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Assessment 2

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This essay will consider the issues surrounding the presentation of the town of Pripyat, Ukraine, as a 'difficult heritage' site. Issues discussed will include; the site's 'heritage' status, general issues of appropriately representing sites of 'difficult heritage', and the more specific challenges of the site as still actively dangerous, where efforts to contain the effects of the Chernobyl disaster are ongoing. These will be presented under the umbrellas of two main themes; tourist motivation and the physical site itself, which are considered within this paper to be the main issues involved in the presentation of this particular site. Included in these discussions will be references to the phenomena of dark tourism, danger-zone tourism, 'ruin porn' photography, and urban exploration, where brief links to the context of authenticity will be drawn. This will be executed through firstly examining general issues of presenting 'difficult heritage', through the lens of dark tourism, followed by an outline of the Chernobyl disaster and its aftermath. After this will be an exploration of the terms 'dark tourism' and 'ruin porn', with reference to danger-zone tourism and urban exploration. Issues more specifically related to the site will then be considered; beginning with notions of trauma, and how tour groups handle such trauma in the context of dark tourism and 'ruin porn' photography. Tied to these issues will be notions of authenticity, and so links will be made to this. Further issues, such as the site as still radioactive, and the plant as recently still in use, will then be examined, and finally, future issues of presentation and conservation will be outlined. The concluding paragraph will be a summation of points raised during the body of the paper.

Despite having no UNESCO inclusion, this site is the subject of several tours. Therefore, though not officially a heritage site, Pripyat, and indeed the Chernobyl plant itself, is unparalleled in its existence as an historical site, and issues surrounding its conservation and presentation are equally

as unique. Its use within this essay, and the context of heritage, can therefore be justified. As will be mentioned further in the body of this essay, its reality as a site of 'difficult heritage', with ongoing containment efforts- a site still highly radioactive and dangerous- brings with it issues not only of appropriate representation, but also of public safety. Safety efforts, including the creation of barriers and zones considered too dangerous for exploration, can often have the opposite effect of encouraging thrill-seekers to stray from the designated path, or even to illegally trespass (Eccles, 2018). Therefore, tour operators must consider not only how they portray the heritage of the site, but how their portrayal could be literally damaging to their wards.

This is, of course, nothing new. Dark tourism, or thanatourism, has existed for a very long time, and in its early stages also had to deal with issues of physical safety. Being the act of travel to attractions and sites involving death and/or disaster, the very earliest visits to battle-fields, such as French tours to the Western Front in 1919, surely had to deal with similar issues. As sites of recent military action, they would be strewn with harmful objects, and the ground itself unsuitable for exploration. There has therefore long existed a public desire to witness such sites, despite the possible dangers of doing so. However, that is not to say that such desires are without controversy. The existence of such an activity as a consumer enterprise gives rise to moral protestations with arguments surrounding the commodification of death, trauma, and disaster. The motivations of tourists are questioned. The representation of sites, dependant on political ideologies, are challenged. Perhaps such activities as taboo only fuels desires further. An increasing integration of dark tourism into difficult heritage brings with it issues of commodification, sensationalism, and fetishisation.

With these issues taken into account, appropriately and respectfully representing past traumas within 'difficult heritage' is important. Macdonald (2015) describes difficult heritage as the act of a nation to address and 'flag up' past atrocities and wrong-doing, pasts "recognised as meaningful in

the present but that are also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity” (Macdonald, 2015). Finding a balance between presenting a site with consideration, while also maintaining consumer appeal, is an issue that must be tackled with scrutiny in a climate where increasing emphasis is being put on heritage in a tourism context. What is crucial is framing. Arguably the most successful for creating reflective representations, Germany presents its heritage in such a way that neither shrinks from, nor glorifies its often difficult history. Such attention to its past atrocities is “rare and recent”, having increased emphasis within Germany since the 1980s (ibid). Examples of the approach to its difficult heritage can be seen, from the obvious (the Holocaust museums), to the subtle (the glass dome over the government building in Berlin). Difficult heritage representations can be argued to have an impact on “the role and also form of public remembering in museums and heritage sites” (ibid), highlighting the ways in which nations use the past to form identity. Whether used as a means to legitimise, or as a fresh start, the past is utilised as a tool of representation the world over. Choosing to address difficult heritage brings with it the risk, by drawing attention to negative aspects of national history, of conveying an unsavoury image. However, Macdonald (2015) argues that “such confrontation with unsettling reminders of the past had an educative value”, be that to acknowledge responsibility or to ensure such atrocities are not repeated. And so here we see the ability of dark tourism, as a branch of 'difficult heritage', to heal; in remembrance of the dead, and a contemplation of past trauma that allows for grieving. It must be noted, however, that all representations are carefully crafting and are “often subject to processes of limiting” (ibid), such as in the case of Pripyat.

The Chernobyl disaster of the 25th- 26th April, 1986, was a catastrophic nuclear accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which occurred when a series of scheduled safety tests carried out on the reactor uncovered an inherent safety design flaw within the reactor itself. These tests resulted in uncontrollable fission conditions, causing a large explosion and blowing the reactor apart. Fuel

material, undergoing uncontrolled nuclear fission, was blasted out of the reactor, contaminating much of the surrounding area and filling the atmosphere with fallout. The knock-on effects of the disaster were felt across Europe, whether directly or indirectly. Pripyat, the neighbouring town inhabited by the plant's workers and families, was evacuated in the following days. Those who didn't die, or were hospitalised suffering the effects of radiation, left behind all possessions and even family pets. The result was what is commonly referred to as a 'ghost town'; vehicles left abandoned on roads, books still on school-desks, and bumper cars poised on the fairground. Though efforts to contain the effects of the accident are still ongoing even over 30 years later, and the site still largely radioactive, it has nevertheless become something of a tourist destination. Recent years have seen an increase in tours to the site, operating under the banner of dark tourism.

'Dark tourism', though not considered a new term- past incarnations could be said to include attendance at Roman Gladiatorial games and medieval executions- has however become more of a household term in recent decades. Stone and Sharpley (2008) assert that dark tourism provides the opportunity for death to be more integrated into society, allowing humans to contemplate and acclimatise to its prospect. Further to this, it is argued that confrontation with sites of death alleviates anxiety and dread of death. However, Buda and Shim (2015) contend that dark tourism is driven by novelty, the need for tourists to experience unusual and extreme sites. Further to this, Buda, d'Hauteserre and Johnston (2014) advance that the advent in dark tourism known as danger-zone tourism goes beyond the simple contemplation of death, and that despite assumptions of the opposite, danger and the threat of harm become a draw for tourists. Potential harm becomes a motivation for visitors, much in the same way as urban exploration. Indeed, danger-zone tourism can be viewed as the next step-up for so-called 'adrenaline junkies' who enjoy risk. Urban exploration itself is also a factor for issues surrounding Prip'yat. "Urbexers" such as Bradley Garrett portray the exploration, often illegal and dangerous, of urban spaces as daring, "recreational

trespass” (Macfarlane, 2013). The influence on those who visit the site can be seen in the ways tourists leave designated paths, climb buildings, or even break in illegally to explore the area. Indeed, there exists one Youtube channel, bionerd23 (2018), dedicated to documenting (often illegal) exploration of the site.

Advents in technology have meant that it is now easier than ever to take and share photographs (and as mentioned above, videos) from such sites, both serving as adverts for tour companies and creating further appetites to see them 'in real life'. For example, photographs shared online of the Pripyat ferris wheel have created an instantly recognisable landmark. This is where an exploration of 'ruin porn' photography must be brought in. Though not necessarily associated with dark tourism, it can be argued that many facets of it run parallel within 'ruin porn' photography.

'Ruin porn' is the critical term for ruin photography, in which photographers chronicle abandoned and derelict buildings, from inside and out. How this relates to representation of difficult heritage can be seen in the way they are both “playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures” (Macdonald, 2015). Leary (2011) notes elements of ruin photography include “the exuberant connoisseurship of dereliction”, “rejoicing at the 'excitement' of it all” and “the absence of people” (Leary, 2011). A notable example would be the work of Marchand and Meffre (2010), involving the spaces created by de-industrialisation in Detroit. Such work seeks to capture interiors of buildings, once bustling with activity, as now empty and abandoned. The main focus of the photographs is the absence of humans. This becomes problematic, as the empty space becomes fetishised, and historical and social situations become overlooked. At a site such as Pripyat, which is an abandoned, and therefore necessarily derelict town, such photographs can be taken. And indeed, any internet search of 'Pripyat' or 'Chernobyl' produces dozens of such images. Of course, there are differences between Pripyat and Detroit; Pripyat is no longer resided in, Detroit is. However, the fetishisation of both is problematic. Leary (2011) argues that ruin porn “dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the

people that inhabit and transform them” (ibid). Obviously, in this context, there are no inhabitants to transform the town. However, if we were to consider this quote in the past tense- the people that inhabited them- we can better draw criticism. Tourists visiting the site are largely motivated by its absence of people. Tour websites are covered in ruin photographs, with eerie contexts that liken the town to those in post-apocalyptic video games. This sensationalising of the abandoned nature of the site overlooks the suffering of former residents, and glorifies the horrific accident that has left it in such a state. Pripjat, or rather Chernobyl, becomes a metonym. Whether that be for nuclear disaster, man-made disaster, or post-apocalyptic ideas. While this does in part acknowledge the history of the site, it sensationalises and gives an agenda to its existence above and beyond its reality: as a town that was once inhabited by people- families- who experienced huge trauma and loss. Ruin photography turns such a reality, through fetishisation, into 'porn'. Something to be celebrated, almost enjoyed, rather than a source of reverence. Leary (2011) adds “as a purely aesthetic object, even with the best intentions, ruin photography cannot help but exploit a city's misery” (ibid). This sensationalism filters through to a public who then want to experience the reality of the site, who become excited by the prospect, and are willing to pay for the opportunity. It is hard to imagine such an attitude being taken of a tour of Auschwitz. Indeed, pages such as yolocaust.de shame tourists who do not show sites the respect they are due (Cole, 2017).

The motivations of tourists to visit Pripjat, and therefore control of the narrative, can be argued to be one of the biggest issues in presentation of the site. Chitty and Baker (1999) assert that perceptions of the narrative, and difficulties surrounding perception are “not confined to prehistoric times; there is plenty of scope for misunderstanding the historic survivals of the millennium now ending” (Chitty and Baker, 1999, p1). They continue “the opportunities for first-hand communication bring with them risks that the inevitable baggage of personal experience will hinder attempts to provide broader perspectives” (ibid, p1). Such issues arise in the case of Pripjat, where

personal motives to visit the site can be seen to hinder viewer understanding of the reality of the site. Ruin photography plays a key part in such misinterpretations. However, Chitty and Baker (1999) also assert that “it is an emotional response to the physical experience of a place that is the principal means of engaging the mind and interest of the viewer” (ibid, p14), and this relates to authenticity. As has been outlined above, tourist motivations are linked to thanatourism and ruin 'porn' photography. Deeply ingrained in these are notions of authenticity.

The subtraction of human from space in this context creates a certain air of authenticity. When tourists visit the site, they are under the impression that they are entering a ghost town, abandoned in a second, everything left in its place. Walking around, they gain a sense of what a human-less earth would look and feel like. In a culture increasingly interested in dystopia, it's easy to see the appeal of Pripyat. Due to its status as still radioactive, the town has not been dismantled. For now, the buildings still stand. Residents could not take possessions with them, as they were also radioactive and had high risks of contamination. Indeed, the plants and trees have been petrified, and are neither alive nor rotting. The air of assumed authenticity is palpable. Regardless of the fact that previous visitors have moved bumper cars, and staged scenes such as the gas masks, tourists attend this site believing that what they are seeing is a moment frozen in time. Such assumptions cannot separate fact from faked, however, “it would be to fall into a naturalistic fallacy to assume that historical facts in themselves determine how they will be represented” (Alexander, 2012, in Macdonald, 2015). Within the heritage context, high value is placed on authenticity. Visitors want to know that what they are viewing is authentic, in other words, 'real'. The state of authenticity can relate to the value society places on things (objects, sites) within a certain context. Here, it is the site, the abandoned town of Pripyat, and the objects within the site. Everyday mundane objects take on special significance within this context. Links can be drawn between this and the displays within Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence*, in which 'normal' objects take on significance in their

contextualising. For example, the books on school-desks become a signifier of trauma, alluding to the suffering of the children of the town. However, even the staged objects, such as the gas mask, are taken as authentic by visitors, and are a much-photographed spectacle. Despite not being original to the site, they are made authentic by their context.

Obviously this site has not been left largely untouched by choice. It is not being conserved for the sake of heritage, but rather because it is too dangerous to disturb the site, and disposal of objects and structures is a complicated and hazardous issue. By allowing visitors to the site, authorities are both creating and alleviating these safety issues. In allowing tours of the site, authorities are potentially putting members of the public at risk. However, by sanctioning such trips and designating paths and restricted areas, they are alleviating issues of trespass. Radiation scanners and guards are present at exits and entrances, to ensure visitors don't take souvenirs from the site. Again, this is a safety issue and not one of conservation, but one that is at the forefront for those protecting the site. When allowing viewers to the site, their very being there is potentially damaging to health. This factor has effects for the types of tourists who visit, and their motivations, as has been outlined previously in this work. In order to understand this issue, as it is perhaps the biggest when considering presentation of the site, we must consider its implications. Studies have shown an increase in Papillary Thyroid Cancer in Ukraine and Belarus, which has so far persisted over the decades since the accident (Hatch and Cardis, 2017). Likewise, studies of clean up workers show increased dose related cases of thyroid cancer (ibid). Some findings even stretch as far as to display evidence of genetic effects on the offspring of those exposed, though these are inconsistent (ibid). These are the very real circumstances that authorities must deal with in terms of tourist activity, indeed, even the health of the tour operators and their families must be considered.

And so we see the need to think ahead, to make plans for the future of the site, and with that comes

further issues of representation and safety. It is fair to say that Chernobyl and Pripyat are areas that will remain radioactive, and therefore dangerous, for generations to come. Authorities will have to consider how to convey this risk. In the documentary *Into Eternity* (2010), narrator Michael Madsen discusses the issues arising in the building of the Onkalo nuclear waste repository. The film highlights the 'eternal' existence of radioactive matter, and the difficulties in the disposing (or rather containing) of it. One major consideration of the film is how authorities can convey a true sense of the danger of such a site, and how to do so without sensationalising the hazard in a way that will in actuality tempt the curious. This has been and will be an ongoing issue in the representation of Chernobyl and Pripyat. In a climate of ruin 'porn' and "recreational trespass" (Macfarlane, 2013), where threat of harm becomes temptation, there is a fine line between warning and advertisement. Again, tourist motivations become a major factor.

A further safety issue presents in the conditions of the town; the buildings, left untouched for over 30 years are beginning to decay. This also raises issue for the heritage of the site, here we see a town that could fall down within the next few decades. How will the site be represented if/when that happens? In terms of heritage representation, Chitty and Baker (1999) identify three strands of thought in professional involvement; "to let the past 'speak for itself', to be explicit about the theoretical and methodological assumptions behind any work, or to relate academic or research-based perceptions with social issues" (Chitty and Baker, 1999, p14). Will the site be left to speak for itself? Or should authorities intervene to keep buildings standing? These considerations themselves raise issues of authenticity, and have effects on representation and tourism. It could be argued that the sites deterioration and eventual levelling could allow for better conveyance of the trauma suffered at the site, by taking away the novelty factor that distracts visitor attention. Perhaps it could even provide the opportunity for a museum to be erected on site, giving authorities better grasp of the narrative. Or has the main draw of tourism been the existence of the town, and with it collapsed, will tourism decrease?

Representations of difficult heritage seek to stop us forgetting wrong-doing and death in the past. Pripyat, as a site of remembrance, is important in the consideration of such points, but also as a space still dangerous and radioactive. It raises questions about science and human nature and serves as a metonym for man's destruction of himself and his environment. Huge consideration must be taken to ensure that future generations can be educated by the site; not only about the trials of scientific endeavour, but also about loss, grief, and healing.

It can be argued that the motivation behind dark tourism is driven by authenticity and a desire to witness and experience sites first hand. Indeed, further to this are 'ruin porn' notions that places such as Pripyat represent a different level of authenticity, as nature's reclamation of man-made structures. They stand as examples of what a post-human world would consist of. However, such notions are problematic. No matter how potent its 'ruin porn' aesthetics may be, Pripyat remains a site of trauma, a place where lives were lost, whether by death or evacuation. Those considering the town only as a space absent of humans ignore this trauma and the difficult memories of those who grieve, and thus limit the site's healing potential.

The representing of Pripyat and Chernobyl then is an issue of control, both of the imagined and the physical. There is a sense of irony to be taken here, that man seeks to control things he cannot possibly have any power over; imagination and nuclear power. That the Chernobyl disaster happened exactly because we cannot control the latter, and now struggle with the former in the quest for representation.

The narrative becomes key. Issues arise in the acknowledgement of this difficult chapter of history. Whereas in Germany a nation is highlighting itself as a perpetrator, matters are not so simple for Ukraine. Who is to blame, and who is to acknowledge it? The plant itself was, until recently, in use, the site still largely active. Is it responsible to allow tourists to the area? Would it be irresponsible not to? As it is not deemed a heritage site, at least from the UNESCO point of view, is it reasonable

to assume the narrative can be controlled? And finally, given the deteriorating state of the town, in the long term, does it matter?

In terms of Pripyat, the past has been left to speak for itself, but given the tourist context, has it been saying the right thing? The lack of direction has left the site open to interpretation, and while this allows for viewer agency, it could also mean that consideration of the trauma has been, at best, overlooked and at worst, become a novelty thanks to the commodification and sensationalism of dark tourism and ruin 'porn'.

And so, in conclusion; the main issues for representation of difficult heritage are those surrounding control of the narrative. Meaning that visitors to such sites bring with them their own lens and motivations that could impede the transmission of certain nuances. The transformation within recent years that has seen nations embrace and acknowledge their own difficult histories must be considered carefully as the roles of perpetrator and victim are open to a myriad of interpretations. Sites of suffering and death must be presented in ways that respectfully and openly deal with trauma. This becomes difficult in a world that increasingly relies on the spectacle of death, in which trips to such sites become a novelty.

More specific issues related to the site are predominantly preoccupied with basic safety. In a heritage climate that often depends on funding generated by tourism, authorities must balance how threat of harm is portrayed to the public; too much emphasis may sensationalise such aspects and lead to unregulated visits, too little may not be sufficient in conveying the reality of the dangers. Prip'yat is on borrowed time as it is, the site is unstable and the buildings, which may be a major draw for tourists, will not be standing for much longer. Authorities have many difficult choices ahead of them to make, choices that involve preservation, presentation, and further safety, and from which arise issues of authenticity, narrative, and economy.

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