

Unveiling the Nuclearocene: Exploring Earth's Sentience and Humanity's Role in the
Anthropocene in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and Aleksandr Kott's *Ispytanie*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between humanity and the environment in the context of nuclear fallout aftermath, as depicted in the films *Stalker* and *Ispytanie*. Through an analysis of these films, particularly examining their portrayal of radioactive wastelands as non-human actants, the study delves into the implications for understanding the Anthropocene. Drawing on the events of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the Semipalatinsk failed nuclear test of 1949 as contexts, the thesis examines how directors Aleksandr Kott and Andrei Tarkovsky animate the environmental actants, representing the Earth as a sentient being reacting to nuclear fallout. By positioning the Earth as a central character, the directors challenge anthropocentric narratives, emphasizing the impact of human activity on the environment. This portrayal aligns with the discourse of the Anthropocene, shifting focus from humanity to the natural world as the central actor. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining film analysis and environmental studies, this thesis contributes to the understanding of humanity's relationship with the environment within the Anthropocene framework.

Résumé

Cette thèse explore la relation entre l'humanité et l'environnement dans le contexte des retombées nucléaires, telles que représentées dans les films *Stalker* (1979) et *Le Souffle* (2014). À travers une analyse de ces films, en particulier en examinant leur représentation des terrains vagues radioactifs en tant qu'acteurs non humains, l'étude se plonge dans les implications pour la compréhension de l'Anthropocène. S'appuyant sur les événements de la catastrophe de Tchernobyl en 1986 et le test nucléaire raté de Semipalatinsk en 1949, la thèse examine comment les réalisateurs Aleksandr Kott et Andrei Tarkovsky mettent en scène les acteurs environnementaux, représentant la Terre comme un être sentient réagissant aux retombées nucléaires. En positionnant la Terre comme protagoniste central, les réalisateurs remettent en question les récits anthropocentriques, en mettant l'accent sur l'impact de l'activité humaine sur l'environnement. Cette représentation s'aligne sur le discours de l'Anthropocène, déplaçant l'attention de l'humanité vers le monde naturel en tant qu'acteur central. À travers une approche interdisciplinaire combinant l'analyse cinématographique et les études environnementales, cette thèse contribue à la compréhension de la relation de l'humanité avec l'environnement dans le cadre de l'Anthropocène.

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Introduction

Environmental degradation has emerged as a prominent subject of discourse across political, social, and cultural spheres. Extensive deliberations regarding the impact of human activities on the environment have been undertaken through both literary and scientific analyses. Throughout their development, these discussions have underscored the concept of the current Anthropocene epoch, a geological era distinguished by humans' pervasive influence on the global ecosystem,¹ leading to profound alterations and irreversible consequences. There are compelling reasons to consider humanity's role in the current state of the world within the Anthropocene framework. Notably, this perspective acknowledges the profound impact of human activities on Earth's geology and ecosystems, while underscoring the imperative to address such issues as biodiversity loss, climate change, and increasingly rapid environmental transformations. Through the lens of the Anthropocene, the complex interplay between human civilization and its ecological context comes into focus. Viewing the world through the Anthropocene provides a chance to examine and address the pressing challenges facing our planet today.

The general perspective of the discourse, however, is highly anthropocentric – predominantly centered on capitalism's influence as the primary driver of impending environmental crises. Jason W. Moore, a scholar of environmental history, capitalism, and social theory, postulates that the current global ecological crisis is a direct result of capitalism's unfettered inclination to exploit the energy, raw materials, and food generated by both human

1. Paul J. Crutzen, Will Steffen, and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The "Anthropocene,"" in *The Future of Nature*, ed. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 483.

and non-human entities.² Moore's argument engages solely with capitalism as a catalyst for the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, the East, which has diverged from capitalist ideologies, faces criticism for neglecting the environmental impacts of advancing its pursuits, most notably evident in developing its nuclear initiatives.

Piggybacking off of Moore's argument with the addition of nuclear advancement, Dr. Sharae Deckard, who has published multiple articles on postcolonial ecocriticism and world-ecology, claims, "Our capitalist nuclear modernity is above all a global modernity – singular, planetary, and world-historical – in which all forms of earthly life have been altered by the atmospheric effects of nuclear development."³ I agree with Deckard that capitalism triggered countries to simultaneously race to develop nuclear power and weapons, which plays a significant role in the "Capitalocene,"⁴ an era in which the earth's environment began to incur irreparable damage from the initial effects of capitalism and industrialization. However, the consequences of rapid technological advancement of nuclear weapons apply just as much in communist countries as in capitalist countries. Communist and Socialist countries were also complicit in accelerating the Anthropocene by producing nuclear arms and energy. Thus, a more appropriate term for this era would be what Alessandra Naccarato coined the "Nuclearocene."⁵

2. Christian Parenti, Eileen C. Crist, Justin McBrien, Donna Jeanne Haraway, Elmar Altvater, Daniel Hartley, and Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? : Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: Pm Press, 2016), 11.

3. Sharae Deckard, "'The Future Is Behind Them!': Post-Apocalypse and the Enduring Nuclear in Post-Soviet Russian Fiction," in *Toxic Immanence: Decolonizing Nuclear Legacies and Futures*, ed. Livia Monnet (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 40.

4. Moore. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? : Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, 6.

5. Alessandra Naccarato, *Imminent Domains: Reckoning with the Anthropocene*. (Toronto: Bookhug Press, 2022), 11.

This explanation supports the contention that responsibility for the rapid escalation of climate change cannot be attributed to a certain economic ideology. Rather, I argue that those who engage in the race to develop nuclear weapons bear the primary burden, regardless of their capitalistic roots.

In particular, the Soviet Union played a fundamental role in the development of nuclear power. However, subsequent accidents at three significant nuclear facilities – Chernobyl, Kyshtym, and Chelyabinsk – marred the eagerness of developing nuclear energy and revealed the grave potential of nuclear development to enact mass ruin. Approximately 60 million individuals were negatively impacted by the Chernobyl disaster, and around one million people were affected by incidents in the Kyshtym and Chelyabinsk regions.⁶ These instances solely pertain to nuclear energy and do not even encompass the extensive and deliberately concealed incidents associated with nuclear weaponry. The Soviet Union's proliferation of nuclear weapons differed from the West's capitalistic roots in that the Soviet Union "saw technology as a means to convert this largely agrarian, peasant society into a well-oiled machine of workers dedicated to the construction of communism."⁷ The conventional notion which asserts that the Great Acceleration (and its consequential environmental catastrophes) should be attributed solely to tenets of capitalism forgets nuclear technology's influence on the postindustrial age. Although it is crucial to acknowledge capitalism's role in causing significant disruptions and disasters, this viewpoint often neglects the historical context of nuclear calamities that have already transpired.

6. Daniel L. Collins, *Nuclear Accidents in the Former Soviet Union: Kyshtym, Chelyabinsk and Chernobyl* (Bethesda: Defense Nuclear Energy: Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute, 1992), 13.

7. Paul R. Josephson, "Atomic-Powered Communism: Nuclear Culture in the Postwar USSR," *Slavic Review* (1996): 297.

Over the past half-century, human beings have witnessed various nuclear disasters, prompting a critical examination of the development and acceleration of this type of energy generation and weaponry. Therefore, it is imperative to reflect on the nuclear dimensions of the Anthropocene. Catastrophic nuclear events in Russia and Ukraine, such as the Chernobyl disaster and failed testing at Semipalatinsk, underscore the importance of broadening our perspective beyond a Western-centric view of environmental challenges. Focusing solely on the United States and Western world at large in discussions of the Anthropocene and their capitalistic precursors overlooks the significant impact of nuclear power and its associated risks. Neglecting the nuclear aspect of environmental discourse leads to an incomplete understanding of the complexities of the Anthropocene paradigm.

The environmental and health consequences of the Chernobyl and Semipalatinsk nuclear incidents have been catastrophic. Of particular significance is the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, which extended beyond national borders and permeated neighboring European regions. This transboundary dispersion of radiation posed a significant risk to the health and well-being of individuals residing outside the confines of the Soviet Union, which emphasized its participation in the Anthropocene. Confronted with the impossibility of resetting the world and the unattainable ideal of undoing the consequences of human actions, there is a pressing need to cultivate awareness of the Anthropocene's context and causes.⁸ Specifically, it is important to explore the environmental ramifications inherent in radioactive incidents of this scale, and their subsequent implications for humanity. This necessitates a shift from an anthropocentric

8. Adrian Ivakhiv, *Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times* (Punctum Books, 2018), 97.

perspective which focuses solely on the environmental impact on human beings, to a broader consideration of how these incidents affect Earth as a whole.

Chernobyl's catastrophe represents what Zhiwa Woodbury refers to as "Climate Trauma," which she says, "challenges the very idea of a shared future in a way that fundamentally indicts our present identity as a species."⁹ Effectively, in the face of climate catastrophe, human lives are changed drastically to the point where our collective identity is altered. This consequential shift resembles the transformative impact experienced by individuals following personal traumatic events, forever changing them at a fundamental level. Cultural identities across history have been shaped by collective traumas, such as the impact of warfare or the systemic oppression of minority groups by governments. These instances typically involve a discernable adversary, responsible for deliberate actions. In the case of Climate Trauma, however, we find ourselves entirely at the mercy of nature – a force that, until now, has only been attributed agency in folklore and fictional narratives.

Within the ruins of these catastrophic events lies a profound exploration of the role of art, particularly cinema, in grappling with the complexities of nuclear development during the Anthropocene. The irreversible consequences of nuclear weapons and their leftover radioactivity have been documented in news, scientific journals, and global reports, but we can also see their prevalence in fiction novels and films. As Jennifer Fay observes in *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*, "Filmmaking occasions the creation of artificial worlds, unnatural and inclement weather, and deadly environments produced as much for the sake of entertainment as for scientific study and military strategy. Cinema's dominant mode of aesthetic

9. Zhiwa Woodbury, "Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma." *Ecopsychology* 11, no. 1 (2019): 4.

worldmaking is often at odds with the very real human world it is meant to simulate.”¹⁰ The portrayal of deadly environments in films' *mise-en-scènes* predominantly revolves around a speculative post-apocalyptic future, which bears resemblances to the contemporary world yet remains detached from its actualities. In cinematic portrayals, the representation of future post-apocalyptic desolate landscapes primarily takes place many years subsequent to the catastrophic event. These visual depictions largely tend to showcase two distinct scenarios: a regression to a more primitive lifestyle or, conversely, an evolution into an exceptionally advanced, science-fiction-based version of contemporary existence. It is noteworthy that humanity consistently remains the focal point of such narratives. Significantly, films seldom present a post-apocalyptic world wherein humans do not occupy the predominant species position on the planet.

Even in the narrative world of a novel, Amitav Ghosh asserts the challenge faced by science fiction in effectively representing disasters in the Anthropocene. He emphasizes the predominance of narratives set in the future within the emerging genre of science fiction known as "climate fiction" or "cli-fi." He says, “The future is but one aspect of the Anthropocene: this era also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present.”¹¹ The Anthropocene does not play by the normal rules found in science fiction and cli-fi. Unlike the fictional realms typically portrayed in these genres, the Anthropocene does not unfold in a distinct world or a speculative future time period; rather, it is a present-day reality. I agree with Fray and Ghosh on the challenges associated with representing the present within the Anthropocene in both cinema

10. Jennifer Fay, "Introduction," in *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. (New York: Oxford Academic, 2018), 4.

11. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement : Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 72.

and literary fiction. This task is particularly arduous when approached from the point of view of Earth and not from an anthropocentric perspective.

The portrayal of the current repercussions of nuclear energy and weapons development is particularly complex. Given that these technologies were created by humans, there is a tendency to emphasize and focus solely on the impact on human beings in films and novels. The genre of "eco-horror" captivates audiences with its portrayal of the potential consequences awaiting humanity, drawing viewers to cinemas for its exploration of environmental themes and their impact on society. However, two films, *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky and *Ispytanie* (2014) by Aleksandr Kott, show the remnants of nuclear catastrophe but emphasize the perspective of radioactive effects to the Earth itself, and less so on the human characters in the film.

In my thesis, I examine the relationship between humanity and the environment in the aftermath of nuclear fallout, as portrayed in *Stalker* and *Ispytanie*. Specifically, I explore how these films depict the environment of radioactive wastelands as a non-human actant and the subsequent implications on our comprehension of the Anthropocene. To achieve this, I analyze *Stalker* through the lens of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and *Ispytanie* as a response to the result of the Semipalatinsk failed nuclear test conducted in 1949. Kott and Tarkovsky's approach to animating the environmental actants in each film represent the earth as a sentient being, reacting with more than life qualities to the nuclear fallout and its aftermath. By portraying the Earth as a central character, the directors challenge the anthropocentric narrative and highlight the impact of human activity on the environment. This portrayal of the Earth as a sentient being connects with the discourse of the Anthropocene, as their filmmaking shifts the focus from humanity to the natural world as the central actor.

In Section 1, I explore the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the way that it stands out for its eerie blend of sci-fi-like surrealism and the devastating reality of radioactive destruction. The film *Stalker*, preceding the disaster, unexpectedly found resonance post-Chernobyl, becoming a symbolic bridge between fiction and reality and aiding survivors in comprehending the catastrophe's incomprehensible aftermath. Unlike the infamous nuclear bomb detonations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Chernobyl's aftermath unfolded gradually, revealing the perilous and unprecedented impact of continuous radiation leakage. Using the perspectives from Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl*, I highlight the harrowing experiences of survivors of the Chernobyl disaster. Specifically, I focus on their descriptions of the environment surrounding the destroyed nuclear plant, the aftermath marked by the disfigurement of their bodies, and the existential meaning they sought to grasp amidst chaos. Survivors, grappling with the task of articulating their experiences, developed a new language in an effort to convey the catastrophe's incomprehensible aftermath.

Section 2 is a scene analysis of *Stalker*, presenting an exploration of humanity's connection with the environment. The language in the film is echoed heavily in the stories of survivors from Alexievich's book and will be analyzed in conjunction with *Stalker*. The film's portrayal of the Zone's consciousness, its impact on characters, and the symbolism of the Room prompts contemplation of the consequences of selfish desires, paralleling humanity's actions in the Anthropocene. Tarkovsky does this by employing non-human actors, which I will support with the framework developed by Bruno Latour in his scholarship on non-human agency. The Zone, imbued with non-human agency, slowly shifts the perspectives of the protagonists regarding the Zone itself from an unhomely place, to an environment that one does not want to

leave. *Stalker's* relevance to the Anthropocene along with humanity's culpability is also highlighted.

The third and final section explores a renewal of the nuclear film dialogue with a contemporary film about nuclear catastrophe, *Ispytanie*. Released in 2014, this film centered on the Semipalatinsk nuclear test of 1949 in the Soviet Union, focusing on the protagonists' lives in the Kazakhstan Steppe and their encounters with nature. The movie navigates through the days before and immediately after the nuclear explosion, framing it within the context of the Anthropocene. Within the film, non-human actants, the relationship between human and non-human entities, and the lack of language and dialogue are discussed at length, coupled with scene analysis. Kott symbolizes humanity's interdependence with nature, culminating in a catastrophic explosion and a nuanced exploration of humanity's role and responsibility in the Anthropocene.

Section 1: Chernobyl

As far as catastrophes go, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear is unique in the prolonged nature of its catastrophic effects. The lifespan of its aftermath gave rise to a distinct convergence of surreal science fiction elements and harsh realities of radioactive destruction and contamination. While events like Hiroshima and Nagasaki are characterized by immediate and devastating destruction, Chernobyl presents a different kind of wonder. The explosion, and especially its aftermath, were unprecedented—General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, in his speech on May 14, 1986, referred to it as a cataclysmic force that had surpassed all previous encounters with the formidable power of nuclear energy that had spiraled out of control, «мы впервые реально столкнулись с такой грозной силой какой является ядерная энергия вышедшая из-под контроля».¹² It was both extraordinary and perilous. The magnitude of the nuclear accident was estimated to have released 30–40 times more lethal ash than atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹³ In fact, the Chernobyl explosion released “400 times more radioactive material into the Earth's atmosphere than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.”¹⁴ The stark contrast between the use of nuclear weapons and the Chernobyl incident highlights the unique and unparalleled nature of the Chernobyl catastrophe.

12. *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*, directed by Vladimir Shevchenko (Soviet Union: Ukrainian Newsreel, 1987), 00:02:04.

13. "Chernobyl's Fallout Exceeded Hiroshima : Disaster's Output Termed 30 Times Heavier Than WWII Bombs," (Los Angeles Times Archives, August 17, 1986).

14. International Atomic Energy Agency. *Ten years after Chernobyl : What do we really know?* (Vienna: World Health Organization, 1997), 8.

Those who lived through the destruction and witnessed the strangeness unfold also compared it with the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From Svetlana Alexievich's book, *Voices from Chernobyl*, Anatoly Shimanskiy, a journalist, said, "At first everyone said, "It's a catastrophe," and then everyone said, "It's nuclear war." I'd read about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I'd seen documentary footage. It's frightening, but understandable: atomic warfare, the explosion's radius. I could even imagine it. But what happened to us didn't fit into my consciousness."¹⁵ Shimanskiy offers a poignant personal reflection on the incomprehensible nature of the Chernobyl disaster when compared to the nuclear devastation in Japan. This was truly unlike anything ever experienced. Even Hiroshima, killing an estimated 69,000 people, and Nagasaki killing approximately 39,000 people¹⁶ pale in comparison to the overall impact of Chernobyl. True, any radiation left over from a blast leaves radioactive remnants, leaving disfiguring effects on ecology and human populations, but nothing like the Chernobyl disaster, where approximately 60 million people were negatively affected.¹⁷

The peculiarity of the Chernobyl incident is that it did not involve an initial cataclysmic explosion that immediately resulted in widespread destruction. Rather, the catastrophic elements unfolded gradually as the effects of continuous radiation leakage from the reactor became apparent and deadly. The accident caused the largest uncontrolled radioactive release into the

15. Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, trans. Keith Gessen. (New York: St Martin's Press, 2006), 127.

16. The Manhattan Engineer District. *The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, June 29, 1946.

17. Daniel L. Collins, *Nuclear Accidents in the Former Soviet Union: Kyshtym, Chelyabinsk and Chernobyl* (Bethesda: Defense Nuclear Energy: Armed Forces Radiobiology Research Institute, 1992), 13.

environment ever recorded for any civilian operation, and large quantities of radioactive substances were released into the air in the first 10 days following the initial explosion.¹⁸ In the Translator's Preface to *Voices from Chernobyl*, Keith Gessen notes, “The initial blast killed just one plant worker, Valeriy Khodomchuk, and in the next few weeks fewer than thirty workers and firemen died from acute radiation poisoning. But tens of thousands received extremely high doses of radiation—it was an accident that produced, in a way, more survivors than victims.”¹⁹ Human health consequences aside, the subsequent months and years left the affected land sickly and desolate. Everyone living in Chernobyl, Pripyat, and the surrounding villages felt the effects, whether in their own health or in witnessing the catastrophic transformation of the landscape.

Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarussian journalist, documented the oral history of some of the inhabitants’ experiences in response to the transformation that took place in her book *Voices from Chernobyl*, which is “the first book to present personal accounts of the tragedy.”²⁰ Her nonfiction collection of stories won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015 “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”²¹ The testimonies in the book describing what happened before, during, and after the Chernobyl disaster give a historical account of the survivors’ reactions, especially when it comes to their linguistic choices in articulating the unparalleled nature of the Exclusion Zone.

18. World Nuclear Association. *Chernobyl Accident 1986*. April 2022.

19. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, vii.

20. University of Chicago, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2016).

21. Svetlana Alexievich – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024. April 5, 2024.

Chernobyl became a crisis of language. The unprecedented nature of the explosion necessitated linguistic adaptation, as anything in the inhabitants' vernacular proved insufficient to encapsulate the other worldliness they experienced. The seismic shift that occurred in both the physical landscape, its inhabitants' lives, and the geopolitical landscape forced an embracing of the surreal by those attempting to make sense of it. As Tamara Hundorova notes, "During the period of uncertainty after the catastrophe a new language emerges along with new forms of expression."²² Those living there described themselves as part of a different nation of people, "We call ourselves Chernobylites. 'We're from Chernobyl' 'I'm a Chernobylite.' As if this is a separate people. A new nation."²³ Everything about the environment they were living in changed in a way unfathomable to any other human enclave in history. Nature became deadly from a very real, unseen and unmerciful toxin that permeated everything everywhere. There was no way to escape the effects of the radiation from the decimated reactor, a reality that Chernobylites alone shared. Based on Alexievich's documented oral history of the Chernobylites, they often struggled to articulate their experiences in their new world.

Even what they described did not match the run-of-the-mill descriptions of radioactive catastrophe. In certain instances, for example, survivors described the leftover effects of radiation *enhancing* nature's beauty. One resident remarked on the unexpected beauty of the new growth of flowers where they lived, "Whereas here, why, please, go outside to your garden and everything's blooming!"²⁴. Remarkably, the food that they grew and ate appeared to thrive under

22. Tamara Hundorova, "8. Chornobyl and the Crisis of Language," in *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s*. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 7.

23. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 126.

24. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 123.

poisonous conditions. Because the radiation was not visible, residents were puzzled by the fact that they should not eat the fruits and vegetables they had grown. “Try telling people you can’t eat cucumbers and tomatoes. What do you mean ‘can’t’? They taste fine. You eat them, and your stomach doesn’t hurt. And nothing ‘shines’ in the dark.”²⁵ Everything was seemingly normal, but then again, they experienced health effects like nothing ever before witnessed.

The initial casualties alone would not warrant classifying Chernobyl as an apocalyptic event akin to a nuclear bomb, but the release and spread of radioactive particles into the air the victims breathed and the ground they walked on created an otherworldly environment that defied adequate description. It was not just rumored that the radiation caused severe health defects, as was documented in the health records. The affected landscape itself became a hazardous zone, with elevated levels of radiation posing a significant threat to anyone who dared to enter the area, let alone live there.

Extensive research on the long-term health consequences of radiation has revealed a multitude of illnesses and genetic abnormalities that affect both survivors and their descendants. According to a UNSCEAR report in 2018, approximately 20,000 cases of thyroid cancer were diagnosed between 1991-2015 in adolescents 18 years and under at the time of the accident, in which at least a quarter of the cases were due to high doses of radiation.²⁶ In addition to the increase in diseases among the population, there was a significant increase in birth defects – and not just for humans. “There have been some reports of birth defects among farm animals...The

25. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 122.

26. World Nuclear Association, *Chernobyl Accident 1986*. April 2022.

possibility of long-term genetic effects remains to be studied.”²⁷ The catastrophe that continued to unfold over time started to look and sound more apocalyptic.

Scientists, working on an unprecedented front of their own, were unable to provide explanations for the event in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. The incomprehensible nature of reactor explosions has led many researchers to seek supernatural or biblical explanations to aid their understanding. The biblical interpretations of Chernobyl specifically serve as a prime illustration of this phenomenon. When conventional explanations rooted in mythology or religion fell short of elucidating certain phenomena, a new language was devised to make sense of the inexplicable.

The word for Chernobyl has prophetic connotations when connected to end-of-world prophecies in the Bible. The Ukrainian term for Chernobyl – “wormwood” – takes on prophetic connotations when connected to end-of-world prophecies in the Bible. In the Book of Revelation, there is a verse which states, “The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter.”²⁸ The association between the term “Chernobyl” and the biblical notion of “wormwood” has contributed to the perception of the Chernobyl disaster as a harbinger of the end of the world, and one can imagine how easy it was for early victims and investigators to draw those parallels. By intertwining historical events, linguistic symbolism, and religious references, this passage seeks to elucidate the significance of the Chernobyl disaster in the broader context of post-apocalyptic representations. These parallels had a great influence on the linguistic aftermath of

27. International Atomic Energy Agency, *Ten years after Chernobyl : What do we really know?* (Vienna: World Health Organization, 1997), 14.

28. Rev 8:11 (ESV).

the Chernobyl disaster, as the traumatized community experiencing it sought any form of understanding they could find.

There emerged new language in the naming of the demolished reactor's reinforced concrete container "Sarcophagus." "впервые были всего лишь штабов возникло слово саркофагни. Ночи нашей тревоги из глубины веков оно приобрело иной спасительный смысл железобетона прятать ядерную кухню разрушенного реактора."²⁹ The designation of the container as a "sarcophagus" alluded to one of few apparent facts: that whoever stepped foot in or around the reactor would quickly meet their death inside its confines.

However, as cited in Hundorova's book, Roger and Bella Belbeoch draw our attention to the way the meaning of the word "sarcophagus" is distorted in Chernobyl discourse in their book *Tchernobyl, une catastrophe : Quelques éléments pour un bilan*. In ancient Greek, the term "sarcophagus," referring to an engraved coffin, was associated with the concept of flesh-eating due to the predominant use of limestone in their construction, which dissolves human remains. But the sarcophagus constructed over the Chernobyl reactor serves to preserve it.³⁰

I disagree with the Belbeochs' assertion. The containment does not preserve the reactor as a corpse as much as it protects residents from its effects. The Soviet Union has essentially buried the reactor alive, which leaves it in an even more deadly state than at the time of the accident. In the Historical Note in *Voices of Chernobyl*, Alexievich cites Ogonyok magazine,

29. *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*, directed by Vladimir Shevchenko (Soviet Union: Ukrainian Newsreel, 1987), 00:08:10.

30. Hundorova, "8. Chornobyl and the Crisis of Language," 45.

“Everyone knows that if the Cover were to collapse, the consequences would be even more dire than they were in 1986.”³¹ The reactor remains dangerous, even in containment.

Bearing a striking resemblance to the aftermath of a devastating missile assault, the reactor and the building that housed it were utterly decimated. It is worth noting, however, adjacent structures remained unaffected. Photographs documenting the contaminated areas portray an eerie normalcy, simultaneously concealing the true extent of the catastrophe and highlighting its insidious nature. Trees flourished with vibrant foliage, seemingly oblivious to underlying contamination, and the surrounding landscape displayed an abundance of life. This naturally caused confusion among the inhabitants residing in the vicinity of Chernobyl, who were now forced to grapple with an event that defied rational explanation. Their preconceived notions of nuclear-related catastrophes were predominantly shaped by the context of nuclear warfare, rather than incidents within the nuclear facility where they worked.

An inhabitant from Chernobyl posed questions to Alexievich, an outsider, hoping to get answers:

What’s it like, radiation? Maybe they show it in the movies? Have you seen it? Is it white, or what? What color is it? Some people say it has no color or smell, and other people say that it’s black. Like earth. But if it’s colorless, then it’s like God. God is everywhere, but you can’t see Him. They scare us! The apples are hanging in the garden, the leaves are on the trees, the potatoes in the fields.³²

The god-like presence of radiation, invisible yet pervasive, disrupted victims’ lives and transformed their perceptions of their environment. Chernobyl, once home, became a place of fear and uncertainty. The surreal emergence from the aftermath of the disaster, coupled with the

31. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 3.

32. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 51.

unknowability of the radiation's effects, instilled terror in the inhabitants. Another survivor said, "I'm afraid of the rain. That's what Chernobyl is. I'm afraid of snow, of the forest. This isn't an abstraction, a mind game, but an actual human feeling. Chernobyl is my home."³³ But even among the fear it instills, Chernobyl remains home to many. Even with the inconceivable effects, the familiarity and affinity with the land beckons for its inhabitants to stay.

The dichotomy of land itself there, on the one hand highly dangerous and on the other visually sublime, confused conventional depictions of decimated land. When you think of a climate or nuclear disaster, the first thing that comes to mind is land uninhabitable, a wasteland, a stark desert with no life. You do not think of fruit trees, blossoming with the brightest oranges you have ever seen, or flowers that, though they have no scent, still look ravishing. It must have been a perplexing experience for the Chernobylites to witness a seemingly flourishing physical landscape, only to have the Soviet Union dispatch military personnel to mitigate the dissemination of imperceptible and invisible peril.

In their remediation efforts, the Soviet Union employed various burial methods, including the interment of trees, shrubs, food, and soil itself:

It's a well-known statistic that there are 800 waste burial sites around Chernobyl... They're filled with 'orange forest,' which was cut down in an area of 150 hectares around the reactors. [In the days after the accident, the pines and evergreens around the reactor turned red, then orange.] They're filled with thousands of tons of metal and steel, small pipes, special clothing, concrete constructions.³⁴

The photos taken show piles and piles of debris. They were effectively attempting to hide the radiation within the earth in the hopes of preventing its dispersion. However, a dilemma arises

33. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 174.

34. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 141.

when the very soil is itself contaminated. Their strategy involved not only burying trees and shrubs but also burying the radioactive land within itself:

We dug up the diseased top layer of soil, loaded it into automobiles and took it to waste burial sites. I thought that a waste burial site was a complex, engineered construction, but it turned out to be an ordinary pit. We picked up the earth and rolled it, like big rugs. We'd pick up the whole green mass of it, with grass, flowers, roots. And bugs, and spiders, worms. It was work for madmen. You can't just pick up the whole earth, take off everything living.³⁵

They were willing to do anything to force Earth back into complacency, though the novelty of the disaster meant that their methods were elementary. Despite daily, persistent efforts to bury the earth, remediators appeared to lack comprehension or faith in the efficacy of their actions. They could only do what they knew how to do – which, in unprecedented circumstances, is never much.

It is difficult to cope with such convoluted physical destruction. People are dying, growing things on their bodies, contracting diseases, but their surroundings are beautiful. The prevailing discourse surrounding Chernobyl often employs language that conveys such indescribable fallout. The horror associated with the Chernobyl incident, as depicted in the HBO series *Chernobyl*³⁶ and through various visual media, primarily revolved around the disfigurement of both humans and animals, rather than the physical destruction of the environment. However, the HBO series and other media do not account for environmental effects that are not associated with human conditions.

35. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 161.

36. *Chernobyl*, directed by Johan Renck; aired May 6, 2019, in broadcast syndication, HBO Home Video.

Although damage to human life is important, to focus on it is to have an anthropocentric view of the accident. The use of an anthropocentric lens in describing an event is understandable, given that humans naturally view themselves as a point of reference. However, the strangeness within the catastrophic nature of Chernobyl lies in the fact that not everything perished, but rather only humanity.

There is nothing like Chernobyl in terms of scale and effect, past, or present, and it is crucial to recognize that the impact on the environment itself was not as severe as the toll it took on the inhabitants' health and psychology. Typically, a new language is formed in the aftermath of such catastrophe, which is then reflected in contemporary literature or film. James Berger, a lecturer on apocalyptic literature and film, argued that "post-apocalyptic representations often respond to historical catastrophes and that, either explicitly or obliquely, the apocalypses of post-apocalyptic representations are historical events."³⁷ Regarding Chernobyl, most of the language used to describe aspects of unlivable land and dissidents that illegally entered the area came from a film Andrei Tarkovsky directed seven years prior, *Stalker*. Thus, Chernobyl itself, as a catastrophe, did not create the language through which the Chernobylites attempted to comprehend the bewildering reality in which they found themselves, but it was borrowed from Tarkovsky.

Stalker emerged as a unique amalgamation of science fiction, drama, and fantasy, defying conventional genre boundaries upon its inception. Its premise, which was detached from reality, initially seemed distant and improbable to viewers. The Chernobyl accident altered these perspectives. In Alexievich's book, the Chernobyl disaster was portrayed as the "mythology of

37. James Berger, *After the End : Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

Chernobyl,"³⁸ thus positioning it as a fantastical event that could be understood in terms of folklore. The crisis birthed a struggle with language, spawning terms like “Chernobylites” to describe the inhabitants as if they were now aliens or other beings. Suddenly, *Stalker* began to resonate deeply as a conceivable phenomenon. Its eerie portrayal of the environment reveals a poignant connection to those affected by Chernobyl, who later borrowed the film’s terminology to articulate their reality.

Chernobyl's unprecedented events left people grappling for comprehension, and *Stalker* unexpectedly served as a touchstone amid chaos, providing a symbolic bridge between fiction and reality. The film became an unwitting and profound aide to the Chernobylites, offering a framework for comprehension of their personal experiences. It also serves as a lens through which to grasp the broader implications of humans in the Anthropocene, particularly in relation to the consequences of nuclear incidents.

38. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 127.

Section 2: *Stalker*

Stalker, released in 1979, transcends traditional narrative boundaries by immersing audiences in a profound exploration of philosophy, existentialism, and metaphysical inquiry. Derived from Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic*, the film serves as a meditative journey through the desolate landscapes of "The Zone," a mysterious and deadly realm. At its core is the elusive Stalker (Alexander Kaidanovsky), a guide leading two clients, Writer (Anatoly Solonitsyn) and Professor (Nikolai Grinko), into the heart of this enigmatic territory to reach the Room, rumored to be capable of manifesting one's deepest desires. In the film, the characters speculate that the Zone was visited years ago by a foreign entity, whether in the form of a meteorite or aliens, which is now isolated and guarded by military personnel.³⁹ The film tells the story of a stalker, an ordinary man with a wife, and a crippled daughter who harbors otherworldly magical powers and takes these two intellectuals to the Zone. When they finally reach the Room, Writer and Professor fail to pronounce their wishes and fully enter because of their lack of faith or desire to unearth their deepest thoughts and wishes.

The movie was filmed at an abandoned power plant and dam situated on the river Yagala in Estonia. This made for a realistic setting depicting an abandoned, poisoned, not-so-close to our world scenery. Before its time, the setting of *Stalker* closely resembled the scenery of Chernobyl. As Adrian Ivakhiv noted, "The penultimate scene of the Stalker and his wife and child walking home shows, in the background, a power plant that, in retrospect, eerily prefigures

39. *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979, Soviet Union: Janus Film), 00:45:46.

the Chernobyl nuclear plant.”⁴⁰ Just like Chernobyl, the environment in *Stalker* has reclaimed the areas in and around it after human abandonment. Humans are not allowed to enter the vicinity of the toxic reactor in the forbidden Exclusion Zone. Seeing *Stalker* through the lens of Chernobyl, we are catching a glimpse of a post-apocalyptic, post-human world.

In addition to the physical similarities that uncannily foreshadow what would come during the Chernobyl incident, the language from the film was used later as well. The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone matches Tarkovsky’s name for the Zone in *Stalker*. Additionally, those that travel within this real-world evacuated Exclusion Zone are also commonly referred to as “stalkers.” In comparing Alexievich’s collection of testimonies to the words Stalker uses in the film, there is much that resonates. At its inception, the film was categorized as science fiction; however, its application in the context of Chernobyl lends itself to historical fiction from a contemporary perspective.

Through an ecological and contemporary lens, Tarkovsky effectively engages in a dialogue about the Anthropocene by giving the environment of the Zone a significant role in the film, alongside the characters of Stalker, Writer, and Professor. While *Stalker* was not the first Russian film to depict the unimaginable effects of a nuclear catastrophe, it was one of the most analyzed by scholars in terms of subject matter. The Zone itself has been interpreted using various lenses. Scholars have drawn comparisons between the Zone and the reflection of the minds of the characters, as suggested by Sean Martin.⁴¹ Others, like Geoff Dyer, have argued

40. Adrian Ivakhiv, “The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema.” *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2011): 131.

41. Sean Martin, “Chapter 8: Stalker,” in *Andrei Tarkovsky*, (Herts: Oldcastle Books, 2011), 157.

that this serves as an allegory for the gulag.⁴² Additionally, the Zone has been seen as symbolizing inaccessible foreign territory, the possibility of nuclear explosions, or the site of meteorite impact, as posited by Slavoj Žižek.⁴³

While I do not challenge the metaphysical interpretations of the film, for the purpose of my argument, I will adopt Jon Hoel's assertion that the Zone represents a disconcerting embodiment of the Anthropocene.⁴⁴ Although there is no explicit dialogue between the characters and the environment itself, the human characters' actions and decisions are heavily influenced by the immediate consequences of the Zone. One can imagine that the Zone reflects a sped-up representation of our impact on the real-world environment: Earth's response to human actions may realistically be delayed by years, but in the Zone they occur instantaneously.

Chernobyl is an essential lens to use in analyzing *Stalker*, as it is helpful to understand the fictional depiction of the Anthropocene from a realistic point of view. Due to its roots in science fiction, *Stalker* may have possessed a more fantastical quality during its initial conception. The presence of supernatural elements in the film is accentuated through those same elements' implausible nature, which becomes more apparent when considered in isolation from the grim realities of the aftermath of nuclear fallout. The center of these implausibilities and oddities is the Zone. Through a contemporary lens, focusing on the nuclear parallels of the Zone and its ever-changing nature, *Stalker* could very much be seen as a work of the cli-fi genre. Its

42. Geoff Dyer, "Geoff Dyer on STALKER," interview by Criterion. 2017, 00:06:13.

43. Slavoj Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space: On Tarkovsky." *Angelaki Oxford* 4 (1999): 226.

44. Jon Hoel, *Stalker* (Liverpool: Auteur, 2021), 45.

predation of the Chernobyl disaster means that it fits even more so with the genre, since cli-fi often explores climate-related events yet to occur.

We first arrive at the Zone with Stalker, Writer, and Professor, as they travel into it on a railway cart.⁴⁵ Tarkovsky employed a notable technique to distinguish between different cinematic worlds by deliberately transitioning from sepia tones to color upon the characters' entry into the Zone. The disorienting effect on the viewer is intensified by the multitude of close-up shots of the characters' faces, as well as eerie boings and gongs in the background, which deviate from the familiar sounds of the train cart meditatively clinking to its own rhythm. These auditory elements, coupled with the shifting focus from one character to another, briefly expose glimpses of the desolate landscape and debris, signaling the abandoned world we are about to enter.

As the characters draw nearer to the Zone, the once discernible sounds of the train cart recede into the background, yielding to the sound of sharp pings. The characters show signs of slight disorientation as they traverse the terrain, and the frame shifts to color when the train car finally comes to a halt. Having arrived in the Zone, the camera pans to reveal a dark and flourishing landscape, fixating on a group of dilapidated phone wires. As the camera continues to pan gradually to the right, the audience is confronted with an expanse of seemingly abandoned and overgrown land, replete with a wrecked vehicle and scattered metal debris occupying the majority of the frame. The Zone itself is an overgrown place, lush with foliage and grass. Manmade machines are completely overcome by nature, and the decay and deterioration of the structures within the Zone, evident through crumbling walls, rusted metal, and scattered debris,

45. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 00:38:50.

serve as poignant reminders of both past civilizations and ecological catastrophes that have befallen this place.

Tarkovsky's depiction of this run-down and abandoned nuclear site shares eerily similar conditions to the Chernobyl site, especially years later. Some scholars have said that *Stalker* was prophetic in the way it relates to Chernobyl as posited by John Riley,⁴⁶ Stephen Dalton,⁴⁷ and Sean Martin.⁴⁸ The uncanny representation in *Stalker* matches what Mary Mycio in her book, *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl*, reinforced. "Defying the gloomiest predictions, [Chernobyl] had come back to life as Europe's largest nature sanctuary, teeming with wildlife."⁴⁹ Following the Chernobyl disaster, the post-apocalyptic landscape has undergone a process of reclamation, with nature winning back a formerly human-dominated space through slow encroachment upon buildings and man-made structures. Here, nature has regressed to a state reminiscent of the pre-Nuclearocene era, a phenomenon not often portrayed in fictional works and cinema. Usually, a film shows uninhabitable terrain characterized by horror and desolation. In reality, though, the environment around Chernobyl naturally reclaimed what humans had tried to lay claim to.

46. John. A. Riley, "Hauntology, Ruins, and the Failure of the Future in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*." *Journal of Film and Video* 69, 1. (2017): 20.

47. Stephen Dalton, "Tarkovsky, *Solaris*, and *Stalker*," in *Russian Science Fiction Literature and Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Anindita Banerjee (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 288.

48. Martin, "Chapter 8: *Stalker*," 159.

49. Mary Mycio, *Wormwood Forest : A Natural History of Chernobyl* (Washington: Joseph Henry Press, 2004), 2.

In Alexievich's book, Arkady Filin, a liquidator at the Chernobyl site describes the environment in a marvel. "And the place was so beautiful! Really incredible. The horror was made more horrible because it was so pretty."⁵⁰ Similarly, in *Stalker* the beauty of the Zone possesses a sinister quality in that it is so dangerous. The natural environment within the Zone embodies the unfamiliar in its capacity to continuously change and kill without regard. The protagonist, Stalker, emphasizes to Writer and Professor that many have died entering the Zone, and it is not a place to be treated lightly. When they first enter the Zone, Stalker warns the others, "The zone is a very complex maze of traps. All of them are death traps. I don't know what happens when humans aren't around. But as soon as humans appear, everything begins to change. Former traps disappear, new ones appear. Safe ways became impassable. The way becomes now easy, now confused beyond words. This is the Zone."⁵¹ Stalker is drawn to this hazardous environment yet is simultaneously overwhelmed by an insurmountable fear.

Although *Stalker's* setting possesses an otherworldly quality, it would be inaccurate to categorize it solely as a supernatural realm. In the Nuclearocene, we are met with a convergence of humanity's remains and nature's overwhelming ability to compensate for destruction. In comparing the landscape in *Stalker* with Chernobyl, one resident notes, "You immediately found yourself in this fantastic world, where the apocalypse met the stone age."⁵² This characterization of Chernobyl mirrors Tarkovsky's *mis-en-scène* in *Stalker*, where the environment is simultaneously fantastical and stripped down to something more primitive. While *Stalker* can be

50. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 95.

51. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 01:02:15.

52. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 91.

considered super-natural in the sense that it transcends the boundaries of the natural world, its allure lies in the familiarity of the ordinary with crucial aspects of the fantastical that leave the viewer on the edge of improbability. It is important to note that “the environmental uncanny is not the same as the uncanniness of the supernatural: it is different precisely because it pertains to non-human forces and beings”, as Ghosh explains in his book, *The Great Derangement*.⁵³ Central to the exploration of the Anthropocene in *Stalker* is the unconventional portrayal of non-human agency. The film proposes the notion that nature possesses an active and potentially conscious agency.

The Zone, depicted as a radioactive wasteland, transcends its physical attributes to become a character in its own right. Tarkovsky's meticulous use of color and cinematographic techniques accentuates the otherworldly quality of the environment, emphasizing its sentience. Through a visual language that distinguishes the Zone from the mundane world, he compels viewers to perceive Earth as an active participant in the narrative. Tarkovsky immerses the audience in The Zone, an ever-changing environment, with its own narrative agency. It is not merely a static setting, but an active participant in unfolding events with the power to transform the individuals who enter it, eventually manifesting their deepest desires. The Zone, as if conscious, engages directly with the characters and their innermost desires and vulnerabilities.

In the Anthropocene, consideration of non-human agency offers a pathway toward a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the challenges we face. This invites us to reevaluate our ethical and practical responses to environmental and societal dilemmas. In this epoch defined by the consequences of human activity, recognition of non-human agency shifts our perspective to the pressing environmental issues of our time and how we might navigate a sustainable future.

53. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement : Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, 32.

Bruno Latour, known for his arguments about the active role of non-human entities in shaping human actions and interactions, provides a framework for understanding the subtle yet significant ways in which the Zone operates in *Stalker*.

The core of Latour's argument is that a non-human actant is any entity that can perform actions and have effects in the world, but is not a human being. This can include objects, technologies, animals, and concepts or ideas. Non-human actants play a crucial role in shaping the world, and we need to recognize their agency in order to better understand the complex systems that make up our environment. As he said in his seminal work, *Reassembling the Social : An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, “Nonhumans have to be actors and not simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection.”⁵⁴ And these actors are increasingly more evident as our world becomes one where humans and nonhumans alike are affected by the degradation of Earth’s ecosystems. Latour expects that:

Humans and non-human actants will interact on equal ground, ultimately leading to the evolution of a new body politic inclusive of non-humans, with Gaia – the ultimate assemblage of life on Earth – recognized as sovereign. In this context, neither politics nor society, but rather a new geosocial dynamic will be comprised from new ways of living and struggling on a damaged planet.⁵⁵

Stalker helps us see the interconnectedness of humans and the environment through Tarkovsky’s use of non-human actants, primarily reflected in the Zone.

The Zone in *Stalker* not only transforms the characters' external circumstances but also profoundly affects their relationships and inner lives, serving as a catalyst for emotional and

54. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social : An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

55. Bruno Latour, Denise Milstein, Isaac Marrero-Guillamón, and Israel Rodríguez-Giralt, “Down to Earth Social Movements: An Interview with Bruno Latour,” *Social Movement Studies* 17, no. 3 (2018): 354.

psychological transformation. The characters' desires, fears, and vulnerabilities are laid bare within the Zone, and the environment itself acts as a mirror for their deepest selves. The Zone's influence on *Stalker's* characters reveals the active role of an environment in shaping human emotions and interactions, much like Chernobyl affected its residents in the aftermath of disaster. This representation aligns with Latour's assertion that non-human entities can actively participate in the complex web of human relations, and are key players in how we learn to make meaning.

We can even see the Zone's perspective from the point of view of the camera. At the timestamp of 00:49:38 in the film, Stalker points the Professor in the direction of the run-down light post pole, prompting Professor to follow its path into the nature of the Zone. The subsequent shot presents a seemingly subjective viewpoint from Professor's perspective, as he approaches an abandoned and dilapidated car. As the camera traverses through the interior of the vehicle, though, eventually settling with the car window framing the shot, Stalker, Professor, and Writer come into view one-by-one, settling in the middle of the debris frame. This transition in perspective effectively shifts the viewer's assumed vantage from Professor to one that can be interpreted as the consciousness of the Zone itself. Consequently, the camera highlights the sentient nature of the Zone, which actively observes the trespassers' movements.

In another example, Tarkovsky compels the viewer to acknowledge the Zone as a non-human actant with consciousness by having it embody a voice that Writer hears. Stalker confirms the otherworldly occurrence moments later, remarking, "You're lucky. The Zone warned you,"⁵⁶ as if the Zone itself possessed the ability to communicate. With this device,

56. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 01:04:02.

Tarkovsky introduces the Zone as a character, transforming it from an environment dominated by characters Stalker, Writer, and Professor, to a conscious being in its own right, participating in the scene.

With the entrance to the Room, a stone's throw away, Writer, could have traversed 200 meters directly rather than following Stalker's instruction to take the longer, more indirect route. As Writer attempts to progress towards the Room, he momentarily halts, and the wind intensifies when a voice commands "Stop. Don't move,"⁵⁷ causing Writer to come to an abrupt standstill. The camera pans out to reveal that our viewpoint is situated within the building, as if something is peering out at Writer from the viewer's perspective. Both Stalker and Professor do not understand where the voice came from and accuse the other of telling Writer to stop. The Zone has a voice that can be heard, at least within Writer's mind, personifying the environment with an unpredictable nature that can control, and now speak to its visitors.

The Zone even imbues its peripheral visitors with otherworldly powers, similar to how Chernobylites described accounts of their children. In *Stalker*, Tarkovsky shows Stalker's daughter, named Monkey. Her physical condition is a consequence of her father's association with the Zone, and is living evidence to the outside world of what unseen horrors occur there. It is worth noting that the color shift in the film occurs again during the final scenes when Monkey is shown on Stalker's shoulders, walking down to the edge of the lake. This visual connection serves to link Monkey with the Zone, as it is the only other instance in which the film is shot in color. Furthermore, Monkey's physical deformities are implied to be a result of being the child of a stalker, as mentioned by Professor early in the film. He states, "His daughter is a mutant, a so-

57. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 01:00:30.

called Zone victim. They say she has no legs."⁵⁸ This portrayal of children with deformities resonates with the descriptions of children affected by the Chernobyl Disaster.

In Alexievich's book, numerous accounts describe children with deformities caused by radiation. One parent recounted how her children's deformities rendered them unable to attend school or play with other children.⁵⁹ Another child described herself as an invalid due to her father's work at Chernobyl.⁶⁰ Some descriptions go beyond the typical effects of radiation, highlighting the eerie and otherworldly qualities associated with the victims. One account mentions a child being referred to as a "Chernobyl rabbit" who glows in the dark, and others "made her go into the yard at night so they could see if she was glowing."⁶¹ A journalist, Anatoly Shimanskiy, describes the children of Chernobyl as if it was right out of the script of *Stalker*, either unknowingly or knowingly, emphasizing Monkey's genius-like qualities in Tarkovsky's film, "The Chernobylites are giving birth to children who have an unknown yellow fluid instead of blood. There are scientists who insist that monkeys became intelligent because they lived near the radiation. Children born in three or four generations will be Einsteins. It's a cosmic experiment being carried out on us..."⁶² This parallel between the explanation of children affected by Chernobyl and Monkey's powers illustrates how the imaginary Zone in *Stalker* and

58. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 0:42:58.

59. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 150.

60. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 223.

61. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 198-199.

62. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 133.

the real Exclusion Zone in Ukraine accentuates the otherworldly effects of what it is like to live in the Nuclearocene.

Chernobylites and their tragic legacies are elucidated through a linguistic framework reminiscent of the themes depicted in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Comprehension of their experiences hinges upon acknowledging their heightened sensory perceptions beyond the typical empirical range. In *Stalker*, the mystical telekinesis that Monkey exhibits is shown in the final scene, when she moves a glass across a table with her mind until it falls on the ground. However, the true essence to be grasped lies not solely in the possession of superhuman abilities by Monkey, or Chernobylites for that matter. Instead, it is encapsulated in Sarah D. Phillip's notion of the "sixth sense of Chernobyl," which suggests that "the Chernobyl accident has led to a developing creative memory and has awakened a heightened sense of conscience among Ukrainians...and they are the grounds for making a new society."⁶³ The crux of the matter lies in the misinterpretation of how to exist within this "new society" in the Nuclearocene. The language used by Chernobylites, reminiscent of the character Monkey in *Stalker*, indicates a tendency to draw upon fictional representations in order to grasp and define a novel form of existence.

The thematic parallels observed between *Stalker* and the lived experiences of Chernobylites offer insight into the exploration of human consciousness and societal evolution. In *Stalker*, characters are depicted grappling with their deepest desires within the confines of the Zone, while Chernobylites strive to comprehend their altered reality in the aftermath of a devastating catastrophe. Both narratives are characterized by a pervasive sense of uncertainty. Notably, the Zone in *Stalker* exudes a different form of uncertainty compared to the Exclusion

63. Sarah D. Phillips, "Chernobyl's Sixth Sense: The Symbolism of an Ever-Present Awareness," *Anthropology and Humanism* 29, no. 2 (2004): 160.

Zone in Chernobyl, as the former possesses the capacity to fulfill the wishes of those who venture inside. Entrants to the Zone do so with clear intentions and expectations, anticipating the realization of their desires, though they do not always end up that way. Conversely, the Exclusion Zone of Chernobyl embodies a heightened level of unpredictability regarding the outcomes for those residing within its boundaries in terms of the effects on their health.

Tarkovsky constructs a narrative wherein desire is not a passive element, but rather an active force intricately intertwined with the unpredictable nature of the Zone. The Room lies at the core of the Zone, which is rumored to grant the deepest desires to those who venture inside. This Room serves as a central force driving the actions and motivations of the characters, symbolizing the capacity of non-human entities to influence human behavior at both the individual and societal levels. The allure of the Room acts as a catalyst for the characters' decision-making processes, highlighting the film's exploration of desire as an intrinsic facet of the human condition.

Tarkovsky deliberately imbues the Zone with capriciousness, thereby reflecting the notion that the fantastical realm is not solely a space for wish-fulfillment, but rather a domain where human desires are tested and scrutinized, challenging conventional expectations. This notion resonates with broader societal attitudes as our deepest desires for rapid technological advancement and domination through nuclear development are currently being played out on the global stage. It is evident that these desires transcend mere wishes as they carry tangible consequences derived from self-centeredness. In the context of the film, the Zone can be seen as a manifestation of the outcomes resulting from the fulfillment of selfish human desires. Writer ultimately refrains from entering the Room due to apprehensions regarding the potential harm that his greatest desire may inflict upon him or his writing. This serves as a reminder that our

deepest desires are not always altruistic. On a larger societal scale, the pursuit of our desires may come at the expense of the planet's well-being, driven solely by our collective selfish interests.

The distinction between the interior of the Room and the lush, overgrown nature outside is noteworthy, as it becomes more unfamiliar to the viewer and characters alike. It also marks a shift in the level of danger faced by the characters. As they approach the Room, the environment within the film becomes progressively more unfamiliar and unsettling, which contrasts the familiarity found in the external landscape with its ordinary-looking trees, typical grass, and familiar sunlight reminiscent of the world outside of the Zone. However, as the characters get closer to the vicinity of the Room – particularly in the Meat Grinder, and nearby, where impeccably formed sandhills are found – the film's environment becomes more unpredictable, forcing the characters to come to terms with this strange Zone that has influenced their actions and thoughts. The Zone and its embodiment of non-human agency lead the characters deeper within itself. As Stalker, Writer, and Professor come to accept the Zone and its powers, the unhomeliness that they felt at the beginning of their journey within the Zone dissipates into an acceptance of its nature and an ease of existing within its confines.

As the film progresses, a sense of unhomeliness becomes increasingly prominent. While it does not venture into the realm of the supernatural, the fantastical elements discussed earlier become more prevalent as the pace of the film increases. A pivotal moment in the narrative occurs when the characters enter the Meat Grinder, a location that departs completely from the natural world. Here, the beautiful and lush environment of the Zone is replaced by a treacherous and dingy pipe.

Interestingly, Tarkovsky deliberately chose to omit the music composed by Eduard Artemyev specifically for this sequence. In an interview with Criterion Collection, Artemyev

reveals Tarkovsky's hesitation, stating, "I wrote the music—Tarkovsky said it was good. When I came to the recording, I saw Tarkovsky was putting it on and off. I asked him what the matter was; he said that if he could do without music, he wouldn't use it at all. He just didn't need any music there."⁶⁴ The absence of music in this scene highlights the inherent tension and unpredictability and heightens the anticipation of something significant that might occur. Unpredictability is related to unhomeliness in that the more unpredictable something becomes, the more it feels unnatural or unfamiliar.

In this scene without music, the only sounds heard are the echoing footsteps of Writer, as he nervously and carefully traverses the hazardous terrain. His unease is amplified by the crunching of glass and debris beneath his feet, accompanied by his unsteady breathing. The intensity is further emphasized by the audible cessation of movement, and as the characters draw closer, the sound of running water becomes discernible. The extended duration of this scene contributes to the meditative and entrancing atmosphere that pervades the film.

The closing shot of the Meat Grinder is particularly haunting, as Writer brandishes a weapon in a futile attempt to protect himself from whatever unknown dangers might lurk behind the door. Stalker intervenes, cautioning, "You can't go in there with a gun! You'll be killed, and you'll doom us! Remember the tanks!"⁶⁵ Perhaps it only makes sense that weapons such as this take human life so easily, so why would not it be able to stand up against the larger-than-life forces that the zone embodies? A similar approach was taken during the containment of radiation

64. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 00:13:24.

65. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 01:41:49.

following the Chernobyl disaster, when military forces were deployed to combat the perceived radioactive threat.

The language used in the *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks* documentary reflects this war-like mindset, where soldiers were bused in, as if in war, to eliminate the aftereffects of the accident.⁶⁶ The residents of Chernobyl also equated their experience of the disaster with war, saying, “Chernobyl is like the war of all wars. There's nowhere to hide. Not underground, not underwater, not in the air.”⁶⁷ Even with the absence of the destruction of a nuclear war, inhabitants perceived a prevailing sense of division between "us" and "them" between themselves and the so-called enemy, the Earth. This dichotomy can be observed not only in manmade conflicts, but also in instances of natural calamities like hurricanes or tornadoes. During such crises, governmental authorities typically mobilize humanitarian organizations, the national guard, and similar entities to alleviate the impact of the disaster. However, the response to the Chernobyl disaster is unlike the response to natural disasters in that military forces and weaponry were employed to address risks, as the unprecedented nature of the Chernobyl incident led authorities to explore various avenues to address the crisis. Similarly to the Meat Grinder scene in *Stalker*, the response to Chernobyl revealed the human tendency to display force in the face of an unknown threat. The language used and actions carried out in both instances further emphasize the compulsion to see these changed environments as unpredictable, conscious beings that need to be conquered.

66. Shevchenko, *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*, 00:23:04.

67. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 45.

One of the striking aspects of the Zone in *Stalker* is its eerie unpredictability. While it has the potential to grant wishes, its behavior is far from straightforward. “The eerie Zone into which the protagonist ventures is a space of mystic immanence hallowing the radical contingency of the natural world.”⁶⁸ Characters encounter unforeseen challenges and obstacles, and the capricious nature of the zone introduces elements of uncertainty and contingency into their journey. This unpredictability influences the characters' decisions and actions throughout their journey. They are not passive recipients of their wishes but active participants in a complex dance with the Zone. The characters' desires are met with uncertainties, and the Zone's nature forces them to adapt and respond to the unexpected. This dynamic reflects Latour's idea that non-human entities can actively shape the course of human affairs by introducing moments of contingency that challenge conventional expectations.

A crucial aspect of becoming familiar with the unpredictable is that it enables comfort in a strange environment. Near the end of the film, Stalker, Writer, and Professor are tensely situated in another room, on the precipice of entering *the* Room. Amid a heated argument, the phone unexpectedly rings, prompting Professor to answer it with an air of nonchalance. This response is particularly perplexing given the implausibility of someone being able to call them directly, let alone make a phone call at all. Despite the initial shock reflected on their faces, Professor ignores Stalker's warning to not touch the phone and proceeds to engage in conversation.

The Professor's phone conversation appears by all accounts to be normal, but *Stalker's* characters are moving deeper into the Zone. As they do so, both Writer and Professor gradually

68. Deckard, "'The Future Is Behind Them!': Post-Apocalypse and the Enduring Nuclear in Post-Soviet Russian Fiction," 43.

become more at ease by exploring not only the enigmatic realm, but also their own inner selves. The fear they once felt about the Zone and the Room slowly dissipates into an ease and comfortability – an acceptance of their new reality. The outer world from which they came, both physically and mentally, that they were engaging with the zone in ways that they would not have previously. At the beginning of the film, Professor was too scared to even start the journey and exclaimed that he would wait for others until they returned. He is now at the edge of the room, disregarding Stalker by talking on the telephone and contemplating whether to blow up the room with his bomb.

While the Zone begins as a place of unknowability and fear, it later evokes a sense of comfort and familiarity. The Zone becomes a part of the viewer just as it becomes a part of the characters, its vastness and potential to fulfill desires beckons its visitors inward, and its power compels them to bend to its will. In the film, the Zone becomes a compelling place where Writer and Professor feel inclined to stay. We see them all situated outside the room for some time in quiet contemplation. Professor decides not to set the bomb off in the Room, which I interpret as gaining an affinity for the place, or at the very least an understanding that he will be unable to truly destroy it. We do not see what becomes of Professor and Writer, but perhaps they end up feeling like Stalker does about the Zone: that its uncanniness is preferable to their homes in the outside world. In the unsettling moment when the three protagonists arrive in the Zone, Stalker utters the phrase, «Ну вот... мы и дома» ("Well, here we are... home").⁶⁹ Paradoxically, this statement heightens the unhomely paradoxical nature of the Zone, given the mysterious nature of their destination, while also affirming the Zone as a place where Stalker feels most at home.

69. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 00:39:45.

This sentiment is echoed in reality through the words of an unnamed hunter from Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl*, who similarly describes the pull of the Exclusion Zone in Chernobyl, stating, "The Zone pulls you in. You miss it, I tell you. Once you've been there, you'll miss it."⁷⁰ Stalker's desires align with those of the survivors of Chernobyl. Once they had started to understand the true nature of their environment, The Zone in Stalker's case and the Exclusion Zone in the Chernobylite's case, they started to become attached to the place, even if it was full of damage and radiation.

A thorough examination of films such as *Stalker* provides us with insights into inconceivable events or catastrophes, even if we are not directly experiencing them. This is precisely why the film holds significance. Through Tarkovsky's skillful storytelling, the audience can establish a personal connection with the film and relate it to their own world. Given the prevalent qualities of the Anthropocene era today, the themes portrayed in *Stalker* hold significant relevance to the modern epoch. At the very end of the film, when Stalker, Professor, and Writer are on the edge of the Room, they clearly decide that they will not enter. The camera moves back and holds at the center of it, looking out, meaning the Room is now where *we* are.

In relation to the Anthropocene, it is clear in the modern age that our not-so-righteous desires were fulfilled. In Chernobyl's case, it was prophetically fulfilled seven years later. Humans have destroyed and poisoned the earth with radiation as a consequence of other desires. In *Stalker* Tarkovsky himself acknowledged the discerning nature of audiences, stating, "Audiences, I'm quite sure, are far more discerning, subtle and predictable in their demands than is often supposed by those responsible for the distribution of works of art. And so an artist's

70. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 97.

perception of things, however complex or rarified it may be, is able—I would even say bound—to find an audience.”⁷¹

While we cannot definitively ascertain whether Chernobylites truly empathized with *Stalker*, we know that they used its language. Through the lens of *Stalker*, we can gain a deeper understanding of the consequences of human choices and their impact on our lives. Throughout the journey of Stalker, Writer, and Professor, the theme of ‘no going back’ is prevalent. When Stalker sends the railway car down the track, Writer questions, “How do we get back?” to which Stalker responds, “Nobody finds their way back from here.”⁷² Furthermore, when Professor decides to wait for the return of Writer and Stalker, Stalker warns him that “Nobody goes back the same way they came.”⁷³ This can be seen as analogous to the Anthropocene at large. We are unable to reverse the environmental damage inflicted; we can only move forward with a heightened awareness of our future actions, similar to the three protagonists in the Zone. They must focus solely on the potential consequences of their actions and the retaliation from the Zone, which can be seen as analogous to the Anthropocene at large. We are unable to reverse the environmental damage inflicted; we can only move forward with a heightened awareness of our future actions, similar to the three protagonists. As depicted by *Stalker* and exemplified by the Chernobyl disaster, the world exerts a formidable force that cannot be overcome by human will alone. Instead, we must adapt to its desires and needs until we eventually gain a respect and understanding of the Earth as a sentient being.

71. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time : Reflections on the Cinema*. Rev. ed. (London: Faber, 1989), 166.

72. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 00:49:06.

73. Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 01:09:07.

While *Stalker* predated Chernobyl by several years, Aleksandr Kott's more contemporary film, *Ispytanie*, renews the dialogue about nuclear catastrophe and its connection to the Anthropocene by depicting a historical nuclear explosion in the Soviet Union. Similar to Tarkovsky's depiction of non-human actants within the Zone, Kott imbues the Kazakh Steppe with a consciousness of its own. By situating the two films together, we can see how both directors emphasize the relationship between human characters and the environment, and what that means in connection with the Anthropocene. Kott's *Ispytanie* explicitly explores the interconnection between humans and the environment. However, rather than focusing on the omnipotence of the Earth, Kott highlights Earth's role as a companion and friend to humanity.

Section 3: *Ispytanie*

Ispytanie, released in 2014, provides a cinematic interpretation of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test of 1949 in the Soviet Union, which occurred on the northeastern Kazakhstan steppe—a primary testing site for the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons. The narrative revolves around Dina and her father, Tolgat, leading a simple life in the desert. Dina becomes entangled in a love triangle with a local Kazakh cowboy, Kaysin, and Maxim, a Muscovite. The film delves into the immediate consequences of the nuclear explosion, portraying the destructive impact of the Anthropocene on both human lives and the environment. By anchoring the narrative in a specific historical event, the film has less wiggle room for interpretation and instead steers forcefully towards conveying a specific and significant message: Our careless behaviors and inventions have detrimental effects on the environment and take us down with it.

The setting of *Ispytanie* is a perfect backdrop for examining the Anthropocene and nuclear destruction. Between 1949 and 1989, a staggering total of 456 nuclear tests were conducted by the Soviets, of which 116 were conducted aboveground.⁷⁴ Semipalatinsk is a nuclear test that was carried out, and the conclusion of the film presents a direct encounter with catastrophe. We observe this in real time from various perspectives. In contrast to *Stalker* and Chernobyl, the Semipalatinsk failed test came decades before *Ispytanie*.

According to James Berger (as cited earlier), post-apocalyptic portrayals frequently serve as responses to past calamities, and it can be inferred that the apocalyptic events depicted in

74. Livia Monnet, “The Immanation-Image: Immanent Experience and Kazakhstan's Socialist and Postsocialist Modernity in Almagul Menlibayeva's Video Installation Transformation (2016),” in *Toxic Immanence : Decolonizing Nuclear Legacies and Futures* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 337.

these portrayals are often rooted in historical occurrences.⁷⁵ This observation is particularly evident in the case of *Ispytanie*. The film portrays actual events and depicts catastrophe on a localized scale. The narrative progression of the film culminates in the detonation of a cataclysmic explosion, engulfing a small village that the characters in the movie represent. Kott depicts the real-life calamity with more attention trained on how the bomb ravaged the earth itself. The subsequent demise of the characters represents the real-life people who lived there and became victims themselves. Kott gives a voice to the Environment in the film, the Kazakh Steppe, rather than only to the characters themselves.

Ispytanie can be classified as a dialogueless film in that the characters never speak verbally, though it is not completely devoid of sounds and words. Dialogue-less cinema is a prominent genre in the shorts directed by Kott. Elena Stishova, in her work "Melankholiia," suggests that the silence «может быть истолкована как метафора информационного вакуума, в котором жила семипалатинская округа.»⁷⁶ In this context, silence may be perceived as an alternative means of communication as opposed to a simple incapacity to speak. On the other hand, Ellina Sattorova argues that "The silence of Kott's characters appears to be an homage to the early days of cinema rather than a decision dictated by the film's content."⁷⁷

I disagree with both scholars and argue that the absence of dialogue in the film highlights the presence of non-human entities depicted in it, namely, elements of nature. Although ambient

75. Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse*, 19.

76. Стишова, Елена. "Меланхолия. Русская версия. «Испытание», режиссер Александр Котт ." (Искусство кино, 2014), 72.

77. Ellina Sattarova, "3. Russia's Quiet Other: Dmitrii Mamuliia's Another Sky and Aleksandr Kott's The Test," in *Cinemasaurus : Russian Film in Contemporary Context*, ed. Nancy Condee, Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 78.

sound is present, the silence of the characters brings to the foreground the sounds of nature that permeate the soundtrack. At times, music fades in and grows louder, only to dissolve into whispers of wind, the buzzing of flies, and the chirping of birds. Through his editing, Kott effectively conveys the characters' ability to communicate with each other without language. He relies on conventional sequences of shot-reverse-shot patterns to imply dialogue between the Kazakh Steppe and other protagonists to clarify what would have otherwise remained ambiguous. This differs from *Stalker* in that the Zone is not usually seen talking or reacting in such an obvious way.

There are a few instances in *Stalker* when one of the protagonists hears a voice that was not really there, or feels an impression from something non-human, but for the most part the Zone communicates in different ways. It physically alters the trajectory of its trespassers and threatens them with imminent death if they are to disobey its rules, which we can understand through the reactions of the characters. Kott, on the other hand, leaves space for the Kazakh Steppe's voice even though there is not one. Kott's deliberate avoidance of language elevates the Steppe as the main protagonist of the film, as the other characters assimilate and communicate using *its* language. The characters cannot rely on human speech at all to convey ideas, emotions, and desires; instead, they utilize body language to engage in conversation with the Steppe. In so doing, Kott de-anthropomorphizes the narrative for the viewers, as we are forced to rely upon and consider visual language.

The only words in the film occur when the Soviet Union's voice is heard over the radio and read in a newspaper.⁷⁸ This scene occurs near the beginning of the film, when Tolgat returns home after a long workday and the radio in the background informs listeners of a successful

78. *Ispytanie*, directed by Aleksandr Kott (2014; Russia: Droog Drooga), 00:12:17.

harvesting season in the northern Rostov region. The camera cuts from a medium-long shot to a close-up of the front page of the Soviet Union's prominent newspaper, *Izvestiia*. The headline on the front-page reads, "inflation and currency chaos in capitalistic countries." This scene serves as a reference to the capitalist system while also highlighting the Soviet Union's propaganda. The inclusion of these two shots and the obvious nod to capitalism suggests that both the Soviet Union and the West played a role in the Nuclearocene. Although the Soviet Union is not a capitalist nation, it still actively contributed to the Great Acceleration, thereby incurring a share of responsibility for the detrimental impact of rapid technological progress on the environment. Additionally, the Soviet Union bears full responsibility for the development and utilization of nuclear weapons in regions such as Semipalatinsk and various locations within Russia.

In *Ispytanie*, the main human characters bear no responsibility for the nuclear accident. Their lives are portrayed as simple and closely intertwined with nature, leaving them with little agency over the decisions and actions of their government or others. Consequently, they, along with the Steppe, suffer the consequences of their government's actions. Therefore, the primary allies of the human protagonists in the film are non-human actants in the form of elements of nature, as opposed to the other human characters.

The three primary non-human actants in the film are the sun, trees, and earth. Kott cuts to other nature elements, but these three are the most interactive with the characters. The sun serves as a prominent and interactive element of nature in the film, playing a significant role in the relationship between characters. Through the use of framing and depth of field, Kott highlights the sun as the primary focus in the shots, with characters appearing as secondary elements. Kott's portrayal of the sun is devoid of human or otherworldly attributes, instead focusing on its daily actions of rising and setting. This is in direct contrast to Tarkovsky's depiction of nature in the

Zone. The Zone is mysterious and unsettling in a way that defies our understanding. Consequently, it becomes a prevalent theme within the narrative. This is why Chernobylties used *Stalker's* language to describe their experiences. The incomprehensibility of what happened to them was otherworldly from their perspective because it was still rooted in an anthropocentric lens. In contrast, Kott guides his viewers to challenge narratives of the Anthropocene by telling the story from the Steppe's perspective, which includes the perspectives of multiple non-human actants. Through his cinematography, Kott captures the sun's true essence in relation to the characters and does not embody it with otherworldly qualities. In doing so, the portrayal of the sun does not evoke the characteristics of science fiction but rather showcases it with its natural functions, rising, and setting.

Throughout the film, the camera lingers on the rise and fall of the sun in multiple scenes, bringing the rhythm of the film to real time. This deliberate pacing may be perceived as slower than classical rhythm in films, but it also enhances the film's realism and relatability to the outside world. The sun interacts with human characters, such as when it "holds" Maxim's hand. This is communicated by the camera lingering on his wiggling fingers as he looks down at his hand and the sun's rays glisten on it. Alternatively, when the camera holds on the frame of the sun dancing on the wall, Dina stares at it, connecting her with the sun as if they are two equal beings in the eyes of the viewer, as if they are friends speaking. While these actions may appear somewhat humorous in another context, Kott's deliberate pacing and editing choices further enhance the sun's role as just another character in the film and one that the human characters interact with directly, and for which they have an interpersonal fondness.

The use of multiple non-human actants in *Ispytanie* breaks the Steppe's role in the narrative down into manageable chunks for the viewer. In *Stalker*, the Zone is its own singular

entity. Trees, grass, water, fire, and earth are all viewed as one entity. This differs from *Ispytanie* in that the tree, sun, and earth are distinctive elements that all hold their own personalities, together forming the whole of the “Steppe.” A barren tree near the family home, which serves as a prominent symbol, plays a significant role as an actant. In Russian mythology, trees are associated with various aspects of life. Specifically, a withered tree was seen as a harbinger of woe and doom.⁷⁹ Throughout the film, the tree becomes barren over time, as Kott foreshadows the awful destruction that will take place at the end of the story.

It is worth noting the striking resemblance between the tree depicted in Kott's film and the tree featured in Tarkovsky's final film *Sacrifice*, which has led critics to draw comparisons between the two. In Tarkovsky's book *Sculpting in Time*, the tree is described as a symbol of belief.⁸⁰ Further in *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky describes the symbol of the tree in *Sacrifice* in more detail:

Has man any hope of survival in the face of all the patent signs of impending apocalyptic silence? Perhaps an answer to that question is to be found in the legend of the parched tree, deprived of the water of life, on which I based this film which has such a crucial place in my artistic biography: the Monk, step by step and bucket by bucket, carried water up the hill to water the dry tree, believing implicitly that his act was necessary and never for an instant wavering in his belief in the miraculous power of his own faith in God. He lived to see the Miracle: one morning the tree burst into life, its branches covered with young leaves. And that ‘miracle’ is surely no more than the truth.⁸¹

In *Ispytanie*, the tree symbolizes the belief that nature can persevere in the face of catastrophe. Initially, the tree was shown to be alive, drinking water from the stream, as in the legend of the parched tree. However, as the narrative unfolds, the tree is struck by lightning, loses its last leaf,

79. Natalia Borisovna Kirillova, "The Concept of Self-Sacrifice in the Philosophy of Andrei Tarkovsky's Work," *Rupkatha Journal* (2022): 3.

80. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 224.

81. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 229.

and becomes a stark and barren skeleton after the nuclear explosion. The optimistic ending of the tree bursting into life, covered in leaves that relate to the parable, is impossible in the face of man-made catastrophes. Kott places the blame for destruction not on the shoulders of the Steppe's human friends, but on the Soviet Union. The main characters are shown paying reverence to the tree as they each sit under it in their last moments of life. Specifically, before Tolgat dies, the camera shows him sitting directly under the tree as he stares emotionally into the sunset and withers out of frame in rhythm with the setting sun. Dina and Max are also shown sitting under the tree in their final moments before death when the nuclear explosion occurs.

Kott animates the tree through his use of montage, whereby shots of the tree "drinking" water are juxtaposed with shots of Tolgat drinking water. By sequencing these shots together, the tree takes on a sense of animation within the narrative as it is placed in close proximity to a living person. Simultaneously, Tolgat's position next to the tree implies a lack of autonomy in the face of an impending explosion. This juxtaposition suggests that both humanity and nature are equally vulnerable to the consequences of nuclear fallout. Both human and non-human entities have a shared susceptibility to the far-reaching repercussions of nuclear catastrophes. This aligns with the recognition that the Anthropocene is not solely a human-centric epoch, but rather encompasses the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of humans and the natural world. Earth has the capacity to exist after humanity comes to an end, but humans are doomed without its functioning systems. The consequences of the nuclear fallout transcend human experience and extend to the broader ecological fabric of the Anthropocene era. As Latour argues, "To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with

other subjects that have also lost their autonomy."⁸² The tree in *Ispytanie* serves as a powerful symbol, as it clearly shares agency with the characters occupying the frame.

One final character in the film, Earth, plays a significant role in the narrative. In Russian folklore, the Earth is often personified as a female entity, referred to as "Mother Native Land" or "Mother Russia."⁸³ This belief stems from ancient Russian beliefs that depict Earth as a deity, also known as Damp Mother Earth. During the early Middle Ages, rituals surrounding Earth were of great importance. People would take oaths by touching or swallowing dirt from their native lands as a means of protection. Burial rituals also involve placing food with the deceased, symbolizing a return to the womb. Throughout life, and especially before death, it was believed that individuals should approach the Earth with purity and repentance. Sins were confessed to a hole in the Earth, seeking forgiveness before passing away.

Prior to Tolgat's death, he performs necessary rituals, such as washing himself, putting on formal attire, and bowing in respect before the sun, indicating his adherence to these ancient beliefs. There is a striking similarity between this scene and the experiences of Chernobyl. A chemical engineer from Pripyat, Ivan Nikolaevich Zhykhov, recalled how the ritual of digging affected his relationship to Earth, "What do I remember from those days? A shadow of madness. How we dug. And dug. Somewhere in my diary I wrote down that I understood, in the first few days I understood—how easy it is to become earth."⁸⁴ In a very literal sense, we join the earth when we are buried, which is how Kott depicts Tolgat's death. Becoming one with Earth is the

82. Bruno Latour, "Agency in the time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 5.

83. Sydney Schultze, *Culture and customs of Russia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 23.

84. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 165.

end of the ritual, and rituals such as oaths and burial customs serve as a means for individuals to connect with nature as a whole. In ancient Russian folklore, people understood the importance of respecting the Earth and preemptively mitigating unwanted consequences. We see this less and less in our contemporary society as we ravage through the Earth's resources with little collective care for the state of the environment.

Later in the *Ispytanie*, during the nuclear explosion scene, when we see a mushroom cloud followed by close-up explosions of the Earth, part of the explosion is Tolgat being spewed from the earth after he had been already buried.⁸⁵ Despite his rituals, Damp Mother Earth rejected him: The question arises as to why Tolgat was expelled from Earth during the explosion. A strong possibility suggests that his theft of radioactive railroad pins triggered his expulsion because he was physically unclean and not pure enough to enter Damp Mother Earth's holy ground. Similar to the Chernobylites, the unanticipated effects of large-scale radiation poisoning were too much for Earth. Damp Mother Earth had always been in control of itself and the burial of humans in the ground, but after Chernobyl, the mass graves included poisonous dirt. Kott shows that Damp Mother Earth cannot accept Tolgat, which in turn poses the question of how she will accept herself as she is buried alongside the nuclear dead. Even folklore is disrupted by the Nuclearocene and its unimaginable outcomes. Another possibility for Tolgat is that his desires, specifically his longing to fly planes, seduced him towards modern technology. He did not seek after nature like his daughter but fell prey to human temptations that would inevitably harm it. Dina was shown to be continuously connecting to the living Steppe, whether directly with the non-human characters or dead remnants of nature, which she used as a means of storytelling.

85. Kott, *Ispytanie*, 01:30:27.

Dina uses pieces of nature in her nature composition diary to tell stories and depict her desires. She uses remnants of leaves and twigs to build collages in her diary, echoing other nonverbal communication shown throughout the film. Kott utilizes the portrayal of nature in her diary as a means to articulate and convey Dina's emotions, thereby accentuating the profound connection she shares with the natural world.⁸⁶ Rather than establishing a dichotomy between herself and the elements of nature, Kott emphasizes a sense of unity and solidarity. There are three specific components Kott showcases to accomplish this: the progressively complex composition pages as a means of tracing Dina's relationship with nature, the potential symbolism of industrialization and the exploitation of the environment from what she assembles in her diary using leaves, and the significance of Dina's depiction of the dying tree, which is a recurring theme and touchpoint for viewers to use as a timescale of an atrophying land.

The composition diary begins with a single leaf, is not used to depict any image, and includes collaged depictions of an intricate boat and the Kremlin. This progression symbolizes our societal shift towards industrialization and technological advancement, with each page representing a stage in this development and the exploitation of nature to reach these goals. Moreover, the inclusion of the Kremlin hints at the government's responsibility in the culmination of the technology that would later kill her and her family.

The final shots of the scene, featuring a jump cut from Dina's composition of a healthy tree to a barren tree on their property that has been exposed to radiation and withering away, show a before and after of sorts of the tree's radiation poisoning.⁸⁷ The fluttering leaf that floats

86. Kott, *Ispytanie*, 00:22:14.

87. Kott, *Ispytanie*, 00:23:23.

away near the end of the film signifies Dina's collection of fallen leaves from the beginning of the tree's decline, highlighting her attempt to meaningfully document her grief. This is something that we do as humans with each other—we save photographs of those we care about from the time they are born to the time they die as a way to celebrate them. Dina's inventive way of capturing the tree's life and her close relationship with nature is like that of a friend. Kott removes the barrier of language in order to showcase the possibility of a relationship between the Environment and humanity.

This sentiment echoes stories from Alexievich's written oral history of the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, in that the absence of words has the capacity to increase communication with nature. In the book, an unnamed person expresses this intent, "Is the world as it's depicted in words the real world? Words stand between the person and his soul. And I'll say this: birds, and trees, and ants, they're closer to me now than they were. Man is frightening. And strange."⁸⁸ The Chernobylites shared the same sentiment as Dina, which means that the elements of nature became closer to them when the language was broken down. Human spoken language can be a hindrance to accessing empathy towards the environment as a sentient being, since the environment doesn't speak our language at all.

The clear antagonist in the story of *Ispytanie* is the nameless, faceless members of the Soviet Union who physically intrude into Dina's family home, fence them in their compound, and echo through the radio. Throughout the course of the film, the dominance of the Soviet Empire is portrayed primarily through technological means, such as by the presence of Soviet-originated vehicles, trucks, planes, radios, and radiation detectors. The portrayal of the Soviet Union's technology is dark and dangerous, while the technology Tolgat uses seems relatively

88. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 66.

harmless. The soldiers seem out of place, as they do not belong to the Steppe's world. This is the aspect of the unhomely that *Ispytanie* emulates.

In *Ispytanie*, the unhomely does not stem from the Steppe in which individuals reside, akin to the Zone depicted in *Stalker*. Rather, it manifests itself in the form of soldiers and machinery that represent the Soviet Union. The Steppe is an entity that engenders familiarity and warmth, fostering a sense of rapport between them. But *Ispytanie* echoes *Stalker* in this sense: machinery and run-down vehicles have been shown to represent human intervention on a broader scale. It is almost as if it represents the 'before' and 'after' of a calamitous event. Domination transfers from man-made technology, as shown in *Ispytanie*, to the sheer power of Nature depicted in *Stalker*.

In *Ispytanie*, we are presented with a depiction of Soviet soldiers and Tolgat using various forms of technology. As Dina witnesses her father operating his truck or pretending to pilot a plane, she experiences skepticism. This skepticism is further heightened and turns to fear when Soviet soldiers arrive at their house, as their possession of such technology appears unfamiliar and potentially harmful. Similarly, in *Stalker*, tanks overgrown with moss and grass serve as a symbol of the violence that once occurred here. However, as viewers, we do not necessarily fear the threat of human violence in this particular place. Instead, our fear is directed towards lingering trauma and the potential for mysterious harm that the Zone seems to possess. Both films explore the juxtaposition of machinery in the natural world, highlighting the unease and distrust that can arise from the introduction of unfamiliar and potentially dangerous innovations. This portrayal invites viewers to question the implications and consequences of technological developments as well as the potential for them to contribute to the Anthropocene.

The unhomely is depicted quite differently in *Ispytanie* than in *Stalker*. In the latter case, it primarily originates from the Zone. The environment itself drives an unhomely feeling toward the viewer, as we feel the eerie environment of the Meatgrinder or traverse the Zone with the characters. In *Ispytanie*, the unhomely feeling comes from people—specifically through encounters with the people who represent the Soviet Union, who are the perpetrators of the technology responsible for decimating the Steppe. These soldiers arrive unexpectedly in the middle of the night to assess the radiation levels in and around the protagonist's home, and the composition of the frame portrays Russians as almost alien, distinct from the characters within the Steppe who are living one with the land. Clad in thick rubber suits and wielding otherworldly technology, they appear out of place against the natural elements that have been exposed throughout the film. The soldiers' faces are either partially visible or completely obscured from the viewer's perspective.

Additionally, the rain and harsh conditions experienced by Tolgat, who is naked and shivering, serve to further emphasize the separation between the representation of the Soviet Union and that of the family connected to nature.⁸⁹ According to Andy Bruno, indigenous peoples were consistently repressed by the Soviet state and considered to be at the lowest rung of a supposed evolutionary hierarchy.⁹⁰ The protagonists living on the Steppe are treated in the same way that the Soviet Union treats nature, with little regard for the sanctity of life. Kott's choice to depict a return to the pre-modern world as a plausible and effective means of telling an apocalyptic story is reinforced by this scene.

89. Kott, *Ispytanie*, 00:49:31.

90. Andy Bruno, "Studying the Siberian Anthropocene: An Introduction," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 48, no. 3 (2021): 261.

In the final scene of the film, when the nuclear explosion takes place, Kott uses extreme close-up shots to magnify the details of various elements within the scene to heighten the experiences of the viewer watching portions of the Earth explode. We see Dina and Max sitting on the bed her father sat on right before he died, under the stark and barren tree, playing the cat's cradle. We see them witness the initial explosion as it lights up the frame. We see that the dust gobbles them up as they hold their hands. The tree is the first thing we see in the explosion, after a series of shots showing each part of their home and part of the land being decimated, the camera shoots the tree again, and the demolished land that used to be their home.

In the final climactic scene of the film, Kott uses extreme close-up shots to magnify the intricate details of various elements within the frame. This deliberate approach serves to intensify the viewer's experience, as it witnesses a devastating nuclear explosion. With a mixture of close-up and medium-long shots, the camera captures Dina and Max positioned on the same bed that belongs to Dina's deceased father, situated beneath a desolate and bare tree. Playing the game of a cat's cradle, the two characters bear witness to the initial detonation, illuminating the frame with an intense burst of light.

As the dust engulfs them, the shot fades to darkness, and Kott leaves us lingering for a few seconds. The deliberate and prolonged pause between the demise of our human protagonists and the destruction of Earth further emphasizes the devastation of the earth itself. Notably, shot cuts from the darkness to the tree emerge as the primary focal point within the explosion. The frame rate is slowed down, allowing for a detailed portrayal of the explosion's effects. Following a series of shots depicting the gradual destruction of their home and surrounding land, the camera returns to the tree, now reduced to bony carcass, devoid of any of its remaining life, with another cut to the characters' home as a desolate landscape of rubble. The concluding several-minutes-

long scene depicts the gradual ascent of the sun, stretching over several minutes until it finally emerges fully above the horizon. The camera lingers on this image for several seconds, until the sun begins to descend and disappear once again behind the horizon. This portrayal of the sun's limited rise signifies its inability to fully ascend in the aftermath of the devastation, serving as a poignant symbol of mourning for the loss of both Earth and its human friends.

Ispytanie encourages reflection on humanity's responsibility in the Anthropocene, where human actions have had profound consequences on the planet. The Steppe also has profound consequences on the film's human characters. Though the consequences are not what we see today—natural disasters and unprecedented weather events that adversely affect humanity, the consequences result in a strong bond between humans and their environment. Kott changes the perspective of how we normally interact with the Earth in the face of destruction. He victimizes the Steppe along with Dina, Tolgat, Max, and Kaysin. This fictional portrayal of a historical event changes the way we view the Anthropocene from an anthropocentric lens to an Earth-centric lens.

Conclusion

Both *Stalker* and *Ispytanie* explore the concept of Earth as a sentient being through their narratives, highlighting the repercussions of human activities in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster. In *Stalker*, the audience is transported to a post-apocalyptic Chernobyl-esque world, providing a glimpse of the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe that occurred years earlier. The visual details in the film bear striking resemblance to the actual aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, enabling survivors to use Takorvksy's language to describe their own experiences in the Exclusion Zone. Throughout *Stalker*, viewers are prompted to interpret the reasons behind the transformation of the Zone into an otherworldly realm, with much of the context left open for individual interpretation. On the other hand, *Ispytanie* takes a more direct approach to address the consequences of a nuclear accident on the Kazakh Steppe. Kott's narrative compels viewers to directly engage with the repercussions of the disaster through a range of cinematographic perspectives and varying frame rates. The film predominantly showcases a pre-catastrophe landscape, portraying the Steppe before it falls victim to nuclear devastation. Through real-time depictions, viewers witness the unfolding of the catastrophe on Steppe and its inhabitants. Without language to describe or communicate within the Steppe, Kott de-anthropomorphizes the narrative to give voice to the Steppe and perspective to viewers.

Stalker was initially regarded as a science fiction film, however, a contemporary assessment of the film viewed through the lens of the Anthropocene, reveals intriguing parallels between its thematic elements and the emerging genre of climate fiction. Notably, it is in the aftermath of the devastating Chernobyl disaster that *Stalker's* resonance with the realities of human-induced environmental crisis becomes most discernible. With the subsequent release of

Ispytanie, *Stalker* assumes new significance as it embodies the concept of the Nuclearocene. Within the Nuclearocene framework, the film portrays landscapes marred by radiation and communities grappling with the profound repercussions of nuclear technology. The evolution of *Stalker*'s genre, specifically in relation to the Chernobyl disaster and other nuclear catastrophes, has engendered a fascinating interpretation of the film's significance within various eras of modern history. In this reinterpretation, *Stalker* transcends its origins as a work of science fiction, transforming into a poignant exploration of humanity's fraught relationship with the natural world amidst the specter of nuclear devastation.

In both films, the directors show us Earth's sentience and bring new meaning to the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is characterized by pressing environmental concerns that necessitate a thorough reassessment of our interactions with the natural world. Issues such as climate change, habitat destruction, species extinction, and resource depletion have surfaced as direct consequences of human activity. On the grand timescale of geological history, human existence represents a mere fraction of the Earth's lifespan. We are guests on this planet, as *Stalker*, *Writer*, and *Professor* are also guests in the *Zone* or *Dina* and her family in the *Steppe*. If, hypothetically, humanity was to enter the *Room* in *Stalker* with a primary desire for collective pursuit of technological progress, alternative energy sources, and nuclear armament (which seems to be the desire of humanity at present), we might inevitably face the repercussions of these desires—potentially culminating in our own annihilation in response to the Great Acceleration.

The current era marks the nascent stage of comprehending the profound implications that the Nuclearocene epoch will impose upon the planet. The Chernobyl disaster is a poignant example of an unforeseen nuclear accident and its far-reaching catastrophic repercussions on a

global scale. This catastrophic event is distinct from the devastating potential of nuclear weapons, which serve no purpose other than for destruction. Contemporary discourse frequently broaches the topic of Russia's purported intentions to utilize nuclear weapons in an offensive capacity against the Western world, while the United States flaunts its formidable arsenal with the implied readiness to retaliate swiftly to aggressive actions. The specter of total annihilation and Armageddon has loomed since the Cuban missile crisis, perpetuating a sense of inevitable peril. Beyond the realm of human existence, though, the question arises as to the fate of Earth in the aftermath of such cataclysmic events, after humanity's reign has ended.

The concept of Earth as a sentient being with its own timescale extends beyond the realm of nuclear impacts. Presently, mankind is acutely conscious of the adverse consequences inflicted on the environment. Various social activists, artists, authors, and filmmakers frequently depict apocalyptic scenarios related to climate change, and international non-governmental organizations advocate for nations to adhere to prescribed standards to preserve Earth's ecosystems. The presence of the Climate Clock in Union Square, which counts down the seconds, symbolizes the diminishing time until irreversible harm to Earth is reached, thereby sealing humanity's destiny in the Anthropocene epoch. Furthermore, the existence of the Doomsday Clock, created by Martyl Langsdorf, the wife of the physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project, sits in Chicago, illustrating a warning about how close we are to destroying the planet with nuclear weapons.⁹¹

However, the discourse surrounding the demise of Earth and the effort to restore it often pivots towards considerations of human survival on a planet irreversibly altered by human activity. The emphasis frequently lies on human cohabitation with a damaged Earth rather than

91. "Doomsday Clock." Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. March 26, 2024.

on the intrinsic value of Earth itself, which transcends human temporal scales. Cinematic works, such as *Stalker* and *Ispytanie*, serve as catalysts for recognizing Earth's sentience as distinct from human existence, potentially fostering greater empathy towards the environmental degradation caused by human actions.

The current status of the Doomsday Clock indicates an alarming proximity to a potential global catastrophe, with the clock set at 90 seconds to midnight. This heightened threat is primarily attributed to various factors, including Russia's aggressive stance towards the use of nuclear weapons in the context of its invasion of Ukraine, as well as other ongoing conflicts and the escalating impacts of climate change. Russia's actions, particularly its noncompliance with the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and its extensive efforts to modernize its nuclear arsenal over the past few decades,⁹² have significantly raised concerns regarding the possibility of a catastrophic event that could potentially lead to the annihilation of humanity and the emergence of a post-apocalyptic world devoid of human existence.

In addition to Russia's nuclear ambitions, Ukraine faces a unique challenge, as it strives to maintain the operation of a substantial network of nuclear energy plants amidst a full-scale war.⁹³ The situation in Eastern Europe, exacerbated by Russia's actions, underscores the importance of acknowledging the long-term implications of developing nuclear power for energy and weapons and the potential risks it poses to not only human civilization but also the broader global ecosystem.

92, Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, Mackenzie Knight, *Russian nuclear weapons*, 2024. (March 7, 2024).

93, Brian Mann, "Ukraine Strains to Safely Operate Nuclear Power Plants While under Russian Invasion," NPR, September 6, 2023.

It is imperative that we remain cognizant of the collective future of humanity and the planet, acknowledging that the consequences of our actions – or inaction – in relation to nuclear proliferation will have enduring ramifications that extend far beyond our lifetimes. Ignoring the complexities and risks associated with nuclear technology and those who would not hesitate to use it could have profound and permanent consequences for the future sustainability and stability of the world we inhabit. A world that likely we will not be around to see.

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