernobyl» and all that word entails is no longer a state of shock but has become a state of being».²⁷ In other words, just as 95 percent of the radionuclides are no longer *on* the zone, but *in* the zone and have entered the food chain, Chernobyl has worked its way into the political, economic and social system of Ukraine and beyond. In a material and discursive sense, then, Chernobyl lives forth in the small community described in *Bastard Eden*. According to the short introductory text, the people in this community are emigrants from other cities who are afraid of modern life.²⁸ Their pronounced material poverty, however, adds another layer to this story. Life in and around the zone is cheap, but precarious. The sharing (and trading?) of risky foodstuffs from restricted areas like mushrooms, game and homebrewed alcohol that takes such a prominent role in *Bastard Eden*, as well as the scavenging of scrap metal to sell on the black market that is documented in the second part of the series, are testament to a growing informal economy around the zone. As Chernobyl's welfare and benefit system is shrinking, these activities ensure collaborative survival. However, the images do not contribute much to understand these mechanisms.

Mimicking the vernacular snapshot, Weber's images are taken with the affectivity of the insider (or so it seems), giving them an energetic, spontaneous, and occasionally humorous quality. However, this also means that the viewer remains excluded from what is happening inside the frame. What the frame cannot contain is largely lost on the viewer. While this is true for any photographic image, *Bastard Eden* renders this lack visible by increasing the illegibility of the image with the use of blur or unusual perspectives. These strategies render photography's discontinuous nature disruptive, hence exhibiting its ambiguity of meaning. It sends the viewer on an investigative journey that puts the image in its place as limited truth. Perhaps *Bastard Eden*, by encouraging the viewer to think *through* the medium of photography as much as *about* it, triggers the kind of critical curiosity that is needed to describe this new condition we call post(nuclear)nature.

Anmerkungen

- 1 INTERFAX, website, 2015, <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/economic/255025.html>, accessed 17 February 2017.
- 2 William J. T. Mitchell, «What do pictures 'really' want?», in: *October*, 1996, Vol. 77, pp. 71–82, here p. 74.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality*, New York 2005, p. 15.
- 6 Paul Dobraszczyk, «Petrified Ruin: Chernobyl, Pripyat and the Death of the City», in: *City*, 2010, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 370–389, here p. 384.
- 7 Richard B. Woodward, «Disaster Photography: When Is Documentary Exploitation?», in: *Art News*, 2013, <http://www.artnews.com/2013/02/06/the-debate-over-ruin-porn/>, accessed 17 February 2017.
- 8 Media Farzin, «Jane and Louise Wilson», in: *Art Agenda*, 2013, <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/jane-and-louise-wilson/>, accessed 17 February 2017; Robbie Wilson, «Chernobyl, Jane and Louise Wilson: Atomgrad», in: *The Manchester Historian*, 2012, <http://manchesterhistorian.com/2012/chernobyl-jane-and-louise-wilson-atomgrad/>, accessed 17 February 2017.
- 9 Farzin 2013 (see note 8).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, New York/London 2003, p. 157.
- 13 Dobraszczyk 2010 (see note 6), p. 381.
- 14 Mary Mycio, *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl*, Washington 2005, p. 189.
- 15 John Berger, «Appearances», in: *Another Way of Telling*, ed. by John Berger and Jean Mohr, New York/London 1982, pp. 81–130, here p. 89.
- 16 Max Kozloff, *The Privileged Eye: Essays on Photography*, Albuquerque 1987, p. 3.
- 17 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York 1977, p. 20.
- 18 Ibid., p. 3.
- 19 Philip Stone, «Dark Tourism, Heterotopias and Post-Apocalyptic Places: The Case of Chernobyl», in: *Dark Tourism and Place Identity: Managing and Interpreting Dark Places*, Melbourne 2013, pp. 79–93.
- 20 Adrian Searle, «Jane and Louise Wilson: «A sense of threshold is compelling for us», in: *The Guardian*, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2012/nov/05/jane-louise-wilson-video-interview>, accessed 17 February 2017.
- 21 Anna Veronika Wendland, «Inventing the Atomograd: Nuclear Urbanism as a Way of Life in Eastern Europe Before and After Chernobyl», in: *The Impact of Disaster: Social and Cultural Approaches to Fukushima and Chernobyl*, ed. by Thomas M. Bohn, Thomas Feldhoff, Lisette Gebhardt and Arndt Graf, Berlin 2015, pp. 261–287, here p. 269.
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- 24 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001, p. xviii.
- 25 Ibid., p. 49.
- 26 Larry Frolick, «Afterword», in: *Bastard Eden, Our Chernobyl*, ed. by Donald Weber, Portland 2008, pp. 62–63, here p. 62.
- 27 Mycio 2005 (see note 14), p. 30.
- 28 Frolick 2008 (see note 26), p. 63.