

Approaching the Void – Chernobyl’ in Text and Image

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Abstract: How, if at all, can the worst-case scenario nuclear accident be represented artistically? Chernobyl’ poses problems for writers, visual artists and film makers alike. For all the eventfulness of the first days and weeks following the accident, the area now seems devoid of life and activity. Nevertheless, the documentary prose writers Jurij Ščerbak and Svetlana Aleksievich, the photographer Robert Polidori and the documentary film maker Nikolaus Geyrhalter have managed to capture in text and image the events of 26 April 1986 and their consequences. Above all, they convey the sense of shock and helplessness that reigned following the accident. They achieve this by working with monologues, underscoring the isolation of those affected, subverting supposedly apt comparisons (for example with the First World War) and revealing the emptiness of existence through a carefully calculated silence.

Keywords: documentary (works of art), (inapt) comparisons, questions, perplexity, nothingness

“Very little has been written about Chernobyl’,” says Svetlana Aleksievich, a writer from Belarus, in a much quoted interview with the French media theorist Paul Virilio (Aleksijewitsch, Virilio 2003:14). The disaster which occurred on 26 April 1986 triggered considerable debate about ecology and politics, yet very little has been said about the way in which art has contributed to coming to terms with this accident. When it comes to literature, Svetlana Aleksievich is therefore right. It is worthwhile exploring the reasons for this poetic restraint.

Natural disasters are by no means rare in western art and literature. Yet responsibility for the whims of nature seems to lie not in the hands of people, but in those of God or some other supernatural powers. Even when one postulates that there is a connection between a sacrilegious event and divine punishment, people appear as victims, helpless in the face of the natural powers unleashed upon them. Their impotence regarding natural disasters is something which may be lamented, described and sung about.

This is why, for centuries, as in Russia, earthquakes or floods (generally interpreted as great deluges) have had stories told about them. Aleksandr Pushkin’s tale in verse, *The Bronze Horseman*, for example, became famous as a story about the heroic, but possibly blasphemous foundation of the city of St. Petersburg by Tsar Peter the Great. When autumn storms break out, the granite banks of the Neva river, which are deliberately built low in order to heighten its beauty, offer no resistance whatsoever. The Baltic Sea is driven back into the Finnish Bay and St. Petersburg regularly experiences floods. Pushkin’s text refers to the historic flood of 1824. The “little” civil servant Evgenii, whose fiancée is killed in the flood, appears here as the victim of a superhuman ruler, who himself can affront God and powers of nature.¹

Unlike natural catastrophes, the disaster of Chernobyl’ is the result of human failing, an earthly error of judgement as it were. As an act of divine judgement, the meltdown defies interpretation. Human complicity even makes the nuclear catastrophe comparable to a war. In Russia, there are numerous experiences which one may look back on, in particular the suffering caused by the invasion of the German army in 1941. There is no lack of literary or visual works which refer to the Second World War in the Russian-speaking world. Yet the experience of war, which particularly marked Belarus and

western Ukraine, and therefore the region around Chernobyl', only partially enables us to understand this nuclear accident. Some early Chernobyl' texts take the opportunity to identify perpetrators and to distinguish them clearly from victims. This is how the director of the atomic power station is given the role of the guilty party in Vladimir Gubarev's play *Sarkofag. Tragediia* (Gubarev 1986).² The poet and member of the KGB, Vladimir Iavorivskii, also looks for bogeymen. He presents his story of *Mariia s polyn'iu v kontse stoletii* (Iavorivskii 1987) as a piece of fictional writing, speculates playfully on the meaning of the word "Chernobyl'" (as a subspecies of the wormwood plant "polyn'") and spins a corny family saga about the accident.

But as time passes the poets' and artists' perplexity increases. Unlike a war, this event was not accompanied by any perceivable enemy. Although the director of the power plant may be said to have done something wrong, he is simply a cog in the machinery, a machinery which cannot even be identified with the political system. Nuclear power plants exist both in the East and the West. An additional aesthetic challenge is the lack of any specific event in the contaminated area. Hardly anything has happened in the Chernobyl' region since 1986. If one does not wish to breathe literary life into the first days or weeks which followed the accident,³ all that one can write about is simply a lack of events. The area is quiet, where very few people live and where time seems to have come to a standstill. Even fictional stories cannot really convincingly be set in the contaminated zone, for the Chernobyl' region has itself turned into a piece of science fiction or, in the words of Anatolii Shumanskii, who was interviewed by Svetlana Aleksievich, "Instead of writing you should record. Document. Show me a fantastic novel about Chernobyl – there isn't one! Because reality is more fantastic" (Aleksievich 2005:124).⁴ Few artists have risen to the challenge of capturing fantastic reality in a text or image, of doing away with accusations of guilt and of focusing on the topic of perplexity itself. This essay will present some examples of this.

Documentary Prose

The first attempt to put into writing the nuclear accident along with its immediate consequences was undertaken by Iurii Shcherbak. In 1986 Shcherbak was on the spot as a correspondent for the reputed Soviet literary journal *Literaturnaia gazeta*. On top of this he embodies a literary type which is seeped in tradition in Russia. Like Anton Chekhov or Mikhail Bulgakov, Iurii Shcherbak is a doctor. These professional skills lend him and his text moral authority in the eyes of the readers, which cannot be underestimated in the case of the reactor accident.

Shcherbak worked (as did Svetlana Aleksievich later on) with interviews, recorded the voices of firefighters, journalists, local politicians and doctors and put them to paper. He then published the results of his investigations in 1987 in an article called "Chernobyl'" in the magazine *Iunost'*.⁵ A considerably longer version of this collection and condensed witness reports was published as a book called *Chernobyl'*.

Dokumental'noe povestvovanie (Shcherbak 1991). A brief comparison of these two renderings reveals the special nature of Chernobyl' and the problems arising from it.

In the preface to *Iunost'*, Shcherbak expresses the following hope.

"The Time will come, I firmly believe, when the Chernobyl epic (...) will appear before us in all its tragic fullness, in all its polyphony, in the grateful biographies of the real heroes and the scornful characterisations of the criminals who allowed the accident and its grievous consequences to take place."
(Shcherbak 1989: 2–3)⁶

At the same time, and at the same point in the text, Shcherbak expresses his doubt whether existing literary forms suffice to do justice to the facts.

“I think that, in order to create such an epic we will require new approaches, new literary forms, different, let us say, from *War and Peace* or *Quiet Flows the Don*. What will these approaches and forms be? I do not know. And all the while... All the while I feel I want to propose to the reader my own original presentation of the documents and facts, of the testimony of witnesses – shortly after the accident it fell to my lot on several occasions to be in the Zone and in the places adjoining it.” (Shcherbak 1989:3)

This preface was omitted from the book version of 1991. The author could hardly have given a clearer indication that the search for guilty culprits and the vision of an epic presentation had become superfluous in the wake of the nuclear catastrophe.⁷ Yet Shcherbak adhered to the principle of documenting the event, mainly in the form of quotations and their montage, while a further specificity of the accident – its formidably spatial dimension – now came to the fore.

Shcherbak considerably extends his text. *Chernobyl'. Dokumental'noe povestvovanie* is at least four times longer than it was in its first version. The author adds new interviews and new recollections to the existing material as if he wants to show how complex and vast the catastrophe was simply by increasing the quantity of text.⁸ *Chernobyl'*, so it seems, is now boundless, *Chernobyl'* suspends causal logic. The author even seems to get more and more entangled in the events as they unfold, and hides (though not completely) behind the witness reports he quotes, strings them together, albeit without being able to establish any sequence of motivation. The multiperspectival viewpoint which becomes evident in Shcherbak's composition (which is already evident in the first version of the text and, by 1991, is dominant) gives emphasis to the intensity of the moment and its inevitability. Hence the events preceding the accident, the unfortunate Saturday, and the evacuation of Prip'yat' are all presented from different angles. The fundamental questions are asked repeatedly but remain unresolved. Shcherbak's montage thus visualizes the *Chernobyl'* accident as a vicious circle, whereas the fine structure of the text gives voice to the fuss and ignorance of the initial hours after the event. The author does this by working with ellipses and pauses, the latter presented graphically with suspension marks (“...”) – as in the later works by Aleksievich. In addition, there are smaller leaps in time forwards and backwards. In this way, a swift pace, ignorance and the collapse of chronology go hand in hand.

“Pecherytsia said, ‘Stay around there for the moment, ring again in fifteen to twenty minutes, we'll tell you what to do. Don't get worried, here in the town we'll call out our own doctor.’ At this very moment three people came together to me. I think they had been despatched with a young man of around eighteen. He was complaining of nausea, an acute headache, and was beginning to vomit. (...) And he ‘floated away’ before my eyes, although he was awake (...) beginning to stumble, as if he'd downed a good dose of spirit, but no smell, nothing... (...) I gave the lad injections of relanium, aminazine, and something else (...) to ‘reduce’ their mental problem and the pain... (...) Tolia Gumarov (...) brought me a pile of drugs. I phoned back and said that I would not use them. After all, there were no burns cases. (...) Having sent the firemen off, I asked them to send potassium iodide, tablets (...). Later in Moscow, in Clinic

No. 6, I lay in a ward with a dosimeter operator. (...) My three ambulances were circulating all the time.” (Shcherbak 1989: 42–44)⁹

In this short passage, the reader is confronted with a variety of questions. For example, when exactly did Belokon, the narrator of the quoted passage, realize that there was a connection between the condition of his patients and the radioactivity? Yet this question is not answered. Moreover, the graphic presentation brings to bear the speaker’s reservations and his own insecurities: the notions of “float away” and “reduce” are recognizable as auxiliary constructions. Finally, Belokon jumps forwards in time in his account to a scene in a Moscow hospital, then backwards again to the early hours of 26 April. This is both unsettling and a challenge for readers. They are forced to fill the gaps in the text, to understand the previously omitted explanations and to recognize the way in which time is manipulated. Reading this text requires extreme concentration, as was required of those involved in the events of 1986. Shcherbak’s *Chernobyl’* brings the reader once again into close contact with the situation as it was at the time of the reactor accident, and shows first hand how perplexity and temporal confusion find expression in the discourse about Chernobyl’.

Svetlana Aleksievich, who had already made a name for herself with her books about soldier-returnees from the Soviet-Afghan conflict and about women’s experiences in the Second World War (Aleksievich 1991; Aleksievich 1985), carried out her research about ten years after the disaster. Both the author and her interlocutors look back on the event with more detachment. This text does not bear such a distinct trace of the hustle and bustle which immediately followed the event. However, the stagnation and the void left in the wake of Chernobyl’ may be felt all the more strongly.

Among Aleksievich’s interviewees are the wife of the late fireman Ignatenko,¹⁰ a former worker from the nuclear plant, resettled and returning inhabitants of the area, including refugees from the post-Soviet war zones. Her interviews are more structured than those conducted by Iurii Shcherbak. And although the author is explicitly referred to only in the preface, the different testimonies form a coherent whole thanks to the division of the work into three main sections, the standardized titles of chapters and a consistent style, which may be felt throughout the interviews. At the same time, these interviews by no means constitute a dialogic text in the sense of Mikhail Bakhtin; that is, those which are marked by a recognizable mixture of voices or a discussion between the author and her interlocutors. Aleksievich brings us face to face with *monological words*.¹¹ She does not add anything to the words of the people concerned, and the readers are also left aghast or at least astonished in the face of these confessions. It is not by chance that single chapters are called monologues, while the unbridgeable distance between those involved and their listeners or viewers (and even between the various interview partners) remains intact. The title of the book *Chernobyl’skaia molitva* emphasizes the phenomenal dimension, for the prayer (*molitva*) is addressed to an absent, higher authority, not to real readers. The monological aspect of the text and the loneliness of the narrators come especially to the fore when the content of the stories assume immense proportions, and when phenomena are to be conveyed whose representations have previously been confined to the realm of medical discourse. This is how Liudmila Ignatenko describes the body of her husband:

“The last two days in the hospital – I’d lift his arm, and meanwhile the bone is shaking, just sort of dangling, the body has gone away from it. Pieces of his lungs, of his liver, were coming out of his mouth. He was choking on his internal organs. I’d wrap my hand in a bandage and put it in his mouth, take out

all that stuff. It's impossible to talk about. It's impossible to write about.”
(Aleksievich 2005:19)¹²

The nuclear accident and its consequences seem to have rendered the limitations of language all the more apparent. Yet precisely the indication of these shortcomings, along with the pauses, ellipses and omissions to which Liudmila Ignantenko resorts, are among the special qualities of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. The interview partners' silences, their loneliness and their pauses testify to a fundamental rift between things, for they are a sign of nothingness.

This work also contains manifold efforts to compare the nuclear accident with other catastrophes. For witnesses of the disaster it seems natural to compare it with the Second World War, which caused a great deal of suffering in the region. Many Belarusians and Ukrainians can still remember the wartime evacuations.¹³ Once again they are summoned to leave their houses, once again they have to pack their belongings and climb into vehicles, leaving behind their animals. The comparison between the disaster and the war triggers unforeseen difficulties in the minds of witnesses, for it leads to aporias. This apparently useful analogy does not help to explain the disaster. Instead, one is left bewildered.

“They herded all the livestock from the evacuated villages into designated points in our regional centre. These cows, calves, pigs were going crazy, they would run around the streets – whoever wanted to catch them could catch them. The cars with the canned meat went from the meat combine to the station at Kalinovich, and from there to Moscow. Moscow wouldn't accept the cargo. So these train cars, which were by now graveyards, came back to us. Whole echelons of them, and we buried them here. The smell of rotten meat followed me around at night. “Can it be that this is what an atomic war smells like?” The war I remembered smelled of smoke...” (Aleksievich 2005:141–142)¹⁴

The witness clings to the notion of *war*, although it does not fit the nuclear *accident*.¹⁵ This vain attempt to mediate between new and old forms of threat – if only by referring to them both with the single term “war” – reveals the limits of traditional explanatory models. New “wars” smell differently from old wars; yet the comparison of odours does not help us to define them any more accurately. Whereas smoke, for example, used to indicate where enemy bombs were falling, today one can at best identify people themselves, with their blind faith in progress and love of technology, as the cause of the stench. The slaughter of animals no longer leads to food production, but only to the production of corpses. Even the eyewitness appears to be astonished at this new and unfamiliar logic. We are ultimately left mainly with unanswered questions.

The witness reports collected, arranged and edited by Aleksievich do not claim to provide a philosophical interpretation of the world. However, their monological and uncommunicative structure, as well as their ellipses and unanswered questions, do indicate a dimension which philosophers like Martin Heidegger or Jacques Derrida have described as “being” or as an interspace between being things (“*différance*,” Derrida 1990), as a space which is itself not being, but one which provides conditions in which being is possible. Both philosophers assume that this dimension has been wantonly disregarded and even forgotten in western thought and behavior, whose progress has been marked by the advance of technology (Heidegger 1954a, 1962). Aleksievich's Chernobyl' text not only reveals the failure of technology, but also the failure of its underlying metaphysics (a metaphysics which Heidegger consistently criticizes as the

loss of being (Heidegger 1954b)). Hence this text also reveals the limits of western thought.

Ultimately, references to works of art are among the comparisons which, in the new conditions brought about by the nuclear age, no longer make any sense; instead, they make the gulf between the compared objects all the more apparent. The practice of intertextuality which has been used as a means to ensure “meaning complexion” in the modern, and in particular in the postmodern, age (Lachmann 1983) leads to nowhere, to the void. The titles for chapters chosen by Iurii Shcherbak in *Chernobyl'*.

Dokumental'noe povestvovanie testify to the hope of finding parallels, that is, borrowings for possible interpretations in Russian literature. Shcherbak draws on Andrei Platonov's novel *Kotlovan* (Shcherbak 1991a:172), on Arkadii und Boris Strugatskii's science fiction story *Piknik na obochine*, on Andrei Tarkovskii's Film *Stalker*, which in turn is based on *Piknik na obochine* (Shcherbak 1991a: 249); he refers to the debate about physicists and poets in the 1960s at a time when people in the Soviet Union were enthralled by technology (Shcherbak 1991a: 187, 197), and finally to Aleksandr Gertsen's *Kto vinovat?* (Shcherbak 1991a: 360). However, Shcherbak achieves little more than the naming of titles. The author looks for aids to interpretation but does not find any, and even brings this failure to the fore.

Although the Chernobyl' phenomenon eludes any comparison with conventional war and conventional catastrophe texts, its unique aspects, and even its “incomparable dimension” come into their own when the operation unfolds in reverse, that is, when things collapse indiscriminately. It is not by chance that the anonymous witness of the failed meat convoy remembers the returning wagon in terms of a mass grave. Graves are a consistent motif in Aleksievich's collection of interviews, in particular because an exceptionally large number of things and many unusual things were buried in the wake of the disaster – household appliances, for example, including sewing machines. One was no longer allowed to throw them away, for they must be covered with earth in so-called *mogil'niki* (burial mounds or pits). This activity led to the flattening of a meaningful philosophical, socio-political and even legal distinction between living beings and things. Sewing machines come to rest alongside the old, “real” dead. Henceforth all things are buried. The former hierarchy distinguishing people from sewing machines and, above all, which places people above sewing machines, effectively collapses in Chernobyl'. The burials even culminate in the practice of burying things not only *with* earth, but of burying *earth itself*. Gardens are ploughed up together with their products along with, finally, forests.

“We buried the forest. We sawed the trees into metre-and-a-half pieces and packed them in cellophane and threw them into graves.” (Aleksievich 2005:89)¹⁶

The Chernobyl' region evolves into a gigantic cemetery, a mass grave in which there no longer appears to be any difference between things and people, between the dead and the living. In light of the huge spatial and temporal dimensions of Chernobyl' and in light of the fact that objects were stolen from the *mogil'niki*, then sold and brought back into circulation, even cemeteries as “counterplaces” to effective, living spaces, as Foucauldian heterotopias (Foucault 2006) have lost the function they once had. Chernobyl' is therefore everything and nothing: utopia, heterotopia and reality at the same time. This absence of norms arouses a sense of pain in witnesses, and it is this pain, the trace of nothingness, which Aleksievich captures in her writing.

Photographs with Various Emphases

Of all forms of artistic expression, photography is especially suited to represent the all-encompassing cemetery of Chernobyl'. Photography is not an art of movement, but stands still. The spatially static nature of photography is particularly appropriate for capturing the contaminated radioactive zone around Chernobyl' as it rots away over time. Moreover, the documentary aspect, that is, the historical responsibility of art towards the nuclear accident, is an effective by-product of the form. Roland Barthes summarizes this characteristic of photography by writing that, 'The referent always sticks' (Barthes 2009:14). 'Photography (...) is the absolute *particular*, the (...) *real*, in its indefatigable expression' (Barthes 2009:12). Barthes' definition, which insists on the referentiality of a photograph, may be appropriately applied to the photographic representation of the Chernobyl' region, for arranged and stylized images are superfluous in this case. The catastrophe itself has already stylized the landscape, turning it into a stage. What counts now is rather to capture this "spectacle of reality". The Canadian architectural photographer Robert Polidori, who traveled to Chernobyl' in the summer of 2001 and published the results of his trip in the book *Zones of Exclusion. Pripjat and Chernobyl* (Polidori 2003), has been exceedingly successful in doing this.

Polidori's images depict, among other things, the exterior facades of the houses and streets of Pripjat'. One of the photographs shows blocks of flats typical in eastern Europe, surrounded by lawns and trees in bloom, and the scene also includes the tarmaced path leading to the entrance, a footpath which leads in between the buildings. The weather is pleasant, for the picture was taken in the summer. At first sight the photograph appears to be unspectacular, though its finer qualities become apparent on closer inspection. This delay in perception, the "liberation from automatism" by "making the objects unfamiliar" (to take up the terminology of the Russian Formalists),¹⁷ is one of the foremost qualities of the photographer Polidori. One may presume (on account of a number of missing window panes and the state of the tarmac) that the place is uninhabited. In this case nothingness, that is, in the first instance the absence of people, is represented by the *lack* of window panes and by an additional unfamiliar aspect, which is the form of plants growing haphazardly on the tarmac. The photograph documents empty houses, but it does not recount why the buildings were abandoned. This silence of the image encapsulates a sense of being mindful of the accident, and the silence gives rise to a number of questions. Where are the former residents now? What fate befell them after their exodus? And what holds sway here and now, if not people? Many things which form part of everyday life are still here, including houses, trees, streets and panes, but they have been rid of their function, so why are they still standing around? The special quality of Polidori's photographs is that they reveal situations which need a lot of explaining.

Like Aleksievich, the Canadian photographer works with comparisons which lead nowhere. He starts with his viewers' everyday experiences and their habits of perception. These imply, among other things, that in a photograph taken in an estate of blocks of flats one should be able to see a child playing, a curtain wafting in the wind perhaps, and rubbish lying around on the ground – all signs of living. But the work of art leaves the viewer to find out what the meaning of an uninhabited estate may be.

The effect of Polidori's photographs can be explained with the aid of a contradiction. The works of Igor Kostin and Robert Polidori have been compared several times before.¹⁸ Kostin is considered to be the person who took the first ever photograph of the exploded reactor. Although many disagree whether this famous picture was taken on 26 April or rather much later,¹⁹ there remains no doubt that Kostin was on the spot

immediately after the accident and therefore captured very dynamic shots. He documented the salvage crews, the pilots who flew over the reactor, and the evacuation (Kostin 2006). But in all cases (and this diagnosis is just as valid for April 1986 as it is for the 1990s) Kostin's images are characterized by clarity. They contain not a trace of perplexity. He frequently includes shots of prohibition signs and signs warning against radioactivity, official indications of contamination. The viewer can grasp the meaning of the images at once. Their messages are blatantly obvious, there is not a trace of irritation, and the photograph does not trigger a search for meaning or, to quote Roland Barthes again, there is no "punctum" (Barthes 2009:36), which means no sense of dismay and consternation.

The Documentary Film



Still from Nikolaus Geyrhalter's documentary "Pripyat". PRIPYAT (C) NGF

The documentary film *Pripyat*, written by the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter, is quite different. In this film, which was made in 1999 (Geyrhalter 1999), Geyrhalter attempts to come as close as possible to producing a tranquil and static image. His camera shots are long, and if it were not for the soundtrack, if there were not a few crows to be heard and leaves wafting in the wind, one could believe that it is a montage of photographs.

Moreover, Geyrhalter succeeds in capturing the emptiness of the space by frequently fading to black. These sequences do not unfold slowly, but mark out black images from preceding and subsequent sequences with sharp cuts. The essence of Chernobyl' appears to lie in pure detachment, in nothingness. The director uses this technique to draw attention to the stagnation of an entire region. He shows an empty space in which there are few inhabitants and where time appears to have been suspended.

Similar to Aleksievich, Geyrhalter also has a dual strategy. By fading to black he emphasizes the void between things. At the same time, he evens out differences between people and things, and sometimes even between centuries. When, for example, the camera (which follows the solitary inhabitants, returnees and engineers like a stalker) suddenly turns away from the fleet of vehicles and helicopters and briskly focuses on the back of a horse-drawn carriage driver and even drives along a sandy path gracefully with

the horse and carriage, this change of perspective initially appears to indicate nothing more than the difference between the age of technology and industry and the age of agriculture. If the helicopters were intact, and if the landscape were intact, this montage would simply evoke a step back in time. We would have been propelled backwards from the century of helicopters into the age of horse-drawn carriages. This is, however, not the case. Not only do the helicopters look damaged and unserviceable, they are also very contaminated, which the guard expressly points out to his visitors (including the cameraman). The montage of helicopters and carriages thus arouses a sense of irritation, which throws fundamental doubt on the idea of history as progress. In the contaminated zone nothing is any more modern or antiquated than anything else, for all things are equally radiated. All sense of time is lost. As such, very few things happen in Geyrhalter's film.

The short scenes are therefore all the more moving when something does actually happen. Such is the case when a lab assistant visits her former flat in Pripyat'. She is still employed at the plant, as she was before the accident, but now commutes from Kiev to Chernobyl'. For the sake of the cameraman she walks through the overgrown backyards to her former home in a block of flats for the first time in a very long time. Yet she experiences a surprise. In spite of the radiation all the objects have been stolen from her flat. The only thing the distraught lab assistant finds there on the floor is her son's school exercise book, which was of no value to the thieves. In the context of the general uneventfulness of the film this devastating discovery acquires a particularly poignant emotional effect.

In Geyrhalter's work, the nuclear catastrophe again presents us primarily with a series of questions. The director has no explanations. Instead, his viewers are presented with pain and anger, resignation or fatalism, and the people of Chernobyl's simple emotional reactions to the incomprehensible situation with which they are confronted day after day. Here too, they are left with something which could be defined as tranquillity, or nothingness.

By adopting a cautious, inquisitive approach to Chernobyl', Geyrhalter erects a monument to the "heroes", that is, the returnees, guards and the employees of the nuclear power plant when it was functioning. Unlike the socialist realist monument in Chernobyl,²⁰ this film is moving, just as Polidori's photographs and Shcherbak's and Aleksievich's books are moving. Their works exercise restraint in order to lend a voice to those who are concerned or to give an impression of their perplexity. In light of the challenge posed by this topic, this is a magnificent achievement.

¹ For more details, see Grob, Nicolosi 2003.

² According to Andreas Guski, Gubarev therefore remains committed to a typically Soviet discourse of "exposure" (Guski 2008:364).

³ Aleksandr Mindadze, for example, does this in his film *V subbotu (On a Saturday)* 2011.

⁴ "Nado ne pisat', a zapisyvat'. Dokumentirovat'. Daite mne fantasticheskii roman o Chernobyle... Net ego! I ne budet! Ia vas uveriaiu! Ne budet..." (Aleksievich 2006:176)

⁵ Both the first German translation (Stscherbak, 1988) and the first English translation

(Shcherbak 1989) adhered to this version. When writing this article I referred to these two texts alongside the Russian version of 1991. In what follows, I focus on a comparison of the translation of the first Russian version and the second Russian original version.

⁶ Cf. Stscherbak 1988:9.

⁷ Shcherbak clearly does not take back his criticism of the poor information supplied to the population by politicians, the director of the nuclear plant and the medical doctors involved on 26 April 1986. This false reticence meant that the children of Prip'yat' continued to play peacefully in the sand on that sunny spring day instead of sitting behind closed doors at home. No iodine tablets were handed out to the population although the doctors at the nuclear plant knew in the very early hours of that day that the complaints uttered by firemen could only have been caused by an overdose of nuclear radiation (Shcherbak 1989:72–77).

⁸ The editors of the (second) German translation (Stscherbak 1991b) considered the shapelessness of the text to be unreasonable and were afraid (somewhat justifiably) that this would put readers off. The second German version, which appeared in 1991, therefore contains a shorter version of the Russian edition from the same year, to which are added a few passages from the *Iunost'* version, including the preface.

⁹ Pecheritsa skazal: "Ostavaisia poka na meste, minut cherez piatnadsat' – dvadsat' perezvonish', my skazhem tebe, chto delat'. Ne volnuisia, my na gorod dadim svoego vracha, vyzovem." I bukval'no tut zhe ko mne podoshli troe, po-moemu komandirovannye, priveli parnia let vosemnadsati. Paren' zhalovalsia na toshnotu, rezkie golovnye boli, rvota u nego nachalas'. (...) A on "zaplyvaet" u menia na glazakh, khotia i vzbuzhden (...) nachal kak-to zapletat'sia, vrode prinial khoroshuiu dozu spirtnogo, no ni zapakha, nichego... (...) Etomu parniu sdelaia relanium, aminazin, chto-to eshche (...), chtoby psikhiku nemnozhko "ubrat'", boli... (...) Tolia Gumarov (...) privel mne kuchu narkotikov. Ia perezvonil i skazal chto delat' ikh ne budu. Ved' obozhennykh ne bylo. (...) Otpравiv pozharnykh, ia uzhe poprosil, chtoby kalii iod prislali, tabletki (...). Pozzhe v Moskve, v shestoi klinike, ia lezhal v palate s odnim dosimetristom. (...) Moi tri mashiny vse vremia tsirkulirovali. (Shcherbak 1991a:63–65)

¹⁰ This particularly impressive interview, which Svetlana Aleksievich presents as an introductory monologue, was turned into a documentary film about Liudmila Ignatenko (*Ljudmilas Röst; The Voice of Lyudmila*), made by Gunnar Bergdahl in 2001.

¹¹ See chapter five of *Discourse in Dostoevsky* (in Bakhtin 1984:181–269). Bakhtin is particularly interested in the opposite of unanimity, that is, in dialogic words which can accommodate foreign talk, a foreign ideological horizon and take (either polemically or affirmatively) a stance. However, Aleksievich's interview partners speak a very different language. Their utterances are a more direct, immediate and solitary expression of what they lived through, which Bakhtin would categorize as a monological word.

¹² "V bolnitse poslednie dva dnia... Podnimu ego ruku, a kost' shataetsia, boltaetsia kost', telesnaia tkan' ot nee otoshla. Kusochki legkogo, kusochki pecheni shli cherez rot... Zakhlebyvalsia svoimi vnutrennostiami... Obkruchu ruku bintom i zasunu emu v rot, vse

eto iz nego vygrebau... Eto nel'zia rasskazat'! Eto nel'zia opisat'!"(Aleksievich 2006:29)

¹³ Cf. also Stscherbak 1989:61–62.

¹⁴ “Gnali skot... Ves' skot iz vyselennykh dereven' gnali k nam v raitsentr na priemnye punkty. Obezumevshie korovy, ovechki, porosiata begali po ulitsam... Kto khotel, tot lovil... S miasokombinata mashiny c tushami shli na stanciu Kalinovichi, ottuda gruzili na Moskvu. Moskva ne prinimala. I eti vagony, uzhe mogil'niki, vozvrashchalis' nazad k nam. Tselye eshelony. Tut ikh khoronili. Zapakh gnilogo miasa presledoval po nocham... ‘Neuzheli tak pakhnat atomnaia voina?’ – dumala ia. Voina dolzhna pakhnut' dymom...” (Aleksievich 2006:238)

¹⁵ Paul Virilio has drawn particular attention to the fundamental difference between these two phenomena (Alexijevitsch, Virilio 2003:11).

¹⁶ “Khoronili les. Derev'ia pilili do poltara metra, upakovyvali v tselofan i zavalivali v mogil'nik.” (Aleksievich 2006:134)

¹⁷ According to the Russian Formalists this is a procedure which is generally applied in art. See in particular Šklovskij 1988:15, 31.

¹⁸ See, for example, Daum 2006.

¹⁹ See the discussion about this in Paul 2008.

²⁰ A picture of the monument appeared in *Osteuropa*, 2006:26.

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