

# Chernobyl dreams: investigating visitors' storytelling in the Chernobyl exclusion zone

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Little is known about the overall meaning of the Chernobyl exclusion zone (CEZ) from the visitors' point of view. Conceptualizing the zone as a storyscape and its narratives as intangible heritage resources, this study aims to investigate the visitors' engagement with these resources and the resulting articulations from the engagements as translated into verbal and visual storytelling.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Participant observation and participant generated images in combination with in-depth interviews with different types of tourists were conducted. This paper uses the photographs chosen by the interviewees themselves as a photo essay to explore the evocation of stories through narrative engagement.

**Findings** – Through participant-oriented research, this study identified three dominant storytelling themes through which visitors focus their understanding of the CEZ. Visitors' narrative engagements and visual storytelling co-produce the site and entail fluid and even conflicting narrative articulations about the CEZ and its cultural significance.

**Research limitations/implications** – The discoveries of this study stem from a unique developing heritage site. This study provided a more nuanced understanding of the different visitor categories in the CEZ and their group-specific ways to articulate, imagine and co-produce the storyscape of Chernobyl.

**Originality/value** – Gaining insight into the verbal and visual storytelling of tourists will contribute to the discussion of narrative consumption of different consumption profiles in tourism sites in addition to the mediation and construction of entangled memory spaces.

**Keywords** Dark tourism, Visual studies, PGI, Storyscape, Storytelling, Narrative

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to continue earlier research on storytelling in dark tourism (Kučnik and Veble, 2018; Lennon, 2018; Tercia *et al.*, 2022) through visitors' narrative engagement with a case study on the Chernobyl exclusion zone (CEZ), which has been in the process of gradual marketisation as an international tourism destination (Banaszkiewicz *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, a study conducted from the perspective of international visitors themselves is timely.

The nuclear power plant accident in Chernobyl on April 26, 1986, is one of the largest catastrophes in recorded history and the worst ever disaster in the history of nuclear reactors (Medvedev, 1990; Chernousenko, 1991). Thirty-one people died as an immediate result of the explosion, and the contamination forced the evacuation and resettlement of 350,000 people. Over 600,000 liquidators were involved in securing and cleaning operations in the area. Current estimates place the mortality toll somewhere between 4,000 deaths estimated by the United Nations and 90,000 suggested by Greenpeace. The full consequences of the disaster, including the long-term social consequences, are still being

debated and studied. Many controversies, the accident's unprecedented nature and the unknown nature of its consequences all contribute to its symbolic power (Dobraszczyk, 2010). Arguably, vagueness about the numbers of victims and the sheer difficulty of comprehending or measuring accurately the full-scale consequences of the disaster have contributed to the creation of a mythical Chernobyl imaginary. In addition, the contemporary storyscape of Chernobyl is a rich narrative template, which combines pieces from both fantasy and reality. As it is often the case with contested heritage, its intangibility serves both "to augment its human fascination and to compound the elasticity of its interpretation" (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996, p. 129).

Due to the long-term and far-reaching social, cultural and economic effects of the disaster: health impairments, the trauma brought by the evacuation, the loss of jobs, social networks and places of historical value, it has not remained unnoticed in the social sciences or humanities either (Stone, 2013; Yankovska & Hannam, 2013; Yankovska & Hannam, 2018). Phenomenological, autoethnographical inquiries into visitors' embodied responses, interpretation processes and engagements with the sites of dark and difficult heritage have recently acquired more academic attention (Farkić, 2020; Farkić & Kennell, 2021; Hryhorczuk, 2019; Rush-Cooper, 2020). These studies diversify the knowledge on embodiment and senses behind the tourists' site experience and in the construction of the site knowledge. However, what has remained unnoticed are the varying forms of tourism and their particular engagements with the heritage resources in the CEZ. Hence, the elaboration of different types of visitors and their particular forms of storytelling makes this paper an addition to the current research body.

The emphasis of this article will be on the visitors' engagements with the heritage resources in CEZ and how these encounters translate into patterns of storytelling. The data collected in 2019–2020 comprises semi-structured interviews in addition to participant-generated images (PGI), which are used to elaborate on the interactive narrative spaces opened up by the image and on-site visit. The current paper provides consideration of how such a contested site of dark heritage is viewed by the visitors themselves by analysing the practises of engagement with the site through the storytelling of different visitor profiles (Lennon, 2018). Consciously aiming for an interdisciplinary approach and merging dark tourism studies with the branch of visual and nuclear heritage studies, this research uses the notions of dissonant heritage in addition to verbal and visual storytelling, particularly concentrating on the heritage resources as narratives which translate into visitors' photographs.

### The place of dark tourism in heritage studies

The phenomenon of visiting places of atrocity, accidents, natural disasters and battlefields became more visible in the late nineties, and as a result, during the years 1995–2000, three new concepts were introduced into tourism research: dissonant heritage, dark tourism and thanatourism (Hartmann, 2014; Light, 2017). The concepts of dark tourism, thanatourism and dissonant heritage are used to describe, define and conceptualise various forms of tourism in the places associated with death, suffering and atrocity, with nuances in content. Dark tourism is commonly defined as "the presentation and consumption of real and commodified death" (Foley & Lennon, 1996), whereas thanatourism is understood as "a trip to a location motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death" (Seaton, 1996). Dissonance heritage, on the other hand, proposes that heritage resources have different meaning and significance for groups of stakeholders, thus making heritage, by its nature, dissonant (Light, 2017; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996).

Alongside the development of initial definitions and typologies, there has been a growing interest and effort to identify sub-forms of dark tourism and, therefore, a myriad of different conceptualizations have emerged over the past decades, such as dystopian dark tourism (Farkić, 2020; Podoshen *et al.*, 2015), disaster tourism (Robbie, 2008;

Yankovska & Hannam, 2013) and nuclear tourism (Gusterson, 2004; Hryhorczuk, 2019). A consensus has not been reached regarding the definition of the phenomenon nor its relation to heritage studies generally (Lennon, 2017; Light, 2017). Lennon and Powell (2018) conceptualise the term as inclusive, which incorporates the extensive and identifiable phenomena of visitation to sites associated with the shared darker past of humanity. Light (2017, p. 277) suggests that dark tourism and thanatourism seem to be little different from heritage tourism. Therefore, there is an increasing return to heritage (Hryhorczuk, 2019; Light, 2017) to understand tourists' activities at such places.

As Lennon (2018, p. 142) indicates, "the tourist attractions at sites of dark and dissonant heritage become key physical elements of heritage, either authentic or created, that combine in whole or part, commemoration, history, and record". The investigation of heritage from the point of view of tourism contains the notion that heritage is not a relic but has an important instrumental dimension. Tourism produces special heritage outcomes because tourists have an interest in special experiences, artefacts and narratives in the context of heritage (Šešić & Mijatović, 2014). Importantly, it is not only the physical components and materiality of the site that are of interest in the heritage markets. Intangible heritage, such as narratives, ideas and feelings, is communicated through the interpretation of physical elements (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996, p. 8). What is left under-investigated is the more specific ways in which visitors interact with the heritage resources in order to mutually shape and enact the on-site experiences. In this paper, I investigate these interactions by looking into visitors' verbal and visual storytelling in CEZ, thus contributing to the understanding of how visitors construe and consume the site through narratives.

### Storytelling in heritage sites

A heritage site can be viewed as a storyscape, a landscape where narratives are the central objects of consumption (Chronis, 2005; Chronis *et al.*, 2012). Storytelling at a heritage site communicates the experiential value that can act as a catalyst for tourism experiences and frames the imagined value of the heritage destination (Tercia, Teichert, Sirad, & Murniadi, 2022). Storytellers create the world rather than simply recording it (Olson, 2016). In a story, there is a plot, a setting and a narrator with the aim of creating a final point to be made (Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2021). Storytelling has a significant role in both supply and demand in tourism, as the known stories about the site can be commodified for the visitors, thus increasing the appeal of the site, and enhancing the tourists' experience (Kužnik & Veble, 2018; Lennon, 2018; Tercia *et al.*, 2022). However, visitors are not passive participants in the co-construction process of narrative interpretation; they have their own individual narrative dispositions about the meaning of the past, which are influenced by many factors: personal associations, prior knowledge, age and nationality (Chronis, 2012). Due to the idiosyncratic refigurations of history in the touristscape, the resultant imaginaries can be multiple (Chronis, 2012, p. 1811). Visitors flesh out the story by using their existing knowledge, filling the narrative gaps and enacting the story through their patterns of exploring and imagining the site.

### Storytelling in Chernobyl

The subject of this current article, the CEZ, was established on May 2, 1986, six days after reactor number four had exploded. It has been officially open to visitors since 2011 (Hryhorczuk, 2019). The borders have been adjusted since the establishment a number of times. Today, the area designated as the "exclusion zone" is the size of a Luxembourg state. Along with the process of touristification and gradual marketisation (Banaszkiewicz *et al.*, 2017; Stone, 2013), which can be reflected in the increase in the number of visitors alongside the construction of visitor infrastructure such as accommodation places, visitors' centres and sanitation facilities, there are intentions on the part of tourism industry stakeholders to attach the CEZ to UNESCO's world heritage list. Thus, the zone would join

the category of UNESCO's nuclear cultural heritage along with the Genbaku Monument in Hiroshima and the infamous nuclear testing site at the Bikini atoll. The CEZ would symbolise man's greatest technological failure and would function as a reminder of the threat of increasing reliance on dangerous technology (Hryhorczuk, 2019).

There is not a single narrative authority regarding Chernobyl. The competing narratives construct Chernobyl in different ways: "as a medical and financial crisis, a tale of government mismanagement, a warning to humanity, or an ecological success story" (Hutchings & Linden, 2018, pp. 209–210). The storyscape of Chernobyl consists of a plethora of symbolic meanings. This multivocality has been enhanced by biblical passages and coincidental analogies to the accident in literature, such as the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* (1972) and the subsequent film *Stalker* (1979) by Tarkovsky, which have shaped the cultural constructions of Chernobyl in often mythological ways. The landscapes of the abandoned city of Pripyat were further used in computer games such as *Call of Duty* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, which speaks to the fact that fantasy and fiction constitute a multi-layered composition of different memories, representations and narratives of Chernobyl.

This study seeks now to investigate how the visitors of the exclusion zone are construing the tale of Chernobyl through these complex and dynamic collections of narratives and imaginaries through storytelling after visiting Chernobyl. The visitors of the CEZ may, through different tour choices, frame the storytelling in varying ways. I will be arguing that this framing, enabled by the tour choice, establishes distinct patterns of storytelling and, therefore, those reflect different narrative articulations of the storyscape of Chernobyl.

## Methodology

This study was conducted with an ethnographic case study approach in combination with a multi-methods orientation comprising qualitative interviews and PGI, particularly concentrating on the demand side of tourism (Çakar & Aykol, 2021). The examination of the setting started as fieldwork, which took place in Ukraine over a two-month period in September and October of 2019. This geographical proximity due to the fieldwork enabled my personal journeys into the CEZ, and this engagement with the tours and the overall fieldwork in Ukraine provided a useful overview of the types of tours currently available in the area. To meet the diverse set of visitors and their needs, there are a plethora of different tours available, ranging from a one-day tour to multiple-day private tours that can be fully customised to a client's needs. For visitors who are after an intense experience, it is possible to book online the so-called unofficial or "Stalker tour" into the exclusion zone. The latter presents itself as an alternative to the standardised "mass-market tours" (UrbexTour, 2022). My engagement with the tours and the overall fieldwork in Ukraine provided context knowledge which was further used when continuing the interviews with the actual interest group of this research, the visitors of the exclusion zone.

The interviewees were recruited from the Facebook platforms in September 2019 and January 2020. The establishment of these online communities is based on the idea of a collective commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster. In these groups, the members usually publish their photographs and share their experiences from their visits to the CEZ. For the purpose of this research, these platforms were valuable sources of visitor data in combination with their visual records of the CEZ. The group members were sent private messages where I introduced myself and the purpose of the study, after they had shared images on the forum. In most cases, the research participants had visited the exclusion zone a while before, ranging from a few months to a few weeks, thus enabling the participants to have some time to reflect upon their experiences. The social media platforms enabled communication with participants from 17 different countries of origin. Their ages vary between 21 and 59, and they come from different occupational classes in society. Men are more present, as the interview requests were more commonly accepted by men, although I pursued sending interview requests equally to men and women. Thirty-eight out

of 40 were conducted with the assistance of Skype. Two other respondent interviews were conducted in September and October 2019 in Kyiv, Ukraine.

A total of 40 ( $n = 40$ ) semi-structured in-depth interviews ranging in length from 30 to 90 min were conducted all in English. Personal interviews focused on the visitors' experiential benefits, particular tour choices, their interactions during the visit and their practises of photographing. Along with the in-depth interviews, the research design comprised the PGI method (Rose, 2016). Whereas the benefits of photo-elicitation have been widely acknowledged, it is less common for these photographs to be provided by the participants themselves (Balomenou & Garrod, 2016). Respondents were asked to send the author of this study three to four photographs that they took while visiting the CEZ and which describe the place and their experiences in that place most accurately. It was a logical supplement for the interview questionnaire as well, as the interview covered questions concerning the respondent's photographic practises in the CEZ. The participants' photographs therefore assisted in elaborating the individual engagement with the site and the place-specific narratives that could not have been expressed only linguistically. More importantly, it made visible the emerging storytelling forms of different visitor categories; group, private and unofficial, which were then processed into the themes of this study when the data was analysed.

Narrative analysis was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions to understand a specific phenomenon through a story (Saldaña, 2016). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim in English. I organised and coded the data using Atlas.ti software. In narrative analysis, the focus is on "the stories that people employ to account for events" (Bryman, 2016, p. 590). The narrative analysis was used as a means of unpicking the details within a given account of a participant (Grbich, 2013, p. 216), and the deeper meaning of the details in used language and expressions were further processed into themes and sub-themes. First, I identified each individual storyteller's position within the tour choice categories. Second, I linked each position to a distinct narrative in the transcript that it elicited. Third, I classified all the narratives to develop key themes; the particular tour of the participant, whether group, private or unofficial, comprises distinct patterns of storytelling and activities of photographing.

An iterative movement between the emergent understanding during the fieldwork and collected data resulted in an enriched understanding of visitors' experiences and the emergent patterns of storytelling were further triangulated in subsequent participant interviews. The remainder of the article is structured as follows: The results part presents the identified three themes of storytelling, which became visible with the methodology and theoretical framework of this study: By combining image and textual accounts gained through interviews, they will be presented as the basis for the subsequently discussed modes of storytelling; *the tale of mighty nature*, *the tale of apocalyptic afterness* and *the tale of the mythical zone* (Table 1).

## The tale of mighty nature

As sites of dissonance heritage are essentially multi-layered (Kužnik & Veble, 2018), the exclusion zone can be articulated through various storytelling forms. Visitors to the CEZ are one category of stakeholder among the tour providers and individuals who are impacted due to the accident that participate in the articulation and production of these narratives of place. The first storytelling format that this study identified was articulated by the respondents who visited the CEZ on a one-day group tour. The visitors follow the route itinerary that consists of the main sights in the CEZ, such as Duga-radar, Chernobyl town, the nuclear power plant and the abandoned city of Pripjat. The route is pre-determined, and the visitors are accompanied by the tour guide. A respondent (15) described her decision to visit the exclusion zone:

**Table 1** The profile of qualitative interviews *n* = 40

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>Type of tour*</i>	<i>Year of visit**</i>	<i>No. of visits</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Respondent 1	M	46	Sweden	Unofficial	2017	4	B
Respondent 2	M	22	UK	Unofficial	2019	1	CE
Respondent 3	M	46	Denmark	Private	2019	1	NS
Respondent 4	F	33	UK	Group	2016	1	P
Respondent 5	M	25	Belgium	Group	2019	1	B
Respondent 6	F	31	Ukraine	Unofficial	2016	5	P
Respondent 7	M	52	UK	Private	2018	2	P
Respondent 8	M	33	UK	Unofficial	2019	1	P
Respondent 9	M	31	Italy	Group	2019	1	P
Respondent 10	M	53	UK	Private	2016	3	CE
Respondent 11	M	29	Belgium	Unofficial	2019	1	CE
Respondent 12	M	34	Belgium	Private	2019	1	P
Respondent 13	M	28	Germany	Private	2019	1	P
Respondent 14	M	34	UK	Private	2019	1	CE
Respondent 15	F	43	UK	Group	2019	1	CE
Respondent 16	M	44	Austria	Private	2017	2	P
Respondent 17	M	34	France	Unofficial	2019	2	CE
Respondent 18	F	38	Poland	Private	2018	3	P
Respondent 19	M	45	France	Private	2014	7	P
Respondent 20	M	42	Australia	Group	2016	1	P
Respondent 21	M	44	Belgium	Private	2017	2	CE
Respondent 22	M	49	UK	Group	2016	2	CE
Respondent 23	M	59	USA	Private	2019	1	NS
Respondent 24	M	25	Norway	Private	2019	1	CE
Respondent 25	M	44	Germany	Group	2019	1	NS
Respondent 26	M	38	Germany	Private	2012	10	CE
Respondent 27	M	42	Belgium	Private	2019	1	CE
Respondent 28	M	32	Germany	Group	2019	1	P
Respondent 29	M	52	Australia	Private	2019	1	CE
Respondent 30	M	26	USA	Private	2019	1	S
Respondent 31	M	29	UK	Private	2013	4	CE
Respondent 32	M	37	Germany	Private	2019	1	NS
Respondent 33	M	43	Portugal	Unofficial	2019	1	NS
Respondent 34	F	38	Finland	Group	2019	1	P
Respondent 35	M	21	Sweden	Group	2019	1	S
Respondent 36	M	44	UK	Private	2019	1	CE
Respondent 37	F	30	Netherlands	Private	2019	1	P
Respondent 38	M	32	Finland	Group	2019	1	CE
Respondent 39	M	38	Czech	Group	2019	1	CE
Respondent 40	M	40	Poland	Private	2012	2	P

**Notes:** (\*) If a respondent had visited the exclusion zone with several type of tours, the category equals the one that respondent preferred. (\*\*) If a respondent had visited the exclusion zone more than once, the category equals the year of first visit. M = male, F = female, B = businessperson, CE = company employee, NS = national service, P = professional, S = student

**Source:** Author's data

That given its chance, nature will find the way, and I wanted to go and visit the abandoned town. And see the fact that nature has started to recuperate things and live really, it is the sort of going around a ghost town, that's the main reason.

As it comes clear, the abandoned town, which is slowly being covered over by nature was a sufficiently alluring travel destination for these respondents *per se*. The spontaneous decision to visit the exclusion zone and the activity of "going around the ghost town" describe incisively the group tour visitors' specific style of travel to the exclusion zone and the relationship with its landscapes they sought to experience.

Pripyat is already an impressive experience in terms of its scale; 50,000 inhabitants lived in the city before the 1986 evacuation. Its ruins simulate an alternative experience of the modern city.



The deserted city provides a contrast to organised life in contemporary societies by challenging controlled, staged and regulated urban space. The group tour reveals the size of the exclusion zone, the scale of the destruction and the many historical details of the area (Plate 1).

The movements of the visitors that took the group tour were mostly concentrated on the exterior surfaces in the exclusion zone. As a result, they recognised nature and its spatial outcomes in the area. The decaying silhouettes of the city and villages were “impressive” to look at, but they contained dangers and risks, and looking at them from the position of distant contemplation was a sufficient level of engagement for these respondents:

It looks so beautiful, but at the same time it is so different because it has to fight for its survival in this new mode of existence, and at the same time it is horrifying and beautiful because it can do that, the new order of earth. (Respondent 38)

The visit provides an opportunity for extraordinary sensory experiences: what does the infrastructure of a medium-sized city look and feel like when slowly disappearing under vegetation? Another respondent (5) described his experience:

I would say the city of Pripjat was indescribable. It is impressive to see such a young city abandoned. The town was not founded until 1970, so it was only 16 years old before the accident. It was impressive to see such a big city completely abandoned and to see how life continues even after such a terrible disaster. (Plate 2)

As these respondents’ accounts and photographs illustrate, the visitors who joined the group tour construed their storytelling by engaging with the exterior surfaces in the area. The landscapes and slowly disappearing silhouettes of infrastructure impacted them deeply due to the loss they signified, but nature’s inexhaustible ability to recover was a way for interviewees to discuss their experiences of the tour. Even after the most devastating nuclear accident, life continues in nature. The story is forwarded verbally and visually and is thus referred to as *the tale of mighty nature*.

### The tale of apocalyptic afterness

The second storytelling format could be identified from the accounts of the respondents that visited the exclusion zone on a private tour. A common denominator in the experience of visitors from this category was that they were less satisfied with common, regulated patterns of tourist activities in the area. A respondent (13) reasoned his choice with the following argument:

Like this really honest and personal and a good opportunity to see things that are not just touristic. I did not know exactly what you would do, but I knew it would be some kind of non-touristic, not-so-guided tour. That is what I expected and what happened.

**Plate 1** The Pripjat Ferris wheel



**Source:** Respondent 35

**Plate 2** Bumper cars in Pripyat amusement park



**Source:** Respondent 5

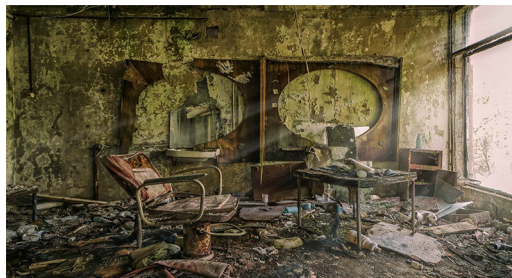
The respondents sought to avoid the more pre-planned tours, as those would place too many limitations on their on-site experience. In contrast to the top-down style of tours through the CEZ, respondents who chose the private tour sought equally to avoid the crowds of other visitors and the more touristic spots in the zone.

As [Dobraszczyk \(2010\)](#) has acknowledged, the ruins of Pripjat offer many opportunities for sensory pleasure, but equally, due to the sheer scale of the ruined environment, it can overwhelm the visitors. Whereas the previous category presented visitors who engaged with the narrative resources mostly through encounters with the landscape and exterior surfaces, a pronounced engagement among the private tour visitors was the artefacts and the insides of the buildings. Due to this type of visitor's choreography, respondents construed the story of the zone through its attributes of *absence*:

The place is abandoned for the most part, 50 000 people, so being there with a big group you miss the soul of this place. You miss being inside a building because the 10 of you can't go inside the buildings and just sit there and listen to the wood creak from the window outside. You miss that if you are in a big, noisy, loud group. (Respondent 14)

[Plate 3](#), an informant photograph taken in a Pripjat barber shop, exemplifies the type of multi-sensual engagement sought from private tours. The room shows explicit signs of devastation and absence brought by the natural decay. The plaster and paint on the walls are chipped, and the floor is covered by garbage and empty bottles. These impressions are warmly illuminated by the sunlight coming out of the window. The picture represents the special relationship the respondent sought to perceive with their surroundings. It could be

**Plate 3** Pripjat's barber shop



**Source:** Respondent 16



the sensitivity to the sounds of the zone, as the respondent described above, or the ability to sense the light or wind.

In addition to the atmospheric sensory engagement with the contradictions and ambiguities of the ruins, another way that the respondents reconstructed the narratives of the zone was through their observations of the artefacts that can be found inside of the buildings.

The narrative of the accident was reconstructed when the respondents could observe and photograph these reminiscences of the people who once inhabited the area. The tangibility of these artefacts was a crucial aspect in connecting the respondents to the CEZ and what led to their particular storytelling. These embodied experiences created moments of presence, which brought forth a powerful emotionality, as expressed by a respondent (27):

When you enter a place like Kopachi kindergarten, it's like nails to the ground. There were little beds in perfect shape, and the dolls and puppets were still lying there. They did not take anything; it was all just left over there. There were children that used to play with those dolls; it really goes into your head. (Plate 4)

The moments the respondent described as those presence moments, or moments of *being-there* (Chronis, 2012), were generative for a deeper understanding of the past, where narrative imagination is informed by the particularities of the environment. The ruins of Pripyat, and generally the ruins of the whole CEZ, are shaped by systematic looting rather than natural decay (Dobraszczyk, 2010, p. 381), and visitors themselves might rearrange the artefacts. It is still the emotive value of these artefacts that functioned as a channel to the residents that possessed them once and created the narrative engagement and the second type of storytelling: *the tale of apocalyptic afterness*.

### The tale of the mythical zone

A further approach into the storyscape of CEZ that this study identified was forwarded by those who visited the zone on an unofficial tour, also called the Stalker or Chernobyl Urbex Tour. The visitors in this category enter the exclusion zone by trespassing. In practice, this means that they place themselves outside the official safety regulations of the CEZ; they access the area with an unofficial guide; they explore the area outside the marked routes for visitors; and they enter the ruins and buildings of various kinds in the zone. This provided an interpretation frame that rejected the established regulations and gradual standardisation of the tours in the exclusion zone.

Placing their visitor subjectivities and bodies in the closest proximity to the storyscape, they partook in a choreography where the respondent allowed the landscape to go through them, as in intense bodily experience:

**Plate 4** Golden Key Kindergarten in Pripyat



Source: Respondent 27

And if you do it like unofficially, you push it kind of through yourself and it becomes part of you. Your own knowledge that you gathered, not from the others; you get your own. (Respondent 6)

What is informative in this excerpt is that it is not a mere extension of a visitor's knowledge but an embodied, physical understanding and reading of the storyscape and its events that respondents sought. The visitors in this category exhibited patterns of exploration that were characterised by their physical proximity to the CEZ, their special movements through the area at night and the need to remain undetected. Due to this type of tour, respondents experienced the landscapes of the zone through the mythical attributes they attached to them:

Time moves in a different rhythm; you mostly travel at night, so that alone... It turns the way you used to live upside down. It is a lot to describe really. (Respondent 33)

The stories of these respondents emphasised the transformative attributes of the zone as a place that has the capability to turn the ordering of the world upside down. Equally, the trip through the surrounding forest was not merely perceived as any forest; it was the forest of the exclusion zone, where there had not been any humans for over 30 years. It was left by its residents due to the nuclear accident, and the respondents were encountered by this untouched radioactive nature, which was striving and exciting due to the lack of the presence of the human population. It added a layer to the visitor's imagination:

When you are there, you really have this feeling like a box of Pandora in the room, because everything is empty over there and you have the feeling it could be there. You know it is not there, but your imagination starts to work there. (Respondent 11)

[Plate 5](#) exemplifies aptly these visitors' spatial practices. What is descriptive in the picture is not only the adventure it wishes to communicate; portraying the group of unofficial visitors under the starry night sky, but it challenges the other visitors' choreographies in the area and the commonly held understanding of the area as polluted and dangerous.

Although the story of *Stalker* as portrayed by Tarkovsky and the Strugatsky brothers was not familiar to all interviewees, their accounts underline this cultural reference familiar to and typical for the last years of the Soviet Block, given its atmosphere of impending destruction and mystical hopes for a better life.

The zone gave a sense of mystery and adventure in the lives of the respondents, and their storytelling emphasises the peculiarities of *the mythical zone*: mirroring, disturbing and strangely comforting, as an intense bodily experience ([Plate 6](#)).

## Conclusions

This study found three storytelling themes as the result of visitors' engagements with the CEZ: *the tale of mighty nature*, *the tale of apocalyptic afterness* and *the tale of the mythical*

**Plate 5** Unofficial visitors rest while hiking through the zone



Source: Respondent 11

**Source:** Respondent 6

zone, through which visitors focus their understanding of the site and their visitors' subjectivities. The approach outlined in this article can assist in better understanding the networks of co-constitution of different visitor profiles through storytelling in the context of urban tourism settings. The present study indicates that the tourists are not merely forwarding the narratives of the given site; they are telling stories about themselves as visitors in the exclusion zone.

By choosing a tour, making pictures of the site, contextualising them in relation to the place and other visitors' subjectivities, visitors of the exclusion zone are not merely reflecting the place. Instead, through digital photographs and tour choices, they enact the place's imaginative narratives; they actively bring it into public view; and participate in the making of Chernobyl's touristscape and its radioactive heritage (Hryhorczuk, 2019). The individually framed storytelling formats due to the tour choice and the opportunities for spatial exploration in the zone are defining contextual parameters that shape the storytelling in a distinctive way.

This study has contributed to the literature on urban tourism generally as it directs the focus towards the networks of co-constitution of touristscapes, where multiple imaginaries are used to compose a novel texture of place (Dürr *et al.*, 2021). Through the patterns of storytelling, visitors become involved in the composition of the social and cultural imaginaries of the tourist site. The tour choices supplemented with the visitors' photographs capture the narratives of the place, which integrate these experiential articulations into "ongoing social and collective memory practices" (Bareither, 2021, p. 588). These shifting frameworks of storytelling, which through experiencing, viewing and documenting are taking place, can be used in further studies on urban tourism to elaborate on the ways these discursive spaces may articulate meta-social commentaries that reproduce and challenge social norms and conventions (Edensor, 2000; Geertz, 1993). The multi-layered storiscapes are entangled with the constellations of visitors and comprise changing forms of representation.

### Further research and practical insights

This research provides detailed knowledge for further consideration of how such contested heritage is viewed and interpreted by visitors. This study answered the call to study the storytelling and narrative engagement of different consumption profiles (Lennon, 2018) from the point of view of visitors and deepened the analysis by combining visitors' verbal and visual storytelling. Further studies would benefit from the model outlined in this paper by investigating how visitors weave their experiences into stories and how the stories are placed within the wider context of a given tourist site. A closer look into intersectionality within the visitor categories, such as nationality, gender and age, would enrich the understanding of the consumption dynamics in the touristscape. The interconnectedness of different consumer accounts would be an interesting path to follow, as would the elaboration of their verbally and visually entangled discursive spaces.

For the tour providers, a detailed look into visitors' on-site interactions enriches knowledge of mutually constituted consumption experiences and enhances the picture of visitors' storytelling and the way the site is being enriched, coloured and contested by the visitors. This study elaborates on visitors' negotiation processes in search of autonomy and freedom and the resulting spatial implications of these engagements.

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