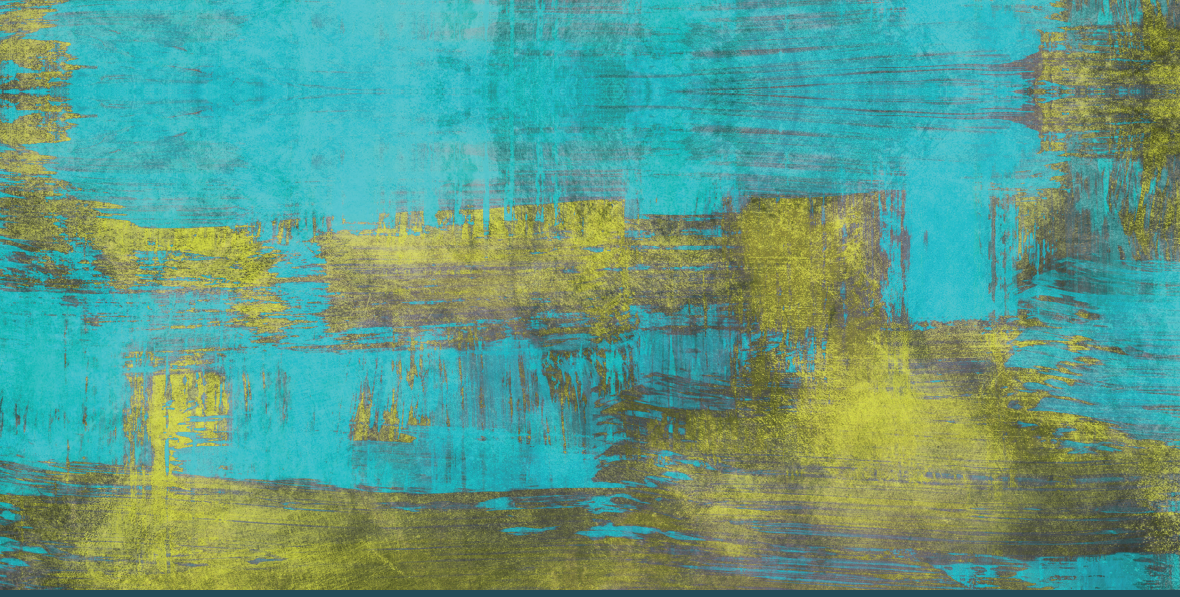

Heritage, Tourism, and Community

TOURISM AND HERITAGE IN THE CHORNOBYL EXCLUSION ZONE

Magdalena Banaszkiewicz

Tourism and Heritage in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone

Tourism and Heritage in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) uses an ethnographic lens to explore the dissonances associated with the commodification of Chornobyl's heritage.

The book considers the role of the guides as experience brokers, focusing on the synergy between tourists and guides in the performance of heritage interpretation. Banaszkiewicz proposes to perceive tour guides as important actors in the bottom-up construction of heritage discourse contributing to more inclusive and participatory approach to heritage management. Demonstrating that the CEZ has been going through a dynamic transformation into a mass tourism attraction, the book offers a critical reflection on heritagisation as a meaning-making process in which the resources of the past are interpreted, negotiated, and recognised as a valuable legacy. Applying the concepts of dissonant heritage to describe the heterogeneous character of the CEZ, the book broadens the interpretative scope of dark tourism which takes on a new dimension in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Tourism and Heritage in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone argues that post-disaster sites such as Chornobyl can teach us a great deal about the importance of preserving cultural and natural heritage for future generations. The book will be of interest to academics and students who are engaged in the study of heritage, tourism, memory, disasters and Eastern Europe.

Magdalena Banaszkiewicz, PhD, a cultural anthropologist, affiliated in the Institute of Intercultural Studies, Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Her field of research include heritage and tourism studies, in particular her interests focus on dissonant heritage, touristification process, and sustainability in the Central and Eastern Europe region.

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To my Parents

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Preface

The date, 26 April 2021, marked the 35th anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster. A few months later, during the transmission of the traditional Parade of Nations at the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, the South Korean MBC TV used additional visual material, easily associated with a given country, to accompany the athletes representing individual countries to help the viewers identify them. For the Italian team, they chose pizza, for the United Kingdom – a photograph of Queen Elizabeth II. When the Ukrainians entered the stadium, the Korean viewers were shown images of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant after the explosion. Ukrainians were dismayed and MBC apologised for the broadcast. Why were the ruins of the Chornobyl power plant not deemed proper representation of Ukrainian heritage, given that in late 2020 the Ukrainian Minister of Culture, Olexandr Tkachenko, had declared the start of preparations to enter part of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) (Figure 0.1) onto the UNESCO World Heritage list? What is the reason behind that dissonance concerning the heritage of the Chornobyl disaster?

The CEZ can be considered dissonant heritage for many reasons. Memory of the disaster considers the Zone a symbol of cultural trauma, while its exceptional space, stimulating the imagination of artists, is simultaneously construed as one of the region's greatest tourist attractions. Obviously, heritage does not represent a fixed, neutral, and universally accepted meaning; it is an ongoing process of meaning-making. And it is precisely the pluralisation of the discourse about the heritage of the Zone that is the subject of this book.

Chornobyl did not make a particularly dramatic entry into the memory of my generation, Polish children of the twilight/decline of the communist period. Perhaps it left a horrible aftertaste of Lugol's iodine that was administered prophylactically to children in the first days after the explosion. Though the older ones were more aware of what happened on that day. As Jacek Domaradzki, a colleague of mine, an anthropologist, and aficionado of the CEZ recalls, all the kids used to sing in the playgrounds: "Pijcie

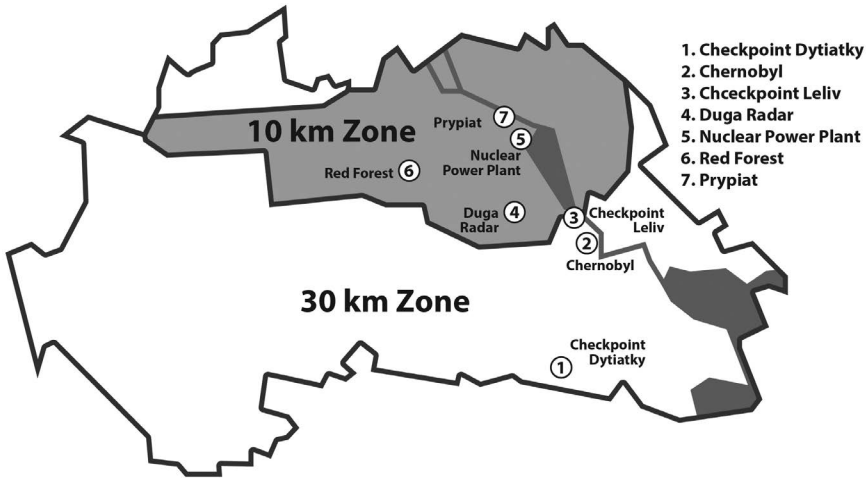

Figure 0.1 A schematic map of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone.

Source: Illustration by the author.

dzieci płyn Lugola/To radziecka Coca-Cola" and "Dylu, dylu na badylu,/ Pierdolnęło w Czarnobylu", which can roughly be translated into "Drink Lugol's iodine till you choke/That's the Soviet Coke", and "Twinkle, twinkle in Chernobyl/That fuck-up was global!"

In just over three decades, Chornobyl became a universal symbol of post-catastrophic heritage. Unlike in Bhopal, the after-effects of the disaster that struck in the nuclear power plant were felt not only locally. They ranged from the direct threat from the radioactive cloud that passed over Poland, the Baltic states, and as far as Sweden and Western Europe, to the fall of the Soviet Union, considered the most important geopolitical consequence of the explosion. Chornobyl became an ideal example of the threat that incessantly accompanies the society of risk described by Ulrich Beck in his monographic work published soon after the tragedy (Beck, 1986) and translated into English as *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* in 1992. Beck claims that the risk of causing serious injury to people and/or nature that ensues from modern developments in technology is an indelible feature of civilizational development. He believes that the future catastrophes can neither be predicted nor managed efficiently and you simply need to learn to cope with them, as proven by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This book was written during the lockdown which made us so keenly aware of how difficult it is to manage crises of a global nature. It is a paradox, but there are many parallels between these two seemingly very different crises, Chornobyl and Covid-19: a lack of credible information about the reasons and direct consequences of the explosion at Chornobyl

did not significantly differ from the lack of knowledge about the origin of the pandemic and the covering up of the original hotspots by the Chinese authorities in the first months of 2020; the decontamination campaign in the contaminated area was in many ways similar to the fight against the spreading of the infection; radiophobia found its counterpart in coronaphobia, not to mention the long-term economic, medical, political, social, and cultural consequences of the two crises that are hard to estimate.

The pandemic resulted in a deep depression in the global tourist market. Many heritage sites that until recently had been struggling to deal with the problem of overtourism made it their goal and purpose to exploit the opportunity of a forced reduction of tourist traffic to introduce new solutions favouring sustainable development.

Early in 2022, when it seemed that the pandemic crisis had been overcome and new opportunities were opening up for the tourist sector, one could have hardly guessed that the Chornobyl heritage would be confronted by developments that transformed the entire global order. These words are being written three months into the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although the manuscript had been submitted for publication before the war broke out, the editors and publisher agreed to include a remark on the current situation in the preface. Writing about the developments of recent weeks that have directly affected so many good friends is very hard. Adopting an academic, distanced attitude seems near impossible when your friends are fighting on the frontline, when the organisers of Chornobyl tourism and devotees of the Zone organise aid for the *samosely* who lack any contact with the outside world and for the residents of the villages located in the area of hostilities, and when a young woman guide from Kyiv stays there with her three young children to bear witness to life in the shelled city in real time.

For people who have long examined post-Soviet politics and culture, the Russian attack was an obvious consequence of a process that had been progressing over years. You do not need to be an expert to know that the current conflict is a continuation of the annexation of Crimea and, taking a broader perspective on the geopolitical situation, from the earlier developments in Georgia and Belarus as well as the more recent ones in Kazakhstan. All were steps on a path of doom to armed escalation that was buttressed by the persistent state policy of remembrance. Said to be a postscript to the Second World War, this latest Russian aggression also provides a new framework for interpreting the Chornobyl trauma. An update to the question about the material heritage of the CEZ came with its occupation by Russian soldiers, which brought a direct nuclear threat to the region. The military activity in the Zone also revealed the lack of awareness of radiation among rank-and-file soldiers, and the cynicism of their commanders. At the same time, the news from the Zone, which found extensive media resonance all around the world, again made the Zone (and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant) a symbol of the frailty and fragility of the global energy

security system. Russia's attack has not only changed geopolitical relations. It has also dynamized the process of decolonisation of Ukrainian culture, including language. Although this is a complex issue that requires fundamental reflection, I wish to contribute with this publication to a broader discussion of this problem in the field of critical heritage studies. As much as the English language might have adopted the spelling "Chernobyl" for both the toponym and the disaster that occurred in the city's power plant, the editors follow general principles while making decisions on the transliteration of proper names from alphabets other than Latin. For that reason, the above transliteration from Russian, used throughout the Soviet Union, is only retained in titles of books, official documents, and quotations that were originally written in that form. Consistent with the said principles, the book uses the spelling "Chornobyl", which renders the Ukrainian name Чорнобиль in the Latin alphabet.

As a struggle for the future fate of Ukraine, the war forces us to confront the past that keeps on hurting people as the trauma goes on; the wife of one of the elder guides refused to be evacuated, arguing that she could not survive being evicted from her home again. The trauma of war accrues on the difficult remembrance of Chornobyl, and the traumas of Holodomor and the Holocaust. How to reflect on the future while you are being shelled by artillery? One would be tempted to say that this future is built on the evidence of hospitality of the countries welcoming the refugees, and the new forms of the financial and moral support of Ukrainians such as the fictitious reservations on the Airbnb platform. A more meticulous study of the fortunes of tourism and heritage in the face of war would however require new research and publications. I very much want to believe that the CEZ will nonetheless one day become a true Zone of Revival.

Hoping for revival, I would like to dedicate this book to all the heroes and heroines bringing aid to the victims of this conflict.

Magdalena Banaszkiewicz
Krakow
June 2022

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In closing, I would like to thank my family: my parents and sister, sons, and friends, without whose support this book could not have been written.

Glossary

Agency (the)	State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management (SAUEZM)
CEZ	Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, or simply the Zone
Chornobyltsi	people resettled from Chornobyl, the term used to be derogatory (Ukrainian: Чорнобильці)
looters	people who steal property from within the Zone (Ukrainian: мародёры)
NPP	Nuclear Power Plant
samosely	people who have moved back into the Zone (most of them are old now, Ukrainian: самосели)
SE COTIS	Center for Organizational, Technical and Information Support of the Exclusion Zone Management managing tourist traffic in the Zone
stalker	a person who has made illegal visits to the Zone their habit (Ukrainian: сталкер), from Strugatsky's novel

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Introduction

Chornobyl disaster

On the night of 25–26 April 1986, during a power outage safety test in the No. 4 reactor, as the reactor power was being decreased, a sudden and uncontrolled increase of power occurred at 1:23 am after the control rods were pulled out, resulting in the shutdown of the reactor, an explosion of steam, and a fire in the turbine hall. Firefighting units immediately rushed to the scene, and the government in Moscow was informed about the accident at 4 am. Parallel to the effort to extinguish the fire, attempts were made throughout the Saturday to determine the impact of the disaster. A decision was made to start moving people to safety, and evacuation started on Sunday afternoon. In a matter of hours, 1200 buses and 200 heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) evacuated Pripyat, a city of 50,000 people. People were told only to take the most necessary belongings, as they would be returning to their homes in two or three days. Nobody expected they were leaving forever.

The following hours made people aware that the disaster exceeded the scale of initial guesstimates and calls were made for an extraordinary mobilisation of resources all around the USSR to contain the results of the accident. An increased level of radiation was recorded in Sweden and Poland on Monday. News of the disaster in Chornobyl was published in the Western media earlier than in the USSR, where it only received a mention in the TV news on Tuesday evening.

As the wind changed direction, the radioactive cloud primarily contaminated land inhabited by around 6 million people in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.

Evacuation continued over the following days and, apart from Pripyat, it was extended to the city of Chornobyl and 100 villages in Polesie lying in a 30-km radius from the epicentre. In total, 350,000 people were evacuated from the contaminated areas in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, of whom 163,000 came from Ukraine alone. On 2 May 1986, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) was established in an area with a radius of approximately 30 km

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from the power plant, covering the territory most severely contaminated by the radioactive fallout. It was divided into three sub-zones:

- the area immediately adjacent to Reactor 4
- an approximately 10 km radius from the reactor
- the remaining 30 km zone.

The campaign to put out the fire lasted continuously from the night of 25 April until 6 May. As the burning graphite could not be removed from the ground, helicopters were employed to drop tonnes of sand, clay, lead, and other materials. At the same time, attempts were made to pump water from the tanks situated below the reactor so as not to extend the contamination. Despite the elevated level of radiation in Kyiv, the annual International Labour Day parade was held on 1 May and attracted thousands of residents. From the very beginning, the Soviet Union endeavoured to downplay the aftermath of the disaster, conducting an efficient disinformation campaign targeted at both Soviet society and the international community. During his TV appearance on 14 May, instead of discussing the extent of the catastrophe Mikhail Gorbachev focused on the irresponsible actions of the Western states in unleashing an arms race and levelling accusations at the USSR's peaceful initiatives.

The remedial actions transformed into a toilsome campaign of neutralising the effects of the fire, and the subsequent decontamination lasted several months and involved an estimated 600,000 people – soldiers on national service and young men drafted from all over the Soviet republics. They were called the "liquidator army" as liquidation of the consequences of the nuclear disaster was indeed a battle: fighting an enemy that no one had ever come across before, and one that continued to kill even many years after the encounter. Beyond doubt, the situation could not have been contained so quickly if it were not for the barely imaginable determination and heroic sacrifice of these people. Most liquidators were not aware of the danger. Alcohol was believed to be a remedy for irradiation, and young men protected their genitals with thin lead strips. Newspapers hailed the heroism of the liquidators and the consecutive successes of the campaign, using the opportunity to praise the "Soviet friendship of nations". The liquidators were given different tasks, some of them cleared the area of debris, some measured radiation levels, while others provided support for the crews working directly "on the frontline". An exceptional concert was held in a little village near Pripyat on 8 September 1986: Alla Pugacheva, the Tina Turner of the USSR, performed for the liquidators.

Work on covering the ruins of Reactor No. 4 with a steel and concrete construction, known as "Shelter", continued from May to November. Its construction required around 400,000 m^3 of concrete and 7300 tonnes of steel. In just half a year, the Zone turned into a particular microcosm governed by its own rules and inaccessible to unauthorised people. In the

summer of 1986, the former residents of Pripyat were allowed to return to their homes just once to collect documents and their most valuable possessions. The resettled people tried to find their place in a new reality, which was not easy. They encountered social ostracism and could not find employment or organise their lives. Some of them, mostly the elderly, returned to the Zone despite the dangers. Around 1200 people known as *samosely* are believed to have lived in the Zone during the first years after the disaster.

In October, the authorities in Moscow decided to build a new city as the permanent residence for the staff of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant (NPP) and their families. The phoenix known as Slavutych, a name derived from the old Slavonic name of the Dnieper, was to rise from the ashes of Pripyat, some 60 km north-east of the Zone. "Russian has a neologism for such miracles. It is the verb 'to phoenix', meaning 'to build something from nothing'. The government went phoenixing" (Domaradzki, 2021). The authorities assumed that, despite the disaster, the work on the construction of units 5 and 6 of the NPP would continue, which meant that in the not-too-distant future the city would be populated with new staff. In the words of the academic Anatoly Alexandrov, "our nuclear powerplants pose no threat. You can build them even in Red Square. They are safer than samovars."

What is the true number of people who suffered due to the disaster? The report issued two decades after the disaster by the Chernobyl Forum quotes the number of 53 casualties caused directly by the disaster, of which most are due to acute radiation syndrome, and "up to 4,000 fatal cancers in addition to the approximately 100,000 fatal cancers to be expected due to other causes" among the 600,000 people receiving more significant exposure (IAEA, 2006, p. 16). At the same time, the psychological consequences of the disaster were emphasised: observable in many citizens of Ukraine and Belarus, they included the most extreme cases of post-traumatic stress disorder present among the people resettled from the contaminated area.

Immediately after the disaster, a Soviet scientist coined the notion of "radiophobia", or the fear of ionising radiation (radioactivity), whose consequences could be an unspecified, and moreover delayed, impact on health. Without a doubt, radiophobia was used to denigrate the opinions of the victims about the somatic consequences of the explosion for many years. Moreover, the "fear of the nuclear" became significant in the development of social attitudes that were sceptical of nuclear energy, and not only in Ukraine.

The estimation of the scale of the medical consequences of the explosion is a difficult task as it strongly depends on the methodology followed and the key constraint is access to credible data. Adriana Petryna (2013) suggests that the Chornobyl disaster contributed to the development of biological citizenship. Years of grappling with the aftermath of the disaster resulted in greater awareness of Ukrainian citizens who, with time, began to speak vociferously about their rights, claiming compensation for lost property and health. The Law of Ukraine (Про статус і соціальний захист громадян, які постраждали внаслідок Чорнобильської катастрофи, n.d.) consisted of a

system of benefits and reliefs for over 3 million Ukrainian residents, in this way establishing a special category in society: the Chornobyltsi.

The Post-Chornobyl Library

The reading list of publications attempting to explain and describe the Chornobyl disaster itself and its various consequences is long. One of the first works is a novel by Yuri Shcherbak MD, *Chernobyl. A Documentary Story*, originally published in Moscow in 1988 that was soon translated into English (Shcherbak, 1989) making its author a particular "Chernobyl celebrity". A famous historian and Sovietologist, David Marples, wrote in his diary about the popularity of the doctor who was one of the first to confront the subject of Chornobyl in the West, basing his research primarily on analysis of the press (1988a, 1988b). Marples admitted that he only visited Kyiv and Chornobyl in 1989 when there was an increasing openness around the issue of Chornobyl (Marples, 2020). Russian censorship is one of the reasons why the burden of insinuations and false information spread deliberately by the authorities and the lack of knowledge among the authors lay heavily on the publications from the late 1980s and early 1990s. A good example is *The Chernobyl Notebook* by Grigoriy Medvedev published in Moscow and later translated into English (under the title The Truth about Chornobyl). Even though it contains plenty of inconsistencies, the book, written partially in a first-person narrative, became one of the most important sources of knowledge on the disaster and has shaped its representations to this day. (It would be hard not to notice its influence on the *Chernobyl* series.) Many publications in Russian and Ukrainian were only translated into English much later. For example, the reports of Alla Yaroshinskaya (2017), a Russian social activist and journalist were published in Moscow in 1992 but were not published in the West until the 25th anniversary of the explosion in the power plant.

It goes without saying that the breakthrough came with the breakup of the Soviet Union, which marked the end of political censorship, and also the gradual opening of archives that had previously been inaccessible. This is another criterion that should be considered when discussing the Chornobyl bibliography. With successive years pushing the disaster back into distant history and access to source materials that were top-secret in the early years continued to increase. Kate Brown, author of the *Manual for Survival* (Brown, 2020) – one of the most thought-provoking publications in recent years – admitted in an interview that she gives most credence to archive materials she found in the countryside, as "It was like private conversations between Soviet officials" (Brown & Róg, 2019).

The archive materials made accessible after 2015 were also a resource for Serhii Plokhy, a famous Ukrainian historian and lecturer at Harvard University, whose book *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* (Plokhy, 2020) coincided with the premiere of the *Chernobyl* series, which

certainly added to its popularity. The case of the fictional account of the disaster in *Midnight in Chernobyl. The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* written by Adam Higginbotham (2019) is similar and it made it onto the prestigious Ten Best Books list of *The New York Times* in 2019. It is a perfect introduction for people who are confronting the subject of Chornobyl for the first time, even though experts on the subject are critical about the value of that work and point to numerous inconsistencies resulting from the lack of a deeper query (especially on technical issues) and the resorting to dated sources of information which, in the context of latest research, misrepresent the image of the disaster.

Another book "introducing" readers to the subject of Chornobyl (as yet only published in Russian) is "Truth of Chernobyl" by Vladimir Gubarev (Губарев, 2019), a recognised scientific journalist and one of the first correspondents who arrived at the site of the disaster. The work is highly critical towards the authorities of the Soviet Union and the author writes simply: "The Chernobyl disaster is the apotheosis, the peak of all the improper management of the economy that continued in our country for many decades" (Губарев, 2019, p. 30). The large, beautifully illustrated book is a proof that the issues related to Chornobyl also raise interest among Russian-speaking readers and, several decades after the disaster, the "truth of Chernobyl" is different to what was originally promoted on either side of the Iron Curtain.

In this context, the continuing process of declassification of the archives is important. A collection of documents concerning the Chornobyl disaster covering 1986–91 and entitled "Files of the Chernobyl KGB" (Бажан et al., 2019) was published in Ukraine in 2019. It speaks of life after the catastrophe: the general mood, everyday life, and actions to reduce the impact of the disaster. This source material will certainly contribute to the complementation of the social and cultural background of the first years following the disaster. Materials from the archives are also being translated into English, for example, "Top Secret Chernobyl: The Nuclear Disaster Through the Eyes of the Soviet Politburo, KGB, and US Intelligence" – a two-volume collection of source materials that includes Politburo notes, diaries, and minutes that have never been translated into English before. (*Top Secret Chernobyl: The Nuclear Disaster through the Eyes of the Soviet Politburo, KGB, and U.S. Intelligence*, Vol. 1, 2019.)

Worth mentioning among the publications that also attracted major interest among non-academic readers is the monographic work that Adriana Petryna (2013) devoted to the medical aftermath of the disaster and its role in the development of social and political challenges of post-Soviet Ukraine. There is also significant continued interest in the book by Mary Mycio (2007), which calls the Zone "Europe's largest wildlife sanctuary". It is particularly significant in the context of discussion of the Chornobyl anthropocene. In recent years, the monographic work Paweł Sekuła devoted to the Chornobyl liquidators has also been translated into English. Sekuła's work

(2020) is an exceptional tale of fighting the impact of the disaster presented from the perspective of eyewitnesses.

The subtitle of this chapter borrows from Tamara Hundorova, a Ukrainian literature expert who proposes the category of "Chernobyl discourse" (Hundorova, 2019) to denote a conglomerate of texts, whether official or not: news, gossip, testimonies of witnesses, documents, and artistic works on Chornobyl. As she noted:

> One thing is undeniable in modern culture, nuclear accidents such as Chornobyl or Fukushima turn from historical events into cultural (artistic) constructions and become not only real but also virtual phenomena. Chornobyl is a symbol which represents manmade catastrophe, the destruction of culture, a threat to human life, an exclusion zone, an ecological crisis, etc. It has entered into the vocabulary of modern culture as a synonym of catastrophe.
>
> *(Hundorova, 2019, p. 31)*

The Chornobyl Exclusion Zone

The CEZ was delimited in 1986. In 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, on the power of the document entitled "On the Legal Status of the Territory Exposed to the Radioactive Contamination resulting from the ChNPP Accident", the territory of the Zone was entrusted to the Administration of the Exclusion Zone and the Zone of Absolute (mandatory) Resettlement within the Ministry of Emergencies of Ukraine. Twenty years later, in the wake of a presidential decree, the State Agency of Ukraine on the Exclusion Zone Management (SAUEZM, Положення про Державне агентство України з управління зоною відчуження, 2014) succeeded the previous administrative structure.

The reason for the incorporation of SAUEZM, which this book simply calls "the Agency", was (and is) the implementation of the state policy concerning the management of the Zone that includes decommissioning of the Chornobyl NPP, transformation and continued combatting of the consequences of the disaster, and the management of the radioactive waste. In 2012–16, the most important project conducted in the Zone was the construction of the New Safe Confinement, whose construction was entrusted to the international Novarka consortium. The new structure covering the damaged No. 4 reactor (165 m long and 110 m high) is the largest movable structure in the world and weighs 36,000 tonnes in total. In July 2019, on the handover of the new "sarcophagus" to the management of Chornobyl NPP, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed the decree "On certain issues of the development of territories affected by radioactive contamination as a result of the Chornobyl disaster" (Про деякі питання розвитку територій, що зазнали радіоактивного забруднення внаслідок Чорнобильської катастрофи, 2019). In his speech, the President argued that

the image of the Zone must change as this will impact the brand of the country:

> The Decree will begin the transformation of the Exclusion Zone into one of the growth points of a new Ukraine. First of all, we will create a 'green corridor' for tourists and remove preconditions for corruption (…) We must give this territory of Ukraine a new life. Until now, Chernobyl was a negative part of Ukraine's brand. It is time to change it. Chernobyl is a unique place on the planet, where nature revives after a global man-made disaster, where there is a real 'ghost town'. We have to show this place to the world: scientists, ecologists, historians, tourists.
>
> *(Head of State signed a decree on the development of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, 2019)*

Zelensky's decree resulted from the spectacular increase in tourism in the CEZ and accounted not only for the economic potential arising from the streamlining of the provision of tourist services, but also from the need to ensure appropriate conditions for the visitors, which, during all those years, must have lingered at the very bottom of the Agency's "to-do" list. Moreover, the decree provided an important declaration to fight corruption and introduce more efficient controls over the activities of the Agency, also resulting in more efficient management of the Chornobyl heritage.

Anthropology of tourism

It is necessary to begin with a short justification of the anthropological perspective chosen for this book, which provides the reference frame for the research project devoted to tourism and the heritage of the CEZ. A set of parallels can be distinguished between the development of a theoretical reflection on the phenomena of travelling and heritage, which results from the general evolution of scientific perspectives in humanities and social sciences that marks "a shift from a synchronic to a diachronic perspective, involving a change of emphasis from permanence to flux, from being to doing, from structure to agency, from sedimented social patterns to the process of their emergence, and from a focus on the more stable fixtures of social life to the mobilities linking them" (Cohen & Cohen, 2012, p. 2180). The synergy of research in heritage studies and tourism studies turns out to be particularly valuable: the approach to heritage visitors also changed on the wave of the performative turn within tourism studies (Bærenholdt & Haldrup, 2004; Edensor, 2001; Haldrup & Larsen, 2015), going along with the notion that heritage is a cultural process focused on negotiating, constructing, and reconstructing cultural memories, values, and meanings (Smith, 2006). The literature of the subject still misses a reflection on how heritage is constituted under the impact of tourist traffic. It is thanks to the interest of tourists from all over the world that the Chornobyl heritage

is revived, reinterpreted, and produced in reference to the new context, namely the tourist function. In the simplest terms, it is an example of heritage "co-produced" by the visitors.

The question about heritage always contains the question about value, as what distinguishes heritage from history is the positive valuation of the resources of the past (Lowenthal, 1998). Only certain elements of the past transform into heritage, and the reasons for that always lie within the present needs. Analysing the process of heritagisation as the process of "producing heritage" one therefore needs to account for the entities that participate in the process and the reasons for which they assign some and not any other values to the resources of the past. One needs to remember that the value of heritage can be measured both symbolically (e.g., as an object of national pride), and economically (as a product), which is why tourism is one of the most important "heritage producing machines" (Gravari-Barbas, 2018). Heritagisation often goes hand-in-hand with touristification, that is, the process in which tourist values turn into tourist commodities and are therefore are sold and experienced by the consumers – tourists, assuming that heritage is present as a product, and that stakeholders other than the inheritors come to the scene in the persons of producers – the agents who fund, design, and make heritage projects, and consumers – the ones who buy the product. On the one hand, tourism can promote the rehabilitation of historical areas and thereby improve the lives of the residents by raising their incomes and improving job opportunities, but on the other, the recipients of heritage producers are not inheritors but consumers, for which reason the inheritors are often ignored or sidelined by the producers. This is precisely one of the dimensions of the dissonances of the heritage of the CEZ, which is an inheritance without inheritors, whose legal heirs are still barely involved in the process of negotiating, shaping, and developing the heritage.

Most fascinating in the CEZ is the process of transformation continuing on both planes of interpretation and physical transformation. On the symbolic level, a gradual process of de-traumatisation of the Chornobyl disaster is observed. In the context of the current debates, it is not as much a symbol of the failure of the human genius that failed to cope with nuclear energy, but a symbol of the re-forging of a defeat into a victory in the fight for more environmentally safe forms of energy generation. At the level of the physical transformation, the Zone becomes an attraction of heritage tourism, whose cultural landscape not only refers us to the past and gives emotions of extreme experiences but also holds the potential to educate on the most pressing problems of our time. Thus, the CEZ is a case study providing an example for phenomena universally present in various parts of the world. As Edward Bruner (2015, p. 12) emphasised:

> To view tourism solely within a frame of interaction among the various actors is too narrow. A site is not fully described from the actors' perspective but must be seen in its larger political and economic context as mediating between the global and the local.

In other words, looking at tourism (and heritage) as a complex social and cultural phenomenon requires an anthropological approach, which assumes that the tourist system reflects the cultural processes and phenomena taking place in individual communities and between them. Nelson Graburn and Naomi Leite suggest that anthropology is treated in the categories of "intervention" (Leite & Graburn, 2009), while Amanda Stronza (2001) distinguishes two fundamental problems in the anthropology of tourism around which the studies oscillate. The first concerns the origin of the tourist traffic and focuses on the tourists, which is why one of the questions most frequently discussed concerns the tourist experience and authenticity. The other area is focused on the consequences of the tourist traffic and the hosting population in the context of cultural change. Presentation of the process of tourist development in the CEZ not only concentrates on the cultural change taking place in the realm of interpretation of the heritage of the disaster, but it also opens a horizon of more general questions about transformations of heritage tourism in recent years, for example under the influence of the process of virtualisation of the tourist experience and the digitalisation of heritage.

The issues of heritagisation of the CEZ also cover the research into transformations of the narrative on a difficult past, which is a perfect example of how anthropology increasingly often tackles questions typical of memory studies. It was not the purpose of the research to study the memory of Chornobyl as such, although the question could not have been excluded from the description and explanation of the dissonances connected to the heritage of the Zone, as the memory of the disaster keeps evolving, drawing ever more from the message of popular culture building prosthetic memory and becoming "reworked" through Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006).

As far as its research tools are concerned, the case study devoted to the development of tourism and heritage of the CEZ also represents the anthropological approach, as it makes use of ethnographic methods and tools aimed at a holistic, interpretive, and reflexive study of the phenomenon (Roberts & Andrews, 2013). Ethnographic research in the field (participant observation, in-depth interviews) is combined with other methods that allow for translation of data and make it possible to describe and understand the phenomena of a dynamically transforming tourist environment (desk research).

The research project that has resulted in this book covered the last five years, that is, from my first entry into the Zone which took place on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the disaster in April 2016. That visit gave rise to a research project that was formalised in 2017 thanks to a grant received from the National Science Centre, a state institution supporting the development of research conducted by Polish academics. That initiated a chain of a dozen visits to the Zone, most of them between May 2018 and February 2019. In the following years, the plan to continue studies in the actual space of the Zone had to be modified twice. First when I learnt that I was expecting my third child, which made it impossible for me to stay in the Zone as pregnancy and breastfeeding are fundamental conditions for excluding women from the

Zone legally. The second time was due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which significantly limited general mobility options but resulted in the development of new tourist products, such as virtual tours of the Zone. Fieldwork is always a challenge for researchers of tourist phenomena that, by their very definition, are connected to mobility (Kaaristo, 2018).

I attempted to note in the text where reduced mobility in recent months has meant that the study does not account for some variables that emerged after the completion of field research but prior to the completion of the book (e.g., the study of the guides' narratives does not account for *Chernobyl* series that premiered in mid-2019).

The research lies within the interpretative paradigm that recognises that knowledge is created in a dialectic process between informants and researchers. As an anthropologist, I am fully aware that my personal social and cultural construction influences the theoretical lens, methodological dilemmas, and data interpretations. Throughout the research project, I kept a diary, in which I recorded diverse observations and comments, trying to grasp the process of knowledge acquisition. The opportunity to discuss the assumptions and initial interpretation of the results of the research with other researchers on more or less formal occasions was also not insignificant.

This study adopted a qualitative and descriptive case study approach as the most appropriate method given its exploratory nature. The findings of this research are derived from two key research methods: ethnographic fieldwork and desk research. The first part of the project was fieldwork in Ukraine. Fieldwork is what Noel Salazar described as the "art of the possible" (Salazar, 2010, p. xix), which very accurately portrays the development of this project. The basic research material comes from participant observation during 12 trips to the Zone organised by various entities, and in-depth interviews with tour guides leading them. I took part in the tours incognito so as not to modify the guides' narratives as, if they knew about the project, they might have behaved less naturally. (However, consent for conducting the project had been obtained from managers of three tour operators, Chornobyl Tour, ChernobylWel.Com,[1] and Solo East.) The visits to the location were organised in different seasons to allow comparison between visits in the high (summer) and low (November–February) seasons. The variables included the form of the trip (group/individual visits) and types of guides (working for major operators, freelancers, and power plant staff). The time spent on guided group tours of the CEZ was helpful for both experiencing the site and for discussing it with other visitors and the guides. After each trip, the guide leading it was asked for an interview. From May 2018 to February 2019, ten in-depth ethnographic interviews, each lasting from 2 to 2.5 hours, were conducted with the guides in English, Russian, Russian with elements of Ukrainian, and English with elements of Russian. Three additional interviews were conducted with tour operators to complement the knowledge of the history and specificity of Chornobyl tourism. The script for interviewing the guides was designed before embarking on fieldwork; however, the questionnaire was updated with the knowledge obtained from

the observation. In the most general terms, it consisted of three categories of questions: (1) questions about the guiding experience and work in the Zone (history of employment, training, special features of the guided groups, cooperation with other representatives of the sector, and the work of the guide in the context of private life), (2) questions about the knowledge on the Chornobyl disaster and its aftermath (from before they started to work in the Zone, and obtained as part of the guide training), (3) questions about the creation of the narrative while guiding, covering the strategies, factors taken into account, and the goals of guiding. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed, and as, at the time of the study, the respondents were active guides working in the Zone and not public figures, their names and details were anonymised. The content was coded and analysed in reference to the materials obtained from observation without the use of professional software for qualitative analysis.

The field of research required a multisite approach that offered the potential for expanding field studies with the data that could not be collected during trips and interviews. The social and cultural meaning of heritage-making practices also accounts for off-side practices related to the shaping of the tourist imagination and post-visiting activity, as well as the creation of the image of a location, and the professional and non-professional activity of the stakeholders participating in the process of assigning meaning to heritage. The analysis of the material obtained during fieldwork was complemented with extended desk research primarily on the official documents concerning the Zone, media reports, and social media (e.g., the activity of the guides on Facebook). To complement/update information, emails were exchanged with the interviewees and representatives of the companies covered by the research. An invaluable source of information were conversations and discussions with two experts on Chornobyl – Tomasz Róg, author of the "Licznik Geigera" blog, and Jacek Domaradzki, anthropologist and traveller. The original research questions focused on the biographic dimension, and a study of the problems of dissonances and heritage resulted in a broader examination of the question of the guides interpreting heritage. For it is not only the memory of the disaster resulting from the biographic experience that influences the narrative but also the cultural representations of the Chornobyl disaster, and the functions that the guide must play in the areas of leadership and mediation.

Ultimately, the research project demonstrated that the strategies of interpreting heritage by the guides are based on a handful of universal principles that let the visitors better understand the essence of the dissonances of the Chornobyl heritage.

Structure of the book

The structure of the book follows the general-to-detail rule that the author believes to be helpful in understanding the complex nature of the challenges related to the development of tourism at a dissonant heritage site and the ensuing selection of interpretation strategies.

The first chapter introduces the questions of dissonant heritage. Following the outline of the context offered by the contemporary critical heritage studies, it tries to define dissonant heritage and operationalise the notion for the specific case of the CEZ. I believe that the dissonances of the Zone's heritage primarily refer to construing it through the lens of different categories, which creates larger or smaller interpretative tensions. Thus, the CEZ may be considered in the dimension of post-communist heritage, heritage without heirs, industrial heritage, heritage of trauma, and post-apocalyptic heritage. An important factor determining the perception of the Zone is cultural memory, to which the last section of the chapter is devoted.

The second chapter shows the Chornobyl disaster and the CEZ as heritage being "worked through" in the realm of culture. Mediated representations are especially important for researchers of tourism as they not only shape tourism imaginaries but also stimulate heritage meaning-making as such. Cultural texts briefly defined in the second chapter shape the imagination of those arriving in the Zone and those working in it; they provide a significant point of reference for the creation of the narrative and therefore for the interpretation of heritage.

The third chapter investigates the history of development of tourism in the CEZ by inscribing the process into the framework of the Tourism Area Life Cycle concept. The second part of the chapter points to the main axes in the studies of Chornobyl tourism in the current literature on the subject, primarily in the context of the use of the notion of "dark tourism" in reference to Chornobyl tourism and understanding its characteristics.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the question of interpretation of heritage by tour guides. Presentation of the current state of research on the role and significance of tour guides paves the way to the discussion on their functions as heritage interpreters. The next part of the chapter provides a closer insight into the heterogenic quality of the group of Chornobyl guides followed by a discussion of the interpretation strategies they use at work. The strategies adopted determine the nature of the tourist experience and, in various aspects, refer to the dissonance connected to the perception of the Zone as a heritage site.

The fifth chapter presents the universal motives in the interpretation of the Chornobyl heritage and reflects on the role of biographical frame in creating the narration of the tour guides. Examining whether tourism is a tool for coping with the dissonances of heritage or, rather, another factor leading to their intensification, it goes on to focus on the problem of commercialisation of the Zone's heritage and the associated risks and points to the opportunities stemming from the participatory and integrated approach to dissonant heritage.

Note

1. In 2021, ChernobylWel.com was renamed Chernobyl X, yet as the research and the writing of this book predates the change, the old name is used throughout.

1 The origin of dissonances

Dissonant heritage in the context of critical heritage studies

With its characteristic fuzzy semantic boundaries, heritage is a generally accepted and applied manner of using the past that undergoes assessment in the context of projections of the future.

Resources of the past may produce a sense of satisfaction, pleasure, and belonging, or of discomfort, distaste, and/or alienation. It is the positive attitude to heritage that makes it "yours" and, for that reason, valuable. A positive emotional tie (which goes beyond artistic or historical value) may bring objects, artefacts, and intangible heritage into the realm of resources that are considered heritage, while a negative link or an utter lack of it – exclude. This is important especially in reference to dissonant heritage, which is a particular burden that a community would rather not be identified with but, feeling such a tie, does carry. Simply speaking, not every monument belongs to heritage and not every element of heritage must be a monument, as only what a community considers to be alive, only what inspires emotions, is its heritage (Gaweł, 2016).

Heritage always belongs to someone, which means that someone feels a tie to the resources of the past, while another someone else does not. As ensconced in the Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention, 2005), "cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past that people identify, independently of ownership." Therefore, one can be a member of a heritage community simply by valuing a cultural heritage or wishing to pass it on. There are various stakeholders involved in the assessment, protection, and development of heritage, each cherishing their own interests connected to it. They may be public (states and institutions conducting their activity at the state, interstate, and suprastate levels), private (enterprises that have their missions connected to heritage), and civil (independent non-governmental and non-profit organisations) players. Heritage is not only a type of resource but also a process. Heritage is a series of interpretations of the past constructed by a community, whose purpose is to express the inheritors' identity. A community may recognise something as its heritage, but a huge role is played here by the variable of time: successive generations perceive the past differently and define their heritage differently.

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Heritage is a living past, made present in community and cultural practices. This means that the community serves the heritage (cherishing it and passing it on to successive generations) but it is also the heritage that serves the community (awards identity and helps the development of the community). The relationship between the community and the heritage does not, therefore, boil down solely to its protection but also extends to its development, which means the development of the specific community. Heritage can present multiple values, the most important of these are cultural, educational, economic, aesthetic, and leisure values. Considering heritage through economics (the commercialisation of heritage) is therefore not tantamount to harming it on the condition that heritage management accounts for a variety of sustainable (economic, social, and environmental) development goals.

Critical heritage studies that rose on the wave of criticism aimed at the approach to heritage that was dominated by Western experts from such disciplines as archaeology, history, history of art, and architecture perceive heritage in relation to the relationships of power. As Laurajane Smith (2006) points out, the Authorized Heritage Discourse sanctioned by experts has, for decades, served a variety of "-isms" such as nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, cultural elitism, and class and ethnic exclusivism. A reflection on the very notion of heritage and what is done with it (i.e., heritage as object and action, product, and process) became the starting point for expanding research on how heritage is used to "construct, reconstruct and negotiate a range of identities, and social and cultural values and meanings in the present" (Smith, 2006, p. 3).

As an anthropologist, I find the approach to heritage that construes it as a lens offering a better understanding of cultural phenomena most interesting, as heritage is used all around the world for political and commercial purposes, to shape the forms in which people perceive themselves and the ways they distinguish themselves against others, as heritage is "complex, mobile, messy, creative, affective, emotional, personal and performative" in nature (Waterton & Watson, 2015, p. 24).

Dissonance is a universal feature of heritage. There are areas of heritage that, at a specific point in history and/or in specific social and cultural contexts, trigger exceptional tensions, as they put the question of the identity of the inheritors and their relation towards the future at the centre of the debate. Heritage dissonances are especially strongly manifested in the space of tourism, which treats heritage as synonymous to the notion of "a tourist attraction". What some find the object of iconoclasm, others consider a motivation to visit.

Dissonant heritage is a heritage that is troublesome and that causes problems, whether due to the inherent dissonance that results from belonging to a specific group or for assorted disputes about its significance. These conflicts are linked to the current and past social and political tensions, to traumatic events, and to the need for coming to terms with the memory of a difficult past; finally, to a heritage that is ambivalent in aesthetic, historical, or other valuations. Thus, the understanding of the reasons that

lie at the foundation of the dissonance, the essence of disharmony, is not only a theoretical value but can also bring a practical solution to the problems stymying the development of local communities. It also has a universal dimension that is emphasised in the Faro Convention. Point 7 of the Convention requires that through the actions of the appropriate public authorities, its signatories create proper conditions for starting conciliatory processes, so that cases where various communities hold contrary opinions about the same cultural heritage can be honestly and justly solved. The Faro Convention is the first to emphasise so strongly the differences in interpreting heritage, and accordingly, also the consequences resulting from the conflict of values between various communities.

The metaphor of dissonance used by Tundbridge and Ashworth (1997) in the context of heritage was previously found in two realms: acoustic dissonance used in the theory of music, and cognitive dissonance that is known in psychology.

An acoustic dissonance is an interval that sounds inharmonious to the human ear (Habela, 2018). The evolution of the original meaning of the term "dissonance", as part of musical theory, proves that harmony was differently interpreted in different periods. As much as harmonious comments and responses in medieval European music only included the perfect octave and the perfect fifth, with time the consonances that had previously been considered not harmonious were struck off the list of dissonances. Moving certain formal solutions from the class of "improper" to "desirable" was closely linked to the search for new sounds and transformations of musical preferences, from an entirely disharmonious consonance – therefore avoided in line with the principles of the art of music – to one that became a preferred interval in dodecaphonic music. This brief example demonstrates that the lack of consonance has always been culturally conditioned and that it has referred to a certain norm binding in a given period. Music was written according to specific rules that considered some, but not other, intervals as "melodious". The exclusion and the subsequent gradual inclusion of intervals was a process of negotiating the aesthetic value assigned to some, and not other, sounds. It also goes without saying that this consequently creates a certain canon of works that meet the principle of harmony, in this way pointing to the model for imitation. This canon develops through assessment by theoreticians and practitioners, as well as the audience. We can imagine a case in which an artist transgresses the binding principles of harmony, which results in the criticism by experts (other artists familiar with the theory) but wins recognition among the audience. In the case of heritage, dissonance is also a process and is linked to the negotiation of values (not only aesthetic) of those resources of the past that are assessed by a given group. Such assessment is conducted in reference to an extant canon and involves various stakeholders. Therefore, it is very easy to find a parallel between dissonance in the theory of music and critical studies of heritage that emphasise the processual nature, performativeness, and role

of the power of authorities in the development of the canon with reference to the values assigned to the features of the resources.

Cognitive dissonance was introduced to the glossary of social psychology by Leon Festinger, who developed his concept while analysing information about an earthquake in India in 1934. Gossip about the forthcoming government aid spread among the people at the epicentre who were badly affected. In turn, the rumour that spread in the surrounding villages, which only felt light tremors and were not directly affected by the damage, concerned successive waves of tremors. Festinger realised that the gossip spreading in the villages in the vicinity could be the justification of fear, which led him to the conclusion that people can adjust their perception of reality to the way they feel at a given moment or to what they do. This dissonance was defined as a consequence of maintaining two or more mutually incompatible cognitive elements including convictions, thoughts, feelings, and knowledge. Dissonance is the "unpleasant" sensation that sets in when there is a divergence between attitudes and values on the one hand, and behaviours on the other. It is connected to the assessment of the situation and of yourself in the context of a given action (people with high self-esteem feel dissonance more often and more strongly in the context of behaviours they consider negative). This "misaligned cognition" takes place at the psychological, and not necessarily logical, level and is, in essence, the existence of cognitive statements or elements concerning a specific issue that result in contradictory behaviours or assessments. The case of smokers is often used to explain the theory of cognitive dissonance. Smokers who learn about new studies proving the harmfulness of smoking may reject information about a study or stop smoking. They may also justify their choices with some other information that will balance the perception of the self and the world: for example, by claiming that they play sport which offsets the harmful impact of smoking.

In the simplest terms, dissonance forces you to change one of the contradictory elements to reduce the tension caused by the conflict: you can change a behaviour or justify it in a new way (Wojciszke, 2009). How does this concept expand the scope of understanding of heritage? First, the fact that people construe the same developments in various manners, and that their opinion also results from their self-assessment. Second, the contradictory information that is inconsistent with our positive vision of ourselves is often rejected or explained through other factors. As history has shown, and as has been proven by scientific experiments, this mechanism is especially important in the abuser–victim relationship: the whitewashing of guilt by laying the burden on others, accusing the victim of aiding and abetting, and searching for mitigating circumstances for behaviours are all known coping strategies in the case of actions inconsistent with the moral principles that have been violated. At the level of individuals and groups, the assessment of past events represented by heritage can also be connected to cognitive dissonance and inconsistency in the current perception of yourself and the world. When referred to heritage, cognitive dissonance again shows the relative quality of appraisal depending on the subjects, but what is the

key here is the aspect of self-definition, the assessment of yourself both at the individual and group levels. The key, therefore, is the identity that must come to terms with the tension in the context of the experienced reality.

In their breakthrough work "Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict", Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) state that a resource of the past that gains the status of heritage immediately and inevitably carries the risk of dissonance resulting from various, often opposing, interpretations and evaluations by people with different identities. This results from the fact that "all heritage is someone's heritage and therefore logically not someone else's: the original meaning of an *inheritance* implies the existence of disinheritance and by extension any creation of heritage from the past disinherits someone completely or partially, actively or potentially" (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996, p. 21). Dissonance reveals itself when the dominant narrative does not match interpretation/interpretations of different interest groups, when it omits aspects that they consider important or highlights those which should not be so prominent, but also heritage is subject to commercialisation, which transforms it into a product for sale.

A systematic review of dissonant/contested heritage was published in mid-2020 by Liu et al. (2020), who searched four electronic databases and finally selected 102 journal articles discussing the question, as emerged mostly in the area of heritage (30 articles from three journals) and tourism studies (30 articles in 16 journals), of which no fewer than 56 texts concerned heritage tourism. Analysis of these texts demonstrated that the semantic field of "contested heritage" is broader, while the notion of "dissonant heritage" rather serves to denote negative and unwanted heritage in studies with post-war, postcolonial, and post-disaster contexts (e.g., Ashworth, 2002; Battilani et al., 2018; Pavlicìć, 2016). However, as the researchers point out, the authors of the reviewed articles relatively rarely offer definitions of dissonant/contested heritage. The authors of just two out of thirteen articles devoted to "dissonant heritage" attempted to propose their own definitions (Bruce & Creighton, 2006; Lemelin et al., 2013), and the others made reference to the definition coined by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), which is best known from the version proposed by Ashworth (2002): "Dissonant heritage is a condition in which there is a lack of congruence in time or space between people and their heritage." Bruce and Creighton (2006) emphasise the process of contesting values by various groups which leads to a dissonance: Lemelin et al. (2013) connect dissonance to the colonial narratives that rule out the narratives of indigenous groups and also direct attention to the context of tourism development in locations associated with battlefield, dark, or warfare tourism.

Summing up the analysis conducted by Liu et al. (2020), one could say that contesting heritage is connected to three phenomena. First, it results from a lack of agreement between the individual stakeholder groups. Second, it is a consequence of the heritagisation process (creation, interpretation, preservation, and consequently – ownership, marketing, and tourism). Third, it is an expression of the discrepancy of the past and present heritage resulting from the various views on the same heritage in various periods.

Some inherited resources of the past are particularly vulnerable to dissonance. This is particularly true about atrocity sites (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005), places of pain and shame (Logan & Reeves, 2011), "difficult heritage" (Logan & Reeves, 2011; Macdonald, 2009), "heritage that hurts" (Sather-Wagstaff, 2016), and "sensitive heritage" (Magee & Gilmore, 2015). Difficult heritage "is not the cultural resources/goods that can only potentially cause a dissonance. On the contrary, that is the heritage that we – as humanity, a specific group, and/or individuals – would rather not inherit from our forefathers and would wipe from memory. For that reason, there is no such interpretation that could ensure a fully harmonious consonance for thus construed difficult heritage: it is an inheritance that no one will willingly identify with, but which nonetheless subjects the living to an inalienable obligation to make it present in the present and save it for the future. That obligation is a homage paid to the victims and a warning for generations to come" (Owsianowska & Banaszkiewicz, 2015).

Preservation is a duty in the case of difficult heritage, places such as death camps, labour camps, and sites of genocide, but one that builds no emotionally positive involvement for any party. Such a burden needs to be preserved for future generations to save them from similar experiences. I believe that this is a category narrower than that of dissonant heritage, where the dissonance refers to the incongruity, incoherence, and lack of harmony in construing and interpreting it. What causes a dissonance in some does not have to trigger such a tension in others, so it depends on the beholder/experiencer of reality. Moreover, experiencing tension related to the dissonance is not a given forever: it is a process, and as such it can intensify or diminish (e.g., by accounting for new data that changes the perception of reality), and it also depends on the parties that perform such an assessment. These discrepant or opposing interpretations may lead to the negation of heritage or the negotiation of the meanings assigned to it. It is worth adding that heritage is also a project of the future, because "when heritage is made meaningful by the local community, it is always directed towards something, be it future visions, dreams or even fears" (Wollentz, 2020, 30).

Obviously, the three notions of difficult, dissonant, and contested heritage are often used interchangeably, yet I intentionally use the term "dissonant" to point to the relative nature of the evaluations of Chornobyl heritage.

The original use of the notion of dissonance, both in the theory of music and in social psychology, demonstrates that it surfaces while experiencing a reality, whether a melody or an event, but it is most important that dissonance is a means of construing and interpreting a phenomenon by a human or a group. Analogously, you could say that dissonance in reference to heritage primarily concerns the way in which the resources of the past are construed, interpreted, and used by various stakeholders.

The dissonance in the case of heritage appears in incompatible and/or contradictory interpretative strategies created by various stakeholders that evaluate resources from the past. The interpretive process stems from

historical and cultural conditions, current determinants, and objectives of individuals and groups involved in heritage development.

In reference to Chornobyl, the three most important questions that create the axes of tensions related to the interpretation of heritage are therefore:

1 What are the components of the dissonant heritage of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ)?
2 What processes lead to dissonance?
3 What strategies for coping with dissonance can be named?

In fact, the first two questions are highly interconnected and it makes no sense to split them artificially. That is why, in the following part, I will focus on discussing both the "resources" and "processes" that are the essence of the dissonance connected to the CEZ heritage.

Chornobyl as post-communist heritage

The fall of the Iron Curtain, which symbolically and physically opened borders that had previously been closed to thousands of tourists from outside the Eastern Bloc, also revealed a new dimension of the heritage of the 20th century in its most tragic form. The spectacular interest in the Auschwitz–Birkenau camp, which over only several years moved to first place in the number of visitors to not only the former concentration camps but also to museum sites in Poland, begs the question about the character of the place and its transformation (Charlesworth, 1994; Cole, 2000). On the one hand, the heritage of the Holocaust – the former camps, ghettos, places of execution and torture, and sites of the material culture of Central European Jewry wiped out by the war – and on the other, Nazi architecture and fortifications from the Third Reich. On the one hand, the Gulag Archipelago, the torture chambers of the security police, the places of mass executions, and on the other – the grand projects conducted as part of the industrialisation of the Soviet Union, monuments to the leaders, and architecture of socialist realism. Preserved in the form of heritage, the whole 20th century – which for Central and Eastern Europe was brimming with drama, suffering, fight, and resistance, as well as modernisation and development of empires – has made it to the catalogues of travel agents, the Lonely Planet and Pascal guides, pages of *The National Geographic*, and TV programmes promoting the discovery of this corner of the world. This shows that what some consider a place of remembrance, a symbol of trauma, and the object of coming to terms with the past, has for others become the object on which to aim their camera lenses.

Especially during the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe acquired an image of being strange, inaccessible, peripheral, and dangerous (Murawska-Muthesius, 2021; Wolff, 2010). Thousands of tourists have wanted to verify that picture and get to know "the new Europeans" in person, as they knew

them predominantly only from literature and films (Velickovic, 2019), and tourism became an important segment in the development of local economies (Williams & Baláž, 2000). In the early 1990s, the region, perceived through the image of exotic otherness had still not joined the global arena of consumption and was a fascinating *terra incognita*.

At the same time, two attitudes, and consequently two strategies of approaching the (post-) communist heritage, could be noted in Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand was the questioning and rejection of the heritage of the *Ancien Regime*. Depending on the particular political goals and general expectations, different countries embarked on various activities contesting the recent past, culture, and ideologies. Characteristic of the first stage of the transition was the spontaneous destruction of the symbols of oppression by the citizens themselves. With time, dismantling them became the object of a remembrance policy conducted on the power of decommunisation laws, whose intention was to develop the identities of the new capitalist and democratic societies (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Luleva et al., 2015; Ochman, 2015). This was accompanied by a focus on the revival of the heritage of the earlier periods and development of heritage tourism, especially in historic cities such as Prague, Kraków, Tallinn, Vilnius, and Budapest, which focused on their belonging to (West-)European civilisation (Light et al., 2009; Rátz et al., 2008). At the level of the political project, this resulted in the expansion of the European Union in 2004, which led to significant financial grants for the preservation and development of material heritage and increased mobility by bringing "New Europe" into the Schengen Zone (Banaszkiewicz et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2006). Following Young and Kaczmarek (2008), you could say that this approach to (post-) communist heritage brought together three phenomena: decommunisation, Europeanisation/Westernisation, and the re-emergence of the previously glorified icons of the Golden Era predating communism. As Coles (2003, p. 193) noted: "The socialist past, as well as other 'inappropriate' periods, events and personalities, have been selectively 'airbrushed' from the historical record. Former 'golden ages' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been invoked to placate the concerns of foreign investors and stimulate nation building."

On the other hand, demand for post-communist (post-socialist) heritage turned out not only to be lasting but also to grow, which motivated the development of attractions to meet market demand (Banaszkiewicz, 2018; Hill, 2017; Ivanov & Achikgezyan, 2017; Light, 2000; Vukov, 2012). This popularised another attitude: the employment of post-communist heritage resources was an efficient strategy for creating an exotic, eastern image (Robinson & Smith, 2006, p. 248) that made it possible to stand out thanks to the iconicity of this heritage (Naumov & Weidenfeld, 2019). Although problematic from the perspective of identity building (Young & Light, 2001), such a strategy was economically profitable (Owsianowska & Banaszkiewicz, 2018; Smith & Klicek, 2021).

Indisputably, over recent years Chornobyl has become the "iconic attraction" of Ukraine, being perceived as an authentic representation of the local culture. And although the CEZ is generally considered to be post-catastrophic heritage, in the context of analysing the dissonance it is worth remembering the culture of the communist modernisation project implemented with the introduction of kolkhozes (collective farms and modern urban centres such as Pripyat, the "city of children and roses", as role models. At the time of the disaster, the average age of residents of Pripyat was 26, the city was considered "a model", and its standard of living far exceeded other regions of Ukraine. That meant the post-explosion resettlement was perceived as banishment from a communist paradise. Despite being drowned in the shadow of the disaster, traces of that heritage are visible in the area of CEZ even today. The socialist realism architecture, the spectacular mosaics designed by the city's visual officer, Ivan Litovchenko, and the specificity of the life in Pripyat before the explosion make the CEZ a peripheral zone, a marginal space dominated by fantastic realism (Bærenholdt & Haldrup, 2004). Tourists seem to visit an ordinary place, as they are surrounded by nature and buildings, but the world they are in is radically different (see Figure 1.1). Exploration of the "frozen" world from behind the Iron Curtain

Figure 1.1 Abandoned heritage. Road to Chornobyl in wintertime.

Source: Photo by the author.

Figure 1.2 Tracing Cold War relics.

Source: Photo by the author.

is a form of mediation with the past. As Stone (2013) commented, Chornobyl is a necropolis of the previous system: it personifies the fears of the Cold War, the political oppression, and the economic inequalities. Discovering this world, as Figure 1.2 shows, is an expression of the need to become familiar with Otherness, which shaped non-Soviet imagination from the 1950s onwards. On the other hand, heritage comprises a set of collective memories existing within "an imagined political community" (Anderson, 1991). These are postcolonial memories, divided and heterogeneous, all the more so, as Jamal and Kim (2005, p. 63) noted, "in the postcolonial space, [where] heritage becomes an important resource for (re)constructing national and local identity, and tourism's political role in this is often disguised by its economic one."

Chornobyl as heirless inheritance

Heirless heritage refers to the inheritance of which its legal heirs were deprived by analogy to heirless property, e.g., the property of the victims of the Holocaust (Uncompensated Survivors Today Act of 2017), and specifically refers to properties that are abandoned, derelict or taken over by the state through separate provisions, whose previous owners have died and have not left heirs or legatees.

However, in the context of the Zone, it is not the legal right to property (property law and claims in the Soviet Union after the fall of the USSR are too complex to be discussed here) but the right to co-decide symbolically about the heritage of the Zone by the people forced out of it. For the right to interpret the heritage of the Zone belongs primarily to its managers, guides, publicists, and visitors. It is also the question of priorities in the material protection of Zone heritage and care for the people who still live within it.

The Chornobyl disaster brought about major cultural loss, as it degraded the unique achievements of many generations of ethnic groups that had lived in fairly complex isolation for centuries, which made them a particular reserve of archaic culture closely resembling prehistoric Slavic folk culture (Obrębski, 2007). The resulting forced relocations were extended to areas of unmatched scenic value with sites of material and spiritual culture. Hubs of ancient culture that maintained local customs, crafts, and folklore in the rural areas were destroyed.

Polesie or Polissya, or the heart of the Slavic lands, was a melting pot of ethnicities and religions (Tapac, 2017), and Chornobyl was first mentioned in the late 12th century. The ethnographic region of Eastern Polissya was inhabited by Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, and Jews. It is precisely for the Jewish heritage that the most "unique" category of visitors arrived in the Zone: the Hasidim who go to pray at the grave of Menahem Nahum Tversky, the Magid of Chornobyl, and not to see abandoned Pripyat or learn about the power plant disaster. In 2020, the Board of the CEZ approved Route No. 24 that traces the history of Jewish Chornobyl. It includes a visit to the former synagogue in Lenin Street (in Soviet days used as military offices and storerooms) and the old Jewish cemetery with the mass grave of the victims of a pogrom of the Jews in 1941. Francesco Cataluccio presents the complicated history of Chornobyl and its vicinity (also from the Second World War) in a beautifully written collection of essays (2011). Rather than another collection of reports from the place of disaster, it is a tale about a place – a symbol that has, for centuries, been the arena of tensions and neighbourly retaliations.

Rostyslav Omeliashko, Director of the State Scientific Centre for the Protection of Cultural Heritage from Technological Disasters compares the Chornobyl Polissya to a continent of Ukrainian culture that, in the wake of the NPP disaster, was wiped from the face of the world like the mythical Atlantis (*Чорнобильська Атлантида*, 2006). Whole villages were lost

over thousands of hectares, and with them the historical continuity and linguistic separateness that developed over centuries. The catastrophe did not as much destroy the cultural identity of Polissya as put it into hibernation. The centre directed by Omeliashko has researched the material and spiritual culture of the area affected by the Chornobyl disaster for 25 years. Despite an extensive research programme, Ukrainian institutions have not embarked on a more comprehensive conservation effort to save architectural relics of Polissya culture *in situ*. Recently the Memory of Homeland ethnographic exhibition organised by the Centre was included into the system of tourist routes in the Zone, so visit organisers can include it in tour programmes. However, as anthropologist Jacek Domaradzki noted (Róg & Domaradzki, 2019):

> the abandoned landscape of the Exclusion Zone shifted into the realm of myth and became the object of general interest not in the context of its unique ethnography or architecture, but ontology. The desire to experience the sight of a contemporary version of an apocalypse, where the vast spaces that experienced extinction reflect our deepest fears, has dominated other potential cognitive motivations.

As the core of Chornobyl tourism focuses on sites related to the reactor breakdown and its aftermath, the cultural wealth of Polissya remains of marginal interest for visitors and some organisers simply deprecate its value. The website of a Polish Chornobyl tour organiser reads: "More time by the Moscow Eye (i.e., Duga Radar – author's note) and the V and VI units of the reactor instead of staying in Chornobyl, a town that today hardly differs from any small town in Poland? No problem. You decide what this trip is for you" (*StrefaZero.org*, n.d.).

The only "vestige" of the pre-catastrophic heritage of the Zone is a meeting with the *samosely* that (sometimes) makes it into the itineraries of the groups staying in the Zone longer than a day. The *samosely* are the people who returned after the evacuation to live illegally within the Zone. Around 1200 people were estimated to live illegally in the Zone in the first years after the explosion. In 1993, their presence was regulated by an act of the Ukrainian government that assigned them the status of "temporary residents" of the Zone before resettling to the "clean" areas. A purely formal ploy, as no one intended to move them anywhere.

The life of *samosely* became known to the broader public thanks to *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* (*The Babushkas of Chernobyl (doc.film)*, 2015) documentary which won an award at the Cannes Festival. Responsibility for the protection of the lives of the *samosely* lies with the Zone administration and the Ivankov regional authorities. The latest official census of the *samosely* was held in 2007 and recorded 314 people living in the Zone. In 2019, a local guide, Yuri Franchuk, estimated their number to be 113. In turn, Krystian Machnik, a Polish guide and organiser of trips to the CEZ,

believes that there were no more than 50 people living in the Zone at the end of 2020. Moved by the fate of the *samosely*, who are not particularly dear to the authorities, he shot a heart-rending documentary with a group of aficionados, *The Last People of Chernobyl 3,* that records conversations with all the last inhabitants of the CEZ. In fact, the situation of the *samosely* is dramatic. Their everyday care is in the hands of the kind-hearted activists gathered around Alexander Sirota, and – from spring 2020 – a formal group of volunteers of the Welfare Council of the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management. The *samosely* are regularly visited by illegal visitors – "stalkers" – who help them with minor jobs around the house, and they receive the proceeds of fundraising campaigns organised for them. Most visitors to the Zone learn about the *samosely* from the guides; however, the vicissitudes of their lives are hard to imagine from just a tale that is marginal to the narrative focused on the disaster. Those who have met them "live" emphasise their astonishment at their acceptance of fate, the directness of the contact, and the authentic joy at the meeting. Tourists find the *samoselys'* lives fascinating, as they seem a relic not as much of the pre-disaster time but rather the 19th century.

Chornobyl as industrial heritage

The CEZ is treated as an emblematic example of post-disaster heritage, and far less frequently as industrial heritage, despite perfectly fitting the definition of the Nizhny Tagil Charter in which the scope of industrial heritage was extended to the "places where energy is generated, transmitted and used, transport and all its infrastructure, as well as places used for social activities related to industry such as housing, religious worship or education" (Charter – TICCIH, 2003).

The CEZ is unique in this aspect as it is an enclosed microcosm representing not only an industrial past frozen in time, but also contemporary functions that were, in a way, imposed on the town in the wake of the disaster. In the first aspect, these are the sites connected to the time when the NPP was intended to be the largest installation of this type in the world (construction works on units 5 and 6 of the NPP were discontinued after the meltdown). These are the buildings of the defunct power plant, the energy grid, transport infrastructure including railway lines, and the harbour on the Pripyat, as well as the towns of Pripyat and Chornobyl as the two largest residential areas for the staff of the plant and their families, and the personnel of the Duga radar system (radars and the Chornobyl 2 secret town).

In the second aspect, industrial sites are a reference to the period following the disaster and steps taken to mitigate its negative impact in Reactor 4 (construction of the Sarcophagus and the NSC (Ark)) and within a 30-km radius of it (the depot for machinery used in the emergency in 1986). It should be remembered that the Chornobyl NPP only closed in 2000, but its nuclear reactors remained active, which gave rise to the problem of storing the spent

fuel and protecting individual installations. So the Zone's industrial heritage has an additional dimension that requires special consideration: as a space for the storage of radioactive waste, it also belongs to the category of toxic heritage (Wollentz et al., 2020), whose future raises a fundamental question about safety. The following dissonance refers to the current use of the CEZ space, primarily the continuation of the decontamination process and the scientific and revitalisation project in the Zone. This includes a 1.6ha solar power plant composed of 3800 photovoltaic panels erected by the Ukrainian–German Solar Chornobyl company several hundred metres from the NPP and launched in 2018.

In this context, we turn our attention to the links between the industrial heritage and the inheritors, the local community who long functioned around an industrial site. The explosion impacted both the plant and its staff living in the newly built town of Slavutych. Their story hardly ever reaches tourists. Life in the shadow of the power plant continues somewhat like that for the people of Oświęcim, who live in the shadow of Auschwitz. In an interview conducted on the anniversary of the disaster, the Mayor of Slavutych, Yuri Fomichev said (Róg & Domaradzki, 2021):

> The decision to switch off the Chernobyl Power Plant was a political one. Certainly not economic, and definitely not technological. By the way, the plant produced more electrical energy after the accident than before. Nonetheless a decision to phase out power production was made and that became the second disaster for us, after the accident in Chernobyl. It is a paradox, as it seems that we understand what Chernobyl is and what damage it caused to people in the world and to Ukraine. In our cemeteries, we see plaques with the names of our friends who lost their health because of Chernobyl. At the same time, the extinguishing of this plant was our tragedy. This paradox is present in the city. For a while I didn't understand why we approach that so critically, but I talked to people engaged in the liquidation of the aftermath of that failure who arrived in Slavutych after the accident. We made a colossal effort, we paid a huge cost in terms of human life and health so that the power plant could be operational again, and then the decision was made to close it. It would have been better not to start work after the accident at all. People of Slavutych are very critical of that decision.

As much as the industrial heritage of the Zone can be called a "landscape of nostalgia" (Halewood & Hannam, 2001), it does not fit the category of heritage as romanticised in the narrative of the post-industrial societies of the West. It asks valid questions about energy safety and security, the role of public debate in the context of nuclear energy, responsibility for radioactive waste, etc. The Zone is no "nostalgia for vanishing landmarks" but a perfect case study in the global discussion about energy sources in the context of the climate crisis.

The year 2021 marks 35 years of Slavutych, an anniversary still held in the shadow of the disaster. A night of remembrance is held in the town, as well as regular conferences attracting the liquidators and experts in nuclear energy. Even the local museum is known as the Local History Museum of Slavutych and Chornobyl NPP. The revenue from the plant only accounts for 40% of the municipal budget (it was 98% 25 years ago) but Slavutych is the symbolic inheritor of Chornobyl's dissonant heritage.

Currently the Chornobyl NPP employs around 2800 people, most of them working shifts: they work and live in Chornobyl for two weeks, then they return for two weeks to Slavutych. Even though the Zone is nearby, it is almost inaccessible: to get to the NPP or the Zone, you need to take special transport across Belarus. This forces the main tourist traffic to pass around Slavutych and go through the Dytiatki checkpoint.

To quote Philip Feifan Xie (2015, p. 8): "the shift of industrial landscapes from production centers to consumption sites may involve cultural changes when choosing industrial heritage tourism. (…) conflicts and opposition may surface when various stakeholders pursue differing goals by using tourism as a vehicle for economic development."

Unfortunately not in connection to Chornobyl heritage, the problem is being tackled by the Nuclear Spaces: Communities, Materialities and Locations of Nuclear Cultural Heritage (NuSPACES) project, which received funding from the Joint European Programming Initiative in 2020. It aims to delve into the histories of the Sellafield and Dounreay (UK), Barsebäck (Sweden), and Ignalina (Lithuania) power plants, working with local communities and museums in a collaborative network to preserve their nuclear past.

The industrial heritage of the Zone is strongly connected to the contemporary problems of Slavutych. This is why people like Sergei Akulinin, Sergii Mirnyi, and Alexander Sirota who are engaged in the development of Chornobyl tourism emphasise that tourism is an opportunity not only for the Zone, but also for Slavutych.

Chornobyl as heritage of trauma

A trauma is a particular situational crisis resulting from the circumstances that an individual or a community cannot stand up to. It (Alexander, 2015, p. 1):

> occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

The events leading to traumas include acts of mass violence, natural and technological disasters, or radical social and cultural changes such as

economic and religious revolutions (Sztompka, 2000). Traumatogenic events are external and are perceived as externally imposed; moreover they are unpredictable, radical, all-encompassing, and forever changing identity. An experience of trauma may also result from the events in which the individual of the community does not participate as such, but the very information about which causes the trauma. Cultural trauma is an experience of a community that becomes a community of memory, whose identity is shaped by a given event (Neal, 1998). Unlike a psychological trauma whose dimension is individual, cultural trauma "has to be continuously and actively sustained and reproduced" (Smelser, 2015, p. 37).

The Chornobyl disaster is frequently considered a cultural trauma (Briukhovetska, 2016; Chuchvaha, 2020; Petryna, 2013; Telukha, 2020).

One of the most important representations of the trauma is the physical space expressing the traumatogenic circumstances. Much has recently been written about the relationships between memory, places, and the processes related thereto (Assmann, 2016; Etkind, 2103; Hubbell et al., 2020; Lacapra, 1998; Macdonald, 2013; Tumarkin, 2005; Winter, 1995). Some authors make the distinction between memorial as the specific location where atrocities were committed, and sites of memory as places dedicated to their remembrance. In general, as Tumarkin (2019, p. 5) defines:

> traumascapes are, therefore, not simply material locations of traumatic events, but are physical places constituted by experiences of particular events and their aftermath. These experiences include, but are not limited to, meaning-making, mourning, and remembering, be they private, shared, ritualised, impromptu, one-off, ongoing, deliberate, involuntary, etc.

According to the researcher, traumascapes are not only expressions of grief and create communities of mourners but also can act as focal points or catalysts for catharsis, truth-seeking, and justice-seeking.

Assmann (2016) believes that places of trauma symbolise the wound and the pain that cannot be alleviated as it refers to the past that you cannot look at from a distance or find a positive interpretation of. This falls close to the definition of difficult heritage (Macdonald, 2013). In contrast, Tumarkin sees transformative potential in the traumascapes even though they accommodate painful memories. Similarly, Mason (2019) stressed the fact that places of traumatic heritage can be treated both as archives of past events and agents of contemporary social change.

Should we assume that heritage has to be continuously and actively sustained and reproduced, then places of trauma, like places of memory as such, are a palimpsest that is continuously rewritten, reread re-enacted, represented, remediated, and reinterpreted primarily in reference to the dynamic of the generational change. In other words, successive generations read "anew" the past, valorise the heritage, and include specific elements

into their identities. Since the memory and meaning attached to the heritage may vary from generation to generation, contestation over heritage is ever-shifting (Harrison, 2004). Another source for dissonance in the heritage of the CEZ can be found in that dimension. Young people, even those coming from the realm of traumatic memory, show a different attitude to the disaster and to the Zone than the generation that survived Chornobyl. As a result, a place of disaster-related trauma has a different value for the people who do not feel burdened by the trauma, which may be positively valued in aesthetic terms for example (e.g., the ruins of Pripyat). Stone (2013) believes that as much as tourism in Chornobyl is a form of deviant pleasure, staying within the Zone has therapeutic potential as one confronts taboos such as death, breakdown, and the causes of the disaster and allows one to see the problems normally displaced to the peripheries of one's conscience.

Chornobyl as post-apocalyptic heritage

The Chornobyl disaster is seen as apocalypse of both ideas (as it demonstrated human vulnerability and questioned progress) and physical space, but also of the ideology that was fundamental for the USSR. Despite the popular representations, the Zone is not abandoned or dead space, and its survival is phantasmatic. The symbolic material dimension of this heritage undergoes continuous transformation. Changeability is particularly visible in Pripyat, whose post-apocalyptic landscape transforms under the impact of natural (expansion of the flora, disintegration of the buildings) and human (interventions by tourists, primarily illegal explorers or stalkers) factors. This is another layer of dissonance in the perception of the Zone's heritage and a major challenge connected to the management of that heterogenic space.

The heritage of the Zone is vested in transgressing human/urban, natural/rural, and past/present borders. As a "model" ruin, Pripyat attracted explorers at a time when entering the Zone was still forbidden. For aficionados of urbex, the CEZ is what Paris is for cultural tourists. Explorers not only aimed to enter the abandoned site and meticulously penetrate it but also to photograph it and show the beauty lingering within. Svetlana Boym (2001) believes that contemporary ruinophilia is a product of post-modern nostalgia. Ruinophilia expresses not nostalgia for the past but seeks new meanings of post-modern times as part of a reflection on space in history. Daniela Sandler (2016, p. 25–26) believes that exploration of recent post-industrial ruins is a symptom of consumerist culture and another manifestation of the photography porn genre. Sandler is sceptical of urban exploration (urbex), claiming that rather than being eager to preserve the ruins, explorers seek egocentric experiences of challenge, a shiver of emotions and pleasure. However, irrespective of its value and assessment, urbex undisputedly contributed to the development of a particular passion for visual representations of the Zone that took TripAdvisor and Instagram by

storm, providing inspiration for hundreds of people eager to confront the post-apocalyptic scenery of the CEZ. Dirty, dust-ridden, ruined buildings with broken windows in Pripyat are considered fascinating, uncanny, and picturesque or even beautiful.

Philip Stone (2013) sees the Chornobyl anthropocene as a perfect example of the heterotopia discussed by Michel Foucault. Heterotopia is a different place, a counter-place, excluded from the principles of cultural practices in "ordinary" places, yet necessary for culture. (Foucault offers the examples of cemeteries and school dormitories.) Stone argues that Chornobyl can be construed as heterotopia, or real space existing beyond time, in whose post-apocalyptic space time is stuck and the understanding of otherness yields to consumption. He consistently analyses the distinctive features of heterotopia and refers them to the phenomenon of the Zone. Chornobyl is the heterotopia of crisis as it presents the possibility of entering a past crisis (the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet empire) combining it with current problems and looking to the difficult decisions of the future. Stone believes that the function of Chornobyl is to bring together two realms of knowledge: tourists can learn something about the new world in the face of the fall of the former safety system. In this sense, the Zone functions as the cemetery of fallen ideas and the grave of the tragically demised communist utopia. Yet this is also a space for coming to terms with 20th-century wet dreams of the power of technological progress, which the explosion in the reactor turned to dust, and a place for lamenting the destructive activity of humans – not so much for causing a nuclear disaster but for gradually pilfering and destroying the abandoned areas of Pripyat and Chornobyl. Perhaps bringing together spaces that are seemingly inconsistent, and moreover, undergoing transformation, is the most visible feature of the heterotopia of the CEZ: wildlife creeps back into the ruins and places of remembrance, but residents are also returning and tourists visiting, and with all that the normal quality of life is also coming back. In this way, the death zone is gradually returned to life. The heterotopy of the Zone connects to its heterochrony, which also is a paradox. Time accumulates in the CEZ: a space frozen at the moment of the disaster (hence its nickname of "contemporary Pompeii") and functioning like an open-air museum whose exhibits testify not only to the event but also to the period when it took place. The tourist traffic in the Zone makes it heterochronous, connecting it to the most transient and joyful element of time: a festive time. The arrival of tourists in the Zone enlivens it and gives it a festive character.

Edensor contrasts visits to the ruins with tourist activities in urban space (Edensor, 2005, p. 95):

> Exploring ruins, on the other hand, cannot permit the smooth movement produced in tourism, for numerous obstacles present themselves and multiple routes may be followed. (…) There is nothing to buy and nothing conforms to the staged aesthetics of tourist space. These

> experiences cannot be inserted into a pre-arranged vocabulary or classified as 'exotic' or 'typical'. I suggest therefore, that exploring a ruin is a kind of anti-tourism.

Edensor contrasts exploration of ruins with tourism. But in Pripyat, both activities interpenetrate, causing dissonance resulting from touristic commodification. Tourism encroaches on the margins of spaces and aims to order them, both aesthetically and functionally. Tourist routes create a new structure: the road (a map being a symbolic dimension of the tourist conquest). Signposting is introduced together with new elements including toilets and waste bins. Ruins may be an object of contemplation or even performative involvement on the condition that this is done according to expertly defined principles. Transformation develops towards "sites of ordered disorder" and "controlled de-control of emotions" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 78).

The question of anti-tourism by illegal explorers (stalkers) is discussed separately later in the book. They treat Pripyat as a Dionysian space, a space of social vertigo, a carnivalesque space. The ruins of Pripyat are tamed and provide a space for adventurous play and artistic practices, primarily providing the canvas for graffiti, murals, and stickers.

Objects in the ruins of Pripyat undergo ornamentation, fulfilling decorative functions. An open book placed on the frame of a broken window, teddy bears wearing gas masks, a tree growing from the floor against a backdrop of propagandist posters – these constructions reinforce the picturesque quality of the ruins, a sense of melancholy resulting from interpreting them through a reflection on life and death, the process of transition, and the question about what will be left of us. It all, however, depends on context and interpretation. To the minds of former visitors to the Auschwitz Museum, the masks and shoes collected in one of the kindergartens bring to mind the exhibit in Block No. 5 of objects taken from the victims – pots and pans, toothbrushes, shoes, and spectacles. Merging objects with other objects exemplifies the process of hybridisation of heritage.

"Arrangements" are interventions in the space that reinforce the symbolic message of the Pripyat ruins. Although composed of other authentic objects predating the disaster, their arrangement results from aestheticising practices, which triggers a more general question: taking into account the interests of various groups, who should care for the space of Pripyat and how?

Following the decree of President Zelenski from 2019, initial conservation practices intended to discipline the ruins and stop the process of further degradation can be observed. Thanks to the involvement of the Association of Chornobyl Tour Operators (led by Chornobyl Tour), in 2020 construction experts conducted a preliminary audit of selected buildings of historical significance in Pripyat that need protection (including the Polissya Hotel, the Energetik Palace of Culture, the residential "White Building" in the central square together with the "Rainbow" shop, the restaurant,

Figure 1.3 Nature conquering civilisation.

Source: Photo by the author.

the commercial centre, and the Azure swimming pool). Although further expertise is needed, the first inspection demonstrated that majority of the structural elements are in good condition, which is the legal condition for including the sites into the sightseeing programme. Nonetheless, these locations already need immediate intervention but are decaying due to the lack of action by the authorities and pose an imminent danger to the people in their vicinity. This is true primarily of the roof over the top floor terrace of the Polissya Hotel (Figure 1.3). The place where the navigation point for helicopters working on the damaged reactor was organised after the disaster is currently in terrible condition, and even though various stakeholders have appealed for action, the management of the Zone has waited months for engineers to appraise the condition of the roof and propose potential remedial actions (if the Agency finds money for the protection of the roof in its budget). In 2020, the receiving antennas of the Duga radar system were entered into the Ukrainian heritage registry.

Although on one hand you can see the drive to protect the material heritage or the Zone, on the other, regular military exercises have been held in Pripyat in recent years, causing significant damage to the fabric of the buildings (the walls scarred with bullets always grab the tourist's attention). Treating Pripyat as a military training ground is not the only act of physical destruction of the material heritage of the Zone. The actions of the AVO (Anarkho-Vandalskyy Otryad) anarchist stalker group which is fighting a private war with the Agency and the tourist sector have found broad resonance in social media. As Igor, one of the group's leaders, claims in an interview by Diamond Richter (2020): "I am not against tourism – I'm

pro-tourism. But official tourism in the Zone today is vicious and corrupt. All the tour companies pay into a criminal kickback scheme, when really the money should be going to the national budget." He explains that "It's a virtual counter-subculture (…) It started in 2010 as a joke. Our mission today is to transform Pripyat – not destroy it as some are saying, but to use performance to bring attention to it." He adds, "even if it's negative attention."

Apart from conservation of the buildings, one of the key questions is the tendency to reconstruct the Chornobyl heritage. A reconstruction of a police inspection checkpoint was put up on the road into Chornobyl late in 2020. It is the work of the Kyiv District Police on the occasion of the Day of the Liquidator which is observed on 14 December. As Pripyat was famous for red roses, 35 rose bushes were planted in the town's centre on the 35th anniversary of the NPP explosion, with more to be planted next year. Stalkers regularly conduct campaigns of reviving the material heritage of the Zone. Vika and Stas Polessky reconstructed a room in a private flat for the 35th anniversary so the decor matched the 1986 design. Their YouTube channel shows the renovation process, which they prepared with friends over the course of a year. (An earlier project consisted of the painting of a room in a Pripyat kindergarten and reconstruction of the space to "re-enact" the state from before the disaster.) In the video, Vika turns to one of the former residents of Pripyat to thank her for tableware she presented for the intervention. The video ends with an address by a couple wearing period clothes (Полесская, 2021):

> I want to greet all the residents of Pripyat and say that I feel great sympathy with you as you, as lost your family homes. Please accept our small contribution to memory, your memory about your life here.

The actions of the stalkers, albeit illegal, reflect the need to recreate the past, and the action described above was intended as a homage to the residents. The Association of Tour Operators intends to create a museum of a Pripyat flat, which would give the town another tourist attraction. The goals of tour organisers are significantly different. Where heritage turns into the heritage industry, tensions between heritage protection and tourism development arise. There is a correlation between the development of heritage tourism and the commodification process, in which selection becomes an essential challenge for the management of the Zone's heritage. Many heritage sites are threatened by increasing commercialisation and by the excessive restoration intended to increase their touristic attractiveness. Consumption based on visual qualities leads to the transformation of cultural landscapes, turning them into aestheticised spaces of leisure and entertainment where the past turns into simulacrum and spectacle.

All the phenomena described above are reasons for tensions and dissonances. Generally, an apocalypse is an end of the world, but the origin of

the word allows a different understanding of the Chornobyl disaster. The Greek word *Apokalýptein* means "removing the veil", or "revelation". The post-apocalyptic heritage of Pripyat reveals how it is hard to speak of harmony considering the simultaneous acts of destruction, conservation, and reconstruction of its material heritage.

Dissonance of heritage in dialogic perspective

I have pointed to a number of categories of dissonance related to CEZ heritage and the processes of heritage interpretation, use, management, and development connected to them. They contextualise the critical issues indicated in the analysis by Liu et al. (2020). The CEZ dissonance is certainly visible in the lack of understanding between individual stakeholder groups, whose activities result from various interpretations of the value of the Zone heritage. Stakeholders are subjected to continuous interactions and are not just a set of isolated actors.

Dissonances also result from the heritagisation process, primarily in the area of commodification and touristification, and the entanglement of memory work into mediation and mediatisation. Returning to the original understanding of dissonance, it is worth tackling the question of coping strategies. On the one hand, a dissonance activates the urge to reduce (psychological concept) and on the other, it can lead to the development of a position of acceptance as an inherent feature of heritage (music theory).

Speaking of heritage, it can be assumed that there are two attitudes corresponding to these strategies; dialogic and agonistic. Both are aligned with the assumptions of the performative turn in heritage studies (Edensor, 2001; Bærenholdt and Haldrup, 2004; Haldrup & Larsen, 2015). According to Smith (2006), heritage should be seen as a culturally constructed idea and a set of values attached to a wide range of artefacts, environments, and cultural forms. Similarly, Macdonald (2006, p. 11) perceives heritage as a set of practices concerned with the continuity, persistence, and sustainability of collective identity. Heritage construed as science, environment, and cultural practices is a space of negotiations resulting from the assessment of the past in reference to the values that are important for self-identification and community development.

The agonistic approach can be derived from the proposal of political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2013) who relies on the agonistic dimension of democracy. Her perspective assumes that you need to accept dissonance (to a greater or lesser extent) as inherent in any heritage, which simply means that you need to concede its existence and realise what value it offers. The pluralism of attitudes based on the emotional identification of collective identities is connected to the presence of a conflict that cannot be resolved. Analogous to dissonant music, that identity cannot be created without the non-consonance that you must agree to, whether you like it aesthetically or not. Therefore, giving a particular discourse the position of hegemony is a

solution, as it allows harmony to be achieved by smothering other voices. In other words, a dissonance cannot be avoided, but as with emotions that cannot be "wished away", you can learn to carefully observe their nature, understand their consequences, and, depending on the evaluation, control behaviour so as not to harm others. The agonistic model makes it possible to achieve a "conflicting consensus", or accepting the principles of interpretation while agreeing that the parties will not agree to accept one of the versions of interpretation. The agonistic approach points to the need to accept differences, not impose one narrative, and manage diversity.

The dialogic approach refers to Józef Tischner's philosophy of drama (1999), which was formed on the basis of the philosophy of dialogue created and developed primarily in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century (Jantos, 1997). Its concepts have since been applied to various disciplines of the humanities and social studies (Mendes-Flohr, 2015). The fundamental assumption of the philosophy of dialogue is the relationship of an individual to other individuals and the world. Tischner's philosophy assumes that the conditions necessary for dialogue is a meeting perceived as a dramatic situation. "For a meeting to occur, a shared space is needed, an 'interpersonal space' with its particular ontology, like its own structure bearing cultural codes" (Kłoczowski, 2011, p. 26). Translating the language of philosophy into that of culture and heritage studies, you could say that culture is the stage on which the drama of the meeting takes place. It also provides the props that the actors use during the interaction. Heritage is an important prop in the drama of the meeting. Heritage sites are a metonymy of cultural identity, as they mediate in the meetings of representatives of various communities, and heritage interpretation can be understood as negotiation between different systems of values. In this way, heritage allows you to learn the Other.

The philosophy of dialogue recognises that "I" continuously changes, becomes modified in time. First, the change comes from the statement of difference: the I perceives itself as something separate from the surrounding world. I can be afraid of the Other, may desire or hate the Other, but first and foremost, that Other is precisely the mirror in which the I sees a reflection and finds corroboration or negation of the self. An analogous process takes place on the plane of heritage definition. What a community considers its own heritage is defined by the negation of what it considers alien and rejects as such. Heritage is not a process of establishing identity by defining what is, and what is not, mine. Although every community has resources of the past that it is ashamed of or would rather forget, it promotes positive values: how it wants to be perceived.

As Tischner states, not every meeting leads to dialogue. A meeting with the Other is neither simple nor automatic but assumes a will and effort that not everyone is always ready for. The concept of the Other has found its place in tourism studies primarily on the grounds of anthropology (Leite et al., 2021; Picard & Di Giovine, 2017; Smith, 1997). Anthropologists'

observations are consistent with what Tischner emphasises in philosophy. A fascination with otherness does not have to lead to understanding it. If it is solely based on stereotypes and exoticisation, a meeting in the tourism space builds no relationship that could provide grounds for entering into a dialogue. The lack of a dialogic situation may also result from the Other's reluctance to disclose their true face.

In other words, the Other is not always eager to disclose their true face. That is why actors often use tricks to conceal their faces. Tischner (1999, 63–85) mentions two forms of disconnecting from the true face – the veil and mask. The veil obscures the details of the face and bars access to it but discloses the features, while a mask completely conceals and is a lie about the face. A particular axiological opposition develops between the mask and the masked truth: a negative value wants to show itself as positive. The main reason for donning masks is fear, eagerness to hide something that can cause harm, pain, and/or shame.

A similar intuition about heritage is presented in the concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith). Similarly, Tunbridge (2001, p. 359) distinguishes two forms of heritage expression – public heritage expression and private heritage expression that draw on dissonant stories. The discourse of heritage is the production of meanings that occurs when sites or events are recognised as heritage, when they are managed, defined, exhibited, visited, and admired. These are performative actions that make it possible to define the values, the cultural and community meanings that allow meaning to be assigned to the present, build identities, and offer a sense of place in the social and physical world. The "official" heritage, promoted and managed by institutions incorporated especially for the purpose of representing the community, may be compared to a mask that the community accepts to demonstrate its identity. Thus, the public expression of heritage is a rigid mask; it may represent the features but can also misrepresent them, a fact that cannot be discerned by the observer. A mask is used for the complete rejection of the inheritance of predecessors that the community does not want, that it is ashamed of. The veil suggests certain tropes of discovering identity through heritage sites that evade clear authorisation with a sanctioned discourse. A mask conceals the face entirely, is explicit and static, while a veil only obscures the true face, offers various options for interpretation, and changes depending on the facial expressions. In the case of the veil, the recipient, i.e., he who looks at it, has greater agency, as he obtains access to the face, even if only indirect and disfigured. The only way to build a relationship and dialogue is to reveal the face. In other words, for the circumstances that allow the true face to be revealed to occur, you need the will and cognitive involvement of one party as well as the rejection of the mask by the other. The consequence of such a relationship between subjects entering a dialogue is the self-understanding and acceptance of what was previously concealed. The presence of the Other is what gives me an opportunity to be myself and to learn myself for the first time. The I experiences the "I"

that is not me. Disclosing the face, which also means exposing yourself to pain, creates a relationship between subjects, one of ethical responsibility.

What the agonistic and dialogic approaches share is looking at heritage as the space for negotiating meanings and interpreting the past, which takes place in relation to others who are also subjects of that process. It is a dynamic network of tensions defining mutual identity. Both approaches are only models, which obviously is a limitation. Both can easily be reduced to platitudes that are difficult to translate into heritage management. The key difference between them is the definition of the purposes of difficult relationships, of incongruent perspectives of otherness. For the agonistic approach, the difference is indelible, and the platform of understanding can only define the principles of accepting otherness. The philosophy of dialogue assumes that meeting leads to revealing the true face, which in turn leads to the creation of space for the establishment of the relationship of mutual responsibility for the Other, and the development of a new quality of not only respect for otherness, but also of taking responsibility for it. Even if the dialogic approach is only reduced to the level of the metaphor in case of heritage, it discloses the deeper meaning of the dissonances. If the dissonances of heritage were to be construed as a veil that hides the true face of the community, it is precisely learning about the heritage that will lead to what is most hidden, to what is most vulnerable to being hurt. Yet this is the only way for the difficult things to also be taken care of by others (in this case, tourists and visitors). Intuitions born from the assumptions of the dialogic attitude are close to the Inclusive Heritage Discourse (IHD) proposal posed by Višnja Kisic on the basis of the line of argumentation presented in the Faro Convention. As Wollentz (2020, p. 26) enumerates, rather than the top-down approach of the expert determining heritage-making, it is IHD that highlights the role of other stakeholders characteristic of the bottom-up perspective. IHD acknowledges that meanings and values are constantly and actively produced and negotiated through how the past and its material remains are made meaningful, or denied meaning, in the present. It supports pluralising perspectives upon the past and suggests that dissonance is not only an inherent feature of heritage, but also a potential positive value for inducing critical thinking and reflection in individuals.

Like the dialogic approach, the IHD concept assumes that a dissonance may lead to something positive – the mutual recognition allows the essence of tensions to be understood, and in turn, a critical reflection may contribute to the easing of tensions between individual stakeholders.

To summarise the reflections on the dissonance of heritage, I propose a model (Figure 1.4) that includes the key sources of dissonance and the processes that reinforce and reduce tensions. I assume that in reference to heritage, dissonance refers to three interrelated realms: knowledge, emotions, and values. At the same time, a dissonance is revealed through the processes connected to heritage management (by both formal and informal stakeholders) and also the experience (e.g., by tourists but also, more

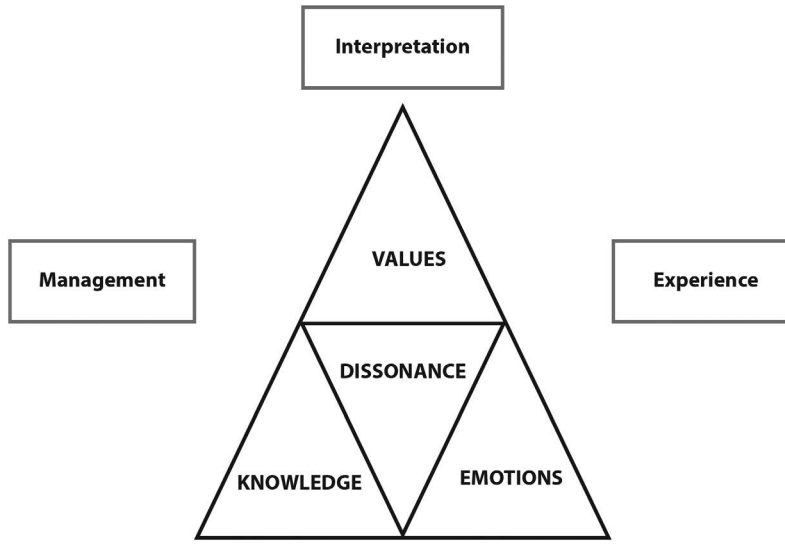

Figure 1.4 Model of heritage dissonances.

Source: Illustration by the author.

broadly, by consumers of culture through representations of heritage in the media), but primarily by interpretation through various forms of mediation.

First, a dissonance originates from knowledge (memory also being a particular kind of knowledge) of the past that heritage represents, and from the contemporary to which the heritage refers. Dissonances result from lack of access to data or contradictions in its interpretation, including the reasons for the disaster (human/machine/system error), the progress of liquidation (heroic victory/manipulation and oppressiveness of the system), the aftermath (many/few victims), radiation (large/small), and the functions and current operation of the Zone (decontamination, touristification, nature reserve, etc.).

The second area of dissonance is the emotions that all parties experience. For tourists, it could be excitement (measurement readings), fear (of a dangerous space), delight (in the beauty of nature, ruins), sorrow and pity for the victims, joy (visiting with friends), curiosity, boredom, disenchantment and irritation (e.g., with the crowds, the pace of the visit), pride (liquidation), fury (concealing the aftermath of the disaster), and relief (security provided by the Ark for another 100 years).

Obviously, knowledge and emotions cannot be treated separately, much as you cannot discuss the values assigned to heritage independently. As emphasised earlier, the attitude to the resources of the past that become heritage is ensconced in the values that make something considered sufficiently significant to be protected, preserved, and developed. As individual

stakeholders assign different values to heritage the values may differ, which necessarily leads to dissonances. Applying Max Scheler's well-known classification to the ordering of values, you can see that in the case of the Zone, much like in the case of emotions, there is great variety among just the visitors. For some, the Zone may be linked to religious values as they perceive the eschatological dimension of the disaster. Others include the spiritual, cognitive (education), legal (justice for the victims, nature), and aesthetic (ruins, nature) values, or the vital (e.g., how to visit the Zone safely), hedonistic (e.g., amusements in the Zone), and even utilitarian (e.g., creation of an image in social media).

All stakeholders present their own knowledge, emotions, and values related to the Zone. Moreover, mutual interactions make all these elements variable. This is the fundamental difficulty in studying the dissonances of heritage, and going further, in the management strategies for these dissonances. I believe that the method that seems to deal best with rendering the complexity of the problem of dissonances in heritage construed as a process – as the space for negotiating meanings and the potential development of relationships through an inclusive discourse based on learning and understanding at not only at the level of knowledge, but also emotions and values – is the rich description in the spirit of Clifford Geertz's ethnography (Geertz, 1973). Although dissonances can be reduced to certain universal processes at the general level (e.g., incoherence of interpretations) or resource types (e.g., death and suffering in the past), at the level of detail you can see a constellation of problems that in each case calls for the most precise description possible to render the specific nature of the given phenomenon.

Therefore, to understand better the role of the guides in the process of interpreting the dissonances of heritage of the CEZ, you need to devote some attention to the context of their activity, and therefore to the question of the remembrance of Chornobyl, how the disaster and the current heritage of the Zone functions in cultural transmission, and finally, what characterises Chornobyl tourism.

Memory of Chornobyl

Heritage cannot be discussed without including the issues of memory. Heritage is a particular selection of elements of the past performed in the present. For that choice to be made, there must be a living memory of the past. When heritage ceases to live, it becomes a relic of the past. For that reason, heritage and memory are inseparably bound to their opposites, disinheritance and oblivion, whether intended or not. The discussion of whether the current memory boom (Huyssen, 1995; Terdiman, 1994) results from the crisis of memory (Nora, 1989) or, rather, a particular transformation of memory in response to the challenges of the present (Saryusz-Wolska & Hohmuth, 2011) only confirms that the research into memory stretches to the furthest outposts of social and cultural phenomena, especially in

a Europe that is considered a "community of memory" by researchers (Assmann, 2016, p. 216) or a "Memoryland" (Macdonald, 2013). Cultural heritage is the object of "a 'game' whose key stake is the intangible layer that is the question of memory and our choices" (Purchla & Galusek, 2017, p. 12) of fundamental importance for understanding the temperature of emotions surrounding those tensions: it is not as much the past that is at stake but the present and future.

How do memory and heritage intersect? Where does memory begin and where heritage? Memory determines the narrative of heritage. Heritage determines how we remember. Heritage stimulates the work of memory, but it is also a resource that is adjusted to the current ideological needs and goals of current historical policy, which obviously translates into what is remembered and how. The dissonance of heritage can also be construed as tension between collective and individual memory, historical memory and politics, and history and memory.

The memory of the Chornobyl disaster cannot be excluded from a more extensive discussion about the memory of the Soviet Union (Weiss-Wendt & Adler, 2021). Stone considers Chornobyl "a monument to the secrecy and failings of the Cold War" (Stone, 2013), yet that is a Western-centric perspective, focusing on international relations and not the internal policy of the Soviet empire. Chornobyl can be seen as a political apocalypse, the end of a utopia that provided the foundation for the Soviet Union for decades. The Chornobyl disaster bared the principles of operation of Soviet society: a society based on the primacy of the collective over individual interest, where a human only counted as a cog in the machine (Geller, 1988). A community living in an aura of mystery that was the key factor of ideological upbringing. As Igor Kostin (2019) admitted: "I've seen people who carried lumps of radioactive graphite in their bare hands. That happened for the first time in history. I believe it was possible only in this country. In the country where the life of an individual has no value." That was possible thanks to the decades of work on the "forging" of the *Homo sovieticus* (Geller 1988). One of the liquidators, Arkadiy Filin recalled (Kostin, 2019, p. 26):

> We were given newspapers every day. I only read the headlines: 'Chernobyl, Place of Great Achievement', 'Reactor Vanquished', 'Life Goes on'. Our unit's political officer organised rallies and told us we have to win. But win with whom? The atom? Nature? The universe?

A disaster is a disaster but the true tragedy lies in what led to the disaster and what followed it. Chornobyl revealed that "glasnost" was just a new idea in Soviet newspeak, the language of lies necessary for the policies of management and control. That is also the claim of Serhii Plokhy (2020), who demonstrates that the true reason for the disaster was not the specific error of an individual but the Soviet system of secrecy that led to the lack of complete information being delivered even to the experts expected to fight

the impact of the disaster. The author concludes that the accident was not only the worst nuclear disaster in the history of humankind but another proof of the destructive power of the Soviet authoritarian system. Polish historian Paweł Sekuła subscribes to this point of view and said in an interview (Sekuła, 2018):

> with the entire context in view, I believe there would have been no Chernobyl without perestroika. This is certain. On the other hand, if not for Chernobyl, the consequences of perestroika would not have been so far-going and far-reaching (…) The wind from the Chernobyl reactor began to blow into the sails of perestroika and propelled the Perestroika ship where its helmsman, that is Mikhail Gorbachev, did not want to go.

Following that line of reasoning further, you can say that the USSR "produced" Chornobyl, but Chornobyl "killed" the USSR. Yurii Andrukhovych, a Ukrainian writer and journalist, believes that "the existential dimension proved more important than the political. The more secrets were disclosed, the more the system shook" (Andruchowycz, 2002, p. 55). Similarly, for Igor Kostin, the photojournalist famous for the first photograph of the reactor after the explosion, Chornobyl is a symbolic watershed; the end of the old world and the beginning of a new order. "To me, Chernobyl is the true symbol of the end of the Soviet Union, more so than bringing down the Berlin Wall. Many share this point of view. The whole nation coveted the change" (Kostin, 2019, p. 235).

In this way, Chornobyl is a particular postcolonial heritage, a site that symbolically reminds one that the citizens of the Soviet Union had nothing to say, as everything was decided in Moscow. The most obvious evidence for the above is the linguistic layer. Even though the power plant is situated in Ukraine, the contamination primarily extended to Belarus (and a small area of the current Russian Federation). While Russia suffered least territorially, the anglophone world knows the word "Chernobyl" precisely from the Russian language and not from the Ukrainian ("Chornobyl") or Belarusian ("Charnobyl"). The nuance of an individual phoneme may seem trivial, yet it testifies profoundly to the distribution of geopolitical forces. Precisely, that to realise the true nature of the dissonance of Chornobyl heritage you need to plunge into the complexity of the memory of Chornobyl, a space of a mythologised tale of the past, or rather multiple narratives that are not mutually harmonious as they are different memories.

The memory of the resettled, who for many years lived with the stigma of being "those from Chernobyl" (*Чернобыльцы*) is different. Different are the memories of the liquidators who, perceived as heroes, were forced to perform heroic deeds as they were the "cogs in the machine". The memory of people affected by the consequences of radiation, which was never officially confirmed, is different. Also different is the memory of those who, living in

the USSR, did not experience the direct impact of the disaster even though its consequences indirectly affected their lives. Different are the memories of the representatives of the current authorities, and those who participated in the decision-making process in many areas and on many levels after the catastrophe. Different is the memory of those who consciously remember the disaster as part of their biography, and different is that of those who remember Chornobyl even though they were born after the explosion. Memory is not given once and for ever. It is a process of acquisition and loss, of gathering and erasing. Memory is different on the 35th anniversary of the disaster, and it was different a decade earlier, as it changes continuously. Collective memory is different, as it is not the sum of individual memories, just like the individual memory is not monadic.

The largest hiatus and lack of consonance is disclosed at the level of the narrative about the victims and the heroes of Chornobyl, which is a consequence of the question about the responsibility for the disaster and its aftermath. The situation seems analogous to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War in Russia, known elsewhere as the Second World War, that was to provide a particular secular religion for contemporary Russia, a uniting myth in which the memory of terror had to make space for the memory of victory (Shlapentokh & Bondartsova, 2009). The celebration of victory over the Nazis is Russia's most important state holiday, and the million victims are treated as the heroes of a fight with an external enemy and not victims of the system that, being totalitarian itself, destroyed people (Etkind, 2013). Memory of Stalin and the Great Patriotic War in contemporary Russia is a perfect example of an efficient historical policy based on prescriptive forgetting and "repressive erasure" (Connerton, 2007).

The Chornobyl narrative is also dominated by the narration of victory. Cultural traumas are a matter of politics. States conceal the traumas by rewriting them into a linear narrative of national heroism (Edkins, 2003). The fact that there were victims (participants of the rescue campaign, and all the liquidators, as well as the displaced and the other people who suffered in the wake of the disaster) is admitted, yet it is the victory over the consequences of the world's largest nuclear catastrophe that is the most important. That point of view was particularly visible during the official celebration of the 35th anniversary of the disaster, when representatives of the authorities primarily emphasised the success of the fight with the aftermath of the disaster, and the lesson that Chornobyl currently represents.

The memory of Chornobyl in Ukraine is different to that in Russia, and different to Belarus (Kasperski, 2020). Following Ekatherina Zhukova (2016), the experience of Chornobyl as a trauma was not uniform, as before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a continuous trauma took place in the form of protests against the established political system. After 1991, a retrospective trauma occurred in the form of recollection of what happened in Chornobyl. However, due to the fact that in Belarus the official media were controlled, fewer attempts were made to construct the Soviet state as

a Chornobyl perpetrator. In Ukraine, the media did not consider the Soviet past as its golden age and consequently the critique towards the Soviet state was more explicit.

These claims seem to be corroborated by a study conducted by the Levada Center in mid-2019. The opinion poll was run in Russia, which is certainly an important variable concerning the replies of the respondents, while its results point to tendencies concerning memory in the Soviet Union. The proportion of Russians convinced that the most important problem that the disaster revealed was the technical breakdown in the control system of the reactor (24% compared to 15% in 2006) and the negligence of the operators and maintenance personnel (22% compared to 16% in 2006) grew significantly. The respondents perceived the problems to be the so-called human factor and overlooked systemic errors, i.e., they laid the blame on ordinary people and not the authorities. The revised assessment of the activities of the authorities rides the wave of a growing nostalgia for the Soviet Union (Koposov, 2018). Nostalgia is an affair with your own fantasy (Boym, 2001, p. XIII), as it reinforces the idealisation of the past as a tale about the lost idyllic childhood, the golden age of empires, high moral standards, and heroic deeds. Nostalgia is a sense of sadness and loss of something that is irretrievably gone or is inaccessible but seems highly valuable. Nostalgia enters where the contemporary disenchants. As much as progressive utopia looks into the future, retrospective utopia is inclined towards the past. Nostalgia projects a mythologised image of the past that actually never existed: it is an imagined past with positive axiological features. A specific form of East European nostalgia is the "ostalgia", i.e., a "nostalgia for the previous system" diagnosed in East Germany (the "Ossi") in the 1990s (Ehrig et al., 2018).

In this sense, nostalgia refers not as much to a specific political system but to the prevailing culture at the time when one was young: films, music, fashion, and design that surrounded a generation during a period that is valued as the best days of one's life. Memory is selective and constructed socially, so memories are also selective and modified. In reference to contemporary Russia and Belarus, nostalgia for the Soviet Union is based on the memory of an empire that, even though oppressive towards own citizens, was the most powerful state in the world in its phantasm of nostalgia. Therefore, the memory of Chornobyl is not only stigmatised with a nostalgia for an imperial past but also a national project based on the heroic myth. It is a memory of a traumatic event that was the disaster and also of the creeping apocalypse of the decomposition of socio-political order in the late Soviet Union. Finally, it is a memory of the lack of stability at a time of transition.

As is the case for many traumatic events whose assessment is unequivocal, allowing things to pass into oblivion is also an important process here. Non-memory (oblivion) is defined as "lacunae in the collective memory significant for the community. If accumulation and recording of information is considered memory, non-memory is everything that lies beyond that:

un-internalised as well as eliminated and forgotten content" (Hirschowicz & Neyman, 2001, p. 24).

Non-memory is based both on natural processes, i.e., ordinary forgetfulness, and on intentional blocking and erasing. "Non-memory" is not utter oblivion, rather it is glossing over and dismissal while retaining the resources of the past, which is the work of not only individuals but also institutions and the media (Sendyka, 2016). The problem of the memory of Chornobyl is not only down to the lack of harmony in the narrative on the past but is also an effect of the effacing and modification of the picture of the past in the decades since the disaster. In 2021, on its 35th anniversary, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) conducted a general opinion poll across Ukraine. Most respondents (69%) could at least remember the year of the disaster, but only slightly over half (52%) knew the exact date. The 50–69 age group, that is, those who were aged 15–34 at the moment of the disaster, performed best (i.e., it belongs to their biography). Although the study was conducted close to a significant anniversary of the disaster, 31% of the Ukrainian population did not remember even the year of the disaster.

The memory of Chornobyl in Eastern Europe transforms over time, becoming more a cultural memory influenced by cultural representations (as Figure 1.5 indicates) and less a communication memory resulting from

Figure 1.5 "Wormwood Star" Chornobyl Memorial Complex.

Source: Photo by Łukasz Gaweł.

contact with witnesses to the events. This memory takes shape in the tension between the official memory (the annual commemoration of Chornobyl Disaster Remembrance Day on 26 April) and the vernacular memory, or the diverse range of collective memory practices, localised, informal, spontaneous, ephemeral, community-based, rooted in tradition, local custom, or popular culture, such as music, photography, performance, street art and other types of artistic expressions (Marschall, 2013, p. 79). Compared to the study conducted in 2020, the proportion of Ukrainians capable of quoting the exact date of the Chornobyl accident grew from 40% to 52% in 2021. Is that a result of the media hype connected to the round 35th anniversary? Or perhaps the popularity of *Chernobyl*, a series that Ukraine also watched? Knowledge of the date of the event is but an indicator of the memory of the disaster. Or is it, nonetheless, a significant reference point for the construction of the identity of young Ukrainians?

The generational quality of memory is a significant variable here, as well as a reason for dissonance in the heritage of the Zone. For the generation that experienced the disaster and remained under the greatest impact of its aftermath, at most the CEZ can be a place of memory, but a difficult one, as it schizophrenically melds together fear, fury, and suffering resulting from the disaster, with a sense of pride resulting from the liquidation. With the passing of the generation that still remembers the accident, the memory of the witnesses dies as well. The next generation is being raised on a glamorous vision of the tragedy in video games, films, and series that fuel fascination with the physical space of the Zone as a post-apocalyptic site. As a result, as far as the memory of the disaster is concerned, you can only speak of divided, fragmentary, and dying memory forced to the periphery of collective memory, but at the same time also reviving, discovered, and shaped by the impact of the media. These dissonances result from the question of who are the holders/executives of the past, how and for what purpose representations of the past are made, and what are the consequences. Therefore, to point out yet another layer of dissonance of the memory of Chornobyl, I would like to make a reference to the concepts of post-memory and prosthetic memory.

The term "post-memory" was entered into the glossary of memory studies by Marianne Hirsch (2016) to denote an inherited memory, a memory of the second generation, i.e., the children of the generation that experienced a collective trauma. Post-memory primarily refers to the experiences of children of the victims of the Holocaust but, as Hirsch points out, it can also be used in reference to the communities that were affected by a collective trauma at any moment in history. That memory concerns the events that become a fundamental point of reference for the development of their identity via artefacts (photographs, souvenirs) and narratives (by those who experienced the trauma). This is a memory of progeny based on the empathetic re-enactment of an experience from before their birth. Post-memory does not connect to the past through recalling but through image-based

involvement that is possible thanks to visual reproduction (here Hirsch makes a specific reference to photography). An important element in her concept is the generational quality in experiencing a difficult past. A generation of witnesses, eager to protect their children keeps silent about what they experienced, but the children live in the shadow of the trauma and themselves try to confront the past.

Similarly, the condition necessary for the development of prosthetic memory in Landsberg's (2006) concept is an empathic experiencing of a representation of the past through specific mass culture media including cinema, serials, and experiential museums. Memories, therefore, are not personal – resulting from one's own experience or the "social framework of memory" (Halbwachs, 2008) of a community – but result from the subjective emotional involvement resulting from the sensual experiencing of images of the past. Prosthetic memory does not refer to the group's collective memory based on blood ties (which is the case in/with post-memory) as they used to, difficult and spreading along consumer channels unlimited by gender, class, and race. This is an imagined community whose identity is based on the shared experience of specific representations of the past (e.g., film) where a key role is played by modern technology as a unique medium of remembrance. The main difference between this and other (individual, collective) forms of memory is commodification – like a prosthetic, memories that develop from experiencing mass culture are easily exchanged. Moreover, prosthetic memories are physically experienced by the individual's body and result from sensual contact with the media representation. Landsberg believes that they generate a level of emotional involvement different to traditional forms of aesthetic experiences, e.g., reading.

I believe that the concepts of post-memory and prosthetic memory share many features, and moreover, both concern the process of experiencing and acquiring memories through emotional identification with other people during contact with the mediatised representation of the past. Both concepts examine the significant question of cultural transmission and development of a representation of the past with the use of media messaging, the proliferation of which, thanks to new technologies (now primarily the Internet), takes place on a scale incomparably greater than ever before in any other medium. By this token, the potential of experiencing the past in a re-created form becomes possible for people from beyond the community of communicative memory, whether construed via blood ties or the culture of a given area (region, state). Another question that brings the two concepts together is the level of emotions experienced towards the victims: empathic engagement is a condition for identification with the fate of people who have experienced trauma.

In the case of post-memory, this refers to the community of the next generation of the "inheritors" of their ancestors' trauma; while in the case of prosthetic memory, the condition is the bodily relationship with the past. In both cases, the affect is a significant constituent of learning in the

process of acquiring knowledge about the traumatic past events. What are the implications of applying these two concepts to the investigation of the question of memory of Chornobyl? First, the cultural transmission by the mass media develops a representation of the past: an image of the disaster itself, its causes, and consequences. Critics of Landsberg's concept realised that the use of the category of memory can only be treated metaphorically for the conventional process of cultural transmission based on acquiring knowledge with emotional experience. These representations have a vast field of impact on the people who have not experienced the tragedy directly, as well as those who remember it. Can one say that this is how a memory of Chornobyl develops? Certainly, a vision of the past, different to that of the people who experienced a disaster, takes shape, just like an individual memory always differs from the collective one. This is precisely the level on which another dissonance connected to the problem of controlling the past appears, which lies not only in the hands of the witnesses of the events, but also with historians and decision-makers responsible for historical policies as well as every author of a film, series, blog, book, or comic. To quote George Orwell's *1984*: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." Memorable events, places, and objects are produced and sold as commodities, which happens through intensified mediatisation. In consequence, memory is externalised and staged outside the local community as a specific spectacle. Not unlike the Holocaust, Chornobyl is also a perfect example of the processes of hybrid heritage production as a "contact zone" between high and popular culture.

The techniques of mass media expand the community of the people experiencing the past. Like the Holocaust is "remembered" through *Schindler's List*, through the *Chernobyl* series, this disaster reaches the people who, even if they heard of it, never realised its scale or the context of its occurrence. Two weak points can be found in Landsberg's concept. The first is the question about the possibility of bodily emotional involvement in the media message. Landsberg uses the notion of "transferential spaces", those that allow processional and sensual access to a visual representation of the past. They are spaces where people experience (sensitively, bodily, empirically) the events that have not been part of their personal experience, yet the memories become "incarnated" in these experiences. Is that, however, a memory or rather a picture of the past? Considerations about the degree of immersion while consuming certain forms of aesthetic expression lie beyond the scope of this book, but the simplest comparison of the experience of a cinema goer and someone sitting on a comfortable couch in front of a laptop, drinking wine, and petting a dog that licks their right foot lead you to conclude that these are different experiences, even if the moving image being watched is the same. Not to mention the experiences of the theatre audience or visitors to experiential museums. Another question is whether that empathic relationship is possible via more traditional narrative forms such as prose.

The other problem that is hard to avoid is the question of authenticity – not so much the authenticity of emotions but the connection between the past and its vision resulting from a particular representation. A representation that is but another version of the past, another "story". As a Kraków guide, I have often heard tourists' comments that the Jewish ghetto was created not in Podgórze but in Kazimierz (a district of Kraków inhabited by the Jewish community for centuries, where many scenes from films were shot). Similarly, the staff of the Museum of Kraków in the former Enamel Factory run by Schindler admit that the film determines visitors' vision of the past so strongly that the "museum" narrative is criticised as the one "distorting" the past. Simplifying Landsberg's reflections, you can say that in this case a new prosthetic created by the experience of visiting Schindler's factory may replace the previous one created by watching the film. Will that then be a memory of the Holocaust or rather of the film or visit to a museum?

The context of the concepts examined above reveals the complex role of the places of memory as a space of representing the past – not only through the material fabric but also because they are a space of performances of the past – through the physical, sensual, and affective contact of the people whose individual and collective memories confront one another. As Joy Sather-Wagstaff (2016, p. 195) emphasised, a way to understand the complexity of the machinery of memory and heritage-making is to view "places and objects as triggers or precipitants for memory and heritage-making rather than of memory and heritage as objects themselves." Places such as the CEZ stimulate the process that Sharon Macdonald called "past presencing", a frame that allows for unconscious or embodied relationships with the past as well as more conceptual ones, these are frameworks in which past things are present or can be remembered (Macdonald, 2013, p. 16–17).

The dissonance of Chornobyl heritage emerges from various memories of the disaster: memories that developed from keeping silent, the memories entangled in current social and cultural issues, the memories that surf the wave of nostalgia and are anchored in trauma, memories that are manufactured, and above all, memories that are permeated with the emotions and projections of the future. These representations of the past at both individual and collective levels determine the interpretations and narratives about the CEZ and influence the positions of individual stakeholders. As they are not static but rather undergo transformations, speaking of the cultural memory of Chornobyl means confronting not only the past but primarily the present, which continues to modify the image of the past.

2 The Shadow of Chornobyl

Among the reasons for the dissonance revealed in respect to Chornobyl's heritage are the different media representations of the disaster itself, its consequences, and today's Zone. Chornobyl is a cultural product that can sell as a film, comic, photograph, novel, game, artistic installation, and music – the numerous means of expression as well as interpretations give artists an unlimited field for developing narratives that shape the tourists' imagination.

The mutual dependency between the media and tourism is difficult to overexaggerate (Crouch et al., 2005). As Picard and Di Giovine (2017, 3) point out: "Particularly in the field of tourism, the realms of journey are anchored in socially constructed imaginaries and meta-narratives that imbue them with magic and meaning" (Bruner 2015; Salazar & Graburn 2014). Tourism imaginaries are conceptualised by Salazar and Graburn (2014, 1) as "socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and that are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices". Their key feature is articulated and widely shared through media and social practices. These include the social and cultural background that results from the process of socialisation in a specific community, but also current participation in culture through media, social media, and real-life and virtual experience. We can therefore speak of a continuous cycle of mediated representations and experiences.

Two important issues are worth noting here. First, those mediated representations stimulate everyone who participates in heritage meaning-making. Although researchers usually focus on tourists and their imagination, one should not forget that the guides and other stakeholders are also consumers of culture, or, rather, cultures. Participation in global culture with access to the same cultural products and practices challenges the dichotomic division into hosts and guests. This is of extreme significance while interpreting heritage, as the level of dialogical relations becomes easier to achieve by referring to shared experiences, for which reason a guide familiar with the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* video game is a more attractive partner for exploring the Zone for a tourist familiar with the game.

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Figure 2.1 Panorama of the Nuclear Power Plant.

Source: Photo by the author.

Second, not unlike memory, tourist imagination has both individual and collective dimensions: it exists in interaction, becomes anchored in the past, and stimulates the experiencing of the present by projecting the future. Thus, imagination functions like a hermeneutic circle, which means that every interpretation of a text is linked to pre-judgements as every human is set in a culture, tradition, and language that they use to learn the world. Therefore, interpretation is entangled in earlier interpretive processes and experiences. These pre-judgements are revised in the process of cognition whenever the subject encounters something unknown in the message (Malpas, 2003). As Figure 2.1 shows, the panorama of the nuclear power plant would be an "ordinary" view if stripped of its content-saturating cultural associations. Thus, a tourist's imagination can be compared to a pre-judgement that is verified during the tourist's experience.

To show, even if only in a fragment, the constellation of the narratives that shape tourism imaginaries to a different extent, let me break them down into three categories. The first are selected cultural texts that represent the disaster itself and its aftermath or are interpreted from that angle but without any connection to tourism. The second group of works are the cultural texts using exploration of the Zone as a plot or a theme in a work of art. The third category are tourism and travel texts, meaning those narratives that resulted from an actual visit to the Zone or were generated by the tourist sector itself.

Individual narrative forms have different scopes of impact. One can assume that a series on the Chornobyl disaster shown on a popular video-streaming platform has a greater impact on the collective imagination than a novel by a Ukrainian physician written late in the 1980s. One can also assume that

tourists would rather read reviews by other tourists on TripAdvisor than something a stalker posted to a closed Facebook group. The essence, however, is not the quantitative reach but also the intertextual power of impact, as certain shots in the series were inspired by those of the photographer who documented the disaster, and the plot draws from reports published earlier as books. The selection of examples is subjective, but they should present how the Chornobyl/Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is perceived in culture and, consequently, what images and narratives create cultural frameworks for interaction between guides and tourists while exploring the Zone.

To express the inexpressible

Chornobyl functions at different levels and in different forms of expression in culture, not unlike the Holocaust, the Great Terror, and the Cultural Revolution. Primarily, it is a symbol of the trauma that exists in the collective memory, and cultural artefacts that make it part of everyday life and make it valid for successive generations. The trauma of Chornobyl is aesthetically reworked in culture, which may also play a therapeutic role. One of the most important features of the cultural trauma is that you cannot speak about it, and yet speak about it you must. The Chornobyl tragedy is "unpresentable". Oksana Zabuzhko (2016), a Ukrainian writer and poet, considers the artistic representations of the disaster as forms of reworking the Ukrainian post-totalitarian trauma. Another Ukrainian writer, Valeriy Shevchuk (1996), equates Chornobyl with Auschwitz and Kolyma Gulags and finds them all symbols of the evil of 20th-century totalitarianisms, whose pressure breaks apart the belief in the reason and morality based on the autonomy of the subject elicited from the Enlightenment.

The comparison to the Holocaust also refers to the dimension of being a witness. Analysing the place of the Holocaust in culture, an Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben (2008), emphasises the particular role in overcoming the trauma played by the witness, who makes the past real by the very act of speaking about it. That is why documentaries, containing the testimonies of witnesses, come first and define the horizon for discussing the Chornobyl disaster. The best-known literary work on the disaster is a collection of reports by a Belarusian writer, Svetlana Alexievich, published in 1997 but only translated into English in 2005 as *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, which brought its author the Nobel Prize in 2015. Justifying their decision, the Nobel Committee wrote that the author receives the prize "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time" (The Nobel Prize in Literature, 2015 n.d.). She intended the reports to be a collection of untold tales of the Chornobyl tragedy's witnesses and victims. The writer "collected the voices" to express for others what they could not express:

> I have frequently heard my interlocutors confess that "no words can express what I saw and went through" (…) Everything must be marked and spoken out loud first. We had no imagination, analogy, or experience

> for what happened, neither our eye nor our ear was ready for it, and nor does our collection of words fit it.
>
> *(Aleksijewicz, 2000, p. 25)*

The quote from Kostin's photo book (Kostin, 2019) features a quote from Roland Barthes, who stated that the photographer's lens is to serve memory not imagination. The Chornobyl disaster demonstrates that modern history does not exist outside the medium of photography, as images have the highest impact factor among the representations of the past stimulating the processes of memory (Baer, 2005).

> The multitude and consonance of the voices of Alexievich's protagonists on the one hand breaks apart the totalising narrative of the great History, and, on the other, provides an inept attempt and building on myth-forming narrative that would allow the post-tragedy world to be understood. With the polyphony of the voices they operate with, the classical reports by Svetlana Alexievich and Yuri Shcherbak (Shcherbak, 1989) endeavour to stand up to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not only refer to the words. Igor Kostin, working for the Novosti Press Agency, was helicoptered over the powerplant and its smoking reactor to take photographs of the accident on 26 April, oblivious to the fact that the radiation was so strong that it destroyed the photographic film in the camera itself. All that survived was a single partially damaged shot, and even that would not be printed by the Soviet press in the following days. Kostin's photographs also disclose the crisis of the visual, the impossibility of grasping the nuclear apocalypse, as radiation is plainly invisible. On the other hand, radiation damaged the photographic film, creating "a nuclear script". For these reasons, visualisations are incomplete and damaged, by that token offering the best depiction of the impossibility to imagine/express the disaster.

In the introduction to the special issue of *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, devoted to the memory of Chornobyl, Melanie Arndt (2012) emphasises how iconic the images from the Zone have become for the history of the 20th century:

> The reactor ruin with its smokestack, and the evacuated ghost city Pripyat – in particular its Ferris wheel which never took passengers to its top, since it had to be abandoned just a few days before its opening – became icons of our era, an era labelled as "risk society" (Beck, 1986) or "age of ecology".
>
> *(Radkau, 2011)*

The special issue edited by Arndt was the follow-up to a conference held in the spring of 2011: a month before the 25th anniversary of the Chornobyl

disaster and a month after the tragic tsunami that led to another one in Fukushima. The Fukushima disaster refuelled discussions around nuclear energy. However, unlike the one in Chornobyl, the disaster in Fukushima received live coverage by global media.

Coining the term "black spot tourism" early in the 1990s (Rojek, 1995) emphasised the significance of the film industry in creating new tourist attractions, related to the deaths of great celebrities (see Best, 2013) and death used as film plots (e.g., battlefields). In this he emphasised that it is not the death itself that matters but rather "spectacle and sensation". He argued that, with the increased speed of media coverage, you will be able to participate, in fact in real time, in dramatic events, while the images you watch fuel the immediate urge to visit the places of tragedy. The date 11 September 2001 proved Rojek's words to be prophetic. The 20 years since the attack on the WTC has been a time of spectacular development of both the new media and of studies on obscuring the difference between the reality and representation of disasters and tragic events. Spectacular events, including terrorist attacks, and natural and man-made disasters, had contributed to the development of imagination even earlier, whether through prose or films from science fiction, catastrophic, and thriller genres. Happening in the real world, they provoked a new reading of the works of art created prior to their occurrence.

In 1979 *The China Syndrome* directed by James Bridges became very popular and famous, with leading roles entrusted to popular Hollywood actors of the time, Jane Fonda, Michael Douglas, and Jack Lemmon. It spoke of an accidental melting of the core of a nuclear reactor, whose components would burn through the crust and body of the Earth until reaching the opposite side (which, in the US, is colloquially referred to as China). Within a fortnight of its Cannes premiere, Reactor No. 2 of Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station underwent a partial meltdown, which boosted the film's publicity and proved that the fiction component in science fiction may be more real than it seems.

I use *The China Syndrome* as an important context for the picture of the Chornobyl disaster in global culture also because it became a point of reference to what happened in the first days following the Chornobyl disaster. Higginbotham (2019, p. 231) mentions that nuclear experts participating in the rescue operation in Chornobyl knew *The China Syndrome*, as it was presented a year earlier at a special show for the members of the Faculty of Physics of Moscow University. Interestingly, American filmmakers created a vision of an event that had never before been taken into consideration by Soviet experts as a scenario that could really happen.

Another film that received a new interpretation after the explosion was obviously Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* from 1979. It was based on a script the director wrote together with the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, loosely based on their science-fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (Russian: *Пикник на обочине*, 1972). Against what the Soviet authorities expected, Tarkovsky's film, following *Solaris*, was not made in the spirit of science fiction. In

1975, the director noted in his diary that he considers the new project "an opportunity to tackle the problem of transcendence legally" (Kuśmierczyk, 2012, 283). As the director intended, critics found the work the opposite of everything a science-fiction film should be: its plot provides no more than a slow reflection drawn in images, greatly distant from cheap visual imagery. The film is not easy to watch, and it is not without reason that Kuśmierczyk (2012, p. 326) compares it to an icon, whose beauty requires appropriate contemplation. Going further in his interpretation that film critic and expert on Tarkovsky proves that Stalker is no hero in search of adventure but a *yuródivyy*: a God's fool, a spiritual guide whose paradox-ridden behaviour inspires transcendental sensitivity in others (Kuśmierczyk, 2012, 326). A look at Stalker through the lens of the model of the *yuródivyy* personality (highly popular in Russian culture, with another famous example being Prince Mishkin from *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky) casts new light on Tarkovsky's film: the tale about exploration of the Zone's depths can also be construed as a parable of a spiritual journey, of travelling into your own depth. After the Chornobyl disaster Tarkovsky's film began to be perceived as a prophetic augury of the tragedy, and "stalker" became a generic term used to describe people illegally crossing the borders of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, a phenomenon described in greater detail in the following chapter.

Stalker is a film whose oneiric form renders the Zone's "climate" perfectly well, building a strong image of it, even though its plot does not obviously concern the tragedy of 1986 (the same case is Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, which Oksana Zabuzhko believes to have provided the best expression of the experience of the Chornobyl disaster). Johanna Lindbladh (2019) emphasises that what many productions filmed after 1986 have in common is looking at Chornobyl as an apocalypse that not only changes the lives of the protagonists and makes them face moral choices but also becomes a trigger for moral, religious, political, existential, and/or emotional rebirth. Among the films that touch upon the subject of Chornobyl in that manner is *Aurora* (2006) directed by Oksana Bayrak. It was the Ukrainian candidate for the Academy Award for a non-English language film in 2007. It tells the story of Aurora, an orphan girl dreaming about a career as a ballet dancer, who received a large dose of radiation during the explosion in the Chornobyl NPP. The USSR sends her for treatment to the USA but it turns out her treatment has not been paid for. In the hospital, she meets an actor and star of the Russian ballet trying to break free from his drug addiction. Obviously, the encounter changes the lives of the duo. Such an optimistic message would be hard to find in *Land of Oblivion* directed by Michale Boganim (2011), offering an image of the city's former inhabitants incapable of rebuilding their lives in another place. An interesting thread is the figure of Anya, who married on the day of the disaster and a decade later was a guide for French-speaking groups regularly visiting the ghost town of Pripyat.

An important theme in the Chornobyl films is the problem of being a hero when good choices are hard to come by. In an article devoted to Alexander

Mindadze's *Innocent Saturday* (2011), Johanna Lindbladh (2012) studies different interpretations of the film depending on various concepts of heroism, characteristic of the realms of Western and Soviet cultures. In the face of apocalypse, heroism in the film is shown in a guise somewhat similar to that of van Trier's film: a heartrending albeit surreal drama revealing how difficult it is to escape when you leave your friends oblivious of the danger.

The morality of the hero is also a problem that is blown up to painful dimensions in the latest Russian-language production *Chernobyl: Abyss* (aka. *Chernobyl 1986*, 2021) distributed, among others, on Netflix. Like Mindadze's film, Danila Kozlovsky's picture, intended to be a reply to the *Chernobyl* (2019) series, is based on a relationship developing in an apocalyptic shadow. Unfortunately, the protagonists of Kozlovsky's film are emotional puppets, and the melodramatic plot twists resemble a soap opera. Nonetheless, the main criticism of the film concerns the fictional elements of the plot in denial of the facts, even though Russia boasted that this film would provide the "truer" silver screen version of the events. Olga Briukhovetska (2016) wrote an essay on the film representation of Chornobyl in Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian cinema, justifying it by saying that films about the disaster are an example of the fight for the memory of the trauma and the right to represent the future in the context of historical politics.

In a sense, the article became the harbinger to one of the themes discussed by viewers and experts alike after the premiere of HBO/Sky *Chernobyl*, which not only gained critical acclaim, but also spectacular ratings. *Chernobyl* had a 9.7-star (out of 10) average rating from about 140,000 users on the Amazon-owned IMDb site (Spangler 2019). It has also been given a high rating of 9.1 on its Russian counterpart KinoPoisk.

The five episodes of the series, written and produced by Craig Mazin, recount the first days following the failure in the Chornobyl NPP, and the plot of the last one is based on the relationship between Valery Legasov, a Soviet scientist and the head of the committee investigating the reasons behind the disaster (Jared Harris), and Boris Shcherbina, Deputy President of the Council of Ministers of the USSR (Stallan Skarsgård). The script is a real gem, based on Alexievich's reports, and in the photographs of Igor Kostin for the visual layer. In this way, it makes room for tracing the sources of inspiration by the Zone's aficionados. Its care for realism has been appreciated by viewers and critics alike. To a large extent, thanks to the work of local specialists (working on costumes, for example) employed while the film was shot in Lithuania, the picture of the life of the Soviet people was rendered perfectly with just small glitches. That realism of the series triggered a number of debates concerning its credibility: minor errors on the set were criticised (such as plastic window frames) as well as the tweaking of certain events (e.g., a helicopter crash caused by radiation and not hitting the wires of a crane with its propeller blades). Major controversies centred on the figure of Ulana Khomyuk, a figure invented by the scriptwriters. She was intended to represent the academic milieu and primarily

to emphasise the role of women in the contemporary USSR. However, most media hype surrounded Lyudmilla Ignatenko, wife of a firefighter who died of the radiation syndrome. Her story was first described by Alexievich in *Chernobyl Prayer*. Ignatenko's lawyer is of the opinion that she never agreed to have her tale used for the series, which under Ukrainian law justifies a suit against the authors of the series. Ukrainian media also published news that Ukrtelefilm and Ukrkinochronika intended to sue HBO for copyright infringement. This is connected with two films from 1986 and 1993 that referred to the Chornobyl disaster (Shulzhenko, 2021).

It must not be forgotten that the series is fiction that is only inspired by the facts. Soon after the series premiered, Sky TV, its co-producer, prepared additional material devoted to the explosion in the Chornobyl NPP. The 49-minute open access documentary, *The Real Chernobyl* features people who participated in the events of 1986. The series generated a lively discussion about the course of the disaster, and its reasons and consequences. Three decades on from the calamity, the witnesses found themselves in the focus of interest, giving interviews and commenting on the series (Shramovych & Chornous, 2019), online forums (*r/chernobyl*, 2012) swarmed with posts tracing inspirations for the series, and a wave of articles and features on the disaster and its consequences regarding the popularity of the series inundated the media (Bendix, 2019). The series shows not only the scale of the calamity and the tragedies of the victims as it is exceedingly emotional but also, as emphasised by its scriptwriter Craig Mazin, it is a tale of dangers growing in the wake of a lie that always leads to a bad end. Just before his suicidal death, Legasov asks the fundamental question about who is guilty, and answers it clearly: the blame must not be laid on individual people but a system built on lies (*Chernobyl*, Episode 1, 1:23:45):

> It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognize the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth and content ourselves instead with stories?

The question about the truth and authenticity is, at the same time, a question asked in reference to the series itself. As Donstrup and Algaba (2020) point out:

> The version of the disaster which the series provides is far from the neutrality and truthfulness (…). In this regard, the audiovisual representation of the truth through this fictional miniseries leads to the demonisation of the Other, as previous film and TV productions used to contribute to the construction of the figure of the Soviets and the historical reconstruction of the Cold War period.

Braithwaite (2019) notices in a similar spirit that "the series was less certain in its gallant attempt to portray Soviet political and social reality."

The Russian-speaking media charge the series straightforwardly with mistakes resulting from ignorance and purposeful distortion of the facts resulting from "Russophobia": "Illiterate, stupid, uninquiring idiots", "HBO's *Chernobyl* miniseries has enraged Russia's state media and pro-Kremlin reporters. Here's why they hate it" (n.d.). The viewers noticed that the picture shows a Western-centric perspective too. However, paradoxically, as demonstrated by the reviews in KinoPoisk, despite the criticism of the Soviet Union's negative image, commentators give very high notes to the series (*Чернобыль (2019, сериал, 1 сезон) – отзывы и рецензии,* n.d.).

However, it is not coming to terms with a Soviet past that is the key to understanding the popularity of the series. As Rindzevičiūtė (2020) depicts, its popularity results not only from the exoticism of presenting a tale of Soviet science entangled in relationships with the regime that turned scientists into loyal servants of the ideology, at the same time expecting they would think creatively. She believes that the series gained such a broad resonance as it presents a universal problem, namely, the relationship between man and technoscience. The problem, as 2020 showed, is extremely current and valid not only when energy sources are in question. The series showing the relationships between ordinary people, the world of science, and the authorities, in the context of responsibility for the situation of a crisis threatening life and health, as well as crisis management that entails limiting individual freedoms, is in perfect sync with the doubts that have affected the global community from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The "alien and American" series began to shape the imagination around the disaster more powerfully than the "native" narratives based on the local memory that is still accessible in direct contact with the witnesses of the events. In a text written for *The New Yorker*, Masha Gessen (2019) admitted that "It being television, and very well-received television at that, it is the series, rather than the books, that will probably finally fill the vacuum where the story of Chornobyl should be. This is not a good thing."

The *Chernobyl* series is a perfect example of how cultural texts can determine the image of the past, using both the resources of historical knowledge and remembrance by creating a new narrative that begins to dominate as "the authentic one". It is hard not to notice the analogy that, for Ukraine, *Chernobyl* is turning into what *Schindler's List* was for Poland. The tale of the catastrophe is already living its own global life in the media, breathing life into the past and, by that token, leading to a reflection of the significance and representations of Chornobyl's heritage.

To explore the forbidden

Tamara Hundorova (2019) writes about two paradigms of Chornobyl (non-)representation, which she calls Chornobyl catastrophism and Chornobyl stalkerism. The first turns reality into a phantasm and, by processing catastrophe into spectacle, it performs a nuclear sublimation. This paradigm allows media representations of Chornobyl, virtual visualisations,

and simulations focusing on the disaster itself, to be found. The latter means a return to the real through a new type of witness, a wanderer in the Zone. The researcher refers to the literature but her observations may be extended to other cultural texts, in which a conspicuous theme of exploring the Zone is visible. As much as the works described earlier focus primarily on the disaster and its consequences, the Zone's discovery sets the plot in the "here and now" of the Zone. Writing about the "stalker" paradigm, the author makes references to the travelogue of Markiyan Kamysh (Камиш, 2015). Unlike many texts of the "post-Chornobyl library" (Hundorova, 2019), his narrative is not turned towards the past but faces the contemporary problems of the Zone. Although born to the family of a liquidator, Kamysh himself looks at Chornobyl through the eyes of a stalker who finds his *locus amoenus*, a friendly place, in the Zone, one that provides breathing space and shelter (Derkachova, 2017). His book has been translated into Italian, French, and Bulgarian. Kamysh writes that "illegal tourists turn dead cities into living ones" (Камиш, 2015, p. 105). Another source following the romanticising aesthetics of the illegal explorations is a short film/clip from 2019, entitled *Wonderwall* and directed by Alexander Denysenko (*Wonderwall – a surreal musical journey through the Chernobyl exclusion zone*, n.d.). It portrays the story of a boy taking an oneiric trip of the Zone. In this sepia-coloured film, it is easy to find inspirations from Tarkovsky but also links between Chornobyl and Fukushima. The film portrays the romantic face of being a stalker: entering the Zone is easy, the protagonists move around it freely, entering the buildings, the roofs, as well as Duga. However, the purpose of that wandering is not to show what a stalker is as such. The filmmakers claim that their purpose was (*Wonderwall – a surreal musical journey through the Chernobyl exclusion zone*, n.d.):

> to show the unique perspective of the universal life experiences such as loss, as well as the theme of Chernobyl from an emotionally new point of view, without the traditional sense of fear and anxiety; to inspire and give hope, being a beacon of light into the many hearts that are filled with grief from their loss caused by cancer.

Thus, like in Kamysh, the Zone is not a space of trauma but an area where you can work through it: a place of safety that gives you power. Niche rather than mainstream, these two works show the Zone in an entirely new interpretation: not as a space of threat and danger that can accost you from anywhere, which was precisely the image of the Zone in the two previous decades.

Chernobyl Diaries from 2012, directed by Brad Parker, certainly belongs to the most distinctive films. The horror received few favourable reviews from critics or viewers. Both groups felt disillusioned with the shallowness of the plot, poor characterisation of the protagonists, and finally copying other films of the genre. One of the reviews reads "*Chernobyl Diaries* is afflicted

with a fatal flaw that damages many horror films: after a better-than-average setup and a promising first half, everything falls apart" (Scheck, 2012). For the lovers of mutants, zombies, and eviscerated human bodies, the film meets the fundamental criteria of entertainment. However, it is interesting mostly due to the location (empty spaces of the CEZ offering plentiful field for the imagination to roam) and the context in which the protagonists arrive in Pripyat. On a typical grand tour of Europe, a group of young Americans visiting Kyiv decide to visit Pripyat, persuaded by the brother of one of them. They are on what is known as "an extreme tour" and Yuri, a former special forces soldier, will be their guide. Their conversation about the exploration includes questions and comments typical of the people interested in visiting the Zone: what you can actually see there, and if the radiation level is safe. Paul, living in Kyiv, presses them to go, his brother Chris is sceptical but is convinced by his friend's argument, "We are in Europe. See as much as possible as we are already here." Assuming it is absolutely safe to go, the tourists decide that the visit is worth it. To go, to take cool pictures, and leave. "It can be a kind of cool" is bandied as a final argument. Then they meet the mysterious Yuri, whose "agency" makes a "professional" impression on them, and with two other backpackers, who arrive at the agreed venue of departure at the last moment, they climb into an old van. On the way, they keep asking Yuri about what they are going to see and the reasons behind the disaster, and watch the poverty of Kyiv's outskirts through the window. After a time they reach the checkpoint, where they are somewhat surprised that an abandoned city is guarded by the army, and begin to realise that this is no ordinary trip. Until that moment, Parker's film can be treated as a paradocumentary rather than a horror, as it accurately depicts both the behaviour of tourists and the organisation of such visits late in the first decade of the 21st century. A similar plot can be found in *After Chernobyl* directed by Igor Kinko and Maxim Litvinov from 2021. This Russian–Ukrainian–American co-production also presents a group of tourists travelling in Eastern Europe who make it to the Zone. The film did not receive good reviews, being unoriginal in both the plot and means of expression.

Unlike the films discussed above, a Russian-language TV series *Чернобыль: Зона отчуждения* directed by Anders Banke and Pavel Kostomarov from 2014 has garnered positive comments from viewers. Two eight-episode seasons were produced, and a three-episode sequel closing the tale was aired in 2019. The series mixes horror, science fiction, and action with state-of-the-art special effects. The plot starts in Moscow, home to five friends. After a thief breaks into the flat of one of them, the youngsters find an online video which shows him going with 8 million roubles to Pripyat. The friends mount a chase, and the atmosphere becomes more uncomfortable with every kilometre travelled. Escaping quickly from the danger zone, the heroes fall into a time loop and arrive in Chornobyl a few hours before the disaster. Although the first episodes may disenchant, the following ones gain pace, and the plot becomes attractive. Rather than being presented as home to

zombies and mutants, the Zone is presented as a space of lurking evil that will always appear in the most surprising way. Seeking similarities, viewers often mention *Dark*, the first German-language production for Netflix from 2017.

Since the 1990s, film-induced tourism has been one of the fastest developing forms of cultural tourism (Beeton, 2016). Films make a strong impact on the decision to visit a place, which not only translates into the popularity of a destination among tourists soon after a film is released but also contributes to the long-term development of a venue based on tourist products referring to the locations where the film was shot, heroes, plot, and the like. The film image is a particular language that creates a representation of a specific place; therefore many destination marketing organisations (DMOs) have contributed to the quick development of tourism, thanks to promotion based on marketing connected to film and series productions.

Speaking of representations of the Zone in pop culture, those in video games also need mentioning. The most famous Chornobyl game is *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, which actually represents a whole series: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl*, its prequel *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Clear Sky*, and sequel *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Call of Pripyat*. This FPP shooter with elements of RPG and survival was created by the GSC Game World studio from Ukraine and proved a spectacular success. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* has sold over 5 million copies (every tenth of them bought in the former USSR in the first two weeks of sales only), with the revenue exceeding $100 million. Sergiy Grygorovych, one of the creative minds behind the game and director of GSC Game World, believes that the game originated from the eagerness to create a "national" project (Степанец et al., 2017, p. 379). *Cossacks*, an earlier game project of GSC Game World, became an export hit. Grygorovych remarked that (Степанец et al., 2017, p. 379):

> many subjects and courses have been exploited by others many times, that is why when a country proposes something unique, like the Japanese – their samurai, and we – Cossacks, and Pripyat and Chernobyl, if this moreover appears for the first time, the effect is entirely different.

The statement of the game's developer is extremely interesting from the point of view of treating Chornobyl as cultural heritage of Ukraine that, despite its tragic quality, is its hallmark.

The game was created with Western players in mind; hence it had to make references to general associations. The developers believed that, despite drawing the vocabulary and elements of the plot from the novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky and the film by Andrei Tarkovsky, the sources are no more than just loose inspiration. The gameplay follows on the 1986 disaster: 20 years later, in 2006 the sarcophagus, that is the construction built over the damaged reactor of the Chornobyl NPP, exploded causing another wave of radioactive contamination, and in consequence

natural anomalies (mutated animals and plants) in the 30-kilometre Zone. Moreover, the Zone's area is expanding, and a mysterious power literally rips living organisms apart into halves and causes wounds that do not heal. Access to the Zone is carefully guarded by the army. Several years later, a handful of adventurous spirits known as stalkers venture into the Zone to gather the remaining artefacts, strange plants and other objects, and later to sell them. The player is one of those stalkers combing the Zone. In the game, your name is the Marked One and after an accident you suffer from amnesia, even though you remember your life's goal: to find Strelok and kill him. Who Strelok is, why the Marked One wants to kill him, and what mystery is hidden in the Zone are the key questions that the gameplay exploits. Making you enter the Zone, meet mutants and dangerous enemies, it brings together elements of adventure, tactical, role-play, and action games. All the parts of the franchise feature perfect graphics that make the gaming experience very realistic. From the formal point of view, the visual quality of the game should be called illusionism, which, like in painting, tries to render an illusion of reality as faithfully as possible, assuming that even those elements (figures and objects) that have no real counterpart (like the mutated animals) also have realistic colours and materials. The details of the CEZ space were rendered with extraordinary meticulousness which, if not for the specific colours of the game, could allow it to be treated as a virtual tour of the Zone. Another popular video game that refers to the space of the CEZ is *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* from 2007; however, only one "mission" is situated in Pripyat, whose role boils down to an aesthetic gimmick, as the plot only alludes to the Chornobyl disaster, while the central theme is the power play between various factions during the civil war in Russia, driven by ultra-nationalists. Proof of the exceptional quality of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is the highly active gaming community who continue to roam the mysterious Zone even 10 years after the game premiered. Many players visit the Zone to experience its real space, which is relatively easy even on a standard organised tour. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* recreates many of the most characteristic locations in the Zone, while their exploration in the game is a natural consequence of following the path of the plot. Since 2010, GSC Game World has worked on the second part of the game. The project encountered many financial and technical problems and was supposed to premiere in 2020, yet due to the pandemic was postponed to 2022.

Chernobylite, a PC game from The Farm 51, premiered in July 2021. A small-studio product, the game nicknamed "the Polish *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*", was eagerly awaited by players fascinated with post-apocalyptic moods. Proof of that is the Kickstarter campaign that the company launched in 2019 which collected twice as much money as intended (over $200,000). *Chernobylite* is an FPP action game featuring survival horror, science fiction, and role-play; however, it is more exploratory than *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and its gameplay is spun around the Chornobyl disaster. The hero is a physicist setting forth to the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone to find his long-lost

fiancée. On arrival, he finds the area controlled by the army mining a precious raw material, chornobylite (an authentic substance developed from the melted down reactor core and nuclear fuel), and the Zone inhabited by monsters. The plot takes place on two temporal planes: in the past during the catastrophe and at present when the hero is looking for traces of the past in the Zone. The game renders the area of the Zone with extreme precision, as it is based on the unique technology of rendering space that brings together photogrammetry with laser scanning (Róg et al., 2018). The visual aspect and the intriguing plot are the two elements especially appreciated in the first game reviews (Stremler, 2021).

It is hard now to foresee the influence this game will have on the shaping of the Zone's image; however, representations of Chornobyl in video games are worth a more extensive insight. It is impossible not to notice the growing interest in video games in the context of tourism development (Jimura, 2021). One of the most frequently discussed cases is the spectacular success of *Assassin's Creed* that not only proves that digital games can be treated as a form of history (Chapman, 2018; Kapell & Elliott, 2013) but as virtual heritage tourism (Champion, 2020) as well. Literature on the subject appreciates the potential of games as "touristic promotional tools" (Esteves & Quelhas Brito, 2020), of gamification as a reinforcement of the touristic experience (Xu et al., 2017; Smorti, 2018) and also an alternative to physical visits to heritage sites (video games as virtual tours) and the ensuing problem of authenticity and immersion (Mochocki, 2021). A related question is video-game-induced tourism, which revolves around people being motivated to travel due to their experience with video gaming. Not surprisingly, many *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* fans either intend to or have already visited the Zone (Banaszkiewicz & Duda, 2020).

To present the dark

It is absolutely fascinating to observe the process in which a place of cultural trauma turns into a tourist attraction. Chornobyl would never have become such a popular tourist destination if not for cultural texts and, even though it is controversial, a tourist attraction is a product of distilling the difficult through the filter of what sells in popular culture. Post-catastrophic radiation leading to an increase in real morbidity resulted in visions of Chornobyl mutants. The evacuation of the population turned the buildings of Pripyat into a ruin that turned into a post-apocalyptic landscape, just to mention the fourth instalment of *Return of the Living Dead: Necropolis* (directed by Ellory Elkayem, 2004) and *Transformers 3* (directed by Michael Bay, 2010). These visions have little in common with reality, but it is to seek out the ruins and mutants that hundreds of tourists set forth each year for the Zone.

The last category of cultural texts are the ones that explicitly examine the realm of travelling and tourism, which originate when a given location begins to be perceived as a tourist destination, which obviously entails

an opportunity of its wider exploration. This is a process that works both ways, as the more narratives about a tourist attraction are produced, the greater the interest in the place, and the greater the interest the more the narratives. The Chornobyl Exclusion Zone began to break into the global tourist discourse with a label of a post-catastrophic place of dark tourism just over a decade ago. Even in 2007, in the part devoted to dark tourism, which also describes the darkometer classification (the indicator of places that attract the interest of dark tourists) the *Lonely Planet Bluelist 2007 Yearbook* included Auschwitz, Roben Island, and Montserrat but it still did not list the CEZ. However, *The Dark Tourist – Sightseeing in the world's most unlikely holiday destinations*, a book by the British comedian Don Joly, was published just four years later. As becomes a comedian, Joly employed a witty style to describe his adventures in various parts of the world, Ukraine included. In his description, it is a typical exotic post-communist country, where he spent a night in a horrible hotel, where he was locked in an elevator, and then couldn't have anything "traditionally Ukrainian" to eat, and was pestered by the room service calling his room at night. During an excursion into the Zone he chanced upon Sergei "who seemed a cheerful fellow". His group featured a typical national mix: a handful of Brits, Americans, a Belgian, a Korean, and an Australian. Joly wondered at the necessity to adjust to "the dress code" (no sandals!) and was moved by a documentary, which probably was *The Battle for Chernobyl*. Joly himself proved quite a surprise for the guide, as he identified the buildings in Pripyat having spent 17 days playing *Call of Duty 4*. A similar compilation arranged according to the "most attractive places in category X" key is *Visit Sunny Chernobyl* (Blackwell, 2013).

With the years passing by, Chornobyl has become a destination associated with ruins and contamination; however, its recognisability entailed a broadening trend of interest in dark and dangerous places. Although the city did not feature as a destination in the Dark Tourist eight-episode series from New Zealand produced by Netflix in 2018, the series promoted the notion of dark tourism even further into the everyday language of pop culture. In that production, David Ferrier, a journalist styling himself as an heir to the image of Louis Theroux, travels to the most "mad, macabre, and morbid" places in the world. However, being a kaleidoscopic merger of locations, "*Dark Tourist* (…) is less often a travelogue than a voyeuristic trip into the grimmest regions of the human psyche" (Gilbert, 2018). The sensationalist thrill- and outrage-seeking approach, the choice of examples controversial in their definition of dark tourism (e.g., locations connected to the Paul Escobar dictatorship) that make the series, whose unquestioned advantage is entertainment, and countered criticism of the content layer.

Even though Chornobyl did not make it to the Netflix series, in recent years it has attracted Western *travelbrities*, becoming for example "the hero" of one of the episodes of *Top Gear* (2014) and the subject of a report by a recognised British traveller, writer, and TV personality Ben Fogle, shown on

Channel 5 (2020). These productions make it clear that the final material was prepared in cooperation with local experts on Chornobyl tourism, and it is in fact they who disclose the mysteries of the Zone, even though they are not the ones who later play the leading role in the films. A similar phenomenon can be detected in the publications largely based on the local know-how. In 2020 Darmon Richter, a British photographer and writer, published *Chernobyl: A Stalkers' Guide*, being a "photo guide-cum-travelogue". The Brit repeatedly visited the Zone as a member of legal groups, and once, illegally, as a tourist taken on an illegal excursion by an experienced stalker, Kirill Stepanec. Kirill is one of the most "media-friendly" stalkers, and it is largely due to him that we owe the publicity of the stalkers' image of the Zone. As another participant in Richter's illegal visit remarked, "Without Kirill, we are lost, somewhere in a forest, with no water, no map, and no plan" (Balakjian, 2019). One is tempted to note an analogy with describing the new inaccessible regions of the world by explorers – discoverers who, styling themselves as heroes, without their guides would have been doomed to fail.

The ranks of people who locally specialise in Chornobyl and cooperate on various projects promoting Chornobyl tourism are highly limited. Kirill Stepanec is a co-author (with Denis Vishnevskiy, head of the scientific unit at the Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve; Serhii Paskevich, Deputy Director on Research from the Institute for Safety Problems of Nuclear Power Plants NAS Ukraine, and Viktoria Ugriumova, writer and journalist, expert on Kyiv) of the *Чернобыльская зона глазами сталкера* guidebook (Степанец et al., 2017). It was published by the Sky Horse publishing house owned by Vladimir Nevzorov, who a few years ago started a new project for a publishing house and design studio "nahs.haus". It is therefore no surprise that the beautifully edited English-language publication of *Interesting Chernobyl: 100 Symbols* in awesomeheritage.com, a new series dedicated to the top symbols of cities and countries, was written by the same authors and translated by Ann Merill, an American who has worked with Chornobyl Tour for a number of years. I describe these connections in detail to show that the local experts in Chornobyl heritage slowly break through to global consumers not only as "providers" of know-how for Anglophone stars but also fully-fledged creators responsible for the Zone's presence in the media.

Beyond doubt, an important supplement to these narratives is the content produced and streamed by the "online travel community" (Lee et al., 2011), who have great potential to exert a positive impact on travel planning in the process of making consumer decisions (Ayeh et al., 2013). As Graham Dann (2012) wrote, the language of tourism evolved from the monologue in which the speaker was the tourist branch and the tourists were the recipient, to a trialogue in which the interaction takes place between tourists, the tourist sector, and locals or external experts. Social media has turned into one of the key sources of information about tourist destinations and offers. TripAdvisor is not only one of the most visited travel and tourism websites worldwide but also one of the most trustworthy sources of information (*TripAdvisor*,

2019). The first reviews of visits to Chornobyl appeared on TripAdvisor in 2004. These are mostly opinions in English referring to a specific organised tour offer, far fewer of them concerning the assessment of the location. Therefore, it is a perfect marketing tool for organisers who are keen to have the largest possible number of positive opinions (which is why it has become standard that tourists are invited towards the end of a tour to comment on their experiences on social media). Each of the three largest operators, that is, Chornobyl Tour, ChernobylWel.Com, and SoloEast Travel, has over 2500 reviews. Certainly it would be a highly revealing and interesting project to study the content of the reviews and author profiles. One can assume that these opinions primarily reach a mass recipient and are short comments that reinforce the positive reception of the Zone and the offer of organised tourism. A slightly more nuanced picture, albeit calling for a separate study, comes from the multitude of entries on professional or amateur blogs, in online newsletters/magazines, travel platforms, and tourist services which certainly translates into the number of visitors, which is well illustrated by crowd waiting to enter the Zone (see Figure 2.2).

Finally, attention should be paid to a particular phenomenon of the community of Chornobyl "fans", whose activity in the social media is not as much of marketing significance but rather assumes the form of promoting the know-how on the Zone and provides guidelines and suggestions on how to visit the Zone. An excellent example is the group known as "Chernobyl Exclusion Zone by stalker's eyes" – an open Facebook group with over 28,000 members – which certainly deserves the name of an online travel community. It is worth noting that the group's activity does not refer to physical travel only, as in their posts its members upload archival materials, comment on the current situation in the Zone, and discuss publications and videos referring to the subject of Chornobyl. For this reason, it is an important space for grassroots shaping of the heritage discourse.

Shadow of Chornobyl as a product

According to Hundorova (2019), Chornobyl is undergoing vulgarisation, and the phenomenon concerns both high-brow and mass culture. As far as high-brow culture is concerned, the author tried to express the inexpressible and touched the truth that cannot find articulation. In mass culture, the nuclear apocalypse has long yielded to commodification and settled the Zone with virtual phantasms.

There are a number of discernible cracks in the discourse of the Chornobyl cultural texts, which makes the Chornobyl representation in culture highly inconsistent. The first is the generation crack. For authors, predominantly Ukrainian, born in the 1960s, who experienced the disaster consciously, Chornobyl is a national trauma, while it is a space of myth and fairy tale for the younger generation, as demonstrated by the travelogue of Markiyan Kamysh. The second crack runs between the local and the so-called Western perspectives. In this case, a precise analysis of the Chornobyl discourse

Figure 2.2 Overtourism? Dytiatki Checkpoint (summer 2018).

Source: Photo by the author.

could be conducted with the use of categories characteristic of the studies of postcolonial narratives and practices. Superimposed on these is obviously the question of alignment of the artistic representations with "the historical truth" and a discussion of memory and trauma. Do the Chornobyl narratives, predominantly films and series, operate, as Landsberg wrote referring to *Schindler's List*, by shaping the prosthetic memory? Do they allow an aesthetic reworking of the trauma of Chornobyl? How do they shape the tourist imagination? Do the narratives focused on tourism simplify the picture of the disaster, bringing it down to only a marginal theme that leaves room for the description of the Zone as an exciting tourist destination?

One can be tempted to take down several general conclusions that are certainly far from exhausting the complexity of this problem range. The cultural texts are proof of the "vitality" of the Chornobyl disaster. They are read anew through the lens of successive phenomena, not only disasters but also crises that affect the global community. Thanks to this, for the society of risk (Beck, 2004), Chornobyl is of outstanding, universal value. Second, the (non-)representativeness of the disaster finds an outlet in art, which results in hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994). It would have been naïve to assume that you can tell the truth of Chornobyl in an unequivocal manner, just like no full truth can be written, said or expressed about any other historical event. Cultural texts can help to work on the trauma but, at the same time, they create an image of the past that is only one of the many visions of what happened. They certainly hone the imagination of those who arrive in the Zone and those who work in it and provide a significant point of reference for creating narratives and therefore for interpreting heritage.

3 Chornobyl tourism

The Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) has recently been considered one of the greatest tourist attractions of Ukraine even though visiting the Zone was considered an extreme adventure but a decade ago. Anna Romanova (2020) depicts four stages of the development of Chornobyl tourism: (1) illegal visits to the Zone (from the late 1980s); (2) official visits (from the late 1990s); (3) emergence of Chornobyl tourism companies (from the 2000s); (4) mass tourism (from the 2010s). Several weaknesses can be found in the proposed approach. Firstly, claiming that visits to the Zone were illegal in the 1990s is a certain abuse as they followed other formal rules and took place with the consent of the then managers of the Zone (obviously excluding the illegal intrusions into the Zone, which, by the way, also happen today). Secondly, tourism companies began to emerge in the late 1990s even before the official "opening" of the Zone. Thirdly, the mass character of tourism in the Zone is a phenomenon known from the last five years, resulting from a handful of factors discussed in somewhat greater detail below. To delineate the phases of development of Chornobyl tourism, it makes sense to reach for an established cycle of evolution of tourist areas known as the Tourism Area Life Cycle (Butler, 1980, 2006). It is a hypothetical model and works best when used for ex-post descriptions, as then the individual phases can be defined from the perspective of a holistic process and, moreover, it uses the linear time concept (Singh, 2011). Nonetheless, it offers a certain ordering and reference system in reference to the CEZ. It measures the intensity of life of a tourist area through the number of tourists and the volume of investment into the tourist infrastructure, condition of the environment, and attitude of the locals to tourists and tourism. A tourist area (location) goes through six consecutive phases: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation. Let me successively follow the phases of exploration, involvement, and development of tourism below.

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Tourism development in the CEZ

The exploration phase – proto-tourism (1991–2010)

From the start of its functioning, the Zone might have been abandoned but it wasn't empty. After its establishment, the process of decontamination continued, and the power plant went on operating. The spaces of the abandoned towns and villages were combed by looters (*мародёры*), removing objects of greater value to sell later.

You could enter the Zone legally owing to special permits. They were primarily granted to groups of organised professionals, for example, scientists and industrial workers visiting Chornobyl as part of study tours. Beginning in 1994, Lviv ethnologists studying the culture of Polesie before and after the disaster arrived here on historical and ethnographic expeditions to work in the territory of the Zone. They, too, were granted permits to enter the Zone as "delegations". Vyacheslav, one of the guides involved in Chornobyl tourism to this day, was the president of the group responsible for international cooperation of Chornobyl and entertained delegations in 1990–96. He called that period the time of organising "proto-tours":

> When we were establishing that enterprise, Parashin (at the time deputy director of the Chernobyl powerplant's economics department – author's note) said: the fundamental task we should fulfil is to inform the society, those who are around (the Zone – author's note), that there are no mutants here, that it's been cleansed, and the powerplant operates.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

He believes that the procedure of entering the Zone was not complicated at the time:

> it was enough to write a letter to the director (Parashin from 1994 onwards), who approved delegations entering. [One of the older guides] reminisces that "no one gathered them (groups – author's note), and nobody made those people pay. I don't even know when tours began.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

In Ukraine, the 1990s were a period of transition bearing the brunt of not only the Soviet past but also the situation on the interconnection of two civilisations: Western and Orthodox. In this context, it would be hard not to notice the justification of the concept concerning the clash of civilisations put forward by Samuel Huntington (1998), who used Ukraine as an example of a cleft country. Western Ukraine's aspirations to be transformed to the model of Western European democracies collided with the post-Soviet political and economic system that had its cultural roots in the Byzantine civilisation, which finally resulted in the outbreak of the Orange Revolution

in 2004. An economic crisis, links between politics and the interests of the oligarchs, and the vast corruption were all factors that made the management of the CEZ anything but transparent, and the organisation of the visits was not really controlled. Reigning supreme was one principle, perfectly well known to everyone who functioned in the Soviet system: "if you want to have SOMETHING DONE, you need to contact the right people".

The significance of those personal contacts that enabled the characteristic "getting things done", which often meant actions bordering on legality, increased parallel to the intensification of interest in the Zone. The ChernobylInterInform Agency was established in 1995 to make the Zone transparent to a wider public). That agency was responsible for issuing permits to enter the Zone. According to Пестушко and Чубук (2010), 900 permits for entering the Zone were issued in 1995, a number that trebled within a decade and reached 2800 in 2005. It doubled again in the following three years to reach 5000 permits in 2008. The 20th anniversary of the disaster brought with it new interest in the Zone in the media. People who had earlier been associated with the Zone provided services for the journalists and filmmakers eager to learn the secrets of the Zone, increasing the level of professionalism in "Chernobyl tourism". Their number included Alexander Sirota, the man behind the project Pripyat.com. Originally intended as a website devoted to Pripyat and people resettled from the city in 1986, Center Pripyat.com was registered in 2007 as an NGO fighting the looters and thieves, and various forms of destruction in the Zone. At the moment of the explosion in the NPP, Sirota was 10 and lived in Pripyat with his mother who worked at the Energetik palace of culture. With thousands of other children, later called "the children of Chernobyl", he was relocated after the explosion, never to return to his hometown for good. He became famous in the autumn of 1995 when his letter of appeal entitled "I want them to remember" was printed in the *DNA News* magazine published by the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs. Today Sirota, who has earned the moniker of "the mayor of Pripyat", lives in Dytiatki, a village near the Zone. Other than creating a virtual monument–memorial of Pripyat (Pripyat 3-D project) recreating the pre-catastrophe city in virtual reality, and being the link between the resettled who have scattered all over the world, he has been a guide to the Zone since his appearance in the media a decade after the disaster. His main argument is that his "main task is to cherish the memory of the events from 1986. (…) It is more important what they (tourists – author's note) are like when they leave the Exclusion Zone. If, after the journey, tourists can take a different look at their life and imagine themselves in our place, later in their lives they will not allow new 'Chernobyls', whether big or small, then our work is not in vain" (Sirota & Róg, 2016).

The year 2020 marked 25 years since Sirota guided the first group in his hometown. In one of the first interviews, he mentioned that the first tours only happened several times a year and were not commercial. It was only

in 2005 that he started to guide regular tours, something his media image contributed to, as people increasingly turned to him to guide them around the Zone (Чечуліна, 2020).

One of the first organisers of tours in the Zone was the Solo East Travel agency operating from 1999 and founded by Sergii Ivanchuk. Interviewed by Nick Rush-Cooper (2013, p. 35), Ivanchuk recalled that the idea of the trips was born from cooperation with the representatives of the UN Development Programme working on the report of the aftermath of the Chornobyl disaster ("The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident. A Strategy for Recovery. A Report Commissioned by UNDP and UNICEF with the support of UN-OCHA and WHO", 2002), which included ecotourism as a strategy for revival of the Zone: "How did it start? See, well, I used to work in the United Nations, so when I heard that United Nations, kind of, they encouraged this agency too. So, yeah, it was always of interest to me, so. You know, it's like catching, when you start coming here you just can't stop… Plus the money. (laughter)" (#i25).

Less than a decade later, in 2008, Chornobyl Tour[1] entered the Chornobyl tourism market. It was co-founded by Sergii Mirnyi, one of the liquidators of the aftermath of the NPP breakdown, often present in the international arena as an expert in the matters of Chornobyl, author of books and articles on Chornobyl (Mirnyi, 2001a, 2001b), and an active lobbyist for developing Chornobyl tourism to provide an opportunity for the Zone's rebirth and retention of its heritage (Мирный, 2017).

Both companies have established themselves as leaders in the Chornobyl tourism market, cooperating from the start with popular media, including *The Times*, BBC, *Forbes*, *National Geographic*, Discovery Channel, and *The Lonely Planet*. Materials from the Zone shaped the tourists' imagination, emphasising the exclusivity of the area as an absolutely different space following its own laws and still dangerous. A good example comes in the attention-grabbing headline of the report "postcard from hell" published by *The Guardian* in 2004 (Staff, 2004). In 2009, *Forbes* ranked Chornobyl among "the world's most unique places to visit" next to such locations as Pyongyang in North Korea and the Taktsang Monastery in the Kingdom of Bhutan.

The profitability of organising visits to the Zone was on the rise due to the rise of the number of visitors as Figure 3.1 illustrates. Пестушко and Чубук (2010) estimated that, charging each person 200 hryvnia, the Chornobyl power plant earned a million hryvnia from tourism in 2008 only. Recapping his visit, Francesco Cataluccio, an Italian reporter who entered the Zone in 2010, simply wrote that: "In Pripyat you move around like among the ruins of Pompeii. You can imagine that, in the wake of the effort of marketing experts, visiting this 'spectral city' will turn into a great business in a few years, and that they will organise a radioactive-themed Disneyland here: a reserve of extreme experiences" (Cataluccio, 2011, p. 130).

His words were prophetic, as the following decade demonstrated.

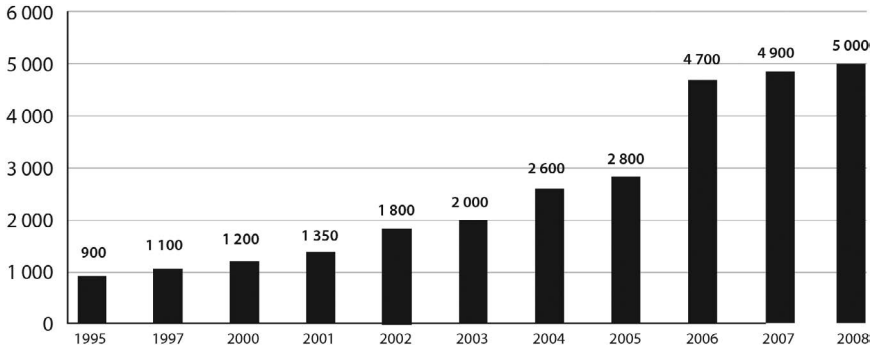

Figure 3.1 The numbers of visitors in the CEZ in 1995–2008.

Involvement – touristification (2011–16)

In 2010–11, a decision to "open the Zone to tourists" was made. After conducting radiological studies that showed a significant drop in radiation, safe visiting routes were marked out and principles governing the visits were arranged. Even though one still needed a permit to enter the Zone, the state decree approved in February 2011 regulated the organisation of "delegations" for the first time (*Про затвердження Порядку відвідування громадянами України, іноземними делегаціями та іноземцями зони відчуження і зони безумовного (обов'язкового) відселення*, 2011.)

Following the administrative reform in the same year, the management of the Zone was entrusted to the State Agency of Ukraine on the Exclusion Zone Management (SAUEZM, *Державне агентство України з управління зоною відчуження*). The period of intensive development of Chornobyl tourism began.

In 2010, the Zone was entered by 8369 tourists, and in 2012, the year when Poland and Ukraine organised the European Football Championship, there were 14,132 visitors. In 2013, the number of tourists doubled compared to 2011.

The Zone was presented as an "extreme" tourist destination. *Visit Sunny Chernobyl: And Other Adventures in the World's Most Polluted Places* (Blackwell, 2013) is a book that discusses travelling to the most polluted places in the world, which the author defines as pollution tourism. Chornobyl is mentioned side-by-side with the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, Amazonia rain forests, oil sand mining in Alberta, Port Arthur in the US and its oil industry, and Yamuna – the most polluted river in India. The episode of Top Gear that visited the Zone (*Ukraine Road Trip: Inside Chernobyl (Series 21, Episode 3)*, 2014) and was aired in 2014 enjoyed plenty of attention. The media message about the possibility of visiting Chornobyl was reinforced by the Fukushima disaster (Veen, 2013). Krupskyi and Temchur (2018) conducted a study analysing the websites of the state and private enterprises

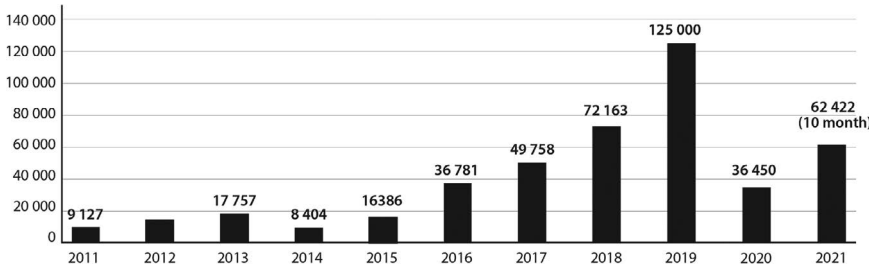

Figure 3.2 The numbers of visitors in the CEZ in 2011–21.

and mass media publications based on the results of trips to the territory in 2013–17, which led them to propose the term "media tourism" for visiting the Zone by journalists acting on their professional duties. They found a strong positive correlation between the number of visitors to the CEZ and the total number of available materials about the territory: "The previous articles form an information layer that stimulates interest in the territory and the demand for new journalistic materials" (Krupskyi & Temchur, 2018, p. 268).

The tourist traffic in the Zone dropped significantly in 2014 resulting from the unstable political situation in the region: the reasons were Euromaidan and the annexation of the Crimea by Russia. Despite these, the number of tourists visiting Chornobyl in 2015 reached the level from 2013, while 2016 was record-breaking with 36,000 people, of which 25,000 were foreign nationals, visiting the CEZ. The growth in the number of visitors to the Zone in 1995–2020 is shown in the graph below (Figure 3.2).

Development – mass tourism (2016–21)

The 30th anniversary of the disaster in 2016 was broadly commented on in the media, with comparisons to Fukushima being made. Ukraine was also a hot subject due to the conflict in Donbass. It is hard not to agree with the observation that "there is a phenomenon of the so-called 'compensation effect', when the reduction of tourists' attention to the territory is compensated by an increase in the attention of the mass media" (Krupskyi and Temchur, 2018, p. 273).

The powerful role of social media, which at the time started to be an important channel of tourist information and promotion, must also be emphasised. The first reviews of the Exclusion Zone (both as a destination and as tours offered) date back to 2015. Currently, the largest tour organisers have garnered several thousand reviews each, most from 2018 and 2019. It is worth using this opportunity to note that until 2016 nearly the entire territory of the CEZ was out of Wi-Fi range and, which is hard to imagine for foreign tourists, even beyond the range of mobile telephone networks.

Mobile Internet arrived in the Zone midway through 2016, when a Vodafone 3G cell was launched in Pripyat. Wi-Fi Internet access became available late in 2017 also in a new site offering lodging in Chornobyl. From the start, compared to the Pripyat Hotel and the Desiatka Hotel, the Polissya Hotel offered a high standard of services: each room contained a modern TV set and a bathroom with shower. The development of tourist infrastructure answered the growing demand for higher levels of service quality, expected primarily by the foreign visitors to the Zone. That fundamental dependency had been noted by Nick Rush-Cooper a few years earlier (Rush-Cooper, 2013, p. 37):

> There is no design of the site with respects to tourism. No attempts to modify the ruins to make them safer, no areas cleaned of radiation that were not cleaned for the workers. Nor does commodification work as a framework for tours. There is money being made, but this is not as a result of any attempts to 'package' the Zone as a destination, but rather a response to demand.

It is the "grapevine marketing" in online social media that needs to be pointed out as promoting the image of the CEZ as an exciting tourist attraction, and the introduction of mod cons for the tourists is a consequence of the number of tourists with specific needs and requirements growing in the later years. But there are some other factors that influence the development of tourism in the CEZ in recent years. It also resulted from the development of the countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy-East as tourist destinations (*European Neighbourhood Policy – East – tourism statistics*, n.d.).

Within a decade (2009–19), there was a stable increase in the number of arrivals of non-residents staying in hotels and similar establishments in the six ENP-East countries, particularly in Georgia. After the crisis of 2008, the number of arrivals in Ukraine steadily rose, from 24 million in 2009 to 26 million in 2013, even though the conflict in the Crimea resulted in the number being cut in half.

It should also be borne in mind that at least part of the reduction of the arrivals in Ukraine should be attributed to changes in the geographical coverage of the data. A loss of such a tourist gem as the Crimea as well as the unstable situation in Eastern Ukraine automatically made Western Ukraine, primarily Kyiv and Lviv, gain significant numbers of tourists, even though the development of arrival tourism was obviously far less dynamic immediately after the annexation of the Crimea, as Ukraine was considered a rather unsafe country. However, since 2017, Ukraine has had the fastest rate of Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) score growth in the Eurasian subregion, rising 10 places to rank 78th globally (*Ukraine. Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019.*, n.d.).

In autumn 2018, the low-cost airline Ryanair opened Ukraine by connecting Kyiv to 10 destinations and Lviv to 5. In just one year, the airline

doubled the number of its destinations and served over 1.5 million passengers (ES, 2019). In 2020, the UK's low-cost airline easyJet was also licensed to fly to Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2019, the passenger traffic at Boryspil, Ukraine's largest airport, increased by 84%, to provide services for over 15 million passengers in 2019.

Thanks to the extensive network of cheap connections to the cities of Western Europe and in the wake of the crisis in Crimea, the nationality structure of foreign tourists began to change. Since the 1990s, the neighbouring countries (Russia, Belarus, Moldova, and Poland) had the largest share in inbound tourism. That was not only due to the proximity and pricing but also because people arriving from those countries accepted a lower quality of services than expected by tourists from outside the former Eastern bloc. It must not be forgotten that the statistics also recognised people arriving on business and for family reasons as tourists: these two reasons were especially important as far as the arrivals from Belarus and Russia are concerned. From the time of the Crimean crisis, the border exchange with Russia decreased radically, and the tourists from Russia who eagerly thronged to the Ukrainian spas actually ceased to arrive. The share of tourists from countries other than the neighbouring ones – Spain, the UK, the US, and China – was constantly rising in inbound tourism. In an article published by *The Spectator*, James Delingpole wrote: "Calling all British tourists – Ukraine needs you! The inhabitants of Kiev are brave in the face of a tanking economy and the fighting in the east". One should have no illusions that tourists from the United Kingdom rallied to visit Kyiv for altruistic reasons to support the Ukrainian economy.

Ukraine was and is one of the most "budget" destinations in Europe. In 2018, regarding the costs of living it was ranked as one of the lowest, which obviously became a significant argument for choosing Kyiv for tourists seeking new experiences at a low price. The phenomenon known as "cheap alcohol tourism", which so badly affected the residents of Kraków and Prague, found Kyiv as a new location. To quote one of the bloggers "As far as cheap places for nightlife go, Ukraine is pretty hard to beat" (Reynolds, 2020). However, it would be an oversimplification to call all the arriving tourists the pursuers of cheap alcohol. The fact that Kyiv city breaks became fashionable was reflected in an increase of tourist traffic in Chornobyl as well.

Like Versailles for Paris, Peterhof for St Petersburg, and Auschwitz for Kraków, for Kyiv the CEZ became the main option for a one-day trip for people arriving in Ukraine's capital.

Late in 2018, it was expected that the number of tourists in the following year may exceed the magical 100,000 mark. And yes, the CEZ was visited in 2019 by 124,001 tourists. That means that the number of arrivals in 2019 doubled compared to 2018 and trebled compared to 2017. In 2015–19, the average annual growth in the number of visitors to the Exclusion Zone was 23,387 people, which corresponds to a mean growth rate of 1.91 (Iurchenko & Iurchenko, 2020). It is generally believed that broadcasting the *Chernobyl*

series helped tourist traffic in the Zone soar by 30% or even 40% (Noack, 2019). It would be difficult to prove that the series did not contribute to an increase in the media interest in Chornobyl and the Zone itself. It should also be borne in mind that it was not the only reason for the record number of visits to the Zone in 2019. For the Zone had received plenty of hype in social media even before, political circumstances had changed, and the Ukrainian cost attractiveness remained – these were the factors that certainly prepared the ground for a tourist boom. Streamlining the procedures and developing the infrastructure also played roles difficult to overestimate. In the summer of 2017, you needed to wait even up to two hours at Dytiatki, the most popular checkpoint to the Zone, due to the slow pace of processing the tens of coaches and buses that brought tourists to the Zone.

It seems that it was 2018 that provided the breakthrough in treating the Zone as a tourist product. That was when the shift from reacting to demand towards its intentional shaping through specific actions by entities that realised that tourism in the Zone had long ceased to be a "fringe benefit" for the management of its resources. The system of electronic tickets that simplified the process of investigating applications for visiting the Exclusion Zone was introduced, which also increased procedure transparency. Introduction of that system curtailed the forging of documents and strengthened the controls aligned with the principles of safety and security. Thanks to the simplified formalities, preparation of a visit to the Zone no longer involved planning it days ahead, as it was enough to declare the intention to visit the Zone in the tour organiser's office even a day before the date of entry, which also opened the CEZ to even the tourists who decided to visit it after arriving in Ukraine. More changes in approaching tourism in the Exclusion Zone followed the famous decree of President Zelensky from July 2019. New tourist routes, including those by water, air, and bicycle, were marked out in the autumn so that their number rose to 21. Information kiosks with maps, location of the settlement, and principles of visiting the area were installed in the key points of the tourist routes, while QR codes made it possible to learn the history of the place and its built heritage. Chornobyl was also recognised as one of the most important "Magnets of Ukraine": key destinations in a project inaugurated by the State Agency for Tourism Development of Ukraine (*Питання утворення деяких центральних органів виконавчої влади*), set up in 2019. The project aimed at developing tourism and research projects, and attracting new investments.

As Romanova (2020) calculated, the real monetary contribution from tourist entrances to the Chornobyl Zone to the national tourism market and the Ukrainian economy in general reached €22.6 million in 2019.

The guesstimates made late in 2019 even spoke of 200,000 visitors potentially arriving in the following year, nevertheless, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the year 2020 radically changed all the forecasts for the development of tourism and the character of visits as well.

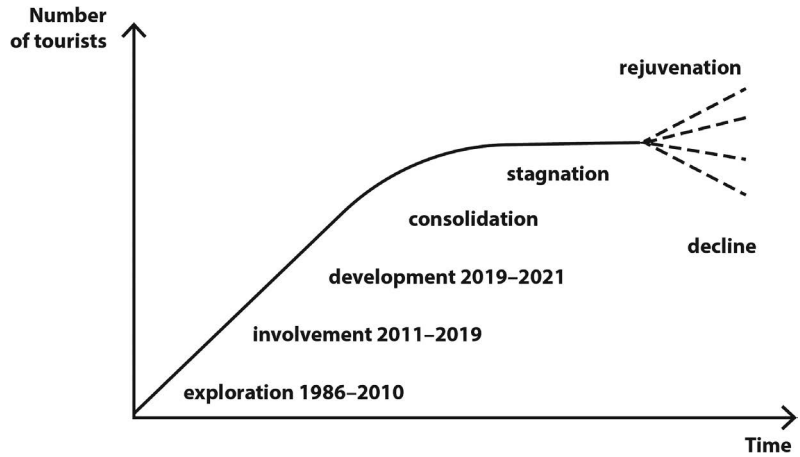

Figure 3.3 The life cycle of the Chornobyl tourism area.

Summary of the stages of Chornobyl tourism development

To present the individual stages of development of Chornobyl tourism, I would like to return to the Tourism Area Life Cycle (Butler, 1980, 2006) mentioned earlier in this chapter. The chart below presents the successive phases (Figure 3.3).

The period of exploration in the Zone are the years 1986–2010, when it functioned in the media as a fascinating place that was dangerous all the same, which is why the number of tourists was low, even as the local community began to notice the business potential in organising visits to the Zone, and the first travel agencies specialising in Chornobyl tourism were established. The phase of involvement lasted from 2011 to 2019, when tourist infrastructure began to develop with the growing demand, and a seasonality could be noticed in the tourist traffic (with intensification in April and May, that is around the anniversary of the disaster, and early in the autumn, that is in August and September). The following phase began in 2019 and was connected to the intensification of the top-down management. Involvement in Chornobyl tourism at the national level began, and investments into marketing and promotion were made. That was also the moment when the problem of overtourism and the negative impact for the Zone's material heritage began to be discussed. Moreover, tensions started among the locals.

Tourism during the pandemic

The beginning of 2020 heralded further development of tourist traffic in the Zone. In February, the checkpoints were crossed by six times as many as in 2017. Estimations suggested that the record number of visits from 2019 would be greatly exceeded, with mentions of even 200,000 visitors made.

The agency intended to continue digitalisation and improve the system of issuing permits for entering the Zone so that the period of waiting for the decision would not exceed one day. Plans to increase the number of staff providing tourist services at the checkpoints were also made to avoid the queues remembered from previous years.

However, following other states, Ukraine closed its borders to foreign nationals on 8 March 2020. After the first wave of the pandemic, the borders were shortly opened in June, to be sealed again for August and September. As a result, the inflow of tourists to Chornobyl in 2020 dropped by over 70%. Tourist companies began to intensively develop alternative offers. On the one hand, these were virtual activities, and on the other – promotion among the citizens of Ukraine. Chornobyl Tour included trips from several Ukrainian cities: Lviv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Chernihiv, and Slavutych (the price of the trip was $54, cost of meal and dosimeter rental not included). The Association of Chernobyl Tour Operators, initiated by Chornobyl Tour, suggested creating a special educational route for young (albeit over 12) Ukrainians. Their bus tour would move away from the most dangerous locations in the Zone (e.g., the area of the "Red Forest") and would not envisage leaving the coach (other than for meals and toilet trips). The proposals were even discussed at a meeting with the Minister of Culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko. Opening access to the Zone to minors was rejected, yet resulted in a lively discussion about the education on Chornobyl's heritage, the principles of security in the Zone, and its commercialisation. That initiative is a testimony to the changing perception of the Zone's heritage. Firstly, by a particular "taming" of the Zone's tourist potential for Ukrainian visitors (the Association also intended to organise free tours of the Zone for the liquidators of the disaster's aftermath), secondly, by emphasis on the heterogeneous nature of the Zone's heritage. The option to add Memory of Homeland, an ethnographic exhibition, to the Chornobyl visiting route was included in June 2020. The Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve signed a cooperation contract to open an open-air museum of a Polesie village in Otashev, hailed the "Venice of Chernobyl" for its system of weirs and canals resulting from its picturesque location on the bank of the Pripyat River. The intention of the museum is to present the culture of the people of Polesie. One of the newly designed routes made it also possible to investigate the Jewish heritage in the Zone. Paweł Sekuła believes that (Róg & Domaradzki, 2020):

> in the context of foreign tourism, this could be perhaps the first step to return the proper proportions in the narrative on the tragedy. Whether this opportunity is exploited, to a great extent, depends on the management of the Exclusion Zone and on the tourist agencies, as it calls for a change in the commercial approach to the reality of the Zone.

In the autumn of 2020, representatives of the Agency managing the Exclusion Zone, the Minister of Culture and Information Policy, and the head of the

newly established State Agency for Tourism Development in Ukraine met in the Zone. The talks concerned further development of tourism in the Zone as part of the "Magnets of Ukraine" project, and options for including individual sites within it on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In a video interview with the AFP in December 2020, the Minister of Culture of Ukraine, Oleksandr Tkachenko, declared that a motion to list fragments of the Zone by UNESCO would be submitted in March 2021. The first step to achieve that was the announcement that the receiving antennas of the Duga Radar were entered to the Ukrainian register of monument heritage early in 2021.

The period of the pandemic was spent on increasing the attractiveness of the Zone's offer for the tourists, and parallel works on a greater accessibility of the Zone. The procedures concerning management of tourist activity in the Zone were simplified: for example, the need to obtain a special permit to offer tourist services in the Exclusion Zone was waived. The time of the pandemic shook the world tourism sector, obliterating the optimistic forecasts of breaking successive records of tourist visits and revenue from tourism. The largest number of foreigners arrived in Ukraine from Moldova (nearly 1 million, yet even that was four times lower than the previous year), Belarus (under 500,000, which is five times fewer than in 2019), and Russia (less than 400,000, which is 4.5 times fewer than in the previous year (Державне агентство розвитку туризму України)). The Ukrainian economy did not suffer in the pandemic as much as the French, or the economies of the leaders in inbound tourism. The value of the economic contribution of tourism in Ukraine can be estimated between the 7 and 10% range, and thanks to the relatively low share of inbound tourism (estimated at around 35%) in comparison to internal and outbound tourism, the limitations in border traffic did not require saving the tourist services sector from a total collapse (Kasum et al., 2020). What can be viewed as a positive indicator on the macro scale is not as optimistic when you analyse what is known as Chornobyl tourism on the micro scale. In 2020, the Exclusion Zone was visited by 36,450 people, which means that, due to the pandemic, Chornobyl tourism shrank to the level of 2016, when 36,781 tourists visited the Zone.

The time of the pandemic stepped up the experiencing of the world through simulated journeys, intensified the process of digitising heritage, and stimulated the development of virtual heritage, even though the virtualisation of tourist experiences had even earlier been one of the most important trends shaping the development of the tourism and heritage market in recent years (Beck et al., 2019; Loureiro et al., 2020; Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2017).

As Bintang Handayani (2017, p. 52) noted:

> The proliferation of ICT in the dark tourism spectrum specifically in the context of death sites revolves around the growth of demand on applying: (1) Free Wifi in the tourist destination; (2) in terms of the Augmented Reality (AR) tourist experience; (3) in terms of enriching the values of attraction through technological application.

An interesting collective work devoted to virtual dark tourism (McDaniel, 2018) presents case studies that explain how video games, virtual tours, and websites recreate traumatic events, create alternative stories, educate, and serve cultural resistance. McDaniel (2018, p. 4) defined that phenomenon as

> a creative work that substitutes a simulated journey for physical travel, recognizes and emphasizes the consumer as a tourist in an alien environment; intentionally represents a site – whether real or wholly imagined – of death, destruction, suffering and calamity, purposefully encourages consumers to consider essential matters of life, suffering, and death; engages with questions related to history and memory and the importance of the past to present and future identities, events, and actions.

This monographic work predated the foundations for the operation of the tourist sector in 2020. Even if the capacity of VR to provide physical immersion and psychological presence still differs from the physical sojourn at another location in a derivative of tourism activity, it was nonetheless the work done by the new media that, in lockdown, provided the fundamental form of social and cultural activity, which replaced tourist activity. Obviously, due to technological limitations, the emerging substitutes were rather the non-immersive VR (niVR). E.g., in 2020, the Ukrainian National Chornobyl Museum in Kyiv offered visits to the exhibition in English (*Ukrainian National Chornobyl Museum Virtual Tour*, n.d.), and the Star Wormwood Museum in Chornobyl – solely in Ukrainian (*Віртуальні тури по музеях та виставках: Музей цивільного захисту "Зірка Полин,"* n.d.).

Businesses operating in the market were forced to limit the operations involving the organisation of physical trips (despite a few months of "opening") and tried to keep in touch with clients through "virtual" offers. Despite the borders reopening, such an option remains part of the ChernobylWel.Com offer using the brand ChernobylX (*ChernobylX Tours*, n.d.). The trip is streamed live on Zoom and is supposed to offer a level of excitement similar to physically being within the realm of the Zone. Moreover, individual guides expanded their services and now offer virtual visits (Freetour, n.d.). The most advanced project that allows people to experience the Zone as part of virtual reality is the Chernobyl VR app launched by Farm 51 in 2016. It is still a niche product as it requires specialist equipment, yet its concept is perfect proof of why Lutz Kaelber's observation that virtual dark tourism has such powerful potential (irrespective of the pandemic conditions) is right: "For visiting a physically obliterated traumascape that is difficult or even impossible to access physically, pilgrims and tourists can engage in alternative, technologically mediated appropriation of the darkest tourism sites" (Kaelber, 2007). Wojciech Pazdur (Róg & Pazdur, 2018), the man behind the project, maintains that the selection of CEZ, rather than showing any other heritage site in the world, was justified by the particular

inaccessibility and transitoriness of that location. Even though there have been many routes marked out that are safe from excessive radiation, the very idea of going to the Zone seems ridiculous and dangerous for many people. At the same time, the material tissue falls into ever deteriorating ruin. These arguments have a convincing power to experience Chornobyl even through the surrogate offered by virtual reality. The objective was to render the reality of the Zone so as to gain experience that would be as close to individual exploration of that space as possible. Pazdur himself calls the project "a virtual museum of Chernobyl" and "homage to the victims of the disaster" (Róg & Pazdur, 2018), yet this is a perfect example of the hybridisation of heritage. The developers of the project managed to invite such celebrities as Svetlana Alexievich and a former boxer and mayor of Kyiv – Vitali Klitschko, whose father was a liquidator, to become the narrators in the project. The social dimension of the project is also worth mentioning, as 10% of the proceedings from the sales of the Chernobyl VR project are donated to foundations supporting the victims of the disaster. As the developers of Chernobyl VR were also keen to have their product used for educational purposes, there is work on developing a PC version of Chernobyl VR. Its major target group could be schools who, as the Zone is out of bounds for children, could use the project in their education process. Moreover, the developers started negotiations with tour organisers to agree on including elements of Chernobyl VR in the programmes of visits to "enter" the sites that are on the route yet remain inaccessible.

Profile of a Chornobyl tourist

Virtualisation of the Zone's heritage, even if driven by the new needs of the market imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, is a derivative of the general development of technology, and in consequence also of Tourism 3.0. However, it is still only an alternative to the traditional, physical experiencing of reality while visiting the Zone.

According to the law binding in Ukraine, the Zone is subject to special controls not only due to radiological contamination but also the facts of lying in the border Zone and containing strategic sites (the NPP included). Hence, visits are only possible in accordance with the regulations, whose signing and observation is the duty of every person passing a checkpoint. The regulations and procedures governing visits to the Zone are defined in a state decree from 2011 (Про затвердження Порядку відвідування громадянами України, іноземними делегаціями та іноземцями зони відчуження і зони безумовного (обов'язкового) відселення, 2011).The three crucial principles binding the people entering the CEZ are: firstly, visiting the Zone takes place along defined routes that are considered harmless to health, and observing appropriate standards of safety, secondly, every visitor or group must be accompanied by a guide, and thirdly, visits are possible only after displaying an electronic ticket purchased through a special system operated

by the Center for Organizational, Technical and Information Support of the Exclusion Zone Management (SE COTIS) at the entry to the Zone. The centre provides reception and information support of foreign and Ukrainian groups of visitors and individual citizens arriving in the territory of the Exclusion Zone (*Правила відвідування зони відчуження*, 2019).

It should be emphasised that all documents use special terminology. This results from the fact that, according to Ukrainian law, no tourist services can be provided within the Exclusion Zone, which is why the Agency pays special attention to refer to "visits" (Ukrainian: *відвідування*) and "visitors" (Ukrainian: *відвідувачів*), and never "tourists" or "tourism", while tourist groups are referred to as "delegations" (Ukrainian: *делегація*) and "groups" (Ukrainian: *група*). Yet even the COTIS website speaks of tourism and tourists, therefore the rule is respected only fairly nonchalantly.

Most travel agencies offer a basic one-day visiting plan with departure from the centre of Kyiv. The agenda of the "visit" covers:

- Dytiatki Checkpoint, an official entrance to the Exclusion Zone.
- The village of Zalissya with abandoned houses and barns, a shop, and the house of Rozaliya Ivanivna, the only settler.
- A bypass road to the NPP around the town of Chornobyl, built a month after the accident to facilitate the traffic of military vehicles.
- The almost fully buried village of Kopachi with a remaining kindergarten.
- A concrete-reloading unit, essential for the Sarcophagus erection in 1986.
- The decontaminated Red Forest at the place of the first and worst radioactive fallout.
- The town of Pripyat (the hospital receiving the firefighters and NPP workers badly affected by the accident; a river harbour and the prestigious Pripyat Café on the embankment; the town hall – the first headquarters for mitigation of the accident consequences; the Polissya Hotel, a collection point for helicopters dropping lead bags over the ruins of the 4th reactor; Energetik palace of culture, the main recreational site for the Prypyat youth; the Ferris wheel in the amusement park that never opened; Prypyat stadium; the Azure swimming pool that was still in operation after the accident.
- Chornobyl NPP (the Sarcophagus and the New Safe Confinement [the Ark]) – an observation point at a 300-m distance; the fire station by the NPP, where the first crew arrived to extinguish the fire after the explosion, Life for Life memorial in front of the administrative building.
- NPP cooling pond (feeding giant catfish, depending on the season).
- Third-generation cooling towers of the Chornobyl NPP.
- The secret Soviet Chornobyl-2 site: DUGA-1 radar antenna, the secret town of Chornobyl-2 which ensured the efficiency of antennas and horizon tracking for the launching of ballistic missiles.
- The town of Chornobyl: the world's best memorial To Those who Saved the World.

- An open-air exhibition of transport vehicles and robots used in the 1986 clean-up activities.
- An ecologically clean dinner in a canteen for the Exclusion Zone workers.

SE COTIS has regularly published statistics of visits to the Zone in recent years, including data on the numbers of visitors, the percentage of Ukrainians among the visitors, and, less often, the visitors' countries of origin. In 2019, foreigners from 140 countries accounted for 80% of visitors to the Zone. Most of them arrived from the UK (18,460), followed by Poland (10,416), Germany (9015), the US (6441), Czechia (4582), and the Netherlands (4155). Over that period, the Zone was visited by 26,228 Ukrainian citizens.

The pandemic period modified the breakdown of nationalities visiting the Zone, as mentioned earlier, and the share of Ukrainian visitors was higher than in the previous years. With the sanitary restrictions being gradually loosened, tourists began to return to the Zone from the first quarter of 2021. Initially they were still Ukrainian tourists, and COTIS estimated their number in the first half of 2021 at nearly 12,000. The most numerous foreigners (slightly over 3500 visitors) were Americans – 715 people. They were followed by the Spanish (369) and British (222) (*Статистика Відвідування Зони Відчуження Січень-Травень 2021 РІК*, 2021). From January to the end of August 2021, some 37,870 people entered the Zone, which means that more tourists visited the Zone in the first six months of 2021 than in the entirety of 2020 (*У цьому році серпень – лідер по кількості відвідувачів Чорнобильської зони*, 2019). These quantitative data concern a heterogenous group: people from all over the world who have very different contexts for their visits as some are enthusiasts of urbex and participants of stag parties, while others are people coming for professional reasons including journalism, blogging, and academic purposes, or as the children of the liquidators and victims of the disaster, or, more generally, people sharing the memory and those who first read about Chornobyl in social media and find the disaster as abstract an event of the past as the Battle of Waterloo.

The question of who is a "Chornobyl tourist" and what he or she does while there has been answered by a number of researchers in recent years (Пестушко & Чубук, 2010; Duda, 2020; Urbonavicius, 2021). According to the survey conducted by Romaeva in 2019 (2020), the average age of visitors to Chornobyl is 31. Almost every second visitor (52%) is 21–30 years old, 26% are aged 31–40, while 67% of visitors are men and 33% are women. The study showed that 81% of foreign visitors had come to Ukraine for the first time and visiting the CEZ was the main purpose of visiting Ukraine for the majority (55%).

The young age and dominance of men among the visitors were also shown in Anna Duda's studies from 2016. Of 383 respondents, 75% were men, and the age of every other respondent was in the 26–35 range (only 10 were over 50). Duda (2020, p. 151–155) concentrated on Poles participating in trips organised by Polish tour organisers (although they cooperated

with Ukrainian partners on organising the stay in the Zone), therefore they were tourists for whom visiting the Zone was the main purpose of their stay even if the programme of their visit included other attractions, e.g., visiting Kyiv. For 86% of the respondents, the most important factor motivating their travel was the wish to experience the Zone in person, for 75% – the wish to experience something exciting, and as many as 50% of the respondents declared openly that paying homage to the victims was absolutely immaterial for them. Another study, albeit following a different methodology, that pointed to similar elements of motivation for the Chornobyl tourists was conducted among a group of young Lithuanians (Urbonavicius, 2021). The survey was performed online and included 256 respondents aged 18–29. Interestingly, in that cohort only 19% were men and 81% were women. Such a gender distribution is noteworthy as both our own observations and information acquired from people connected to Chornobyl tourism in recent years point to the dominance of men among the visitors to the Zone. Sigitas Urbonavicius explicitly claims that "Chernobyl deserves the place among the extremely dark destinations not just because of its historical aspect, but also due to the still existing potential danger of radiation" (2021, p. 128). He refers to Light (2017) to say that "interest in learning and understanding past events is the most commonly reported motive" and adds that "Curiosity seems to be a key push travel motivation associated with dark tourism". The studies make it possible to conclude that, in the case of Chornobyl, the most important motivation is novelty-seeking, triggered by the internal motivation of escaping the daily routine, while the aspect of ego enhancement connected with risk taking is also very important.

The analyses referred to above, which are consistent with my own observations, demonstrate that a typical Chornobyl tourist is a young, foreign man primarily taking advantage of the offer of the local organisers (whether by joining a tour or participating in a visit whose programme is carried out by a local partner). His motivation is an eagerness to see the Zone with his own eyes, curiosity, the desire to experience something new and exciting that may be considered a wish not only to escape the ordinary but also to stand up to challenges, which translates into the construction of a self-image, whether for oneself or in the perception of others (see Figure 3.4). As yet, I have not found studies that would concentrate their attention on Ukrainians visiting the Zone. The only better known local phenomenon is "stalkerism", i.e., the illegal exploration of the Zone.

Stalkerism

Stalkers operate in opposition to organised tourism; however, it inspires and conditions each other. Stalkerism can be defined as a type of sightseeing that originates from urban exploration, practiced illegally in the CEZ. The main motivation of stalkers is the desire to escape from civilisation, to find peace in a post-disaster world reclaimed by nature, and to experience

Figure 3.4 Tourists performing.

Source: Illustration by the author.

extreme adventures. An important part of the stalkers' activity is taking photographs and making movies that are then posted on social media, blogs, and portals devoted to stalkerism, the Zone, and urban exploration. Dozens of amateur videos on YouTube showing the illegal exploration of the Zone are published not only by the stalkers themselves but also by tourists who took part in the illegal expeditions (e.g., "Illegal Freedom: Journey Across Chornobyl Exclusion Zone"). The activity of stalkers has also become a subject of interest for documentary filmmakers such as *Stalking Chernobyl: Exploration After Apocalypse* (Lee, 2021).

The first wave of illegal expeditions to the Zone dates back to the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. At that time, they were not of a touristic nature: the Zone's border was crossed mainly by looters and scrap metal prospectors. To a certain extent, they can be compared to the stalkers specialising in finding strange artefacts in the Zone who are known from the novel by the Strugatsky brothers. The second wave of Chornobyl stalkerism began after 1996, the 10th anniversary of the disaster, when legal visits to CEZ began thanks to falling radiation levels. Stalkerism developed in parallel with official organised tourism and, despite the objections to this form of sightseeing, it has had much in common with it from the beginning.

Stalkers are defined as "illegal wanderers crossing the Zone" (Степанец, 2017, p. 29). The basic difference between tourists and stalkers comes down to the legality of their presence in the Zone (see Table 3.1). Tourists enter the Zone upon payment of an appropriate fee and thus receive an appropriate pass under which they can legally move in certain areas of the Zone. Stalkers cross the borders of the CEZ illegally, usually at night, and explore the space without keeping to the safe routes. In the event of interception by the patrol

Table 3.1 Tourists versus stalkers. (Based on own research.)

	Tourists	*Stalkers*
Status of visit	Legal	Illegal
Number of visits	Single	Multiple
Length of visit	One day	A few days
Form of visit	Organised sightseeing	Exploration off the beaten track
Position	Individual in a group	Member of a community
Relationship with heritage	Observer	Steward
Experience	Consumption	Transgression

services of the Zone, they can be fined, and, in case of violation of other rules (like possession of weapons or objects removed from the Zone) even criminal liability will be incurred. The stalkers move around the Zone on their own and their goal is to examine abandoned places. This makes them similar to the group of urban explorers, but stalkers are primarily fascinated by exploration of the CEZ and not urban exploration as such. For stalkers, the CEZ becomes the adopted heritage that fits interpretation as a new type of heritage that the Faro Convention promotes – a broad, living heritage aligned with a sense of place. Stalkers can be treated as a heritage community that values specific aspects of cultural heritage that, within the framework of public action, they wish to sustain and transmit to the future (Faro Convention, 2005). Put simply, they take care of the Zone as if the Zone's heritage were their own legacy. For this reason, vandal stalkers who destroy the material fabric of the Zone are treated as deviants and are ostracised by other stalkers. For stalkers, the Zone has become the centre of their values, a space in which they "live truly" as Cohen's existential tourists (Cohen, 1979). Although it is not possible to stay permanently in the Zone, the stalkers create their hideouts in abandoned buildings. If the Zone can be compared to a home, stalkers treat other stalkers as family. They help one another when in the Zone. As a rule, they leave drinking water and food in boxes, referred to as "shelters", for other illegals. Thanks to this mutual help, the stalkers feel part of the community, and random relationships established in the Zone move outside it and are strengthened by further contact (usually virtual). Their experience in the Zone can be better understood through the lens of the concept of transgression (Banaszkiewicz, 2022).

One of the interesting consequences of the growing popularity of the Zone is blurring of the boundary between tourism and stalkerism.

Stalkers offer their illegal services on the Internet in a more or less veiled way. Kiril Stepanec, one of the most "renowned" stalkers, admits that he tries to ensure that the illegal groups he takes consist of no more than four people, as a larger number increases the risk of being apprehended by the police. He has already worked with tourists from Poland, Russia, Germany, the US, and even Australia and New Zealand for illegal expeditions. It is not uncommon for visitors who first arrive in the Zone on an official tour to go "on an illegal" with him. When asked about the scale of the phenomenon,

Kirill admitted that he knows at least 10 stalkers who operate like him (Banaszkiewicz, 2022).

More and more people with stalker experience are starting to cooperate with officially operating tourism companies. It is difficult to determine the exact number of stalker-guides as not all admit to their stalker past. On the one hand, the transformation of stalkers into guides (whether legal or not) shows how tempting is the vision of organised tourism with financial benefits, and how it leads to the commercialisation of what was previously amateur and spontaneous. On the other hand, it reveals how much demand there is for innovative product solutions, thereby opening new opportunities for unique tourist experiences. Commercial stalker expeditions are therefore both a grey market of tourism and a periphery of illegal expeditions organised solely from passion and not for material gain.

According to the group's self-definition, a stalker is not someone who crosses the border of the Zone illegally but someone who explores it to appreciate it better and consequently, to preserve it. Stalkers are people from outside who are not "natural" heirs of the Zone, and yet they are those who take action to protect it from destruction and the harmful effects of tourism, considering the Zone their adopted heritage. The commitment to the care of the Zone's material heritage and also the memory of its inhabitants seem to indicate that the stalkers have broken the dichotomy characteristic of the development of tourism in heritage sites: visitors, unlike the local community that "stays", only come and go, which usually makes their sense of responsibility for the site much lower than that of the residents (Gaweł, 2016) (the most obvious proof of this is the amount of rubbish they leave behind, as the Figure 3.5 shows). The failure of the dichotomy between legal

Figure 3.5 The "souvenirs" tourists leave in the Zone.

Source: Illustration by the author.

and illegal tourism as mutually opposed also lies in the fact that it is rather a spectrum of behaviours that inspire each other. In many places around the world, mass tourism develops the patterns of activity of people who question what is socially acceptable or even legal and follow the idea of anti-tourism actively (Bodinger & Di Giovine, 2021). The inclusion of others (non-stalkers) is gradual and not as obvious as the simple visit legality/illegality dichotomy. Moreover, contesting the law does not automatically deny heritage: on the contrary, it can contribute to its better protection. Stalkers undoubtedly actively engage in acts of the meaning-making process.

Chornobyl and dark tourism

It is high time to ask the fundamental question whether Chornobyl tourism is dark tourism. In July 2021, Yaroslav Yemelianienko, CEO of Chornobyl Tour, posted on his Facebook page (Yaroslav Yemelianenko, 2021):

> Do not call tourism in Chernobyl – DARK tourism. This is a misconception that shapes the attitude to Chernobyl and narrows down its essence extremely. Tourism in Chernobyl is an exceptional phenomenon, one that had never been there in the world before. It EMBRACES dark tourism as one element together with its other forms:
>
> - ecological
> - historical
> - sentimental
> - active
> - educational
> - scientific
> - religious
> - sports
> - cognitive
> - military
> - and many others.
>
> Dark tourism really exists somewhere out there. Yet it is absolutely not the foundation.
>
> No international or Ukrainian norms on Chernobyl tourism have been developed as yet: this is work still to be done. But the correct naming conventions are very important even now. Do not simplify for your comfort. Dark is indeed easier to pronounce. But Chernobyl tourism is Chernobyl tourism.

I would like to consider this problem from the historical and cultural perspective. Historical, as in the case of dark tourism, you can clearly point to the moment when that phenomenon began to be studied as part of tourism studies, a fact significantly correlated to the research into the CEZ as

a tourist destination. Cultural, as such research is not conducted in the vacuum of social life, and its dynamic is closely connected to the transformations of tourist cultural practices in recent decades. The notion of dark tourism has become prominent outside the academic world. To quote *The Guardian* from 2005: "Beaches and theme parks? Forget it – dark tourism is the new way to enjoy yourself" (Atkinson, 2005). Craving new experiences, tourists need new categories with which to name them, emphasising their unique qualities (Bauman, 2012). The *Lonely Planet Bluelist 2007 yearbook* included a chapter on dark tourism, which it defined as "travel to sites associated with death, disaster + depravity" (Handicott et al., 2007, p. 122–135). The growing interest of tourists in dark sites, a consequence of which is an increase in the number of studies and works in successive years, as well as the presence of this notion in the media discourse, suggests expanding the context of reflections on the CEZ by not only referring to the most important concepts developed on the grounds of dark tourism studies but also by approaching the task with assumptions characteristic of both critical heritage studies and critical tourism studies, whose centre of interest is the significance of discourse in construing the image of the world and the need for self-reflection by the researchers studying it. Incoming tourism to the CEZ is generally referred to as dark tourism, although the notion of dark tourism is far from exhausting both the nature of the place itself and the experiences of the people who stay in that place.

Travelling to places of death and those connected to death is a cultural practice that has been known for centuries, even though, as Seaton (2018, p. 2) noted, there is still no monographic work on the history of thanatotourism/dark tourism. However, the chronological alignment of the interest in studying places connected to death and suffering in heritage studies and tourism studies seems symptomatic (Hartmann, 2014). In 1996, two concepts were mentioned in a special issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* and later became part and parcel of studies of tourism and heritage. The first of them is thanatotourism, which denotes "travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death" (Seaton, 1996, p. 235), while dark tourism is construed as a phenomenon that "encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites" (Foley & Lennon, 1996, p. 198). The publications coincided in time with the definition of the term "dissonant heritage" by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1997). Characteristically, reflection on these phenomena has always oscillated around similar issues. A challenge connected to the management of sites of dissonant heritage, that is, issues of ethnicity and commodification, was also embarked on by Foley and Lennon (1996). The researchers considered dark tourism a phenomenon characteristic of post-modernity (Foley & Lennon, 2010), and a development significantly influenced by the media (Dann, 2005). Chris Rojek (1995) signalled that on the one hand it is the media who stimulate the interest in death and suffering by bombarding

people with them, which results in death being constantly experienced by the audience/readers, and on the other by distancing people from death, which is made to appear a distant abstract. Both lead to morbid curiosity. In turn, Seaton (2009) treated thanatotourism as a practice of thanatopsis – the contemplation of death that has been observed for centuries, for instance, in Christian culture (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009).

Hartmann (2014, p. 168) believes that the emergence of travel to destinations connected with death and suffering in the orbit of interest of West European (predominantly British) academics should be linked to the political and social transformations of the early 1990s, that is primarily the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe and the end of apartheid in South Africa. West European researchers began to include in their studies cases locations that became far more accessible to West European tourists than they were in the previous decades, which translated into the development of tourism in the places of contested heritage (Dann, 2001), atrocity sites (Ashworth & Hartman, 2005), and places of pain and shame (Logan & Reeves, 2011). Many researchers concentrated directly on the dark-heritage-tourism relationship, and by emphasising that atrocity and death sites are heritage sites at the same time, they spoke of "dark heritage" (Roberts & Stone, 2014; Sharpley, 2009; Wight & Lennon, 2007), "dark heritage tourism" (Kamber et al., 2016), "difficult heritage" (Knudsen, 2011; Logan & Reeves, 2011; Macdonald, 2013), "heritage that hurts" (Sather-Wagstaff, 2016; Uzzell & Balantyne, 1998), and "sensitive heritage" (Magee & Gilmore, 2015).

Taking into consideration precisely that historical context for the constitution of studies of dark tourism, it is worth realising that Chornobyl was absent from the earliest works due to the fact that more extensive access to the Zone was only possible from 2011. Therefore, it was the second decade of the new millennium that saw the first reflections connected to the process of its touristification. In a text stemming from his visit to the Zone, Paul Dobraszczyk (2010) reflects on the universal message of the ruins that makes us aware of how helpless we are in the face of transience. Concentration on the exclusive nature of the Zone as space excluded from everyday life is the main theme of Philip Stone's article (2013), which suggests that the phenomenon of the Zone can be read in the category of heterotopia that is borrowed from Foucault. Although extensively quoted in the literature of the subject, neither text concerns the question of tourism as both are rather devoted to the exclusive character of the Zone.

Dark tourism may be treated as a niche form of tourism (Novelli, 2015), yet the scope of definition of dark tourism is very wide and even extends to the loose relationship between tourism and death or suffering (Biran & Poria, 2012). It would be impossible not to see the difference between visiting Chornobyl and other "subcategories" of dark tourism such as genocide tourism (Beech, 2009), holocaust tourism (Cole, 2000; Reynolds, 2020), battlefield tourism (Miles 2014), morbid tourism (Blom, 2000), and

black spot tourism (Rojek, 1995), even though the last of these categories points to yet another "subcategory" that is applicable to Chornobyl, i.e., the development of tourism at and around post-disaster sites.

Although the first definition of dark tourism proposed by Foley and Lennon (1996) makes use of "disaster sites", over time that category began to be emancipated from dark tourism. Chris Rojek (1995, p. 63) argued that disaster sites are "analytically distinct". In studies on tourism, disasters are perceived as causing crises in tourism rather than favouring its development (Kunwar, 2016). Recently, natural disasters (primarily the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and hurricane Katrina in 2005) shook global tourism and made tourists realise that their lives and health may also be directly jeopardised. Along with terrorist attacks and pandemics, natural calamities cause researchers to start asking about crisis and management (Hystad & Keller, 2008, Ritchie & Jiang, 2019) as well as the role of tourism in destination recovery (Rittichainuwat, 2007; Tucker et al., 2016). Although the aftermath of the Chornobyl disaster is felt even today to a certain degree, it is not "today's" catastrophe: it is a post-disaster heritage site where tourism develops, which is different from locations like Thailand and Montserrat that experienced disaster when they were already tourist destinations and now grapple with reconstructing tourism after the tragedy. Should we then discuss the CEZ in reference to post-disaster tourism, the niche known as *Postcolonial, Post-conflict,* and *Post-disaster Sites* (Séraphin et al., 2019) would be more adequate, as it opens a space of reflection on the more general issue of branding the "negative image destination" that has to combine "a history fraught with violence, poverty, and pain, with the expectative of consumers. In a nutshell, dark tourism, post-disaster tourism, or post-conflict tourism serve very well to educate the next generations" (Séraphin et al., 2020, p. 245).

The CEZ is the best example of the difficulties of defining dark tourism, as other terms can also be applied to it, for instance, nuclear tourism (Mažeikienė, 2021b), energy tourism (Alekseeva & Hercegová, 2021), exclusion tourism (Banaszkiewicz & Skinner, 2021), and – after the premiere of the *Chernobyl* series, the Zone can also be an example of a film-induced tourism destination. Visiting the Zone can be classified not only as communism tourism, but also Cold War tourism, even though this category also includes sites lying beyond Central and Eastern Europe. Yankowska and Hannam (2013 p. 932) defined visits to the CEZ as both dark and toxic tourism, adopting the term introduced by Pezzullo (2007) who used it to describe organised tours to places of environmental degradation, which is analogous to Blackwell (2013), who mentions Chornobyl alongside the other most polluted and contaminated locations of the world.

The variety of sites and locations connected to death, suffering, and disasters, the variety of motivations of the people visiting those places, triggers a fundamental question: what is dark in dark tourism (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009)? Attempts at a theoretical conceptualisation of dark tourism

in reference to the rapidly growing amount of literature of the subject have been repeatedly made in the last decade (Hartmann, 2014; Light 2017; Stone et al., 2018). Light (2017) reflects that dark tourism is, as a rule, defined through the lens of practices (the act of visiting places of a particular type), particular types of places, and motivations, more often than through types of experience. Thus, two approaches can be distinguished: one focusing on the location and its features, and the other – focusing on the visitors and their motivations and experiences. Using the CEZ as an example of a dark tourism site is a general practice, especially in the media discourse, yet only few researchers have embarked on a critical reflection on the application of the "dark" category for the Zone.

For instance, in www.dark-tourism.com, the popular website of Peter Hohenhaus who can be considered an independent freelancer in the field of dark tourism research (Hohenhaus, 2013), the Zone is mentioned as an example of "the very deepest darkest of the dark" next to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Magadan, Hiroshima, and the National 9/11 Memorial & Museum. Hohenhaus is the creator of the "Darkometer" ranking. He declares that the degree of darkness refers solely to the locations, and he glosses over the aspect of the profile – and even more so the motivations – of the visitors. In his classification, he investigates the following criteria of assessment: how authentic is the site (whether it is a place of death and/or suffering, or does it re-enact it), how visible is the representation of death and suffering in the site, what is the scale of the dark event, how recent or distant in history is the event, how established it is in the collective awareness, how emotionally gripping it is, and how big it is. On the basis of the above criteria, Chornobyl gains 10 points (the maximum). Still, Hohenhaus admits that Chornobyl holds the top place in his personal ranking of "the Top 10 dark tourist experiences".

Anna Duda (2020) embarked on a critique of the Zone as a dark visitor attraction and, like Dobraszczyk (2010), referred to Philip Stone's (2006) spectrum of dark attraction. The attractions defined as "darkest" offer a higher degree of authenticity resulting from a given location having been considered dark for the shortest period. As a rule, they are also more politicised and provide a reason for ideological discussions and conflicts. The purpose of embellishing them is usually the protection and memorialisation of a location connected to historical events, while the main motivation of the people going on a trip is the wish to learn and honour the memory of the victims. In the early stage of development of the site of a tragic event or crime, the tourist infrastructure is still not developed and the site is barely commodified. The other end of the scale is held by "light" places, where the tragedy usually occurred in a deeper past thanks to which its ideological and political context has been negotiated, the place is less frequently treated as a space of historical events that are still remembered and is more often construed as part of the historical heritage, one from which tourists can maintain an increasing emotional distance. With the passage of time,

the site also loses some of its authenticity, mostly due to the development of infrastructure and slow absorption by the tourist industry. The process of "increasing the attraction factor" of attractions in order to appeal to new tourists, hungry for stronger experiences, is also observed. Hence, museum sites often organise narrated visits connected to mini productions that help vary the message and induce a greater emotional involvement of the visiting tourists. Many of the "light" attractions are intentionally designed sites that are not connected directly to the tragedy of the past in a given location. The "lighter" and more commercial the attraction, the more the entertainment factor is preferred to the educational one. Duda presents the Zone by comparing it to the Chernobyl Museum. Such a juxtaposition is an interesting and creative endeavour, as one can see an analogy in comparing Auschwitz-Birkenau to the Yad Vashem Centre or the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The author concludes that both places should be placed in various positions on the spectrum depending on the dimension analysed. The CEZ is a site of death and suffering, and not only is the site authentic but it is also perceived as authentic as it is non purposefully designed and the level of infrastructure is relatively low. However, in comparison to the Chernobyl Museum, it is less oriented to education and is definitely rather heritage-centric than history-centric, with the role of political context and ideology being more significant. The author states that CEZ can be discussed as a location that found itself "outside the Authorized Heritage Discourse" as it had been abandoned for years. She believes that as much as the Chernobyl Museum is a project focused on active remembrance and education, the CEZ is heritage without a homogenous narrative sanctioned by the authorities (at least, it was before President Zelensky's address).

In their article on CEZ, Yankowska and Hannam (2013) referred to the typology developed by Sharpley (2009) according to which four "shades" of dark tourism can be depicted, taking into consideration both supply and demand. The first is "pure" black tourism, where the places are intentionally created for people fascinated by death. The second is a pale tourism that emerges when tourists have minimal interest in death and visit dark sites that "accidentally" became tourist attractions. The third and fourth are grey tourism, where tourists who are motivated by a fascination with death visit unintended dark tourism sites, or where sites initially established to exploit death attract tourists with little interest in death. The two authors are inclined to consider tourism in the CEZ as "pale tourism" as not all the visitors are interested in death (see Figure 3.6). Thus, the reflection on the justification of recognising tourism in CEZ as "dark" is based not only on analysing the Zone as a location, but also on the reflection on motivation and the tourist experience. Yet, an earlier text by Goatcher and Brunsden (2011) proposes examining the experience of Chornobyl tourism as a form of sublimation of post-modern anxiety. These are reflections drawn from the visual material found on the website Pripyat.com, with, as the authors duly

Figure 3.6 Radiant love in front of the Duga Radar.

Source: Photo by the author.

noted, photographs taken not only by tourists, therefore the conclusions from analysing them are more of an analogy.

The first text to be actually based on studies of Chornobyl tourism *in situ* is the PhD dissertation of Nicholas Rush-Cooper (2013) who worked as a guide in the Zone in 2010, at the same time conducting field research for his dissertation. Rush-Cooper (2013, p. 33) presents an even more radical opinion on the possibility of classifying the Zone as a dark site from the perspective of the tourist experience:

> Unlike in Joly's journey, the Zone was not sought out because it was 'dark'. I increasingly found that any attempt to categorise why people visit the Zone was fruitless. There was nothing of the 'spectrum' of engagement (from personal interest to some kind of morbid fascination) as outlined by Seaton (1996).

What part of the studies on dark tourism may therefore prove valuable for analysing the Chornobyl case, if both the heritage of the Zone turns out to be too heterogeneous to classify it as a solely dark site, and the experience of exploring the Zone escapes the simple description of fascination (whatever its reasons) with death?

The first is the observable shift in recent years towards studying locations with a performative approach that assumes the presence and activity of tourists as active agents. A key observation made by dark tourism researchers in the context of guides' narratives is the perception of the variety of tourist experiences in the places of dissonant/difficult/atrocity heritage, which is related to the complexity of tourist motivations and needs. In their seminal article, Foley and Lennon stressed that dark tourists look for three kinds of experience: remembrance, education, and entertainment (Foley & Lennon, 1996, p. 195). Biran et al. (2011) reveal that tourists visiting dark sites may engage in other non-dark experiences like education or contemplation of the scenery. There is therefore more to it than just an essential reflection on one's own life and the lives of others (Stone, 2006, Sharpley & Stone, 2009), as there is also the wish to obtain knowledge about the circumstances and events leading to somebody's death. The latest studies of dark tourism emphasise the need for the phenomenological approach: studying the live experiences of tourists who engage with places of death, conflict, and/or disaster (Podoshen et al., 2015). The exceptional quality of being in the Zone is more than just the contemplation of somebody's death as a historical event (the explosion) with consequences lasting to this day (medical impact, cultural trauma) that not only carries a universal message (evaluation of nuclear energy) but also implies taking risks or is a direct confrontation with life-threatening danger (radiation, exploration of ruins).

The most adequate definition of dark tourism, as it allows various problems of Chornobyl tourism to be explained, was proposed by Tony Seaton (2018, p. 18) who indicated that "remembrance, rather than death, is the actual focus of dark tourism". Seaton proposes that "dark tourism/thanatourism comprises encounters through travel with the engineered and orchestrated remembrance of mortality and fatality". The triad of "represented death" that undergoes interpretation by the "engineers and orchestrators" for the group of recipients, that is, "visitors", enters into relationships not only in the physically existing memorial place, but also in the space of cultural narratives. The triad of the model exceeds the dichotomy of supply and demand that has proven insufficient to analyse the phenomena of dark tourism. The dynamic of the model allows tourism to be inspected as a cultural phenomenon existing in a network of social relationships, not only between the living but also as a connection to past and future generations, and not only between those who are physically present at the site visited but also with those who remain within the space of cultural transmission. By that token, the model helps to account for dark tourism in the spirit of a critical look at heritage as a set of power and representative practices. For dark

sites are indeed "adjusted" to the needs of tourists and visitors, but it is a secondary function – places linked to death and suffering are not developed with tourists and recreation in mind, and their tourist function is a consequence of the need to commemorate and educate – to share this heritage with the successive generations. What comes to the surface in this process is a strong dissonance and a range of challenges connected to the management of such locations (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Hartmann, 2014), and with the moral aspects of exploitation in which death is the primary source of attractiveness (Korstanje, 2016). Therefore, the role of engineers is of key importance: they are the interpreters of the past who mediate stimulating the visitors' experience at the physical, sensory, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual levels. Seaton's proposal means diverging from the dichotomy of concentrating only on the motivation of tourists or only on the location. As the studies quoted above have shown, it is hard to obtain clear indications of "typically" dark motivations in reference to the Zone, and at the same time, its character cannot be reduced only to the function of a "dark" attraction. Secondly, the new approach proposed by Seaton concentrates the attention on the practices of commemoration and not on the death itself, which expands the horizon of analysis starting from the conclusion that spaces of dark tourism are continuously (re)negotiated and (re)constructed. This gives rise to a broad approach to the resonance of the Chornobyl cultural trauma and simultaneously offers the possibility of using the paradigms, concepts, and research methods developed in the studies of heritage and memory.

A deeper reflection on the significance of embodiment, affects, and emotions is also extremely important in the context of studying the Zone. Dark tourism, which takes you to the places where heritage hurts, is connected to powerful emotional reactions. This is an entirely different dimension of experiencing, representing, and commemorating death than the form of death known from the media. Feelings related with experiencing the Zone are complex, as they range from anxiety, remorse, or even fear, via shock and thrill, to plain enjoyment. Recent studies in dark tourism focus on emotional place-based encounters (Morten et al., 2018) and the "turn to affect" in dark tourism studies (Martini & Buda, 2018) opens a discussion on how tourists' emotions that result from the atmosphere of a place of dark tourism stimulate affective reactions that might lead to further reflection (Light, 2017; Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2021). Researchers perceive transformative potential in dark tourism experiences (Kirillova et al., 2016; MacCarthy, 2017), providing more than just an opportunity for self-reflection as it can turn into a life-changing experience (Zheng et al., 2019). Returning here is the concept of thanatopsis (Stone, 2012; Sharpley & Stone, 2009), which opens the visitors to experiencing empathy towards the suffering of the others, a practice that allows them to better understand the essence of the trauma. Cohen (2011) believes that it is precisely staying in a place directly linked to a tragic past and suffering of the others that offers an authenticity of experience that

turns it into an educational platform. Similarly, referring to the literature of the subject, Korstanje and Babu (2019, p. 52) note that many researchers assume that "dark-tourism-as-heritage intends to show that psychological trauma helps the community not only to face the adversity but also gives lessons (transmitted from generation to generation) to others who have never experienced such a situation". An example is Sather-Wagstaff's study (2016) devoted to the Ground Zero, 9/11 Memorial which emphasises that dark tourism is used as an instrument for shaping general solidarity, while, by building empathy between the victims and those visiting, helping to build emotional involvement in the tragedy. It must, however, not be forgotten that heritagisation produces the danger of commodification of the disaster. In the only monographic work on dark tourism in German, Steinecke (2020) recognises Chornobyl as "a dark Disneyland", perceiving the transformation of the Zone into a "hyperreal, imagined" place, mostly as the result of the media but primarily computer games and the HBO *Chernobyl* miniseries.

From the earliest studies on dark tourism, the reflection over the tension between education and entertainment (progressing with touristification) has brought the question of the ethical aspects of the commodification of suffering as well as the auto-identification of sites as dark tourism sites, which could be seen as overly entertainment-oriented, into the focus of the researchers' interest. As much as edutainment is excessively criticised in the literature of the subject, an element of entertainment is nonetheless found significant by the tourists themselves (Ivanova & Light, 2018), moreover its potential for strengthening the visitors' motivation, retention, and active learning is also noted, especially in the lighter dark visitor attractions (Wyatt et al., 2020).

The process of commodification of dark tourism sites is also treated by Morten et al. (2018), who used the example of Chornobyl to describe "Foucauldian dark tourism" as packaged dark tourism that "occurs at locations filled with juxtaposition, with chronological significance, in some way representative of the space outside and contained within a clearly recognised system of barriers that are physical, psychical or social". They confront the Foucault-style tourism with "Debordian dark tourism" in which tourism is an intrinsically personal process of meaning-making conducted in regular, non-heterotopic space, where dark associations emerge from a private system of knowledge, memory, experience, culture, and preconceptions. Such a dichotomous approach to dark tourism sites is a major simplification. For it seems that free exploration of the Zone, even when not carried via illegal means, is possible (on the condition that you do not participate in standardised one-day tours). In this case, the discovery of the dark associations in the personal process of meaning-making is far more advanced. This raises the question whether various forms of experiencing places of dissonant heritage lead to different consequences: emotional involvement, empathy, and

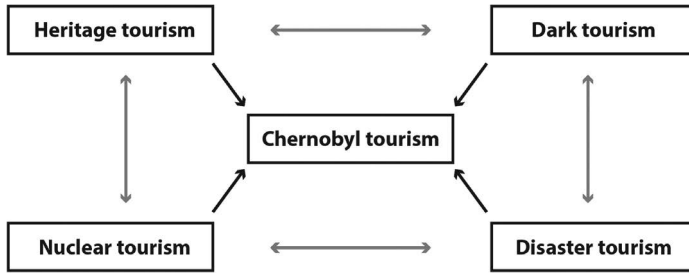

Figure 3.7 Relationships between the types of tourism in the CEZ.

Source: Illustration by the author.

transformation, or rather the fulfilment of the need of self-creation accompanied by a minimal realisation of universal solidarity with the victims.

To summarise, even though the CEZ is generally treated as a dark tourism site that is not the only category that could be used for describing the location (as Figure 3.7 exemplifies). However, dark tourism studies are certainly an important frame of reference for studying the phenomenon of Chornobyl tourism. Assuming that the main axis of the study will be the interpretation of the difficult past, the areas studied will focus on it. First, it will refer to the forms of representation that make up a tourist attraction, of which the Exclusion Zone is one. Second, it will focus on the relationship between the guide and the tourists in the context of demand, i.e., the tourists' motivations and needs, and the supply – the purposes and ways of managing heritage (commemoration, education, commercialisation). Third, it will discuss the dimensions of tourist experience making use of such categories as embodiment, emotions, and the realm of values.

Note

1. The name of this tour organiser can be found in two language versions: Ch**o**rnobyl Tour (the official, Ukrainian name of the company) and the anglicised Ch**e**rnobyl Tour (used as domain name and in promotional materials intended for foreign markets).

4 The guides to the Zone

A reflection on the functions and the significance of tour guides has accompanied the sociological and anthropological approach to tourism from the start, making them the mediators in the contacts between the hosts and guests (Smith, 1978) taking place in "touristic border zones" (Bruner, 2015). The traditional perception of guides as the bridge, "the essential interface" (Ap & Wong, 2001, p. 551) between the host and the visitors, characteristic of the early studies on guiding (e.g., Cohen, 1982, 1985; Holloway, 1981; Pearce, 1984) under the influence of the critical turn in anthropology and sociology, and consequently in tourism studies (Ateljevic et al., 2007) led to reconceptualising the tourist encounter from one of hosts and guests to a multidimensional mediation of tourism practices.

According to Salazar, a tour guide acts (Salazar & Graburn, 2014):

> as a highly skilled technician, working to keep tourism operating properly. Tour guides maintain the tourism system as it is, assuring the continuity and perpetuation of the chain of tourism imaginaries that exist about the destinations visited by tourists.

The practice of tour guiding is a strategic factor in the representation of a destination area (Dahles 2002). The overriding idea in guiding is to help tourists understand the locations they visit (Pond, 1993): the guides not only provide information about the location, and ensure the tourists' comfort and satisfaction, but they also primarily help with the physical and cultural access to the destination. They can also be considered gatekeepers. They are the ones who show others what to look at and how to do it, controlling the knowledge and experience that the tourists gain. Guided tours could be effective instruments used by governments to control tourists and their contacts with a host society and to disseminate images and information preferred by the authorities (Dahles, 2002; Simoni, 2018). On the one hand, they can build understanding across communities (Skinner, 2016), but on the other, they perpetuate power relations inherent in colonialism and sustain an essentialising perspective on the "exotic Other" (Bruner, 2015; Bunten, 2008). As Noel Salazar noted, they are key actors in the process

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of "localizing" – folklorising, ethnicising, and exoticising – a destination (Salazar, 2006, p. 629). Edward Bruner (2015) emphasised that tour guides are influential stakeholders, whose role lets them compete with other stakeholders over the historical narrative. As much as heritage tourism has been extensively researched, the fact that tour guides are involved, whether consciously or not, in the development of public history by mediating between the visitors and the past is still insufficiently realised. After all, translating "the strangeness of a foreign culture into a cultural idiom familiar to the visitors" (Cohen 1985, p. 15) refers not only to the present but also to the past.

Tour guides not only participate in the development of the heritage discourse by narratives about tourist sites but they can also make a significant impact on the tourists, defining their behaviour during a tour and shaping their attitudes. What tour guides do and say has a great influence on how tourists experience the destination (Hu & Wall, 2012). Particularly, when it comes to interpretative guiding (Weiler & Ham, 2001, p. 260):

> What messages a guide imparts to a group of tourists relative to the natural and cultural values of a place may in large part determine what they will think, feel and do both in the short (on-site) and possibly even in the long term (once they have returned home).

At the behavioural level, guides take responsibility for the behaviour of the group they guide and the impact that their visit may have on the natural or cultural environment that is being explored. On the mental level, the guides are responsible for the understanding and appreciation of the local issues to facilitate responsible tourist behaviour in the long term.

The multidimensional nature of the roles does constantly cause ambivalence for researchers, as they are a conceptual challenge. Literature on the subject has defined guides as information givers, sources of knowledge, mentors, surrogate parents, pathfinders, leaders, mediators, culture brokers, and entertainers. One of the most widely recognised and widespread typologies is that of Eric Cohen (1985), who started from the historical roles characteristic of guides. The first was pathfinder, and the second – mentor. The first one "provided privileged access to an otherwise non-public territory", which meant to ensure that the tourists reached their destination and returned safely. The second role was concerned with "edifying his party as in social mediation and culture brokerage" (Cohen, 1985, p. 10). The role of the mentor, also called a "tutor", combined two aspects of guidance: geographical and spiritual. Cohen characterises the role of the modern guide using two principal concepts, that of a leader and a mediator. The leader is derived from the pathfinder, who almost entirely focused on instrumental leadership concerned primarily with the physical environment (managing the group, enabling access to the non-public domain, and ensuring that the tour runs smoothly). As a leader, the guide mediates sites and institutions as well as tourism facilities between his group and the destination, therefore

he is rather outer-directed. It also has its social aspect; as "a social middleman" he or she is responsible for facilitating relationships, bringing cohesion and morale, and creating an entertaining atmosphere within the group of tourists. As a mediator, he or she passes on and mediates information and knowledge to the tourist, therefore it is rather inner-directed (but it also has its outer dimension when it comes to the mediation between the tourists and the local community) The guide selects and points out objects of interest to the tourists and gives explanations by introducing figures or facts about these objects, and in this way, translating the foreign culture to the tourists. Cohen emphasises that the dynamic of the guiding depends on the space-time context and points to a different dimension of guiding in the past than currently. The comment is important as, even though Cohen's typology became a point of reference for many later analyses of the roles of guides, with time it underwent critical interpretation itself (Weiler & Black, 2014; Pond, 1993). His analysis refers to the tourist industry in the 1980s, and guiding differed from the contemporary forms of practising tourism that are entangled in modern technologies and far more strongly individualised. What remains a universal reflection about the guiding activity is the bipolar role of the guide, active both as a mediator between the tourists and the external world (environment, people, and culture) and also between the tourists. This means that a guide cannot concentrate solely on the narrative but must also manage the group within a specified space and time. Nevertheless, the proportions between the activities in the two spheres depend on the type of tour, varying from city tours to treks. That specificity is reflected in some countries in the classification of professions, making a distinction between a tour guide and a tour leader. In practice, however, the roles converge. Ap and Wong (2001, p. 557) claim that tour leaders play complex professional roles including those of an information provider, environmental interpreter, and cultural ambassador. A tour leader also acts as an intermediator and educator for the group. Thus, tour leaders in a tour group perform more than a leading role. Wong and Lee (2012) indicated that a tour leadership style represents the method or mode that a tour leader adopts to guide a tour group as well as his or her habits and behaviour. Similarly, Tsaur and Teng (2017) concluded that tour leaders display different styles because of their roles and work content.

In the editorial to the special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea* devoted to guiding, Jackie Feldman and Jonathan Skinner (2018, p. 7) argue that choosing the term "cultural mediators" "to highlight the multiplex, performative, interactive dimensions of guiding as well as the fluidity of the 'cultures', they seek to negotiate". The authors also stress that guides are not transparent. Their accent, gender, and appearance may become semiotic objects of the tourist gaze, they can be examined by the group, and their accordance with visitors' preimage of the country or people limits or enhances their possibilities as cultural mediators. Bunten (2008, p. 381) notes that tour guides create a "commodified persona" for guiding work "to gain control over

the product of their labour, namely, themselves" since they are expected to "present a simplified version of the self that conforms to (popular) Western concepts of the Other" (Bunten 2008, p. 386).

Peter Howard mentions "reality interpreters" (Howard, 2011, p. 245), a specific type of guide. They include an authentic monk living in a monastery and guiding around it, and a miner guiding around a mine turned into a heritage site once it has lost its original industrial function. A separate category of "reality interpreters" are the witnesses of historical events, whose memories construct a first-person narrative that others cannot provide. The examples include Holocaust survivors on Israeli youth trips to Auschwitz (Feldman, 2010) or Republicans along Belfast's Falls Road (Skinner, 2016). In both these cases, the identity of the guide provides additional justification and reinforces the message with elements of a personal account that personalises the interpretation. Simultaneously, the guide's narrative provides the point for self-reflection on one's own identification that is shaped by the contact with the visitors in the process of guiding (Cohen et al., 2002).

The idealistic visions of being an interpretative guide who works in the paradigm of sustainability are with the vicissitudes of making money. Tour guides have their own agendas based on their country's sociocultural, historical, political and economic contexts, and/or on their employment situation (Ap & Wong, 2001), and successful guides know how to turn their social relations and narratives into a profitable enterprise (Dahles, 2002). As Feldman and Skinner (2018, 10) highlight, guides constantly negotiate changing perceptions of self and other, guiding work and daily life, intimacy and economic exchange, past and present, while the long list of guide roles certainly generates contradictions and role strains (Feldman & Skinner, 2018).

Guiding – the art of interpretation

According to the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (*FEG – European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations*, 2004), a tour guide is a person who "guides groups or individual visitors from abroad or from the guide's own country around the buildings, sites and landscapes of a city or a region; to interpret, inspiringly and entertainingly, the cultural and natural heritage and environment in the language of the visitor's choice". Many researchers and industry practitioners consider interpretation as the principal component of the guiding process. The unofficial motto of interpretation says: "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" (Tilden, 1967, p. 37). Coined by Freeman Tilden, a journalist and pioneer in interpreting natural and cultural heritage, that phrase was included, together with six others, in his manual on tour guiding in US national parks and other protected areas. According to Tilden (1967), interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships to people about the places they visit and the things they see through the use of original objects, by first-hand

experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information. For Peter Howard, that educational dimension was of special significance, which Tilden saw in the activity of the interpreters. The purpose was to create a single, national story about the American natural heritage. A tale unifying Americans, whose different background could give no common point of reference. However, "the determination to select a storyline is very powerful in Tilden, but it was always less applicable to the European scene, where it is almost impossible to describe any element of heritage, even in the natural sphere, without the dissonances becoming obvious" (Howard 2011, p. 262).

It is precisely due to those dissonances, which were more acutely noted also by the practitioners of management and heritage development in the wake of development of critical heritage studies, that the perception of the guide's function has changed. Literature on the subject contains numerous phrases indicating a certain ideal of guiding activity that leads to a deeper reflection in tourists, and the development of ethical attitudes towards the world explored. Interpretation is perceived as a "better form" of information that can give tourists new insights in the area they visit, and the culture and environment they experience. Ap and Wong (2001) say that, through their knowledge and understanding of a destination's attractions and culture, and through their communication skills, tour guides transform tourists' visits from tours into experiences. Moscardo (1996, p. 382) claims that "interpretation is trying to produce mindful visitors; visitors who are active, questioning, and capable of reassessing the way they view the world."

Both the guides and their interpretation are subject to relations of power and dependence. The guides are always pressed for time, caught between their obligation to please their employers and the tourists, and subject to government regulations (Dahles 2002). On the most general level, guiding activity is stimulated by the demands, and actions, of international, national, and local bodies involved in heritage protection and development. The key document on heritage interpretation, also in the tourist aspect, is The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites from 2008. The document contains detailed guidelines to the seven goals of interpretation. The fundamental goal is the physical and intellectual access to heritage using the appropriate selection of information sources, accounting for the spatial and cultural context of the site, with emphasis laid on maintaining the authentic quality of the presentation and the meaning communicated, considering the principles of sustainable development, and inclusion of local stakeholders (*The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites Reviewed and revised under the Auspices of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Interpretation and Presentation*, 2008, pp. 5–6). Principal 6 points to the need to design training and evaluation of people involved in heritage interpretation. It is hard to level any charge at the assumption that guides should be trained as far as knowledge, presentation competences, and skills are concerned. At the same time, a system of training and certification makes

this profession free from external control. As Feldman and Skinner (2018, p. 7) wrote, "some countries, sites and institutions exert a great deal of control over guide narratives, either through intensive training courses which limit guides' explanations to tightly controlled scripts, or through licensing regulations or surveillance" (Dahles, 2002; Ong et al., 2014; Simoni, 2018). The determination of the guiding narrative corresponds to the expectations of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006) because

> although such manuals and training are a step towards professionalising and improving the skills levels of tour guides, they should be adjusted (by wider inclusiveness) to be more democratic and accessible, and provide a more critical platform for tour guides to reflect on their careers, selves and roles.
>
> *(Ong et al., 2014, p. 232)*

Interpretation by a guide means negotiating meanings also in another dimension of the power–knowledge relationships. As Armin Mikos von Rohrscheidt (2021) noted, the guides' programmes of interpretation are increasingly often a product of cooperation among tour operators, guides, and the tourists themselves, who are more than just active participants of the visit as they are often the direct commissioners. That is why their preferences and needs are accounted for in planning, and the subjects they find interesting are embarked on during the interpretation. This results in increasing the flexibility of the guides' range of services, and a better adjustment of their offer to the actual needs of tourists. Russell Staiff (2017) emphasises that interpretation should not be a ready-made message but each time it should consider the sensitivity of the recipients, their cultural and social background, and also make a reference to the individual preferences of the visitors and their background.

Noel Salazar also points out that "tour guide interpretations largely feed off wider imaginaries, culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making devices, mediating how people act, cognise and value the world, and helping them to form identifications of Self and Other" (Salazar, 2015, p. 212). Referring to the latest trends in guiding, researchers observe a weakening of the guide's role as an information giver (Feldman & Skinner, 2018; Weiler & Black, 2014), which was noticed already a decade ago by John Urry and Jonas Larsen (2011, p. 203) who claimed that "the increased use of the internet by visitors using smartphones may devalue the role of guides as didactic information-givers while further increasing the practice of storytelling."

Guides weave tales negotiating meanings and position themselves as an authority towards the recipient, an authority that confronts the pre-images created by culture and the media, in a way complementing and interpreting what the tourists already know or believe they know. On the one hand, new media provides information that is a point of reference for the guide's

interpretation and on the other offers techniques for sharing the message in ways enriching the narrative. The guides are the keystone of the tourist system, not only because they are responsible for its efficient operation but also because they give it "a human face", which has been of special importance in recent years with the violent development of media technologies that open the field for virtual, audio, and mobile guiding. GIS and GPS, translating gadgets, podcasts, e-guides, and all the apps available for personal mobile devices mean that tourists can cope perfectly without the help of guides in many circumstances. In this way, the role of guides as mediators acquired a new dimension, as it not only concerns the relationship with the real world and the tourist but also with an extensive range of narratives and media technologies. Moreover, the use of new media combined with flexibility towards the tourists' needs increases the odds that the guides will maintain their key position in the process of interpreting heritage.

Since Freeman Tilden formulated the six principles of interpretation, many heritage researchers and heritage management practitioners (often combining both the roles) have devoted plenty of attention to designing guidelines aimed at more efficient interpretation (Beck & Cable, 2002; Weiler & Black, 2014; Ham & Weiler, 2007; Hems & Blockley, 2011; Howard, 2011; Moscardo, 1998, 2003; Pond, 1993; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Uzzell, 1992, 1996). Usually these principles indicate the goals of interpretation and generally present the means that should be used to achieve those goals. With the literature on the subject in mind, I suggest the following list of the most important principles:

- Interpretation discloses a deeper truth hiding behind any fact. The purpose of interpretation should be to stimulate those participating in it to take interest in heritage, disclose its deeper significance, provoke reflection, and expand the visitors' horizons.
- Interpretation is not teaching or "instruction". It should be enjoyable for visitors.
- It should lead to optimal experiences sparking satisfaction and joy from communing with heritage.
- It should encourage participants to interpret their experiences, which are holistic, as they result from the engagement of various senses.
- The principles of interpretation should be based on the differentiation of communicative approaches, multidimensional sharing and reception of the message, and activity and involvement of the recipients; therefore, it should also make use of message-reinforcing technologies.
- Interpretation should be shaped in reference to specific types of recipients and account for the specific nature of individual and group participation. It should connect to an element of personality or experience of the visitor.
- Interpretation should make it possible to personalise the past and portray its links to the present.

- Interpretation should involve various stakeholders of heritage, take account of their perspectives, and support the inclusive approach to heritage.
- Interpretation should be based on universal motives, on a theme rather than just the topic. Themes are specific messages, factual but compelling statements about a place and an item, while topics are merely the subject matter of presentation. Motives are the frames for the presentation of values.

The principles presented above are guidelines on how to effectively interpret heritage; however, their fulfilment is always the result of many variables. The successive sections will discuss in detail the activity of Chornobyl guides as interpreters who help to understand multi-layered heritage of the Zone which undergoes performative commodification (see Figure 4.1). They will

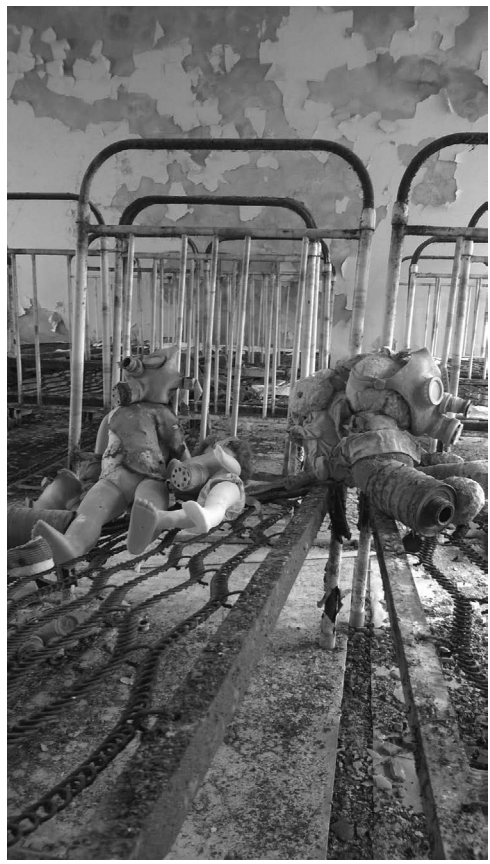

Figure 4.1 Authenticity revised. Installations in Pripyat. Dolls in children's cots.

Source: Photo by the author.

present how different factors influence the process of interpretation, which sheds light on the problem of dissonances relevant to the Zone's heritage. For dissonances seem to be the most fascinating element of Chornobyl's heritage.

Chornobyl guides

From the start, there were people showing others around the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone. They were predominantly employees of the power plant, guiding special delegations that had received permits to enter the Zone. In the first years, the guides were more companions who were not supposed to talk but made sure that a visitor did not do anything forbidden. However, with time and tourism development, their role has changed.

The mounting interest in visiting the Zone was an opportunity for the rise of a particular group of guides specialising in guiding around the Zone. Due to the extraordinary nature of the Zone as a destination (increased risk to health and life, border area, industrial and military facilities), entering it requires the supervision of a certified companion, responsible not only for sharing information but also, first of all, guaranteeing the safety of the visitors. To become a guide to the Zone, you need to meet specific criteria defined by SAUEZM. The fundamental condition is Ukrainian citizenship (in the case of foreign nationals, a residence and a permit to work in Ukraine), command of Ukrainian, and a valid cooperation contract with COTIS. The contract is a particular licence for guiding. Should guides fail to respect the principles defined by the Agency (enter the buildings, allow consumption of alcohol), their licences may be suspended temporarily.

COTIS signs a contract with selected people who have completed training and an internship (organised by COTIS or a third party, in which case a certificate and recommendation are needed) and have provided proof or reports on passing an exam in radiological safety. Besides the commissions that a guide may receive from COTIS, most guides also work with regular partners. This can be a contract of employment with one of the Ukrainian tour operators organising visits to the Zone, or the provision of services to various parties as part of their own business activity. However, those temporal contracts with the guides are also a form of controlling them. As one of the respondents remarked: "this means 'holding all the strings' and they hold them: 'I don't like the looks of you' and so forth.": [V/04.2019/1] Another guide believes that this is

> a warning sent to everyone. If someone suddenly takes the dosimeter off, if there are complaints at the checkpoints, if they see him on the roof or in a building in the city, and so forth. 'We will punish you.' First, they will take you from the roster, and later punish financially – I don't know.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

The number of Chornobyl guides is difficult to estimate as it depends on the tourist flow. There were 110 guides working in the Zone in August 2019, with as many as 36 new people employed for the 2019 season. Interest in being guided around the Zone was very high at the time. In June 2019, Chornobyl Tour published an ad about recruitment for the positions of guides in social media (at the time there were ca. 20 guides working for the company, and the number of tourists arriving brought news about the need to employ another ten). The ad defined the salary as 36,000 hryvnia, i.e., under €1200 (plus tips). The remuneration was therefore extremely attractive, especially in Ukrainian circumstances, yet at the time there was talk about the salary of a Chornobyl guide working a five-day week exceeding 60,000 hryvnia (nearly €2000). The time of the pandemic, when the number of tourists visiting the Zone dropped to the level recorded five years earlier, significantly reduced the number of guides. Some of them, especially the freelancers, had to look for new forms of employment. The guides on so-called junk contracts also had to look for alternative sources of making money, as their earnings were flexible, and depended on the number of groups they guided. This is why, with tourism in the doldrums, it dropped to nought. At the time when the crucial part of the research was conducted, that is, from the spring of 2018 to the early summer of 2019, there were around 60 people regularly providing services to tourists, although there were more contracts signed formally with COTIS, as the COTIS roll included 78 people as of the end of 2018.[1]

It is worth emphasising that tour organisers and tour leaders also unofficially play the role of guides. This is especially true regarding the Polish organisers, such as Napromieniowani.pl and Strefa Zero, specialising in Chornobyl tourism. The group must be accompanied by a guide holding a contract with COTIS, but in this case, the guide's duties include observing the radiological safety and arrangement of formalities connected to the group's stay in the Zone, but the tour leader in fact shows tourists around.

The dynamic increase in the number of visitors to the Zone since 2016 resulted in the need to increase the number of people providing services to the tourists. Two of the three tour operators holding the largest share in Chornobyl tourism, Gamma Travel and Chornobyl Tour, decided to launch their own courses training future Chornobyl guides. On the one hand, that step was an opportunity to educate their own staff and fuel further development (a known practice among the largest tour operators), and on the other, it had a marketing significance, as it presented those companies as stakeholders in the heritage-making efforts to improve the quality of tourist traffic management and integrating people around the Zone. The two initiatives coincided in time with the outbreak of the pandemic, which greatly reduced the interest in the offer and became a significant hurdle for meeting the assumptions.

In February 2020, Gamma Travel announced enrolment to the Chornobyl Guide School, whose slogan was "We liquidate ignorance", very well demonstrated in the logo of the course: the word "Chernobyl" with the "e" stricken out, and an "o" added. Its founders considered it "the first

innovative platform for training qualified guides to the exclusion Zone". The cost of the course was set at 8000 hryvnia (approx. €260). Participants in the course had access to video-filmed lectures guaranteed for a period of six months, additional materials in PDF files, and online support from the school's representatives. The course also envisaged a one-day training session in the Zone (originally, there were more of them). Participants were to receive a certificate of completing the course. The staff were presented as people known for their academic, journalist, and also guiding activity and included Alexander Sirota, Alexey Moskalenko, Sergii Parashin, and Denis Wischniewski (*Chornobyl guide school – навчання гідів*, 2019).

In turn, in March 2020, Chornobyl Tour announced the establishment of Chornobyl University, which is, as its founders claim, "a modern educational project" aimed at "changing the previous view on the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone and the events of 1986" (*Чорнобыльский университет*, n.d.). The authors claim that it is not strictly a course for guides, yet part of the curriculum is a basic course in guiding, and moreover, after completion of the course, the participants may work for the company as guides. The classes were divided into two modules. One concentrated on such technical aspects as the construction of the reactor, issues related to radiation, the reasons and course of the explosion, and liquidation of its results. The other one concerned the work of the guides in the Zone. A Pole, Borys Tynka, fascinated by Ukraine and organising trips mostly to Lviv and Odessa, was among the participants of the first edition of the course. The organisers nicknamed him "Gagarin", as he was the only participant from abroad, which made him the only foreigner to receive the certificate (although due to the lack of permanent residence in Ukraine and a work permit he cannot officially be a guide commissioned by COTIS). As the course was conducted during the pandemic, it was held entirely remotely. It attracted 20 people, besides the Pole, also ones working regularly in the Zone and residents of Slavutych resettled as young children.

In their statement to the media, the creators of the courses for the guides claim that the idea of training results from the need to order the system of guiding so that only selected people worked with the tourists. It is also a form of shaping a specific narrative about the Zone, especially when the guides work for tour operators. Katia, one of the guides who participated in the survey, believes that the training organised by the Agency differs from what is offered by tour operators (at the time of the research, the operators were only planning to start such courses):

> Honestly speaking, state training was not too seriously treated, and everyone could complete it. They did not pay as much attention to our training in the capacity of tour guides. But a tourist company you work with has its line. If you want to cooperate, you must expect far more serious training. You get education in history, you must know plenty of information about the history of the Zone, about radiation security,

> and obviously you get practical training. This calls for time, longer or shorter, depending on the person. Then you go with another guide to the Zone, on a trip, and observe him working. You simply try to remember all the principles and the way of guiding people. You learn how much time it all takes, because good time management is very important, as you have plenty of spaces to show in the Zone.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

The training for guides was based on learning the materials that were delivered to the participants and observation of an experienced guide, to whom the intern was delegated for the time of preparation for the examination: The basic educational material offered to the future guides by Chornobyl Tour was the "script" that was also the grounds for the programme of the visit. However, as Yelena, another guide, emphasises, the script was only a starting point for building your own narrative:

> in our company, we have a script for 'following the locations' and I find it very helpful, because it is interesting. You have a plan you need to observe, but the information you share depends on you.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

As has been mentioned, the heterogeneity of the guiding group has justification in the process of transforming the Zone into a tourist destination.

You can distinguish several types of guides, as the project revealed the fundamental division is based on the dichotomies of age, biographic links to the Zone, and the fact of completing the training or not.

The first group can be labelled as "the old guides". First of all, they were not trained to provide services to visitors, but life in the shadow of the disaster made guiding the visiting groups their basic or additional professional activity. They are witnesses of the disaster who participated in person in the "liquidation", and the ones who were relocated from the Zone (or had their families resettled) or locals living in the vicinity of the Zone (e.g., in Dytiatki village). Many of them used to work for the power plant or for the Agency (as well as for the administrative structures and security units that came before them). I also include in this group the current personnel of the Zone who make additional money by guiding or are delegated to guiding groups of tourists as part of their duties. They did not necessarily participate in the liquidation, but they have long worked in the location. As Vyacheslav says:

> I don't even know, if any of all the old guides have remained, save for me. They were the guides who worked still back on the delegations (in the 90s – author's note). Igor (changed name – author's note) must have come in '98, if not even later. But he is a local one, isn't he, and he also worked in the structures for a time. That is why he knows the Chornobyl Region, all the hamlets. Where you can pass under the fence, and where

> you cannot. And he, additionally, knows plenty of people, besides me, he must be one of the oldest. He, too, is well over 50. You can distinguish three categories: the old local ones, then the guides who have worked for 2–4 years, (…) and well, there are also the new ones, corporate people.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

The other group I call "the professionals". These are guides who have made guiding to the Zone their profession, whether running their own business or being employed by tour operators specialising in what is known as Chornobyl tourism. They were either trained by the Agency or by tour operators. They came "from outside" the microcosm of the Zone. An interesting subcategory here are the former stalkers: the ones who explored the Chornobyl space illegally but began to treat their passion as a pretext for legal employment. Actually, you could also account for the stalkers who bring people illegally into the Zone and charge a fee for it, as in fact they provide tourist services too. However, as the specificity of illegal visits is radically different from the legal ones, this niche of exploring the Zone is not accounted for in this research project.

The old guides are a part of the Zone's community. Those who were rank and file employees of the power plant and residents when the disaster struck grew into the Zone with time, developing a system, a network of connections, changing positions and functions, they are good old buddies, only the career has lifted some a few rungs higher. Therefore, the older guides play the role of reality interpreters, the ones who interpret their own professional, but also private, reality, that is, the realms that the whole life consists of.

Interviews with the old guides brim with information and anecdotes about how it used to be: how the Zone operated before the tragedy, and after the tragedy, about people, and about the entire microcosm of the Zone. Compared to the older ones, the young guides only present quite fragmentary knowledge of the Zone: they know where documents must be delivered but they only know the people of the Zone professionally, and not socially as good old companions. One of those "rooted" in the Zone is Vyacheslav – an engineer and turbine operator who had worked in the power plant even before the disaster, and moved to Slavutych after the evacuation. In the 1990s, he was head of the Chornobyl cooperation team entertaining the delegations and has quite likely had the longest history of guiding around the Zone. Due to health reasons, he cannot do active guiding as he used to, so he rather organises the visits, looking for what he calls "new formats". He considers himself primarily an employee of the power plant, whose role has simply evolved. As he says,

> I only have one entry in my book of employment: the Chernobyl powerplant. That was how I started working, and this is how I'm going to weather it until retirement. Some like it, others don't.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

The other "old" guide who agreed to participate in the project is Igor who has lived near the Zone and has been associated with the power plant all his life. He is also one of those who have longest guided around the Zone. He works using commissions from COTIS, yet he works with many companies, specialising in trips spanning more days, and unorthodox ones, which make very good use of his contacts in the Zone.

Another guide who goes with groups but is primarily an employee of the power plant is Yuri, who arrived in Slavutych as a young boy, with his mother – a nuclear physicist delegated to work at the power plant after the explosion. Yuri has been associated with the Zone for 18 years, for a number of years working on the design of the New Ark, and now not only running research but also guiding groups at the behest of COTIS. Besides those, he has his private tours once or twice a month. He claims to be able to earn the equivalent of a monthly salary over a weekend, and believes that 75% of the power plant staff guide groups, as it is a splendid source of income.

Just because they participated in the development of the Zone's system for years, the older guides can take greater risks, as they know who to call when they themselves or their tourists fall into dire straits. As Vyacheslav said, the young have their advantages as they know languages well, but they don't have the contacts the old ones have. He gave an example:

> The third category is that of girls and boys who have worked here for a short time. Zhenya from St Petersburg had a girl, or rather, wife, who lived in Ukraine. And he arrived in Ukraine, and lived near Kyiv. And he wrote a motivation letter saying that he knows English, this and that, and that he wants to work. They employed him. He is, you know, just like young people, quick and, let's say, resourceful. And he got caught. But he is young. And if, for example, they caught Igor – as he was in a forbidden place – Igor knows who to talk to, to receive protection.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

Situated between the old guides–witnesses and the young–professionals, are the ones responsible for the development of mass tourism in the Zone: they are the owners of the largest businesses specialising in Chornobyl tourism, who, albeit irregularly, still accompany groups. Although Sergii Mirnyi and Alexander Sirota belong to this generation, and are considered the co-founders of Chornobyl tourism, they have long been involved in the activities related to the protection of heritage and development of the Zone (running their commercial businesses by the way as well), yet they don't work as guides per se. Sergii usually accompanies VIP groups (journalists, scientists, activists) and runs study tours (especially with the academia), also participating in the development and promotion of the new routes that are included in the company's offer. Alexander is actively involved in the Civil Council operating by the Agency and in the education and media projects, including exhibitions. Another "cult" figure among the people of the Zone is

a Slovak, Dominik Orfanus, founder of ChernobylWel.Come. As he recalls, his adventure with the Zone started in 2008 when he visited it for the first time as a tourist, and found it a life-changing experience, even though he was more afraid of radiation than excited. As a foreigner, Dominik always guides in the Zone with another, licensed guide.

Most "professional" guides who started work in recent years only visit the Zone when they become interested in becoming employed as a guide. Katia has been a guide for three years, which, considering the average job experience in the Zone, makes her highly experienced. The turnover among the young guides is very high. One who has worked for two of three years is considered an old hand. Many people try that walk of life, but they give up due to its, also physical, intensity since it is totally different from city guiding. Katia belongs to the first wave of guides employed by tourist companies after 2016, the year that marked a leap in the number of arrivals in the Zone. Prior to that, Katia studied international relations and was offered the job of a guide by one of the tour operators immediately on graduation, as her relative worked as a driver in the Zone. Her family includes liquidators, and Katia calls herself "a child of Chernobyl" (she has health problems that she links to the aftermath of the disaster).

Many, if not the majority, of the young guides who worked in the Zone in 2018–19 have only guided for less than a year. A good example is Karolina, a resident of Kyiv, a recent graduate of English and Vietnamese studies, who has worked as a guide for six months. She first went to Chornobyl to see whether she would like to work as a guide. She went on a visit, but with the job advert at the back of her mind. At the time, she didn't know much about the Zone, she didn't know anyone resettled, nor was that a topic of discussion in her home. Only when she started guiding, did she realise that there were people related to Chornobyl around her. For example, it turned out that her grandma's colleague was a teacher relocated from Pripyat.

In Katia's own words,

> What I saw made a huge impression on me, because only when you see certain things with your very eyes, do you run deep into history. You learn it from within. You won't realise that until you have seen it with your very eyes. You go on your first trip, and you see the powerplant, you see Pripyat, you see history – this also makes you very curious, eager to learn, and eager to explain to people what precisely transpired here.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

Like Karolina, Katia had practically no knowledge of the disaster from history lessons, all she remembers is that there were roll calls on the anniversary, but "no specific details about what actually happened, who is to blame, and what nuclear energy is" [K/07.2018/1].

Before completing the training, the young guides have no in-depth knowledge about the disaster or about nuclear issues. As a rule, they are people with a very good command of English and often of another foreign language

as well. Yelena, who first arrived in the Zone as an interpreter for a Russian-speaking guide, which she found very difficult as she did not know many technical terms even in Russian, began her adventure with the Zone thanks to her linguistic competences. She proved to have fantastic predispositions, and in the two years as a guide she gained a reputation as one of the best "young" guides and, importantly, garnered praise even from the "old" ones.

Many young guides were tempted to work by the offer of an attractive salary or by the location itself. Evgeni, who has also been a guide for six months, is a journalist by profession who does voluntary work with autistic children in his free time. He arrived in the Zone for the first time with a group of Italian journalists and found showing the Zone so enjoyable that he decided to do it professionally. Kostya, also guiding for six months, after dropping out of his university in Kyiv, ran a tourist business specialising in organising extreme sports tours. As he did not manage to develop his business sufficiently, he decided to become a guide to Chornobyl and follow his passion shooting videos about extreme sports. Sergei, a mining electric engineer from Donetsk under 60, who left for Kyiv with his wife at the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, is an outlier in that group of respondents due to age and experience. He arrived in the Zone for the first time for a guide training session, even though the Zone made an early appearance in his life. When he learnt about the disaster in 1986, still as a young boy, he wanted to volunteer to dig a tunnel under the reactor but his family and friends stopped him. Sergei has worked in the Zone for two years, cooperating with various companies, but he also has his tourists, which is why he actively manages his social media that plays a major role in the guides' self-creation. Tour organisers as well as individual guides use it for marketing purposes. They have semi-professional profiles on Instagram, Facebook, and VKontakte. Actually, the interest in this realm of activity, lying on the fringe of the research project, would call for a separate study; however, a symptomatic presence of the guiding experience from the Zone can be noticed, as it "seeps" into the profiles of the guides. On the one hand, some use social media intentionally to shape their professional image (this is especially true about the people who are also tour organisers and the ones who provide freelance services). On the other hand, the guides' profiles express their private fascination in the Zone that captivates with its aesthetics and intrigues with its mystery.

The guides often publish photos of themselves in the Zone and also of the Zone, which they see day in day out, disclosing places and phenomena inaccessible to the ones who do not work there. The Zone is presented as a highly mysterious location, where nature manifests its awe-inspiring beauty, sparking a feeling of the sublime in the observer. Ruins belong to the landscape, harmoniously blending with the wilderness of nature and seem a part of it rather than relics of human presence. Many photographs show the Zone as a tamed space, as if those publishing them want to emphasise that it is not their place of work but rather home free of any menace or fear, for example, a photograph of a guide sitting under an apple tree eating an

apple. Moreover, it is a space they care for, so photographs of guides collecting rubbish, scrubbing out graffiti, and visiting the samosely with stocks of food and medications are also published. Far less often, albeit present, are the photographs that show the guiding work: selfies with tourists or other guides, and group photos. One can get the impression that, even though these are the tourists who are the reason why the guides are in the Zone, their presence does not fit the image of the Zone, which in a way belongs to the guides, who disclose its secrets.

Contact via social media lets satisfied tourists share the contacts and recommendations with more people eager to visit Chornobyl. Then a guide who went on an organised tour commissioned by a travel agency has an opportunity to guide a private tour, which obviously pays much better.

A separate subcategory among the young are the former stalkers and stalkers who have temporarily given up illegal exploration, as being caught would automatically strip them of the licence. One of the guides who belonged to that category at the time of research was Vika, one of the most media-hyped female stalkers. Vika did not agree to give an interview, but there were two other ex-stalkers among the guides who shared their experience. One of them was Andrii, a 21-year-old engineer and graduate of the Kyiv University of Technology. His interest in the Zone started in secondary school, and he first entered the Zone at the age of 16, accompanying another stalker, whom he considered experienced:

> I have always been interested in such things as zombies, apocalypse, and also the nuclear apocalypse. When I was in secondary school, I decided to go on such a trip, but I didn't know where, who with, and when. I didn't know anything about that location either, so I found another guide, who I found useless on my first trip, because he was unprofessional. It was only his second time.
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

Andrii believes stalkers stand out with superior knowledge of the topography of the Zone, superior to that of the young guides:

> I don't have more information about the Zone than the others. Obviously, there are guides to the Zone who know more facts than I do, and so forth, and so forth. But when it comes to locations, I'm quite good with those.
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

He estimates that around 20% of guides used to be stalkers. As a rule, at the start of the visit, Andrii does not share his previous experiences, it is only when the tourists start asking him either about his personal adventure with the Zone or about the option to enter the buildings when he admits to the group to having been a stalker. Another stalking guide, Denis, was "given

away" by the photographs of the Zone in his album he showed to tourists, as they included locations out of the visiting routes and sites of elevated levels of radiation (for instance, the scrapyard for the vehicles used during the liquidation). Asked about the authorship of the photographs, he admitted he took them himself, which obviously meant he had to take them illegally. Stalkers do not always disclose their identity. As Andrii admitted, this depends on the group, meaning when there are people for whom it is worth trying to "go beyond the standard". This means enriching the narrative with the tales from the illegal expeditions as, in his opinion,

> people, especially Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians love such stories, are eager to listen to them, and ask you for more.
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

The opinions about stalkers among the young guides are divided. As Karolina admitted, you can learn much from stalkers (not only from ex-stalker guides):

> Stalkers know many more stories than we do. They find it an exceptional place, they want to learn more about it, and sometimes they visit the samosely (settlers) living in remote locations. That's how they know far more tales than we do. I find it a very interesting subject. I think sometimes it's pleasant to do something illegal, but this is not for me.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

Karolina generally divides stalkers into two types: those who care for the Zone and those who destroy it:

> The ones I know are good, as they clean the Zone, and they won't steal, break, or damage anything. They are people who really love the Zone, and when you see such people, you have no reason to hate them. Obviously, I also know stalkers who go about destroying things, and mar the Zone with ugly graffiti – I don't like such people.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

Tanya, who tries to understand the truths of both parties is of a similar opinion:

> I understand people who are so passionate about this place that they try to come here as often as they can, to enjoy the atmosphere. They don't intend to destroy, steal or break anything. They're simply here to enjoy this place. I don't see anything wrong in that but, on the other hand, I understand why the authorities of the Chernobyl Zone take it to their heart.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Yelena is more radical about stalkers:

> They had that idea that they are the owners of the Zone. And that it is solely for stalkers, that they can explore it and show this area to people, and only they know everything about it, which is weird but OK. I try to talk to them, start a discussion, meet them, but no luck as yet. (…) These guys are very romantic but they don't do anything special, and they blame us for doing – I don't know… Talking to them is usually useless. And they don't like me too much as a rule, because I am not especially delicate when I talk to people, especially on that subject. Because when they start quarrelling, they say 'OK, you like making money, and you get paid a lot for one day', to which I say 'Yes, obviously, because I know a lot about Chernobyl'. 'If you are so clever, explain to me some differences between a RBMK and other reactors.' To which he then says 'OK, shut up and do your thing.' So they don't like me and I don't like them, and it's all right.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

The world of Zone aficionados is relatively small. The most active stalkers are well known, also for their activity on social media. But it is difficult not to notice the tension between stalkers and the guides who represent the commercial face of exploring the Zone. It is not so that there is a war or mutual animosity between the "older" and "professional" guides. Primarily, because they work together and are affected by the same problems. They meet on the route (e.g., at a petrol pump on the way to a checkpoint, in Dytiatki, at lunch in the canteen). Guides usually use this time to talk, and exchange comments on new developments in the Zone, gossip, and comment on the behaviour of tourists. The young usually keep to themselves, and the older ones to themselves, which results from the fact that they also stay in touch when out of work. For Katia, her colleagues,

> are more like family. We even have chats on Viber and WhatsApp, when we communicate, exchange information, and also post funny photos. I know many of them, obviously not all, but the ones who work continuously. We sometimes even happen to meet out of work at small parties, when there is time.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Work is very intensive, which is why there is simply not enough time to spend time together and become closer, which Karolina sadly noted, complaining that she doesn't even have time for a barbecue with friends, as some of them always happen to be with a group in the Zone. All that is left are brief contacts at work. Andrii concluded that

> they are all my colleagues. We meet, we say 'hello' every morning, and 'goodbye' in the evening. We share stories from our work and so forth.

> We are friends with some of the oldest guides, and some guides are neutral to me. Not my enemies but not my friends either.
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

Yet, as Yelena noted, the fast development of tourist traffic had an impact on the weakening of the relationships between the guides:

> I arrived back when the guiding people still maintained closer contacts. There was such a backbone indeed, everyone was in touch and was friends. Now there is less of it. Well, there are groups, but there are few of them. This is no longer a single organism. Nevertheless, we all communicate, we all support one another. If you need help, everyone helps one another. Still, I don't see this as a uniform solid. There are young people, there are old ones. The old say "nothing here is ever what it used to be". The young try to look at it their way.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

Young guides speak of the older ones with a certain respect for their knowledge, which they can tap into. This is not a knowledge learnt but resulting from experience. As Yelena emphasised:

> There is a guide called Alexei, and he was actually a witness of the explosion, he was close to the reactor. He actually doesn't know much, but he is a witness. As a witness he can explain a lot, if you only persuade him to talk.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Young guides realise that the knowledge of the older ones is different, that they bound their whole lives to the Zone, which makes them a potential source of information for the young:

> Alexander [Sirota – author's note] was ten when the accident occurred. I believe he can share more details, because he was there. Similarly, Sergii Mirnyi will give you more details, because he was a liquidator, he is a scientist, and he has plenty of information, so if you ask a question, it will be answered.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

A reflection that you need to deserve the trust of the old guides returns in what the young say, as the old are usually reserved towards the newly employed. This was very well summed up by Katia:

> Some older guides were in the Zone, the area of Chernobyl, immediately after the accident and they know a lot. Quite often, which is so obvious, they are more reserved and are not as open as the younger guides. But I find it understandable, as the older are also more competent. Sometimes

> they know plenty of information and quite likely have certain memories that can be painful. This is probably the reason why they experience 'a cognitive dissonance' as they knew the truth at the time and much information they had did not dovetail with what they were told. Perhaps they even developed a certain indifference within. When you start talking to them, they are reserved; also after the conversation. Yet once they open, they share incredible facts. Yes, they are more reserved and, as far as I have seen, they worry more about radiation than the young guides. They are more careful, more reserved, more subdued. If you manage to reach them as a visitor or any other person, they will tell you many interesting stories which the young certainly cannot share.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Being more experienced, the older ones are often disgusted if not revolted by the knowledge and behaviour of the young. The older guides charge the ones Vyacheslav called "the corporate guides" with a schematisation of the message.

The older guides, the ones who worked or work at the power plant believe that the young have superficial knowledge, as they do not understand the essence of the problem:

> They all make good tales, but when it comes to such details as for example 'why there was a failure' they can't cover it as well as somebody who worked there and could talk for a week drawing from their own experience.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

Vyacheslav sometimes tries to help the young better understand the things he talks about:

> I say 'I am the oldest guide here. My name is A…' So the other chap replies 'O, I've heard about you.' Many know my name but they hardly ever associate it with the face. Because I don't advertise, I act quietly. So I tell him 'Excuse me, I'll correct you a bit' and I'm trying to tell him. To which he says 'Really? I didn't know about that.' This means that there is a certain system of training, but it is not professional.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

This also irritates Yuri, who, as he admitted in the interview, can no longer find strength to correct the simplifications and mistakes of the guides he sometimes hears talking to their groups standing next to him. Like Vyacheslav, he, too, blames the system of guide training and the mass quality of the service provided as one-day tours. Older guides don't specialise in one-day tours running along the standard route. Most often they work with individual tourists, which gives them greater freedom, and their trips

usually last for two or more days, which allows a much deeper exploration of the Zone, while the selection of the programme is the result of the group's expectations and the guide's invention. Vyacheslav and Igor are often chosen by the people who have already been to the Zone (for instance, with a corporate tour) and want to see something more. As Igor said

> Then they employ for example me. Because they know that it's better to see with me – to spend these five days in a row driving around the Zone. (…) For the start, I ask them about their wishes, what they want to see. If they don't know, because this also happens, they say: 'And what can you propose?' And that is the best option. So I suggest that we try this and this, and that.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

Igor sees that the young guides know languages but they give nothing from themselves, only recite a lesson they learned, which means a lack of freedom:

> Those young ones, and they've employed many of them, use English, German, French, and Spanish. However, they follow principles, follow clear rules and regulations. The same "route around Chernobyl". And like he started his 'blah blah' in Kyiv, his mouth won't close until in Kyiv in the evening, when they have returned. This is the way he was consulted, the way he was taught. He passed, he was consulted, made an intern, and taught what and how to say it correctly. I always smile watching it and think: 'I can't go that way, this is not my way.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

Igor believes that this is not only laziness but an intentional policy of tourist companies keen on standardisation of the message. As he says, the older guides can afford more, as they don't have a boss controlling them. The guides who are permanently connected to one company are simply afraid of losing their job, which is why they follow the guidelines precisely:

> It is the first thing they're afraid of – losing their job. I know they are paid well. (…) They will never say or show the unnecessary things. They will act as instructed.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

Igor believes that, compared to the certain liberty that the old guides have, this double system of control of the young guides (by the Agency and tourist companies) leads to bad practices that boil down to harming one another:

> For instance, there is a group of Chernobyl Tour being told 'you mustn't – you mustn't – you mustn't'. And suddenly a client of that Chornobyl Tour looks back and sees one or two of my people sitting in

> a forbidden place. So they go 'And who is he? Why is he allowed, and we are not?' That's what it's all about. This is most important – don't let yourself get caught, toe the line. Everyone knows that we still ramble like that. Well, the worst problem is that some snitch on the others.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

The guides know that everyone is controlled by the Agency, which can result in losing your licence:

> Theoretically, it's better not to enter anywhere, to climb nothing. But we all violate the rules. We no longer go to Fujiyama, but to the Friendship of Nations Street and to the Constructors Street. Even though now the SBU (Ukrainian security services) have set up cameras, so they are in control of the situation.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

This leads to practical resistance and cooperation between guides, also representing different companies: "We communicate with one another, and as soon as one sees police in a sector of the city, they share this information with other guides. You need to watch out. That's very good." [K/07.2018/1]

This also means watching the tourists, who must know that a guide runs a risk for them, which is why they mustn't make that risk worse:

> Even if I or Fyodor explore a place, we always know we should be protected. We warn you. You mustn't go about, as many do, posting photos on Facebook and the like immediately. You mustn't do it. They are monitored.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

The Exclusion Zone is a special space due to the risks to life and health but, as a consequence of these threats, there is a system of detailed control. This poses an exceptionally difficult task for the guides to the Zone. A guide in the Zone plays a role more extensive than that of an usher. Managing the group, that is, carrying out the programme in a space restricted by special regulations for visitors, calls for developed leadership competences. Tourists often try to force the guides to take them to the places out of bounds, outside the tourist route marked by the Management of the Zone or violate the rules of the visit (they touch surfaces, approach the locations/objects with high radiation, and drink alcohol).

The guide's narrative presents an entire array of orders and prohibitions supported by appropriate arguments (including tales of what the consequences of a failure to obey may be) so as to make the visit fairly harmonious. Another difficulty is the pressure of time. The group must travel to individual points quickly to make it before the Zone's lockdown in the evening. The special regime accompanying the visit, the presence of the uniformed services, and repeated controls are elements that depress many people who

are not used to such stringent rules. Guides try not to scare the tourists too much, but they certainly must care about discipline and are undoubtedly a particular buffer between the services and the tourists. Each group of guides mentioned above has its characteristic, slightly different approach to the Zone's heritage, and consequently they use different strategies of guiding around the Zone and describing the disaster and its aftermath. The guides balance their message between information and emotions. The Zone is not only a heritage site, but also a place of remembrance and a place of trauma. As guiding is an interaction between a location and a visitor, each visit is different also due to the differences between the tourists the guide accompanies.

One can say that guiding is a dialogically constructed performance developed not only by the guide but also by the recipients who receive the message. Like a conductor, the guide interprets the score of heritage. The specific qualities of "performance" of individual sections of "the work" depend on the line-up of the orchestra (tourists), circumstances of the performance (season, day, time), and additional factors (e.g., presence of other tourists). Every guide, with their unique personality and specific experience, acting in specific conditions of work with a specific group, carries out the task of showing the Zone's heritage entrusted to them through different strategies. Their purpose, whether conscious or not, and conducted with greater or lesser efficiency, is to implement the principles of interpretation.

Falling back on the research conducted, I point out four basic strategies of interpreting the Chornobyl heritage: the strategy of safe exploration, the strategy of personalisation, the strategy of past presencing, and the edutainment strategy. They provide a framework for revealing dissonances, constructing, reconstructing, and negotiating meanings and the embodied, multi-sensory, creative, emotional process of heritage-making.

The strategy of safe exploration

Every guided tour challenges the guide to meet the expectations of the group, follow the regulations of the visit and the requirements of the employer, and also achieve satisfaction from guiding the tour. For tourists, the immediacy of radiation is an important element in experiencing the Zone: it is precisely controlled playing with risk. As the guides meet the visitors in Kyiv, and always before entering the Dytiatki Checkpoint (Figure 4.2) they usually present the safety rules while on the bus to make the tourists familiar with them before they arrive at the checkpoint, where they are obliged to sign a detailed list of rules. The guides all agree that what you tell the tourists primarily depends on the group. This is how Karolina sees it:

> We usually start from the safety rules, and as it's always the same information but every group is different. I know that the choice of stories will make the visit different; it depends on what they add, because I know my groups, and I know what is going to be interesting for them.
>
> *[K/0.2018/4]*

Figure 4.2 Information Centre at Dytiatki Checkpoint.

Source: Photo by the author.

The most important is to define the principles and conditions of safe exploration. The "orchestration" of the interpretation therefore takes place primarily in the context of the rules and regulations in force for visits to the Zone, and differences can certainly be noticed between individual guides, the fundamental variables being the guide's personal attitude to the regulations and the type of group being guided.

The principle infringed most frequently, and at the same time one that can cause the biggest hazard to the tourists' health and life if not observed, is the prohibition on entering the buildings. Mikhail admits he tries not to enter the buildings and only shows people what can be seen through the windows.

> Of course, some hop inside for a moment to take photographs. Take a risk, for the sake of what? Although, actually, all people come here to take risks….
>
> *[M/02.2019/1]*

He believes that young guides are ready to risk more than the older ones:

> I'd say that it's primarily age that counts here. A person of 20 is fascinated and enchanted with it. Obviously, at work they will have appetite for a far greater risk than a mature person.
>
> *[M/02.2019/1]*

In turn, Andrii believes that you get used to working in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) as you visit the same places on the route every day.

What comes on top of that is exhaustion, when, during the peak tourist season, you work – day in, day out – for a fortnight, without a break:

> "Even if you're 20, active and joyful, you will finally have enough of it and there is no longer the adrenaline that was there at the beginning". [A/07.2018/5] With time, the attitude to the Zone changes and the guide no longer takes risks to prove to the tourists how brave he or she is.

Guides are aware that the prohibitions are highly disappointing for the tourists who thought they would be able to "explore" Pripyat freely, especially that many of them have in their heads images of the interiors of the abandoned buildings. Karolina admits that she understands these people, the tourists:

> I explain to them that the houses in the Zone look exactly like in my description. They will find no furniture, sofas or wardrobes with clothes. If there is an opportunity I will let them come close to an interior, but we're not breaking the rules and they will be safe.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

She believes that

> most principles are obvious and you must obey them. I wouldn't do something that is forbidden. You cannot take things out of the Exclusion Zone, you mustn't pick or eat berries or mushrooms. All these principles are there to ensure the tourists' and guide's safety, so I play by the rules.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

The guide does not see this as a kind of a straitjacket imposed on her freedom of visiting. Similarly, Mikhail tries to explain the principles to tourists so that they follow the rules not because they have to, but of their own will based on an understanding of the essence of danger:

> The rules are always the most important. I've worked as a mining engineer underground where they play a key role. I agree with all the rules. I explain to people why this or that rule is necessary, so that they understand it consciously. It's not like an order in the army to 'stay put'. Because everyone here is civilian and they have come here to relax. People should know why they mustn't do something and why others do something. When people ask me: 'why can no short-sleeved blouses be worn' – it is a universal principle. It's like 'only crossing the street on a green light'. You can cross a hundred times or even ten thousand times, but on the ten thousand and first time, lo and behold you're in trouble.

> It's the same here. It's because radiation is an invisible enemy. The consequences may become visible in several years or decades, or perhaps in the next generation. You can follow the rules for just one day and I don't think that walking around in long-sleeved clothes is very tiring. If you're wearing a T-shirt I wouldn't tell you it's immediately lethal. Perhaps it won't have fatal effects in the future but certain rules must be observed.
>
> *[M/02.2019/1]*

The explanation that uses the comparison of crossing the street illustrates perfectly well how important security is as a framework for the interpretation of the heritage of the Zone. Various types of threats that in a way limit free exploration are a context, yet even they themselves become the object of interpretation, which, in turn, allows better understanding of the essence of the dissonances of the Zone's heritage that at the same time make up its exclusive character. The authority of the guide who does not negotiate the ban on visiting the interiors of the buildings must be sufficiently strong for a group to obey. At the same time, the substitute for seeing the interiors of the buildings coming in the form of narratives, illustrations, and videos that the guides show to the tourists must be sufficiently attractive for the group to be satisfied with the visit.

It is clearly expressed by Katia, for whom respecting of the rules is a question of balancing the principles and the tourist's desires, in which the rules take priority:

> Sometimes we complain about all the rules of the Zone but we still must obey them! For example, I get upset if I've told the tourists that they mustn't do this or that and they still ask to do it. I always try to satisfy them and I try the best I can, but sometimes I must put in certain limits because we're not allowed to do some things.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Even though she is a young guide, Yelena has a different attitude to the rules of visiting than Katia or Karolina:

> As far as possible I always try to adjust the rules to the circumstances, but I know the limits and I know what you must do to keep things safe.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

In this aspect, she represents a position that is closer to the former stalkers, power plant staff, and the old guides: if you know the Zone, you understand the dangers that threaten you here, and therefore you are the one who takes responsibility for what is and what is not safe for the visitors. Guides can be divided into those who observe the rules of the Agency and those who obey their own rules that partially overlap with those that are imposed.

Paraphrasing, there are some rules even in the breaking of the rules. This is how Andrii sees it:

> When they ask me for something I don't see a reason to say 'no', because actually the most forbidden thing in the Zone is visiting the interiors of certain constructions. If I don't see a patrol in the near vicinity but only the guides I know and their groups there is no problem. All I say is: 'Boys, now we're going to visit such a place but please remember the two most important things: first be quiet, for if a patrol catches us they'll just fire me. Secondly, please stick together.'
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

It is about not getting caught but also about not risking too much. Interestingly, even this "flexible" approach to certain safety rules does not depreciate their very validity in the eyes of the older guides. They know that the Zone is a dangerous place, but because they know perfectly well what is in fact the most dangerous, they allow themselves to do things they consider risk free while simultaneously respecting the system of control they must obey and which they feel partially responsible for. It is obvious for them, as they have always worked like this:

> Our past is connected to always having worked under control. Such a field. They call it 'a sensitive company'. I've gone to a toilet – 'I'm out, I'll be back'. I'm back – 'I have returned.' 'I've gone to lunch.' 'I've come back from lunch', you understand – they don't have it. They walk and they do what they like however they like.
>
> *[V/04.2019/1]*

Katia believes that it is precisely thanks to the earlier experience of working in the Zone that the older guides are more like the group's guardians in the original meaning of a guide to the Zone:

> The old ones accompany you, they are the guardians. They observe the standards of radioactive safety more closely, and more closely observe the rules. They also have their way of approaching the selection of locations.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

It is, however, worth being more precise about which rules this applies to and what it means "to respect them more closely". In the case of the older guides, it's obvious that the Zone is their world, but the knowledge of that world may manifest in a particularly nonchalant approach to the whole set of rules and regulations. On passing the shrubs, Yuri picks raspberries and eats them, leans against the mill wheel, and sits down on the wall. His attitude to the principles of security is strongly ambiguous. On the one hand, he brusquely

reprimands a tourist at Leliv checkpoint for his short sleeves (although this seems to be just him playing the role of a strict guide in front of the police officers guarding the post), and on the other, he easily enters the buildings, only warning the tourists that if they want to enter any place they must tell him about it and mustn't move away on their own. He enters the 16-floor building with a group, arguing that his life's motto is "to live so as not to disturb others and so that others respect you". However, unlike some young guides, during the dosimetric control (see Figure 4.9) before lunch in the canteen and before leaving the 10-km zone at Leliv Checkpoint, he watches very carefully whether all the tourists pass and whether they stand properly for the measurement. Asked why, he explains that the radiation that the tourists experience is ridiculously low, but it is his responsibility that those people leave the Zone "clean". Similarly, Igor and Vyacheslav treat the individual regulations selectively, arguing that they worked in the Zone even before such regulations for tourists were created and they have developed their own standards of visiting long before the Zone officially opened to tourists.

In this way, what the ex-stalkers and older guides share is a respect for the principle of radioactive safety, yet the interpretation of what is safe and what is not depends on them. It is based on their individual experience, which is far more than that of the guides who only follow the tourist routes observing the regulations imposed by the Agency.

The other variable are the tourists.

The difference between the tourists from the West and those who are "local" describes not only their knowledge but also their attitude to the authority of the guide and the regulations of the Zone, whose source, to generalise broadly, can be derived from the practices of resistance resulting from the lack of trust towards the authorities that are characteristic of the communities from the former Eastern Bloc. Kostya and Yelena expressed their observations in a very similar way:

> There seems to be more of that disobedience in Russian groups. If you tell a European that something is not allowed, it means it's not allowed. And that is binding for everyone. We have 'not allowed' and 'very much not allowed', and there is 'not allowed at all', and there is the 'not allowed – not allowed' and there is 'don't go there, because I will kill you'. Sometimes he knows that this mustn't be done but doesn't care, and that is a problem.
>
> *[K/11.2018/2]*

> You tell a foreigner that you mustn't enter the building and they won't enter the building. You tell one of ours that you mustn't enter the building and he will ask 'Or perhaps you can? Please?' – 'No, you mustn't.' – 'But there are others entering.' – 'You mustn't!' – 'All right, I'll make it a second.' – 'You mustn't!' – I'll only take a look.' – 'All right, take it.'
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Figure 4.3 "Azure" Swimming Pool.

Source: Photo by the author.

What is apparently ordinary can be dangerous in the Zone, and the hotspots are the best example. That is why a competent guide plays such significant role in Chornobyl tourism. Their knowledge and experience are necessary for the safe conduct of a group that does not realise that an area of far greater radioactivity may lie a metre to the left or a metre to the right. The guides pay attention to different aspects of danger that may be a threat to an unsuspecting tourist (see Figure 4.3). Karolina makes her groups shake off the dust and wipe their shoes before entering the bus so as not to bring in the radioactive dust that could later cause problems during the dosimetric control on the return journey (see Figure 4.4). While feeding the catfish, Dima explains that they are obviously not radioactive but can be dangerous in a sense and validates it with a story of a tourist who received a painful bite on the finger from one. As these examples show, it is not the rules that universally determine the process of visiting the Zone but the way in which these regulations are interpreted by a guide, who uses his or her own experience as a filter for the safety principles. The guide who each time defines the rules that the group must obey is the highest authority, which is why another strategy for visiting the Zone, namely the strategy of personalisation, needs to be distinguished.

The strategy of personalisation

The strategy of personalisation is based on the development of the unique relationship between the visitors and the Zone, in which the guide is the mediator. Three techniques can be distinguished: the first is of "a hero", the second – "exclusivism", and the third – "adjustment".

Figure 4.4 Authenticity revised. Installations in Pripyat. Gas masks "on TV".
Source: Photo by Łukasz Gaweł.

The Hero

Guides position themselves as a type of "hero of the Zone" whose knowledge and experience guarantee profound insight into its heritage. The first element of image self-creation is emphasising one's own openness to risk or being accustomed to working in conditions with an elevated threat to life and health. When one of the tourists asked Katia if she had visited the Duga Radar she answered that she had not because it is silly, adding that she had been sky diving and bungee jumping because she loves adrenaline. Then she repeatedly returned to the subject, mentioning herself in "extreme" situations. It seems that to reinforce their authority as a guide is an especially big challenge for the young and beautiful girls working in the Zone. One of the guides interviewed even allowed himself a fairly brusque commentary that their employment is "a marketing ploy" of the companies that use it to boost the attractiveness of a tour, as most of the participants are young men. Girls often build their position using their sharp tongues. When a tourist moved ahead of the group, Katia ridiculed him that he should perhaps become

the leader now. The boy shrugged and said that "People just follow me," to which the guide replied "No, you're simply walking too fast" and then "punished him" by making him walk at the back of the group.

Yelena often faces similar situations as her youthful appearance makes it hard for her to win authority, especially among Russian tourists. In the interview, she shared an anecdote about how she once coped with a tourist who wanted to prove her lack of competence and knowledge:

> When they saw a female guide their reaction went along the lines 'OK, we can do anything'. When we had seen the last item on the programme of the tour, one of them approached me and asked in Russian why the reactor exploded and if I would now explain to him all the technical details. So, on the way back from Chernobyl to the checkpoint, which lasted around 30 minutes, nobody was interested in the subject, the whole group was sleeping, but in that half an hour I kept explaining to him in Russian why that reactor exploded. I believe he regretted his decision but I was mean. He wanted to know and I wanted to prove that I know how to explain it.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Girls try to emphasise their professionalism also through their clothing. The guides working for tourist companies usually wear their shirts or caps, but the image also includes such details as patches, phone cases, and bracelets with symbols associated with the Zone or radiation. Many guides choose trekking and paramilitary clothes that offer comfort but also show that they work in especially demanding conditions.

Another technique for building the authority of a guide, and at the same time building the relationship with the heritage that leads to its better understanding, is making people more comfortable about the space of the Zone, which many tourists initially see as extremely dangerous.

Guides present the rules to the group and then break them themselves. A regular "point on the agenda" is the feeding and petting of dogs (in the past also the famous semi-domesticated Semyon the Fox), something that the rules forbid. The guides give the dogs names and often have some treats for them, so as soon as they approach the animals run to welcome them. As Katia commented: "These are local friendly dogs, don't be scared, it's officially forbidden to pet them, but I do. So, it's up to you." Tourists take photographs of the dogs fawning up to the guides. One of the female guides uses the patting of the dog as an opportunity to show a photo of when it was a young pup, which proves how strongly she has integrated into the Zone. Generally, showing private photographs on the guides' mobiles is a regular practice (during a summer tour the guide may show a photograph of a different group they led while wading in knee-high snow). The practice of showing photographs from the "Me and my Zone" series also builds a certain form of intimacy between the tourists and the guides, with the latter showing special affability or even trust to selected (usually not all) people in the group.

Being a guide to the Zone has an important dimension for building a new identity for young people. First, this work stands out from other professional activities and makes an impression on friends, who are both surprised and feel awe for such a choice. Second, as Yelena admitted, being a guide in Chornobyl means confronting yourself with the memory of the disaster and the Zone:

> My friends Say I'm crazy but OK. My dad doesn't mind either: he had some background knowledge but I explained to him more about what the Zone is. Mum is not too happy, and every weekend she sends me emails with job offers for guides to Kyiv. That's understandable, as people who are directly affected by the accident are far more sensitive, which is especially true about older people. For example, my parents are from the older generation and the problem is that they don't want to learn. For example, if you asked elderly people in Kyiv, say aged 60–70, about anything concerning the accident or the Soviet Union they will answer that it was not the fault of the government. And that life was much better at the time. Well, and obviously that the Zone is dangerous and if you go there you will either die immediately or your body will develop some additional appendage. In fact, people don't want to go there, because everything is fresh and painful and also difficult to explain for that reason. In the Russian-speaking groups I don't see people aged 40–50. It is mostly young people, say 30–40, who are interested in the subject.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

As guides who explore the Zone on a daily basis, within their generation these young people play the role of experts from whom you can learn a lot:

> I know that since I began to work in Chernobyl my friends have asked me what Chernobyl was, what were the reasons for the accident, what happened. Perhaps earlier they had not been interested in it because they had no one to ask. Because, obviously, if you ask the teachers about the reason for the accident they won't answer, because they don't know it themselves. And if you're surrounded by people who know and can explain it precisely you will ask questions.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

Young guides notice that after they started working their friends have either visited the Zone or declare they would like to see it, and they certainly discuss it with the people closest to them which is something they didn't do before. Karolina aptly presented grappling with the dissonance of the heritage of the Zone in the context of her profession:

> Many people compare the Zone to Auschwitz, and that's wrong. It's wrong when somebody arrives at such places only to take photos and selfies. It is a difficult discussion. First, I don't believe you can compare Chornobyl

> to Auschwitz. You need to distinguish between these cases. Obviously, many people suffer but you need to distinguish between an accident from a place where people were intentionally incarcerated to be killed. It is hard, because we have books, films, and video games all around, and the area is quickly regenerating. You could stop leading people there to show and tell them what happened there. You could also live there yourself and say that it is a dark part of history. You could stop going there at all but then you will know nothing about that area. For example, Ukrainians, my peers, believe in the horror stories about Chornobyl. And if you go there, you will understand the reason for the explosion and how things developed. You will hear about the people blamed for the accident who spent many years in prison. You cannot read about everything. That is, you can read about it but the Internet is overflowing with different information and reading all of it takes a lot of time. If you're keen to have interesting information, you go there and it's very good.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

This suggests looking at the role of the young guides as those who do the "post-memory work": living in the shadow of the trauma they try to confront it themselves using their activity, which is the interpretation of the heritage of the Zone. To them, the Zone's heritage is subjected to interpretation through the lens of popular culture, media, and their own passions that bestow it with a unique dimension. Their activity boils down not only to the guiding of successive groups but also to "giving testimony", even if only through their own media activity, publication of videos, running a blog, or posting photographs in social media. This, in turn, builds a modern picture of the Zone as an attractive place for young people who discover something exceptional within it, not only in reference to the past but also the present.

As the heroes of the Zone, the guides themselves become the object of interest of the tourists, who not only wish for contact with the space but also for more information about the people who guide them. I believe you can point to two narrative strategies with a biographic character: those that are intentionally presented by the guides to tourists in specific places and those that "only come up" when the tourists make it evident to the guide that they are interested in his or her life. The guides share basic information about themselves at the start of the tour. This can be only a name, as in case of Karolina, or a more extensive self-presentation, which is the case with Mikhail who speaks about himself for at least several minutes, sharing, for example, information that he has visited the Zone between 300 and 400 times in order to emphasise his professionalism and built trust in him in the role of a guide. The guides are often asked about the work, especially in the context of radiation safety:

> People ask me how much radiation we can encounter on our path and whether they can stay here safely. The questions asked most often are connected to radiation and also to how many times a week I lead groups.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

As this question returns very often, the guides have ready answers, many of them witty, such as Katia's "My mother worries more about my smoking than radiation" and Andrii's "Boys, there's no need to worry about radiation, because it's too late for that." Asked how often he goes to the Zone, another guide answers that he visits once a month and adds that when he's had enough of his three children he visits the Zone like others go to the beach in Egypt. Such distanced, ironic answers give the impression that working in the Zone is absolutely normal. Obviously this is an apparent normality and its actual uniqueness will only be created by the stories about the relationship between a guide and the Zone, which is full of spicy detail.

One of the most interesting threads that generates the greatest interest among the tourists is the guide's life in relation to the disaster itself. Even though she was asked twice whether she had been personally affected by the Chornobyl tragedy, Katia did not answer and it was only when the group approached the building of the Municipal People's Council, the crisis management headquarters in the first days after the explosion, that she replied (properly modulating her voice and adjusting her facial expressions to the sombre tone of the story) and spoke about her grandmother who was a driver and drove a colonel there after the disaster. The officer entered the building and she sunbathed by the car. Despite that, she's now 81 years old and alive and kicking, aside from the complaints of that age, as she belongs to "the strong generation – kids of the Second World War". But Katia's father died of cancer a few years ago, his best friend a few days before him, and there's someone dying of cancer in every family, which is a horrible tragedy for everyone. The story–testimony is presented at the place it is connected to, it is planned in its narration and assigned to a space, making it come alive with the use of memory.

Yuri answered a question asked by a tourist about whether he has ever climbed to the top only when they were near the Radar. He not only explained that he had been there three times but also shared details about the best ways to organise such an expedition, with which he surprised the tourists deeply (he does not look like a fan of extreme adventures). From that moment on, the tourists began to ask him more questions, especially concerning himself, and Yuri started to tell them more.

Katia postpones her story to a later moment on purpose, keeping the tourists in uncertainty, and only explains at the location where she has planned her show, in contrast to Yuri who answers spontaneously. You can also hazard an assumption that one of the differences between the old and the professional guides is the conscious use of guiding techniques. The older ones lead the group, making sure that the exploration is safe and answering questions. Nonetheless, they are not focused on playing the role as specified in the scenario and their guiding behaviours are far freer, less contrived, as if they wanted to say "I am who I am, make use of it" rather than attune themselves to the expectations of the visitors in line with the guidelines they learnt on a course.

Exclusivism

Staying in the Zone is a borderline experience: playing with danger that is invisible as it comes in the form of continuously elevated level of radiation, but also as experiencing the stories of the disaster and its aftermath. Tourists enter an interaction with the heritage of the Zone through the guides who interpret the exceptional experience both in the realm of leadership (leading visitors to specific locations, like the Azure" Swimming Pool, see Figure 4.3) and the narrative (interpretation). The technique of emphasising the exclusive character of the group and intimacy of the relationship builds the prestige of the guide very effectively, and at the same time helps him or her manage the group better. Showing locations on the predefined visiting route, they say at different times "I want to show you why I love this place," "Come, and I'll show you something that I don't usually show to tourists," and "We'll go to the places hardly ever visited by tourists."

Thanks to this, tourists have the feeling that they are seeing the Zone individually, that it is not a "standard" route followed by hundreds of other tourists every day but one the guide designed especially for them. The magic disappears when other groups are encountered and also when the tourists see that other guides are also showing photo albums or measuring radiation in the same hotspots. Some guides solve such difficult moments by saying that the hotspot here is all right but they will show you an even better one somewhat further on. Often, so as not to get into each other's way, the guides quietly agree who will take their group where, so as to pass one another only between individual stops rather than have several groups standing in one place at the same time.

The unique quality of the experience is built by showing the places that are far from obvious from the perspective of the visitor. Apart from entering the buildings, which is formally forbidden, some guides take the group to the Chornobyl Museum or include a non-standard element in the route, e.g., approaching Chornobyl-2. The routes followed by tourists and regular users of the Zone hardly ever intersect. There were moments earlier on when tourists met power plant personnel in the canteen but now the hours for the visiting groups are different to those for the staff of the Zone. Therefore there are practically no interactions between the tourists and other users of the Zone (save for the representatives of the security authorities), possibly also because the presence and behaviour of tourists do not arouse positive reactions. When Yuri took tourists to a shop, the group started photographing everything which annoyed the shop assistant who wanted to throw the whole group out. Yuri then took on the role of a mediator, explaining to her that they are "exclusive people" and ordering those taking the photos to stop immediately.

Guides try to build the impression that "their" group is exceptional and that they are treating it in a special manner. While still on the bus, Tanya

says that she will refer to the group as the Alfa Team (an obvious reference to the alpha rays) which is how she's going to call them to bring them together and also to ask them about things, for example, "Are you hungry for more adventure, Alfa Team?". The term defines a community and builds the group's cohesion, but it also helps "fish out" the group from among other tourists, which means it helps the guide carry out the instrumental function. (Yuri carries a whistle, which he uses to gather the group after giving them a moment for free exploration.) In many places, such as at the "Chernobyl" and "Pripyat" signs and the stairs of the stadium in Pripyat, guides offer to take individual or group photos of the tourists.

By assigning a group name or encouraging them to take group photos, the guides carry out a social function, looking after the good mood of the members of their tour. They also express an interest in the tourists' satisfaction from the exploration, asking questions such as "How do you like it?", "How was lunch? Did you enjoy the food?" Guides also single their group out by extending special care over them, which they emphasise while guiding so that the tourists are aware that they are looking out for their safety, even if in fact there is no major threat. Guides often use this ploy as a good pretext to bypass some places where, for some reason, they don't want to stop. When Katia's group is late for lunch (something she previously discusses with the driver in Russian), she decides not to make a stop where most buses pause to allow the tourists to take a panoramic photo of the power plant and the New Ark, not giving the true reason – namely the delay – but explaining that she doesn't stop here as the level of radiation in this place is high and she, unlike some other guides, won't jeopardise the group's health. The tourists are given a message that the guide cares for them more than other guides care for other groups, and she completes the programme without delays or complaints from the tourists.

The intensive emphasis on attending to the group's expectations as well as the care for the tourists' mood seem to be a particularly standardised guiding technique among the young guides who have undergone training in guiding methods. As they admit, during their internships, the guides they were learning from sensitised them to maintaining contact with the group, entering interactions using questioning techniques, and introducing the tone of conversation. They are also better prepared when it came to being the group's leader.

A command of English is a likely communication barrier that impacts the narrative in the case of all the guides. In this case, you can really see the generation gap, as the young guides cope far better with guiding foreigners thanks to their linguistic competence. Mikhail, Yuri, and Vyacheslav know English but not well enough to become engaged in an entirely free conversation. Sometimes they find it difficult to use the proper term, they simplify their explanations, yet as soon as they switch to Russian they

start saying more and include anecdotes and answer questions far more exhaustively.

Adjustment to the recipient

Interpretation should be shaped in reference to specific types of recipients, accounting for the specific traits of individual and group participation. How a given guide plays the role of an interpreter depends on his or her assessment of the profile and needs of the visitors. The guide–respondents try to consider individual tourist needs, accounting for the cultural realm they come from, their specific interests, and their age. If the tourists are keen on taking photographs, it does not make sense to hector them with stories. If this is the case, guides focus on showing the locations where you can count on interesting shots. From the formulation of the principles of interpretation by Freeman Tilden, it is considered that efficient interpretation combines the presenting or descriptive element with the personality and experience of the recipient. It must, however, be remembered that guiding does not mean fulfilling all the wishes and whims of the tourists. Completing the programme is the overarching principle that every guide keeps to. As Evgeni emphasised:

> Just one thing – you need to keep the line, the limit. It goes like this: I have my programme, there is something I must say. If a given person is here for the first time, more must be said. But if there are questions, I always try to answer them. Because this is contact with a group. I know that listening to the radio is not pleasant. You can listen to a recording of any blogger via your earphones and you get the same. Live work is the most important.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

Live work primarily means entering interactions with tourists and stimulating them to look for the sense in the heritage they are discovering. While undergoing training, young guides are taught the basic techniques of working with a group, by using visual aids (as Figure 4.5 indicates) and stimulating interactions with the group, but the experience in working with people also plays a significant role, which is emphasised by Yelena:

> Sometimes I feel that some stories are not appropriate for a tourist. I am learning that all the time, during every trip I improve my stories and I see how tourists react to the problems of the Zone. More and more people hear about the Zone, more people come and they are deeply interested in the subject.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Figure 4.5 Past presencing.

Source: Photo by the author.

Every guide works out an individual guiding style, which they adjust to each group. Yelena believes that observing the tourists' reactions in order to adjust your interpretation to them is the most important thing:

> You try, you test, you see. There is a group who like jokes. Or you get a very serious tour. How they react, to what questions, to what places. You start from simple jokes. And you go on observing whether they react to them or not. So, we reject this, oh yes, and we expand on that. Sometimes it is like that with me: I start with some witty jokes and comments, and I gather that half of the bus don't get them. (…) Sometimes people simply don't have the knowledge needed to understand some jokes. You speak about security. And you really observe the group. Every tourist is different.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

That is why she treats the scenario flexibly, as a blueprint to order the guiding and not a manual you need to follow strictly.

> I have a script for the whole day, which assumes that people should get the minimal information necessary to understand the message about the accident. Some ask many questions and then you find it easier, at least I do. (…) I don't like following the script all the time, I prefer to be flexible and chat with the group.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

The guides believe that flexibility is necessary, as groups' reactions are physically, intellectually, and emotionally different. This is something Andrii pays attention to:

> If I see they are tired, I suggest we take a break. There are people for whom a 40 or 50-minute walk is a lot, and they get tired covering larger distances.
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

Tourists often inform the guide directly that they want you to respect their needs. Karolina admits that she likes talking and it is only with a clear signal from the group that she limits her narrative:

> Once I was talking too much and one of the tourists approached me and said: 'We love you but please give us some time to reflect in silence.' So I realised it was very difficult for everyone. They walk so much, and I can see they want to relax, their eyes let me see they are tired, so we will be silent for a while and be ready for further visiting. As far as I know, an adult can listen to you for 45 minutes after which they stop processing information.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

As Katia noted:

> People want to communicate, they ask plenty of questions, they are very friendly, and because I love talking I keep on asking them 'Do you have any questions? Are there questions?' And sometimes I see that they are tired and that it's better to give them some time to reflect.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

For that reason, a guide must decide what will not necessarily make it into their narrative from the plentiful information:

> I was wondering whether they understand that it's all about the Cold War and military use, these are different specialist subjects. I know because I'm a linguist, and there are so many technical details to share

> here. But then I realised that it is a very interesting subject. Now I know that I have plenty of additional information about various radar installations and this is a fantastic subject. Now I would like to share this information with everyone, but of course I don't do that.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

The guides believe that tourists fall into two categories: those who know a lot as they are passionate about the subject so they come very well prepared, and those whose knowledge is meagre:

> Sometimes they tell me that they have watched some films, but usually not the documentaries. They have mostly seen the films shot in Hollywood.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

That is why a practice used by many guides is to show tourists *The Battle of Chernobyl* documentary (2006) directed by Thomas Johnson, on the way from Kyiv to the Zone. This film makes a profound impression on the people who did not know much about the disaster earlier. By showing the film at this stage, the guides themselves shape the image of the place the tourists are going to, while preparing the group "emotionally" for the visit. Playing the film quietens down the conversations between tourists, who often giggle at the start, and even those who seemed uninterested start staring at the screen after some time from plain boredom. The mood in the bus becomes more serious and looking around you can see that they expected some fantastic post-apocalyptic landscapes, and now they realise for the first time the historical, tragic dimension of Chornobyl.

What feeds the tourist imagination "forces" the guides to learn successive versions of Chornobyl narratives to be able to do their work competently. Karolina admits:

> They ask me whether I have played *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* And that is the only reason why I have played *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* Just to know what they're talking about. Here in Chernobyl, when we know we have people who play that game we ask them about it at the start of the tour and then I can show them more locations connected to it.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

A paradox perhaps, but this is how guides learn from the tourists, which is especially true about those who have only recently started their adventure with the Zone. As Katia admitted:

> It is funny, because when I started to work and meet guys who played *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* it was really strange, for they knew a far wider area than I did. Someone happened to ask, 'Do you know that building' and when I said I didn't, he answered that that building was in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*

> He followed the whole map as it was in the game and he also knew the whole area from the game.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Dima shared her similar observation:

> It happens that tourists ask you a question and you are not sure how you should answer. Then you start looking around on your own. Films, books, people you need to talk to. In this way, you get some new additional materials every day, new knowledge every day.
>
> *[D/11.2018/1]*

A guide cannot rely on specific knowledge defined once, as they go on meeting new people who ask new questions.

However, expert tourists are a minority, which is why the guides are usually asked to recommend films and books about the disaster and the Zone that they consider valuable. Karolina explained: "They asked me if I can recommend films or books to them. The problem is that most of them are in Russian" [K/0.2018/4]. This statement is an important context pointing to the limited reliability of the reflections made here on the relationship between the tourist imagination, tourist experience, and heritage interpretation by the guides. The study was conducted before the premiere of the HBO *Chernobyl* series and publications such as *Midnight in Chernobyl* that were certainly watersheds in the development of the tourist imagination, and therefore also in the development of the guides' narratives. Chornobyl Tour added an "in the footsteps of the series" tour as a regular part of its offer, and more and more frequently you need to assume that tourists will ask questions about the relationships between the real events and locations in the Zone and the image provided by the series, especially about the real places and protagonists that appear in the film.

Yelena clearly notices a dependence between the presence of the Chornobyl theme in popular culture and the popularity of the Zone in its capacity as a tourist destination: "The tourist traffic intensifies, as games and films come out, there is always something new being published. People come here, there are more and more visitors" [J/11.2018/1].

Katia believes that you should also see the reasons for the popularity of the Zone in the media activity of the stalkers who drive the tourists' imaginations:

> Some stalkers come here and have dosimetric equipment with them. They study the materials, study the diaries, and conduct research. These stalkers are worthy of real respect. It is thanks to them that tourists came to the Zone. Because they began to write blogs and began to talk about their exploration so many people also wanted to come here.
>
> *[K/11.2018/1]*

However, as the tourists' knowledge of the Zone is not always based on credible sources, it poses a challenge to the guide's authority. This is the reason why Karolina decided to try to play *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*: the guide must confront their knowledge and skill in sharing information with the imagination of the visitors, who often believe they know it better. As Yelena sees it:

> Sometimes you get people who think they know a lot about the Zone. They have read a lot and so forth. And this is a problem as you can find plenty of lies on the Internet. It's hard to learn which parts of it are true. When a person like that comes along they will have a negative attitude towards you because you don't know something they know.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

In conducting their narratives, the guides also consider the tourists' wishes by referring to the ideas they have about the Zone. This was mentioned in the description of the challenge vested in the confrontation of the guide's narrative with the message of popular culture, which shapes the tourists' imagination in the case of Kraków's district of Kazimierz and *Schindler's List*. An analogous question concerning the place-making process of the Zone after the HBO *Chernobyl* series remains open. With the Zone becoming ever more popular, the guides face new challenges in working with tourists who have been tempted by the "exoticism" of the destination but don't know much about it. As Igor puts it:

> I understand, I have worked here for many years, and I've had enough of it all. They flock here from Australia, from Canada; grandmas and grandpas of over 80, and those who weigh around 200 kilos. Why do you come here to sweat in the summer? Because the whole world knows the city of Pripyat in the Chernobyl Zone. I understand that for the travel agent it's money. But what do you get out of it? Obviously, I wonder about it.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

And as Karolina puts it: "Sometimes people want something extraordinary, they have plenty of time so why not go to the Exclusion Zone? This depends on the tourist" [K/07.2018/4].

Mikhail notes yet another category of somewhat accidental tourists:

> An interesting category of tourists are those who are accompanying their friends or acquaintances and you can see they are afraid, they don't need it, they are not interested. For example, a young man visits as he badly wanted to come here, and he comes with a girl as his travelling companion. This is not going to be pleasant for them. They are not people with similar needs. She is afraid and becomes fussy: "I'm not going there, I'm tired" and so forth….
>
> *[M/02.2019/1]*

That problem comes to the surface even more clearly as the Zone is promoted as a tourist attraction. Yelena subscribes to Mikhail's observation that many people arrive in the Zone quite by chance, not even knowing why Chornobyl is such an important location on the tourist map of Ukraine:

> Sometimes it's hard, because if people are not interested you have two thoughts – perhaps people are not interested because I'm doing something wrong – the information I am sharing is boring, I'm a bad guide. It seems that not everyone realises what actually happened there and they are simply going on an excursion. Basically – as there is nothing to do in Kyiv so he goes on a trip to Chernobyl. I don't know, it's hard to understand. I think this is unavoidable for a quickly developing tourist location.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

The challenge facing the guide is the adjustment of the narrative to the needs of the whole group, which is often impossible, especially when you work with groups coming from mixed cultures. Igor believes that you present the heritage of the Zone differently to visitors from the UK or the US, and differently to people from Russia, Poland, and Ukraine:

> Stories are also important to Eastern Europe because people can understand them. You're not always capable of understanding them if you come from the US or the UK, or other countries.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

The fundamental difference is vested in the visitor belonging to the community of memory, which Karolina emphasises:

> Of course, you're not going to describe what life in the Soviet Union was like to Ukrainians, so you've got to have more details ready for them because they already have some background. Most foreigners have no idea about it so you need to give them everything, the background, details, so that they can build a story from that.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

If there are tourists from Poland and Austria in a group, the degree of detail in the message may seem unsatisfactory for one or the other group. To help tourists understand better, the guides use the principle of analogy, most often when quoting numerical data, for example, explaining the size of the New Ark which was mounted over the old Sarcophagus covering Reactor No. 4. Depending on the cultural realm the tourists come from, the guides compare it to the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, or the size of the Barcelona football pitch. This kind of visualisation of the scale makes it possible to approach the vastness of the construction better. Even

though it seems majestic when seen from a close distance, it is not as visually impressive as when it is seen from a further away. Moreover, an analogy "borrowed" from the tourist's cultural realm will have a better impact and emphasise the personalisation of the message.

Another difficulty that the guides face, besides the sharing of knowledge, is the way of exploring the Zone. This is how Tanya expressed it:

> There are differences and you begin to notice them once you've worked a bit. You see these differences after you've worked for six months. For example, people from Slovakia, Poland, and Czechia are mentally very close to us, Ukrainians. So, it's easy to understand their way of thinking and they are also probably more open to adventure than other nations.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

According to Karolina, who works more with visitors from Asia, differences in the styles of visiting can certainly be assigned to culture:

> Asians, for instance, won't ask about details. The Asians don't do it, perhaps unless they are engineers or scientists, but for most people it doesn't matter. They don't want to know everything, plunge into the details, so you need to account for that. Once I had a group from China, only Chinese. So I knew they would like to take photographs everywhere. They say that everyone from Asia likes it, so I showed them the most attractive places, some details, and they were all standing there attentively taking photographs. They enjoyed it.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

In turn, as Katia says, Australians and Americans want to listen to more stories, especially personal ones, which is why she sometimes adds some examples from her own life or the lives of the former residents of Pripyat. Adjusting their narrative to the tourists, guides consider not only the size of the group and the origin of the visitors but also their age. As Yelena noted:

> It is easier to describe people's behaviours according to age. Because people of 40 or 50 understand more and listen with interest, and they are full of respect. Younger people, for example those who played *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, only come to see some fear-inspiring buildings, walk around them, or enter them. And you've got to come up with a way, when you have people of different ages in your group – how to combine the interests to make the trip interesting for everyone. It usually works like this – you say: "Guys, if you're not interested in the history I'm telling you, go and take some photos." People who are interested walk with me and listen.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Good interpretation is an effort that guides make, as it is their decision whether they will be more or less involved in the guiding. Andrii straightforwardly admitted that "If they ask me about a location, it depends on my mood whether I'll show it to them or answer like a guide" [A/07.2018/5].

It can be assumed that the more personalised the message, the more adjusted it is to the recipient who has a sense of the unique character of experience, the more effective the interpretation of heritage seems to be.

The strategy of past presencing

One of the most important strategies used by the guides is the strategy of past presencing, which Sharon Macdonald, defines as "ways in which people variously draw on, experience, negotiate, reconstruct, and perform the past in their ongoing lives" (Macdonald, 2012, p. 234). In other words, the question is how the past is read in the present, and what its significance for the future is in a specific reference to the people who participate in the process of interpretation – the tourists and the guide. There are two basic, not disjunctive techniques that can be part of the strategy of making the past alive for the recipients. The first is storytelling, and the other – the involvement of witnesses.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a guiding technique that has always been used by guides (Rohrscheidt, 2019). With a turn towards interpretation in the practice of guiding, it has, nonetheless, acquired a particular significance in recent years. Following Bryon (2012, p. 30):

> The ways in which tour guides convey their narratives vary on a continuum, ranging from the impersonal selling of common, often commercial tourism imaginaries over the neutral telling of tourism facts and stories to a more intimate sharing of personal tales.

This opinion validates the words of Andrii quoted above pointing out the difference between guiding "like a guide" and presenting stories and places to tourists in an involved and personalised way.

Stories must be understood by the recipients, but they do not necessarily have to find them pleasant or funny. Other than providing new knowledge on a subject and moving emotionally, a story may scare or outrage, yet, which seems most important in the case of dissonant heritage, it should primarily stimulate empathy in the recipients. Stories should be attractive, which means that the narrative should be well structured. It should also make use of poise and stage presence with facial expressions, good voice projection, enunciation, and expression. A story should make a reference to the present, that is, indicate a universal message.

An insight into the themes of stories the guides tell in the Zone would require a separate analysis. You can break them cursorily into a number of categories. The first concerns the everyday life in the Zone before the disaster. The second refers to the disaster and its follow-up. The third category consists of stories about the contemporary Zone in multiple contexts: of nature, labour, and tourism (whether legal or not). The fourth category is the relationship between the Zone and the world outside. A separate category consists of the biographic tales of the guides that refer to all the thematic groups listed above.

The significance of stories in the interpretation of heritage is obviously of fundamental importance. First, stories told in the guide's narrative help to explain the essence of the dissonances better: they can be compared to case studies that illustrate general phenomena. Second, because stories usually concern people, they help to intensify the emotional involvement of the recipients – tourists who identify with the protagonists of the tales. Third, the stories "re-inhabit" the Zone. The tales of the heirs absent from the abandoned space make it possible to look at that space not as severed from the real world, a heterotopia that exists independently ruled by its own rights, but a space that, despite the physical separation, has an important symbolical, emotional, and economic significance for the people who live outside its bounds.

There are different ways in which guides introduce stories into their tales. At the most general level, like in the case of biographic references, stories are consciously and purposely placed in the narrative, in specific places connected to the location, or else delivered when needed, ensuing from interactions with tourists who channel the guide's attention on a specific course.

By the Monument to the Firefighters (Those Who Saved the World), Katia speaks of the first hours after the explosion and the sacrifice of the firefighters. Her story presents them as heroic victims: they went in because it was their duty, and then they were taken in a critical state to Moscow, where they were subjected to experiments with various ways of treating the radiation illness (which sounds as if they were victims not only of the disaster but also of the system). They all died within two months, and then the next ones went in there, this time aware of the consequences, and yet they did go in. Katia emphasises that "we are proud of them" (using the plural, identifying with the community of the post-disaster people, she acts as the spokesperson for the group, and speaks in the name of the locals – victims). She admits that the tragedy destroyed many human lives, that there are few who want to speak about it, that these are bad memories, and adds that one of the firefighters' wives "told us her story" (this is the story of Lyudmilla Ignatenko, known from Alexievich's book, but Katia presents the tale as a personally shared account of a witness, which emphasises the uniqueness of Katia's knowledge and the intimacy of what she shares). Interestingly, no one in the group seems to show that they recognise the text. Katia, at ease, wearing a smile from the start of the trip, and joking freely with the tourists, has now

pulled a serious face, put on dark glasses, and speaks in a subdued sad voice, adjusted properly to the narrative she is presenting. Then she explains that it is only a single example, and there are many more such stories, and it is not a tale about nature but of the people who suffered, as officially, according to the government (she does not make it clear which) there were 31 victims. She blurts out that "it's a shame" as in fact there were 500,000 victims. At the end, she makes a universalisation that she also links to the tourists' duties – "we can see what these brave people did for us, and we must remember them." In the meantime, there are plenty of cars and buses passing by the group gathered at the monument. "As busy as on Khreschatyk Street," Tanya remarks to the tourists, and the balloon of emotions bursts immediately. Tanya smiles again and invites her group into the coach.

This description quite clearly shows that stories are among the most important guiding techniques. However, what counts is not only the narrative but also the performance accompanying it: the guide adjusts the facial expressions, gestures, and tone to the content, building an atmosphere that "draws the tourists in". As Andrii emphasised:

> All guides must be actors. I'm sure this is the right word. It is most important for every guide to give the right emotions to their visitors. For example, even if you make a mistake informing them, for example you go 'No, it was 1996, perhaps 1997' that doesn't matter much, but you should give your visitors appropriate emotions. If you cannot or don't know how to share the right emotions, I don't think this work is for you.
>
> *[A/07.2018/5]*

Katia's story touched the audience, which could be gleaned from the behaviour of the group who, laughing and having fun prior to that, were quiet and focused while entering the bus, with one of its members asking the guide to say more about the fate of the liquidators. The tale put the tourists in a cognitive dissonance: with beautiful weather and the atmosphere of a picnic all around, taking selfies, and getting excited to see an elk cross the road, they heard about the suffering and heroism of people and were directly called to take responsibility for being the inheritors of the past. Interpretation of heritage through a tale about the heroism of the liquidators disclosed a deeper universal truth about human nature: one is ready to sacrifice life to save other people; victims of disasters are also victims of the system that leads to them. The tale prompted the audience to take interest in the heritage and provoked reflection and eagerness to learn more about the aftermath of the disaster, as well as self-reflection on experiencing the exploration of the Zone in the dimension of an ethical relation with the Other, who experienced suffering within the same space.

Guides have at their disposal various stories that they share depending on the group, time, and own mood. Storytelling is a creative and unique

activity. Tales concern not only the past but also the present of the Zone. By the Monument to the Firefighters, one of the guides tells the tale of a young Slovak firefighter who arrived in the Zone with a group a year earlier. Fascinated by the place but also feeling a particular connection to it due to his profession, he intentionally brought a bouquet of flowers to lay down at the monument. He happened to be noticed by the chief of that unit, which still operates in Chornobyl, who, equally moved, approached the young tourist to thank him for that gesture.

A guide quoting a story how heritage is reconstructed by another visitor invites tourists to look for their own meaning for what they see and learn during the tour.

One of the most interesting subjects of the stories, especially for the groups that do not know the vicissitudes of life behind the Iron Curtain is the "communist exoticism". The stories of the guides that explain the elements of daily life in the USSR in the 1980s make a huge impact on the tourists. As one of the guides noted:

> There is also a category of tourists interested in Chernobyl because they had that explosion there, which is understandable, but also because everything stayed the way it used to be in the Soviet Union. People find that attractive.
>
> *[M/02.2019/1]*

The space of Pripyat is imbued with the symbolism of the *Ancien Régime*: red stars on the lamp posts, and the posters and propaganda inscriptions are what tourists photograph as designates of the otherness of the world "frozen in time", which is so radically different that even guessing the use of some objects is beyond the capacity of some visitors to imagine. It is so, for example, with a public water fountain machine standing by the haven. The guide must explain what it was used for, as usually no one in the group knows that. Learning that the machine only had one glass, which everyone used to drink from, makes tourists look as if you told them about the culture of everyday life but perhaps in the 16th century. It often happens that guides, especially young ones, are surprised by detailed questions. At the start of the tour, Karolina warns the tourists that there are things she does not know but she has an Internet connection, and she will gladly check things. Kostya believes that it is better to say you don't know than to make things up:

> Because people feel that it is all right if you don't know the answer, but you are trying to find it. They see that you're looking for that information and then you're either trying to give it or you say 'I'm sorry I don't know that'.
>
> *[K/11.2018/2]*

The knowledge of the young guides about the reality of living in the Soviet Union is certainly indirect. As Yelena noted:

> Most of our guides were born after the fall of the Soviet Union, so they can hardly remember anything from the time. Obviously, we read a lot about that, but we can't explain certain things ourselves. Therefore, we try to talk to the locals and get some "first-hand" stories that are interesting and can be attractive for tourists.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

However, young guides show a critical attitude to the past. In Pripyat, most of the narrative focuses on the description of life prior to the disaster and the course of the resettlement. The tales about the quality of life of the residents of the city of children and roses, where the average age was 26, every child could attend a kindergarten or school, and the main supermarket was so well supplied that even people from Kyiv arrived here to do shopping, are presented in the spirit of nostalgia, yet reflexive nostalgia it is, as the conclusion is simple: what good is the fact that people in Pripyat had such a good life, if it all ended in a spectacular disaster? The stories that the guides present are to some extent narratives that deconstruct the colonial myths. They are a critical reflection on the relationships of authority and power, and consequences of living in a specific system. A good interpretation leads to reflection and discovery of the universal quality of phenomena by the tourists themselves. In other words, the recipients associate the phenomena described by the guide with analogies known from their own experience. To quote Yelena:

> In the case of Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking groups, it is precisely this knowledge of life. Everyone knows a liquidator, everyone heard about it in childhood, somebody was tested, mothers were told to have an abortion when they were pregnant with them, to mention some. The subject has accompanied me throughout my life. Later the same liquidators went on strike demanding that their old age pensions were paid. This means that the subject is still alive.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

References to one's own experience are not, however, only limited to the people from the East European realm of memory. For example, when the subject of the so-called "friendship of the nations" in the Soviet Union surfaced during a visit to Pripyat, Katia made a reference to the contemporary Ukrainian–Russian relations and the war in the east of Ukraine. Then one of the tourists commented that this relationship reminds him of that between England and Ireland, as you cannot shape the present without considering the past. Another example comes in an exchange of reflections

that accompanied a conversation about *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* After Evgeni commented that it is a pity that children in Ukraine only learn about the catastrophe playing *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, a tourist brought up the fact that his grandfather was furious to see him as a boy play a game about the Second World War with colleagues, as his grandfather went to that war and believed it was an improper subject for games.

The stories that guides introduce to the narrative help to universalise and discover current senses in descriptions of the past. Certainly, the degree to which the reflection is critical is rooted in the experience of the generation: the tales of the guides who are liquidators or used to work for years in the power plant are different, as they are based on their own experience. In the case of those guides, the telling of stories is the telling of their own past, which does not mean that their tales are more "valuable" from the perspective of the recipients than those of the other guides, which are "collections of testimonies" that are animated just like an actor animates his or her persona in a drama. However, the guide's narrative consists of more than just stories, and the final efficiency of interpretation results from the use of various strategies. In other words, even if a guide belongs to the category of "witnesses", it does not automatically make the interpretation of heritage he or she offers better than that from a young guide. To enrich their narratives, guides constantly try to expand their knowledge on the Zone, albeit with vastly different learning strategies. Mikhail prefers a library query:

> My Irina and I devote plenty of time to studying the subject, and visit the Library of the Parliament. Among the works on Chernobyl we find there, we are most interested in the press, precisely the newspapers from that time. There are many things you can see with your own eyes.
>
> *[M/02.2019/1]*

For Andrii, the Internet is a precious source of information about the Zone. Yelena, in turn, emphasises that the knowledge you can gain by contacting people related to the Zone is very important:

> You contact the elderly, the ones who have long been here. This is first-hand information, and the more interesting as it is living information that you don't always find in the records, memories, and films.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

These are often contacts accompanying the guiding activity, as many people whose early biographies are connected to the Zone have been employed to cater for the tourists. An example is a driver Karolina used to go with.

He was a liquidator after the disaster, so his knowledge means tales of an eyewitness, who would like to come out from the backstage role that was assigned to him:

> The problem is that he doesn't speak English. But there are Russian-speaking groups to whom he tells his story. For instance, he asked me to mention him to my group, and if they had any questions, he would answer and I would translate.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

Liquidators are ready to share their tales, they want to be the witnesses whose voice will be heard, because this is an experience that has made a mark on the lives of many. That was mentioned for example by Katia:

> I go on listening to the stories of my liquidator friends. It certainly gives me a fever when they talk about the cleaning they did, or the tales about their life in Pripyat. And I can see sadness in their eyes. They still miss that. It is like 'Oh, so many years have passed, and you still feel it in the heart of your heart'.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Stories told by the guides make the past come alive and give the floor to those who otherwise would not be heard as witnesses - like the story of a toy duck, which is a pretext for to tell about the life of children in Pripyat before and after the catastrophe (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6 Authenticity revised. Installations in Pripyat. A toy car.

Source: Photo by the author.

Meeting the witnesses

Interpretation should engage various stakeholders of heritage, take account of their perspectives, and support the inclusive approach to heritage. This is the essence of one of the key dissonances of the Zone's heritage, which is heritage without inheritors. And even though the colloquial metaphors make Pripyat the city of ghosts, those inheritors exist; however, their voice cannot be heard.

Many of the resettled are annoyed by tourists, and the personnel of the power plant show an especially negative attitude. One guide quoted an example of what happened to her when she and her group met power plant staff on a train from Slavutych. The workers deliberately chose such seats that she wouldn't be able to sit with her group together. That is why Vyacheslav believes that the situation would change if Slavutych was more actively made a beneficiary of Chornobyl tourism. If that happened, some people could perhaps become more favourable to the visitors.

An exceptional opportunity to get to know the history and to expand your experience of being in the Zone, as far as stories but also as far as sensory activation go, is visits to the samosely. The guides engage in those during the visits that last for at least two days (or individual commissions from the tourists). An opportunity to meet the samosely diminishes from month to month and is irretrievably lost with the death of each successive elderly person. That is why Igor eagerly visits the villages:

> To me going deep into the Zone means to see more and even tell more. Those stories about the villages are interesting. It is best to go and visit those old *babushkas*, that is samosely. Because there will be none of them there soon. Perhaps another five or six years and they will be gone, they will simply have died.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

For many tourists, this dimension of learning the Zone is absolutely surprising. Something Katia grasped perfectly well:

> And finally, after lunch, when everyone is relaxed and has some information about Chernobyl, I say 'I have a surprise for you. We will go to the samosely, that is the settlers who still live in the Zone.' People's reactions are 'All right, let's go', as no one expects much from that, yet very often this is the best part of the visit. Only because these people are so nice, so open, competent, and share absolutely astonishing tales with the tourists, and the conversations are very natural. Those old women open the doors of their homes and treat you like a relative, a member of the family or a really close friend. They treat you to food and vodka, and they tell incredible stories to tourists. Tourists like it very much.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

While visiting the samosely, the guide plays not only the role of the translator, but also primarily a culture mediator between groups of very different competences. Most tourists are young people, many of them intensively travel all around the world in search of exceptional experiences. The samosely are simple people, very old, who not only know no foreign languages but, moreover, only experience the "modernity" of the world during tourist visits. For the samosely, meetings with tourists are a pleasant change in the monotony of everyday life but also an opportunity to improve their living conditions:

> Those old *babushkas* love the meetings. They feel lonely, so they find talking to other people appealing. Obviously, we bring them some goods, so before arriving in a village, I tell our tourists where we're heading and what for. And they ask whether they could buy something, so we go to a shop, and the tourists buy things because they want to present them to her. She is obviously grateful, and very happy, the more so as there are only few people coming to visit her, and she finds it a change from everyday life.
>
> *[K/07.2018/4]*

The level of ethics to be observed, as well as the sensitivity and respect for the difference during a meeting of representatives of such distant groups rests predominantly on the shoulders of the guides, and it depends precisely on the guides whether the exploration of the Zone will be a postcolonial exploitation or an opportunity to transform under the impact of meeting the Other.

Guides are aware of the asymmetry of the contact, in which the sincere intentions of the samosely are subject to the risk of exploitation:

> Such an old woman longs for contact with people and wants to look at people. On the one hand, the samosely we visit… They themselves tell us 'It is a great pleasure for us, do come! It's interesting to get to know foreigners.' Because obviously there is no one around, and new people are for them like a breath of fresh air. Yet, you also need to have an eye on the group because those old women are naïve. Whoever you bring, they will give them food and drink, satisfied that you have brought them to her. And the way people see it? You've got to feel it yourself.
>
> *[K/11.2018/2]*

Speaking about the samosely, Karolina emphasises that she must play the role of the moderator of the conversation, as the samosely "don't understand how things work". Yelena expressed her doubts quite radically:

> Well, let's say there is a very different approach to visiting those who settled there on their own. Some believe that we offend them in this way.

> Offend them by treating them like animals in the zoo. 'Hey look, a living *babushka*!' (…) I've also been with boys, young, Ukrainian-speaking people from Western Ukraine. They wanted to visit those old women, and asked by themselves: 'Perhaps we chop some wood for you, bring you water, perhaps we can help you with something'. So, they are ready to communicate, to help, to do something. And as far as the foreign tourists go, indeed, some treat those elderly women as a curiosity, one more location within the Exclusion Zone. And some have very bad feelings about it. (…) You've got to do it so that you don't visit them like that, that there is contact with them. That they feel good. That they don't feel like animals in the zoo.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

While visiting the samosely, the disaster itself is not usually the main subject of the meeting, as the elderly women do not have much to tell about it. You talk about daily life: relatives, health, harvest, and state welfare, yet, first of all, the meetings are an opportunity to sit together at the table, be treated to all the goods that the old woman prepared, which has tourists authentically thrilled and, at the same time, gives the samosely profound satisfaction when the group appreciate their produce. As the guides say, most visitors are honestly moved with the modest conditions in which the samosely live, and the fact that, despite the hardships of life and solitude, they show so much kind-heartedness and peace. Allowing another generalisation, you could say that tourists go to discover a post-apocalyptic void and they enter a world from several decades ago, which was frozen by the disaster, and meet people who, living in the shadow of Chornobyl, run daily their lonely fight for a modest existence, as if the disaster had never occurred.

Both the techniques make it possible to show the past as a still living framework of reference for the contemporary. For interpretation is founded not as much on learning what happened but on discovering that heritage is a defining factor of identity. Importantly, that identity is not only reduced to the realm of memory when the shared heritage can be seen as a more extensive project that includes people who realise the universal value of the Zone's heritage only after visiting it.

The edutainment strategy

Literature on studies of tourism has long emphasised the significance of co-creation of experience by the tourists (Robinson & Picard, 2017; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Co-creation of tourist experience means becoming engaged in heritage on the psychological and emotional level by independent choice and discovering selected aspects of heritage in line with your interests. Except for teaching, interpretation should be enjoyable for visitors (see Figure 4.7). It should lead to optimum experiences triggering satisfaction

Figure 4.7 Meeting with Semyon the Fox.

Source: Photo by the author.

and joy from communing with heritage according to the 3E principle: entertainment, education, excitement.

Highlighting the correlation between the effectiveness of education and presence of elements of entertainment in the cognitive process is by no means a new phenomenon; however, it has grown in importance in recent decades, at heritage sites that are tailored to tourists' needs for entertainment. Pro-entertainment attitude results in better educational outcomes (Falk & Dierking, 2000). This also means that tourists who arrive in the Zone to experience "something exciting" will also gain in the cognitive dimension if appropriately involved thanks to the guide. It is, however, worth remembering that when presenting dissonant sites, it is particularly challenging to include solutions that allow visitors to enjoy the fun. This is due to the fact that such heritage is not subject to harmonious interpretation. Ambivalence related to its perception requires people interpreting the heritage to be particularly delicate and intuition driven, so as not to present a one-sided, subjective, and over-simplified narrative of the past, in the name of striving to make the heritage experience enjoyable. The guides in the Zone use two techniques of the strategy for combining education with entertainment: activation and multi-sensory approach. The first aims at intensification of the contact with tourists, who instead of being just passive recipients of the message join actively into the creation of the narrative. The other technique aims at complementing the verbal narrative with sensations coming from various senses (see Figure 4.8), which are the object of critical reflection, and in consequence support the process of heritage interpretation.

Figure 4.8 A meal in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone.

Source: Photo by the author.

Activation

Guides interact with tourists so as to personalise the message for a specific profile of the recipient. Guiding visitors is always an asymmetrical situation, with one party dominating the other with knowledge, experience, and the right to move around the space. However, some guides try to activate tourists so that the knowledge is acquired in the "workshop" model, in the spirit of Tilden's principle that makes interpretation provoke thinking. As Karolina noted, elements of "entertainment" make it possible to balance the emotions so that the visit is finally a pleasure but is not bereft of education about what is difficult either.

> Pripyat is a particularly sad subject, yet if you bring a game into it, then they are not very depressed, interaction moves the attention away from the subject, and they react with laughter. Then you return to the story, they have a short break in which they can stop thinking and reflecting on the information, and then they are again ready to listen to the guide. *[K/07.2018/4]*

Tourists are encouraged to become involved in the co-creation of experience and narratives thanks to the methods of activation that the guides use. A good example are the intellectual games Karolina mentioned. The simplest are the guessing games: what a given item was used for or what a piece of art, whether a mosaic, stained glass, or sculpture, presents. Tourists share their ideas, and they often miss the mark, which results in a wave of

comments and laughter once the guide has disclosed the correct answer. The games may also assume the form of "role-plays". By the Duga Radar, Karolina asks the tourists what they would do if they learnt that they are only left with 32 minutes of life. Once the tourists have given their answers (according to the guide, the average breakdown is 80% getting drunk, 10% having sex, and 10% phoning the relatives), Karolina explains that that was precisely the time from noticing a rocket on that radar to its explosion in the USSR. The radar crew would be the only ones aware that this is their remaining lifespan. Such a game is not only an element of entertainment but also what makes the tourists aware of the measure of fear people lived in during the Cold War. Further considerations concerning nuclear weapons or, more extensively, nuclear energy are the starting point for the discussion about contemporary global security, also in the context of anti-rocket shields, nuclear arsenals of various countries, and terrorism. It is also an opportunity to find cultural associations, with tourists referring, among others, to Lars van Trier's *Melancholia* as an example of an analogous situation with people exhibiting different attitudes in the face of inescapable doom. Thus, the exercise that Karolina offers for the tourists is an opportunity to look for universal sense and reflection on life through interpretation connected to a very specific element of material heritage.

Difficult subjects, especially technical ones, such as the operation of the nuclear power plant and the Duga Radar, call for additional visual aids complementing the verbal information from the guide. Young guides use additional educational aids that practically confirm that interpretation should be based on a variety of communication approaches, multidimensional communication and reception of message, and activity and involvement of the recipients, which for example means that it should make use of technologies reinforcing the transfer of the message. Yelena believes in the efficiency of mixed methods:

> Some other photographs come in handy to explain technical details to people – for example ones of the powerplant or the reactor. We also use a stick to draw the Duga Radar, because it is difficult to explain how it works in words only. So, as a rule, we draw with a stick, and we draw how the radar works for them. When we no longer need to draw and we don't need the stick, we give it to the local dog, who answers to the name of Tarzan. He takes that stick and runs all around us with it.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Using a stick to chart the Cold War radar system in the sand is a perfect example of connecting education with an element of entertainment by using local resources. Today drawing in the sand is a surprising activity in itself, as the guide could equally well show how the radar operates playing a video on a mobile phone or drawing on a tablet. This also gives the impression of a spontaneous idea (even though the guides usually keep their sticks in the

nearby bushes). The subsequent fun with a tame dog is a perfect means of relaxing the atmosphere after the presentation of a complicated process and provides a moment of relaxation both for the guide and the tourists.

Yelena mentioned that the guides' narratives have also been enriched by visual materials in recent years. Older guides are reluctant to use them. As Igor noted:

> Such a fad started that they walk in Pripyat and show photographs from that time, time of the explosion. And it's been over 30 years now.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

He believes that tourists should focus on what they see now, and all photographs are unnecessary gadgetry. Young guides consider the visual aids a perfect reinforcement:

> I have various materials prepared for the tourists, for example an album with photographs of some specific places in Pripyat, to show the difference before and after the disaster. This makes them see those differences clearly.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Young guides don't mind enriching their narrative with multimedia as they are aware that today's tourists need various stimuli. The actual goal is education, and the only difference is that the tools they now use comprise not only the word, as the word is not sufficient for the tourists. This is why the guides use their mobiles to show videos and photographs, and sometimes even to play music associated with the Zone (e.g., the well-known musical passage from the Fallout 4 video game). That is why the multisensory approach seems to be a technique that is extremely helpful in interpreting the CEZ heritage.

Multisensory approach

The guides' narrative should encourage participants to interpret their experiences, which are holistic as they result from the involvement of various senses. Obviously, the basic sense is sight helping the tourist experience and understand the phenomenon of the Zone.

However, it is not only gazing, but it is also about retaining images thanks to photographs and videos. The guides generally agree that "there are two main groups of tourists. One consists of people who like to listen, the other – of those who like taking photos" [K/07.2018/4].

The guide's narrative only offers the background for the latter category, who often find the guide's tale absolutely redundant.

Katia emphasises that it makes no sense to force anyone to listen, which is why she devotes far more attention to those who show interest in what

she says. It is therefore not as much about stimulating tourists to look but rather to listen when they are looking. For many, looking and taking photographs is bound for good, which is why the guides know that they must adjust their narratives to the rhythm of taking photos. Some tell the group directly that they will first share information and then give a moment to take shots. Others, arriving at a new location and seeing that people disperse to take photos, wait a while so that people have taken in the view, and only then continue the tale, the more so as, without the context of the guide's narrative, those places are semiotically barren for many tourists.

The primary purpose of the photographs tourists take in the Chornobyl Zone is to render the "authenticity" of the location. Reproduction and multiplication of a single view in the photographs taken by dozens of people reveals how secondary the tourist's view is, which is symbolically expressed by the installation of gas masks, which tourists can see in the frame of an old TV set (see Figure 4.9). Interestingly, that secondary nature does in no way trouble the tourists, as they consider every photograph "original/authentic". As Selwyn (1996, pp. 20–21) observed, the heat-of-the-moment authenticity, subjective and individual, experienced by a tourist is not tantamount to the cold and objective authenticity defined in the categories of true/false, as the task of the photograph is to help to understand the world around, and taking photographs is the construction of meanings that

Figure 4.9 Dosimetric control.

Source: Photo by Łukasz Gaweł.

provides an intimate and individual relationship between the photographer and the photographed.

Apart from the ruins that provide the setting of the post-apocalyptic space, the tourists' lenses aim mostly at details – props. For the abandoned buildings in Pripyat are not empty, their interiors show what happens to the world of commodities when their owners are no more. The interiors of the school and kindergarten are the most visible proof of the sudden abandonment: scattered around, the books, toys, and children's shoes are shocking, as they are a sign of human suffering (as Figures 4.1, 4.4, and 4.6. show). Another historical/artistic analogy emerges: tourists taking photographs in Pripyat are like artists painting still lifes; some even see that comparison – "Just put a trivial door in a frame here, and it'll look like a painting" a visitor said. The reality itself drives reflection on what is true and what is staged. At the beginning of the tour, its participants treat the space surrounding them uncritically, however, once they have become used to it, some begin to notice that the clusters of objects are "overly" picturesque, their styling becoming obvious to them, which is why they seek help with the guide, to have their doubts cleared:

> At nearly every tour I'm asked whether 'Was it like that in the beginning?' and explain what happened to that place and that some parts seem to have been staged. And people feel it because they are not stupid, and they ask me about it.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

Without hints from the guide, understanding what you see is difficult for many, especially foreign visitors. Yelena says that:

> There is a whole floor with gas masks, and people think that they were used by children – I believe it is quite obvious they were not – but people always ask about it, and I always explain to them that nobody used them, because people were not told about disasters at the time, so no one in Pripyat had a gas mask.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

A method that falls back on the multisensory involvement of tourists is interaction with primary evidence. In the CEZ, such interaction involves the measurement of the radiation level by the tourists (see Figure 4.10) equipped with dosimeters that can be rented for a small fee from the companies organising the tours (they can also be bought at the information point at the entrance to the Zone). Properly instructed by the guide, the tourists themselves make measurements along the route of the visit, yet especially at the so-called hotspots, that is, locations where radiation is especially strong. The guide's role is to help tourists look with reflection to stimulate understanding (see Figure 4.11). Thanks to their knowledge, a guide discloses to

Figure 4.10 Measuring radiation at a hotspot.

Source: Photo by Łukasz Gaweł.

Figure 4.11 One of the many murals of Pripyat.

Source: Photo by the author.

the tourists the exceptional quality of places that otherwise do not seem to stand out visually. A tuft of grass, a stone, or a metal railing may seem "normal", and only once a guide has pointed to them and the dosimeter reading has been revealed, do they prove especially dangerous.

As Katia says:

> We explain everything and say, 'Look, this is a hotspot'. We may say 'Take a few photos but don't stay here too long'. So people try to use that time and take as many photographs as they can in a minute.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

It is not only the guide who points to the hotspots and helps to realise that there is invisible radiation around, but it is also the sense of hearing that catches the beeping of the dosimeters. A stalkers' saying goes: "There is no dosimeter, there is no radiation." The groups equipped with the meters make "their own sound": the louder and the quicker the beeping, the higher the level of radiation at a given place. It is enough to imagine the beeping of a dozen dosimeters at the same time for a few, several, or even dozens of minutes. After the tourists have had enough of that sonic experience, while the group moves deeper into the Zone, where the level of radiation is higher, the guides suggest switching the alarm levels to higher, which makes the disturbing sound breaking the listeners' concentration activate only in the locations with really high levels of radiation. Such a choice by the guides shows that a sense of danger, signalled by the sound, is relative and in a way corresponds to the process of the tourists becoming used to the Zone with time.

As the accounts of the visitors (Duda, 2020) show, testing radioactivity by the tourists themselves is one of the most attractive elements of the visit. Similarly to a visit to the canteen which triggers other senses than just sight. Taste and touch, which were previously secondary to looking, begin to play a leading role. Indeed, a meal that could also be eaten equally well in the canteen in Kyiv, Minsk, or Warsaw becomes unique only because it has a "Chernobyl certificate", although it does not differ in appearance and taste. Holding to the principle of placing emphasis on provoking independent thinking, guides encourage discussion at various moments, asking tourists questions that surprise them. For example, in the canteen, they ask where the water for the soup they eat so excitedly comes from. Such a question triggers a reflexive fear – eating your lunch you realise that this water must have been drawn within the Zone (the fear subsides a moment later when the guide explains that it is tapped from a radiation-safe source). This not only is another reason for jokes (e.g., about coleslaw glowing in the darkness) but also an opportunity to realise that what looks safe in the Zone may conceal dangerous levels of radiation.

Exploring the Zone with senses other than sight means a higher level of (real or imagined) risk. Touch in the Zone is limited to the minimum, which

is excellently rendered by the slogan of ChernobylWel.Come: "See, feel, experience…But do not touch."

Therefore, it is the duty of the guide to limit experiencing of the place with that sense: guides reproach the tourists walking off the pavement to the grass, sitting on a low wall, or leaning against a wall. Nevertheless, touching is a must once the guide decides to take a group inside a building. It is hard not to admit that those who claim that limiting your stay in the Zone to looking at the buildings from outside is cognitively restrictive are right. The creaking of the stairs, the touch of a wall, with plaster flaking under your fingers, flakes of rust falling from a ladder onto your fingers, the mildew and chill of the rooms, the fragrance of the dust that the tourists' shoes stir up, the hot breath of another tourist walking close behind you and their panting while climbing the successive floors of the residential tower block, the sound of water dripping somewhere – a visit to Pripyat without entering the buildings becomes bereft of all these experiences involving senses other than sight. Thus, the development of the multisensory technique for the interpretation of the Zone's heritage by the guide depends on how the given guide carries out the strategy of safe exploration. Yelena hit the mark with her comment:

> You cannot go anywhere you want to, we've got to impose certain limitations on the groups. But as far as it is possible, we try to make your visit an adventure at the same time.
>
> *[J/07.2018/2]*

The interpretation strategies used by Chornobyl guides are the result of multiple factors, two of which seem to be of special importance. First, this is a place where they work, where many limitations have been imposed to ensure tourist safety. Moreover, the Chornobyl guides work with tourists, most of whom arrive with an image of the Zone being "a post-apocalyptic theme park" and are eager to experience an exciting adventure. Therefore, the guides must lead the group in such a manner and, at the same time, interpret the heritage in such a way so as to help the tourist to acquire an in-depth understanding of the destination areas' landscapes and peoples, but simultaneously do it through an enjoyable experience. The following chapter presents general conclusions from the research projects that refer to the role of the guides as interpreters of the dissonances of the heritage.

Note

1. Despite the author's requests for information about the number of guides active in 2021, COTIS disclosed no such data.

5 The Zone of Revival

In search of universal meanings for heritage

Interpretation of heritage should be based on universal motives: rather on a theme than just a topic.

Perhaps the most universal motive for Chornobyl tours is the subject of safety. Visiting the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) differs significantly from visiting a museum or walking around a city. The very fact of entering an area of elevated risk results in the need to properly address the forms of exploration, which lays a heavy responsibility on the guides who must safely carry out the programme of the visit. The visiting process, based on regulations, is subject to interpretation. Guides justify their decisions to abide more or less strictly by individual safety principles to the group, sharing their knowledge of the threats that may pose danger to tourists. This means working on the cognitive dissonance that the visitors continuously feel: something that is seemingly safe is actually dangerous (radiation is invisible, and buildings are decaying), something that seems dangerous is in fact safe (the life of the *samosely*, work in the Zone). These paradoxes are revealed in the process of interpretation, which leads to understanding the deeper meanings of the solipsistic challenging of the faith in sensory experience.

The guides' narratives also include dissonances connected to the interpretation of the past: this is the second universal motive in interpreting the CEZ heritage. "For all that we see is not what it seems" therefore seems to refer not only to the physical space but also to the past that requires understanding, yet whose image is complex enough to cause a cognitive dissonance. The guides' narratives contain not only nostalgia for the imperial past but also criticism of the actions taken by the powers that caused the catastrophe. It is a story of heroic people and victims who have not even today been given back what they lost. The guides' interpretations show the Chornobyl disaster as a universal story about where evil has crept into this world from, about the defencelessness of people and nature before the arrogance of the power, about the innocent always suffering, and about ordinary people rising to the heights of heroism when it comes to the crunch. It is a

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question, however, about whether these can be given any meaning. In other words, what is the relationship between that traumatic Chornobyl heritage and the contemporary challenges we are facing?

One of the interpretative paths shows the disaster as a creeping apocalypse that carries on: no one has actually prevailed over its aftermath, people still fall ill, nature is contaminated, corruption is on its ordinary level, the USSR fell apart, then came the Orange Revolution, annexation of the Crimea and war in Donbass, and the shadow of the breakup still lies heavy on the hope for a better future. This message is present in the narrative of Katia, who concludes her story with the conclusion that as much as she loves the Zone, she considers emigrating from Ukraine because she loves freedom and wants to enjoy life, which is impossible in her country. The other version shows that the disaster catalysed changes for the better and a transformation that is ongoing. Now, difficult and entangled in economic and political problems as it might be, things are still heading towards something positive: the Zone is being reborn, young people discover their past and build a future without a sense of trauma. That meaning comes up at the end of the tour with Karolina, who speaks of the heroism of the liquidators without whom, "we would not be here now". She also expresses the hope that the knowledge gained during a day's visit proves that you should not fear radiation as such. The conclusion is to stay optimistic: the tour was safe and gave the visitors a lot of pleasure.

Interpretation of the past also means looking for a sense not only in reference to the Chornobyl disaster but also to the challenges that humanity has been facing in all those decades, and which also determine the future of the following generations. This is an issue regarding energy sources, the threat of nuclear weapons, depositing radioactive waste, human responsibility for and before nature, and information policy in the time of post-truth.

Interpretation as cooperation

The interpretation strategies presented above are not separate, just like it is impossible to separate heritage as a resource from heritage as a process. Interpretation of heritage is an art, and like any art, it depends on the individual style of the artist, which results from various factors shaping their identity and modelling their tools and skills. The studies conducted made it possible to confirm the claim that a guide's performance develops in reference to biographic experience. The first variable is the generational difference in the styles of guiding connected to the degree of professionalism in the guiding skills. For years, the older guides operated rather as companions and group's guardians, not as experts in heritage interpretation. Therefore, what they do is more "amateur" compared to the younger guides trained in the methods of guiding groups and principles of heritage interpretation. For them, interpretation of the Zone's heritage is connected to

their own experience rather than referring to the context of popular culture. They are less inclined to use additional educational aids and multimedia.

Compared to the younger ones, the older guides know the space of the Zone better and have incomparably greater personal and professional contacts with the people responsible for managing the Zone and security within it, which lets them run programmes of types other than those offered by the young guides.

The guiding milieu is heterogenic, which suggests the potential to develop interpretation programmes vested in their group. The guides themselves demonstrate the willingness to cooperate, especially visible among the younger guides who declare that they are eager to learn from the older ones. Moreover, with the quality of the guiding improving, it seems justified to launch cooperation with organisations specialising in interpreting heritage, e.g., Interpret Europe – European Association for Heritage Interpretation, and start contacts for the exchange of best practices with other institutions responsible for the representation of places of dissonant heritage to visitors. Another important factor in the inclusive approach to the development of heritage discourses is the inclusion of other stakeholders. A major role can be played here by the power plant staff, the relocated, the *samosely*, and the liquidators – their voices, treated as testimonies of life in the shadow of the disaster, would not only enrich the narrative but primarily be a step towards a more participative management of the dissonant heritage.

As the process of interpretation does not assume the form of unilaterally conveying the message, the visitors also stimulate one another and may inspire professional interpreters to look at various issues from the perspectives they do not find obvious. Using the metaphors drawn from the philosophy of dialogue, one can say that interpretation of heritage enables an "unveiling of the face", which is one of the ways to build relations and dialogue. In turn, dialogue leads to recognising yourself and acceptance of what previously was hidden. The presence of the Other is what gives me an opportunity to be myself and to learn myself for the first time. The guides overcome the trauma of Chornobyl in their own individual ways. Interviews conducted with young guides confirm what was intuited, namely that their work makes it possible to discover the multidimensional nature of the Chornobyl disaster, which they had never realised so powerfully before. Unless you came from a family of liquidators or evacuees or took interest in the Zone for illegal exploration, your knowledge about Chornobyl was superficial and only came with the process of formal education. The older guides, in turn, realise, thanks to tourists, that their perspective could perhaps become enriched with new elements, as a perception of the past depends on the present, and there is no single tale that would be true only because it is their version, and that there are plenty of stories that complement one another, mutually negotiating and assigning new meanings to what happened.

I am convinced that this is where the exceptional nature of the Zone lies. It is more than just a site of dark or nuclear heritage, or a post-apocalyptic theme park. Interpretation of the Zone's heritage makes it possible for the recipients to experience its multidimensional quality providing a fascinating example of the hybridisation of heritage. For that to happen, the message shared should primarily reinforce the dissonant character of the Zone's heritage and show it simultaneously as a site of remembrance, a place symbolising cultural trauma, and a space of natural rebirth: a piece of heritage that teaches about the past yet offers an option to discuss the current problems. This message must be sensitive to the needs of the tourists, many of whom have very little knowledge combined with exact expectations developed by the media shaping their imagination, which points to the need of developing emotional intelligence in the guides. Due to the nature of this site, the question of tourist safety is an important determinant for the interpretation. It calls for special leadership competences in guides. As Katia noticed:

> I have such a premonition that it is a place that should be a reminder for us, it is a place that people should see, to know that there is something like it. You see it in the Chernobyl Zone – you simply come here and hear a story. And if you do something, you've got to do it well, because this can have a major impact on the world.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Even if Katia's words sound grandiose, they reflect the essence of looking at heritage through the lens of certain universal values that are worth talking about and showing, as they may influence the future of the world. It is similar to emotions that cannot be changed but can be realised, so that you can "work" on them. Education is what underpins coping with dissonances. The Inclusive Heritage Discourse supported by interpretation and the grassroots involvement of such stakeholders as guides supports the pluralising perspectives of the past, as well as suggesting that dissonance is not only an inherent feature of heritage but also a potential positive value for inducing critical thinking and reflection in individuals. It seems that making the visitor aware of the essence of heritage dissonance is a great challenge for the interpreters. One of the aims of interpretation is to engage in a process of positive change. Interpreters aspire to inspire, they are supposed to be proactive agents of social change in the world, a power to disrupt the old ideas, to lobby and campaign, and to provoke and shake the narrow-minded. The interpreters are precisely the ones who make it possible to reveal what is hidden under the veil of heritage: the universal sense of a dissonant heritage site is vested in that heritage not being particular, alien, or impossible to identify with. Thanks to the guides' interpretation, the visitors have an opportunity to enter into a relationship with the space, as personalisation of the message shared by the guides emotionally involves tourists, which can increase empathy towards the heritage and its inheritors. Interpretation of

heritage should inspire the visitors to take action while heritage lasts (e.g., by creating visual documentation) and when it is gone (dissemination of the results of the experience) but, on the most general level, it should lead to the perception of universal values of heritage and the change in attitudes or at least taking responsibility at the ethical level for the fate of the Zone's heritage. Thanks to the Zone's exploration in the spirit of interpretation, the visitors have an opportunity to stop being disassociated observers focused on their own needs, while the interpreters may experience empowerment as stakeholders capable of shaping the heritage from the grassroots level. In an ideal situation, the moment when the tourists leave their comfort zone and start feeling comfortable in the Zone is precisely that of inclusion into the community of heritage, and reinforcement of the processes of participatory and integrated management of dissonant heritage.

Responsibility for heritage

One of the key questions to answer in this context is whether tourism is a tool for coping with the dissonances of heritage or if it is rather another factor leading to the intensification of those dissonances. Commercialisation is believed to be one of the important factors that lead to the intensification of the dissonances connected to cultural heritage, as in most cases it entails the phenomenon of touristification, that is treating cultural heritage as a tourist product. The previous chapters endeavour to show how the heritage of the CEZ is changing in both perception and transformation of the physical space. However, the paradox of the Zone's heritage is vested in tourism that apparently catalyses tensions and yet, by virtue of disclosing their existence, can also lead to positive changes both at micro (change in individual tourists) and macro (management of the Zone's heritage) levels.

President Zelensky's decree from 2019 was intended to provide a new chapter in the Zone's history. In his addresses, the President emphasised the need to rebrand the Zone, not only due to the associations with the disaster but also with large-scale corruption:

> Unfortunately, the Exclusion Zone is also a symbol of corruption in Ukraine. There are bribes that security officials collect from tourists, the illegal export of scrap and the use of natural resources. We will stop all this very soon. Let's finally stop scaring off tourists and turn the Exclusion Zone into a scientific and upcoming tourist magnet. Let's make it a land of freedom that will become one of the symbols of a new Ukraine. Without corruption. Without unnecessary prohibitions.
>
> *(Head of State signed a decree on the development of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, 2019)*

That did seem to present a true new opening for the Zone. Within six months of signing it, Vitaliy Petruk, a protegee of the former Prime Minister, Arseniy

Yatsenyuk, lost his post. The scale of irregularities in the Zone under Petruk was described by Antikor, a recognised Ukrainian platform specialising in publishing materials on corruption (Асадовский, 2020). The key issues included the "disappearance" of some revenue from tourism (COTIS permitted more than 70,000 tourists to enter the Zone in 2018 and injected the Ukrainian budget with 38 million hryvnia, while, as the author claims that "the real profit was nearly five times as high: 150 million hryvnia"). The Zone was also a magnet for the illegal acquisition of scrap metal and wood sold without any radiological tests (Domaradzki, 2020a). The President's decision initiated quick changes in the Zone's management, each successive nomination being proof of the complexity of the tangled connections between the long-term holders of various crucial posts who mutually protected their interests. In 2021 alone, there were three changes of the Agency head, and the successive dismissals were surrounded by the aura of corruption scandals. Many years of neglect brought about the great fire that in 2020 consumed 66,000 hectares of the Zone together with the Emerald Resort and the village of Leliv lying by the tourist route. For years, the management of the "primeval forest" was more interested in logging wood for sale than keeping the firebreaks and forest roads clear, and returning order after successive fires. Moreover, at its start, the firefighting was inefficient, as the rescue services had no people or equipment, and found communication difficult due to the lack of mobile network signals. Once the fires were extinguished, Jacek Domaradzki commented (Domaradzki, 2021):

> the current fires only disclosed the incapacity of Ukrainian institutions, lack of conservation activity, and, primarily, a lack of a vision to protect the heritage of Polesie. (…) There are two types of contamination in the Chernobyl Zone: physical – with radiation, and cultural – with the loss of memory. Today, this already badly contaminated memory yields to the fires.

Corruption and pathological behaviour in managing the Zone had been spoken about for years, a fact obvious both for the organisers of tourism and the guides. The growing tourist traffic also seems to have forced the authorities to deal with the Zone's management:

> Corruption is rife in Ukraine. There is corruption in the Zone. As the profits from the tourists did not reach the very top, they were not given consideration. The management changed, and now this money reaches there. They made their calculations and understood how many tourists there are. Now they are going to work actively for them.
>
> *[K/11.2018/2]*

Working regularly with tourists, guides noticed the needs for change from the level of satisfying the tourists' most basic physiological needs to that of

a comprehensive strategy for developing the Zone as a tourist attraction in the years to come. The guides consider themselves part of the Zone's heritage community and take part in activities for the preservation and development of Chornobyl's heritage. It is worth remembering the regular support they give to the *samosely* while visiting them with their groups, but also their involvement in charity. In their daily work, the guides make sure the Zone remains clean. The tour organisers have regularly asked the question about waste and toilets at meetings with representatives of the Agency, who ignored the demands of the tourist sector to provide infrastructure adequate to the number of visitors.

> I asked director G. that question twice. We meet here in this great building. I say 'Why did you set up a bio-toilet here, and didn't put up even one in Chernobyl-2? Have you seen what is going on there?' 'The forest will do.' That was it. Then we met two more times at a meeting, and the third time I refused. Let's gather outside the meeting and go altogether to Chernobyl 2 to clear the rubbish. What the tourists threw away, bottles, and all that. We did that for the first time. Everyone went to the Antenna, and myself, M., and somebody else removed all the rubbish from the coaches area. Why are we walking so far? We removed everything, raised the glasses. And in a matter of days everything looked the same. Did you see that the containers are always full? They hardly ever empty them. They do no good, they only charge money for that.
>
> *[I/02.2019/3]*

It is, however, a fact that the transformation of the Zone's tourist infrastructure began with the improvement of the sanitary conditions. As Kostya noticed:

> The question of musealisation of some sites in the Zone is being actively discussed. So far, these ideas are put forth by the guides. I haven't heard of the Zone administration approving or doing anything in that scope. Administration develops tourism in the Zone. They introduced coffee at the checkpoint, opened the toilets and a new café in Chernobyl. This means they take steps, yet they do it their own way. They're trying to rebuild infrastructure, but they haven't yet touched the site itself, they still don't understand how to do it.
>
> *[K/11.2018/2]*

The guides themselves expressed mixed feelings concerning the changes taking place in the Zone. Katia expressed them very clearly:

> I would much like the Zone to remain in its original shape, just like now. This is the reason why, when I take longer tours, for four or five days, I prefer to take people to remote villages in the Zone, where you can

> see authentic views. These are no mock-ups but houses that still look the way they did in 1986 when people left. But it is my personal feeling, possibly because I have been to the Zone hundreds of times. I've had enough of patchwork, transformations. I also realise that people who come here for the first time, and see this place for the first and probably last time in their lives, may have more feelings, more emotions connected to what they can see. It makes no bad impact on people but it gives them more experience. I can see nothing bad in it. If people like it, if it makes anyone happier, if they enjoy it, I actually don't mind.
>
> *[K/07.2018/1]*

Evgeni and Kostya addressed the difficulties in adjusting to the expectations of the visitors while retaining the message about the Zone's difficult heritage in a similar spirit:

> To do something that, spending here only one day, a tourist had a sense of experiencing living emotions and impressions, so that they retained the memories. In general terms to have people like it.
>
> *[J/11.2018/1]*

> Not to make an amusement park. That they all understand that this is a site of tragedy. We don't make a depressing tour, but people need to understand that yes, you come here, you can watch, it is attractive, it is important, but at the same time you need to realise that this fact has not been lost. Not to make an amusement park but neither to create a depressing tour that makes everyone cry.
>
> *[K/11.2018/2]*

The guides address here fundamental problems, especially difficult and taxing, that everyone responsible for tourist development in heritage sites faces what is the authentic quality of a place? What should the conservation activities be, beginning from renewal, via restoration of the values, up to the very revitalisation? How should they create the narrative for tourists reflecting the complexity of dissonances of culture heritage and give them pleasure, yet not at the expense of simplifications?

The statements above show that guides are among the groups that can express a valid point representing the bottom-up approach in managing the Zone's heritage. So far, the participatory approach to managing the Zone's heritage has been more or less successfully conducted by the Public Council through the SAUEZM, incorporated in 2013 and yet only recently gaining in importance (*Положення про Громадську раду при Державному агентстві України з управління зоною відчуження*, n.d.). The Council is a consulting organ for the Agency and can initiate actions as well as consult the activity of the Agency itself. In 2020, for example, it aided the *samosely*, whose well-being greatly deteriorated due to the radical reduction in tourist

traffic resulting from the pandemic. Furthermore, the Council took steps to renovate the Monument to the Firefighters, resulting in a fundraising campaign. It also appealed to the Ukrainian government to appoint a new head of the Agency, as nobody stood at the helm of the Zone's Board for 100 days after Petruk's dismissal. In April 2021, the then director of the Agency, Serhii Kostiuk, approved the new Council. It consists of 17 representatives of the organisations supporting the resettled, the veterans, and the natural environment. Its members also include Yaroslav Yemelianienko (as a representative of the Association of Chornobyl Tour Operators), Valeriy Korshunov (European Institute of Chornobyl), and Alexander Sirota (PRYPYAT.com centre) (*Наказ ДАЗВ України від 12.04.2021 №73-21 "Про затвердження складу Громадської ради при Державному агентстві України з управління зоною відчуження"*, n.d.).

The individual members have long conducted their own activity in support of the Zone's heritage. Valeriy Korshunov primarily concentrates on the artistic and media activity, while Yemelianienko and Mirnyi lobby to have some of the Zone's material heritage listed by UNESCO as World Heritage (in 2019 the latter submitted a petition to President Zelensky to start the formal procedure) and to expand the tourist offer. Back in 2009, Alexander Sirota used the pripyat.com portal to appeal to the international community to grant Pripyat the status of a museum city (Старожицкая, 2009).

One of the burning questions noted by people involved in the protection of the Zone's heritage is the state of the buildings, primarily in Pripyat, as they yield to natural erosion and also to acts of vandalism. Campaigns cleaning illegal graffiti from the buildings of Pripyat with the participation of guides working for Chornobyl Tour have been organised in recent years. In the spring of 2021, Chornobyl Tour delivered specialist supports for protecting the roof of the Polissya Hotel, as it is in abysmal condition. Yet they have not been installed, nor has the permit to install them by the tour's staff been granted.

"Magnets of Ukraine" is a programme supporting the development of the economic potential of selected locations in Ukraine, indicated in Zelensky's Decree. It envisages revitalisation of the Zone's material heritage especially for the sake of further development of tourism. During a press conference in August 2021, whose participants included members of the Public Council, an announcement was made that the Ukrainian government will earmark 50 million hryvnia for the renovation of selected sites in the CEZ. The first stage of the project is envisaged to include the renovation and conservation of the stained-glass window by Victor Alexandrovich Blinov in Pripyat Café near the Yanovsky Reservoir harbour, and renovation of the 16-floor-high residential block in Pripyat, similar to the block from the photo (Figure 5.1), where the firefighter Vladimir Pravik lived. The block is intended to become a vantage point, and the liquidator's flat is to be turned into a museum. The following stages of the project include the establishment of yet another museum by the Duga Radar, renovation of Ivan Litovchenko's *Energia*

Figure 5.1 Panorama of Pripyat from the roof of a 16-storey residential tower.
Source: Photo by the author.

mosaic on the façade of the Prometheus cinema-theatre, and the redevelopment of the building itself. However, the overhaul of the Polissya Hotel has been postponed.

Details of the investment plan remain unknown, just as there is no news about how the procedure of entering CEZ sites onto the UNESCO World Heritage List is progressing, even though it has been discussed in Ukraine for years (the initiative received the support of the Bureau of the Ukrainian National Committee of ICOMOS back in 2017). In 2020, global media were electrified by the declaration of the Ukrainian Minister of Culture, Olexandr Tkachenko, that the application would be submitted by March 2021 (as of October 2021 nothing has happened). What requires particularly fine attention prior to the application is not only the justification of meeting the Outstanding Universal Value criterion but also guaranteeing an adequate system of management and care for the Zone's heritage. With the corruption scandals surrounding the Zone's management in mind, meeting that requirement may not be so easy, and the grassroots initiatives that have for years proved the Zone's heritage to be close to the hearts of many are not sufficient. Nonetheless, it is important that the tourism boom of recent years has made many decision-makers realise that the CEZ is precious cultural but also natural heritage.

In 2007, the United Nations approved the resolution on "recovery and sustainable development" of the areas affected by the Chornobyl accident. In 2013, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources approved a request to create the Chornobyl Biosphere Reserve. The Chornobyl Radiation and

Ecological Biosphere Reserve was eventually created on the 30th anniversary of the catastrophe. With over 1200 species of higher plants and 300 species of mammals, birds, and fish identified, it is the largest reserve in Ukraine (*Чорнобильський радіаційно-екологічний біосферний заповідник*, n.d.). Chornobyl has long been present in the debate on anthropocene. Mary Mycio in her *Wormwood Forest* (2005, p. 128) labelled the Zone as "Europe's largest wildlife sanctuary". However, this is not a sanctuary of nature untainted by the human hand but rather an involuntary park where "natural processes reassert themselves in areas of political and technological collapse". In one of the five projects addressing the Zone's future, Philips and Ostaszewski (2012, p. 136) drew a vision derived from Mycio's ideas, in which "the Zone would serve both as a nature and wildlife reserve in the long term, and as an ongoing 'live experiment' to track the resilience of plant and animal life after a radiological insult." With such an assumption, Chornobyl is a perfect heritage site that indicates the dangers and risks to reveal the second chance that nature has given us and emphasises even more strongly the future responsibility for the planet that rests on our shoulders.

Early in 2021, Sergii Mirnyi used the media to announce the Chornobyl Revival Zone (Чорнобильська зона відродження): a national park to be established in the CEZ. Although lacking detail, his idea perfectly dovetails the new narrative about the Zone being "the Zone of Revival". That is precisely the term used by President Zelensky when he announced the acceptance of the three-year development programme for the Zone at the All-Ukrainian Forum "Ukraine 30. Ecology" in June 2021 (*Zelensky: Chornobyl should become "revival Zone,"* 2021). By the time of this book's completion, no detailed information about that programme had been revealed to the public; however, the idea of more than just a semantic transformation of the Exclusion Zone into the Zone of Revival is certainly highly tempting.

Conclusion

The Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) is a perfect example of dissonant heritage, where the meaning-making process causes deep tensions between various stakeholders. The purpose of this book is to portray the question of difficult/dissonant heritage as a dynamic process of cultural transformation, in which the resources of the past are interpreted, negotiated, and revalued.

The first chapter of this book investigates the essence of the dissonances of the Zone heritage from the point of view of critical heritage studies. Dissonance in heritage goes beyond just the consequences of the process of commercialisation, which, in this case, is primarily related to touristification. The dissonance of the heritage results from the valuation of the past with respect to different current interests and future projects. The CEZ portrays the uses and abuses of the past very well: how bygone events and the space that symbolises them turn into objects of interpretative conflict treated as tools for attaining various political, economic, social, and cultural goals at various levels, from local to global.

The second expands these considerations to include the realm of culture that contributes to the creation of the Chornobyl discourse. Narratives of the past are not built as part of the accumulation of expert knowledge but are generalisations based on representations of the past. The practices of various actors of memory are focused both on the internal state pedagogy and on imposing a narrative in the international space and are allowed to build moral capital through different carriers of memory. The reconstruction of tales concerning the past is a stay for identity projects and for the development of a positive image of the community. A measure of the success of the retrospective imagination in the polyphonic global discourse is the capacity to read current problems in the past, which is a way of making the message universal.

The third chapter portrays Chornobyl tourism. It shows how limiting the treatment of the Zone as a form of dark tourism is referring to the trends in tourism in recent years while at the same time emphasising the dynamic of development of the Zone's touristification. In this way, it signals the need to embark on actions to improve the sustainability of Chornobyl heritage

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management. The historical context of Chornobyl tourism development provides a frame of reference for the fourth, which describes the strategies of interpreting heritage that can be observed in the operation of tourist guides. The research project shows that the biographic experience has a significant impact on guiding practices in the CEZ, as it influences the choices of guiding strategies and in this way shapes the experience of the tourists.

An important context for considering the work in sites with a troubled past is the ethical dimension. Heritage prompts one to adopt a position, which goes beyond just assuming a specific point of view as it also calls for taking action consistent with the values being preached. Heritage calls for action because it is alive. Whether the activity in question is protection and development, or omission, or destruction, the attitude to heritage is expressed in action, which is why heritage is discussed as both a resource and a process. Examining heritage from the perspective of the philosophy of dialogue makes it a veil that covers the face of the Other: even though the features can only be glimpsed, that very face calls for an ethical involvement in the relationship. In this way, every heritage is somebody's and not somebody else's, which provides a space for getting to know each other. In the case of working with tourists, the narrative must be adjusted to the recipients and at the same time account for the imperative of recreation and fun, a motivator for travel, thus imposing an additional responsibility for the shaping of visitors' attitudes to heritage interpreters. The key task of heritage interpreters is to deepen knowledge, to nuance the meanings that help better understanding of the essence of heritage dissonances, and to connect those meanings to current problems.

In a wider perspective, guides play a key role in the bottom-up construction of heritage discourse. Their performative activities define the values and create cultural and social meanings that offer a sense of belonging to the place and create a new post-Chornobyl identity.

The perception of the Chornobyl disaster, and consequently the heritage of the Zone, changes. This process is symbolised by the new logo of the CEZ that was proposed in early 2021 by the Banda Creative Agency. Supported by the Ministry of Environment, SAUEZM, and the State Agency for Tourism Development, they worked for 18 months on the concept of a new brand for the Exclusion Zone (*Офіційна презентація логотипу зони відчуження "Яким світ побачить Чорнобиль у 2064 році?*", 2021). The image refers to the shape of the RBMK reactor seen from above. The logo has been designed to evolve, the black colour being successively and evenly replaced by white each year until the Chornobyl nuclear power plant is fully decommissioned in 2064. Such a dynamic logo is expected to reflect the process of transformation of the Zone, which is strongly conditioned by the development of tourism.

The concept of the major revitalisation of the Exclusion Zone, initiated by a decree of President Zelensky, is slowly gaining momentum. On the one hand, the application for a part of the Zone to the process of inclusion on

the UNESCO World Heritage List, announced with much fanfare late in 2020, has not yet happened, nor is it even known what stage the working group has reached. Yet on the other, this could be considered the right decision, as such an application calls for a thorough consideration of the courses of the further development of the zone.

Studying the priority areas of development of visits to the Zone and the design of the foundations for an educational project became the mission of the Centre for Economic Restoration. It has organised three debates to help to find answers to the questions related to the three areas of development: tourism, culture, and natural and cultural heritage protection. One of the key conclusions stemming from the consultations with the experts is the need to allow visits to new sites and landmarks once a positive evaluation of radiation levels in such sites has been achieved. Making new sites accessible to visitors will not only help to diversify the tourist traffic, currently focused on a single basic route, but will also counteract other negative phenomena. First of all, it will automatically decrease the attractiveness of stalker-type exploration, as sites off the official tour routes can only be seen illegally at the moment. Secondly, those sites will no longer be destroyed and vandalised, as best exemplified by the Duga Radar which was dismantled by thieves for years before tourists began arriving there on a mass scale. Above all else, though, the staking out of safe and secure routes will bring new, interesting locations into the picture, e.g., the entire city of Pripyat, the Yanov cargo port, and the villages of the Polesie, which will significantly expand the guides' narrative on the Chornobyl heritage.

Tourism can save the heritage of the Zone from physical destruction and oblivion but is also the factor that may provide the greatest threat to the Zone in the future. The last data obtained before submitting this text to print refer to October 2021, which proved to be another record-breaking month as far as the number of visitors to the CEZ is concerned. COTIS reported that the Zone was visited by nearly 15,000 people, in October, which increases the total number of tourists in the first ten months of 2021 to 62,000, which is more than twice the number of visitors in the whole of 2020 (*Жовтень: десятий місяць став першим по кількості відвідувачів Чорнобильської зони*, 2021).

The return to the levels seen in 2016 seems an invaluable opportunity, as, with the reduction of the number of visitors caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the knowledge of the processes taking place in the Zone in the last five years has remained. Combined with a drop in the number of visitors, it heralds an opportunity to design a development strategy based on sustainable goals.

Unlikely though it may seem, the CEZ is an individual case that allows conclusions to be drawn of a more general nature on the management of post-disaster sites in the context of tourism development. The challenges that the Zone faces are exemplary for the processes that take place in many sites all around the world. Sites of natural disasters – New Orleans,

Montserrat, and Gibellina in Sicily – and anthropogenic disasters – Aberfan in Wales and Bhopal in India – become symbols of tragedies, yield to heritagisation, and build a universal tale of sacrifice, heroism, and responsibility, albeit being simultaneously entangled in conflicts of memory, and power and authority relations. The processes of regeneration of the culturescape and social integration of post-disaster locations are linked to the need to include spaces that are symbolically burdened with the brunt of the tragedy into the daily lives of those who are not only the wardens of the difficult remembrance, but who also seek harmonious development at the level of individuals and communities. The problem of difficult heritage does not allow it to be ploughed over for life to go on. The greatest challenge is how to live in the shadow of the trauma. For reasons of security, the Zone is excluded from everyday use, even though there have been suggestions to resettle it. Yet the people of Chornobyl must live on, just like the citizens of Oświęcim live in the vicinity of the Auschwitz barracks. Even if this is a different type of proximity, the city of Slavutich, or small hamlets beyond the formal border of the zone such as Orane, must go on developing in relationship to the Zone whether they want to or not.

Evidence that the need to develop effective tools for the development of dissonant heritage sites has been noticed is that the Partnership on Culture and Cultural Heritage in the Urban Agenda for the EU has taken up the subject in the form of action no. 10, which focuses on how to "handle, employ, and manage Integrated Approaches to Europe's Dissonant Heritage sites". The CEZ is one of the 50 case studies that were used to illustrate the problems of dissonant heritage sites. In 2022, the partnership is supposed to develop a toolkit for local stakeholders and offer some perspectives on funding programmes and opportunities for European networks to connect and expand reflection and actions dedicated to dissonant heritage.

Even if dissonant culture heritage holds the potential to enable new forms of collaboration and cultural production, the regeneration and adaptive reuse must be carefully planned and take into account the sustainable development goals. Culture heritage is an ongoing creative process and an agent for regional transformation that can be beneficial if remembrance and innovation are not treated as conflicting but complementary actions. Regional development based on cultural heritage assets is only possible if the network of partnerships that would jointly support the co-creation and co-production is reinforced, primarily by taking into account the needs of the local community through their involvement in the processes of management and establishment of new jobs, and also in the development of conditions for social innovation. The principle of social inclusion is one of the cornerstones of the whole spectrum of public policy and is not questioned in principle. Building social capital, strengthening the role of civil society in local communities with management processes are the intended goals to be achieved with the use of tools such as transparency, mutual respect, and dialogue. However, as the sustainability of the landscape and environment

or economic goals can quite easily be operationalised for measurable activities, it is much harder to talk specifically about the practical application of the rules of social sustainability. Nonetheless, these dimensions of sustainability must be addressed to attain the most suitable outcome. The brutal truth is that the very premise of an integrated and participatory approach is not evident in heritage management processes. Even at the level of UNESCO Culture Conventions, participation, inclusivity, and ownership of development processes have only gradually gained importance. Social sustainability is rather slow to penetrate the consciousness of heritage stakeholders operating at different levels not only in practice, but even at the declarative level. It is a process that first requires educating people and making them aware of their rights and responsibilities, which results in specific narratives and activities that allow the attainment of objectives of social sustainability such as the identity of the place and cooperation between stakeholders. The strong identity of a place can facilitate cooperation but can also marginalise some people; therefore, in connection to dissonant/difficult heritage, narratives accompanying social activation processes should take into account the perspectives of different people whose voices are not equally well heard: of those who are alive, i.e., the current residents, but also of those who are gone, whose memory is preserved by heirs not necessarily living within the area. Nor should we forget those who only arrive for a brief sojourn, such as tourists and visitors. Each of these groups can be marginalised and it is necessary to plan how the principle of social inclusion will be implemented with each of them in mind. A number of heritage sites work on building a more inclusive narrative on cultural diversity, as it is not just the extent of physical infrastructure that counts in social inclusion but so do the narratives that they reflect.

That is why guides should play a significant role in the development of a more sustainable Zone of Revival, as the CEZ is perceived as an entity similar to the Zone from Tarkovsky's film. The real world is tough and grim, and shown in black and white in the film *Stalker*. The Zone is colourful, lush with vegetation of a unique and intensive shade, and visually fascinating even though its beauty is dangerous for those who do not know, or do not accept the rules of engagement it has imposed. Even for stalker, who had spent a lot of time within it, it remains a great guessing game and a challenge. On the one hand, it is a wonderful space of hope, but on the other, an unforeseeable system of death traps. In Tarkovsky's film, people arrive in the Zone for various reasons. It is rumoured to make dreams come true. An embittered and burnt-out writer needs it to find inspiration, a professor of physics wants to understand it and primarily the social and ethical consequences of its existence, much like the tourists who arrive in the Zone with various motivations. Thanks to the guide-interpreters, the Zone may help not so much to make their dreams come true but rather make them aware that what they are looking for is not necessarily what they actually need.

All the stakeholders responsible for managing cultural heritage play a critical educational role in conveying key messages on history and forging new audiences. Inclusive Heritage Discourse should inquire why and for whom the heritage sites are designated and provide meaningful narratives for the users to ensure their preservation. Sustainable strategies should congregate the development of heritage education and social participation as instruments to enhance the emancipation, citizenship, and democratisation of decision-making processes. The integration of Inclusive Heritage Discourse in territorial planning politics and heritage management is crucial not only for a broad participatory perspective, but also for all the goals of sustainable development.

Inclusive and participatory approach assumes that dissonances may lead to something positive – the mutual recognition that allows us to understand the essence of tensions, and, in turn, a critical reflection may contribute to the easing of tensions between individual stakeholders. Developing broader and more inclusive practices of heritage management is not just an academic issue, it is critical for the future generations. The case of the CEZ revisits again the dictum "history is the teacher of life" (*Historia magistra vitae est*) since carries a universal message about the need to care for a difficult heritage. This concern requires a special effort to overcome dissonances in memory, emotions, and values. The point of support is the assumption of three goals: preservation, participation, and education, which define the horizon of heritage for future generations.

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