



Pripyat, Courtesy Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion

Tuesday 12 May 2015, 7pm, Cinema 1

Pripyat

Austria, 1999, Dir. Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 100 mins. In Russian and Ukrainian with English subtitles.

Programme Notes by Joana Rafael

“Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place”, writes Susan Sontag to open her seminal text on illness as metaphor. Through it she attempts to unravel the punitive and sentimental fantasies concocted within the kingdom of the ill. She describes the ruthless and morally contagious means by which deadly diseases are mystified, and combats the fatalism associated with them. One can say that Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s film *Pripyat* follows a similar intentional path, through a real yet absurd geography.

Geyrhalter is a leading filmmaker and documentarian who frequently examines the lives of the marginal and hidden, dwelling in so-called ‘ill’ locations. Known for the existentially beautiful travelogues *Our Daily Bread* (2005), *Elsewhere* (2001), *The Year After Dayton* (1997) and *Washed Ashore* (1992), he is no stranger to adventure. Like Sontag, he is ready to leave his comfort zone to survey withered and extraordinary terrains: territories which we do not know (and fear to learn) much about, spectrally shrouded as sites where the means of life and living have been lost.

Geyrhalter’s films depict outlooks on life, outcomes of millennial turning points, and observations of melancholic isolation. Frequently relying upon interviews conducted with the subjects sitting or standing facing the camera, or followed by the camera team, his films foreground a wealth of details - both intimately personal and observationally detached. *Pripyat* offers an eloquent proof of his approach and methods. The film, details lives lived in the decaying remnants and desolate centerpiece of a 18.75 mile restricted zone in the Ukraine; a place encapsulated by clear boundaries and restricted access since the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear meltdown. Shot in black and white, its cinematography, devoid of stylistic flourishes, accentuates the otherworldly illness of the Chernobyl site to make it appear somewhat mundane, and enable the tales of the film’s ‘characters’ to take centre stage. Coloured by their despair, denial, fatalism and resilience, the film’s unflinching and unsettling vision combines with a tragicomic and self-effacing humor that serves to accentuate myriad points of devastation in order to make us look at things in a new way.

The film’s title is taken from the names of its subjects: Pripyat, the flagship Soviet city (turned “ghost town”) built to house the Chernobyl workers and demonstrate the safety of nuclear energy, itself named after Pripyat, the 862 km long river that provided cooling water for the disaster-struck reactor. This river flows east through the Ukraine and Belarus to the Dnieper River and on to the Black Sea. It is highly contaminated with radioactive substances, expanding the spatial scale of the accident to substantial distances beyond the barbed wire fence of Chernobyl’s nuclear Exclusion Zone. However, Geyrhalter’s film avoids an anti-nuclear treatise to capture the circumstances, attitudes and living conditions of those who live off the poisoned land and fish in the contaminated waters within the Zone, amidst a reverberating sense of catastrophe.

To enter this fenced territory, Geyrhalter agreed on a deal by which the European Commission and the Belarussian, Russian and Ukrainian ministries responsible for Chernobyl Affairs could use his footage for their internal assessment works. This granted his team the rare rights to move freely for a three-month period and follow the lives of those evicted from the kingdom of the well to remain in – living or commuting to – an apparently functional wasteland, enclosed by a complex architecture of exclusion and saturated in lethal levels of radioactivity. Such people include, amongst others, the Rudchenkos, a couple of elderly residents that returned to the zone shortly after the meltdown, Mr. Suvorov, a cheerful plant manager coping with the conditions, Mrs. Krasnozhon, a technician monitoring the nuclear devastation, and a forlorn woman complaining about the state's helplessness in the face of a disaster it helped to create. "They should install gas and telephone lines so that I can live here as I did", exclaims the latter to the camera, seeking to pragmatise her everyday in the troubled land. This exclamation is an affirmation of isolation, but also one of the major pivots and registers of the film. At the film's closure, the camera returns to visit the Rudchenkos, whose phone indeed rings. But instead of answering they march across the snow to the river, preoccupied by the task of filling their water buckets. It shows us that the dramatic confrontation of the film is not found in the exoticism of the levels of radiation and irrevocably altered landscape surrounding the nuclear reactor, but rather with the making of Chernobyl an isolated, 'end-of-days' place – a terrain where the practice of existence itself is made more acute.

In the end, Pripjat reminds that in the midst of life, there is awful death, and that on the path to death, life still flourishes. The film is above all a self-reflective device that addresses what it is to live and be human, residing in the hinterland between the kingdoms of the well and ill simultaneously. What one sees in the Zone and in the film are the remains of some former civilization on a ground contaminated by radiation, and our eeriness in having to deal with such a reality. It offers a portrait of a world at odds with the logical organization containing the consequences of a nuclear accident, and an acerbic reminder of the limits of control. Here the role of architecture is one of protectionist subtraction, seeking to preserve wellness by placing illness in isolation. Yet the effects and aspirations of placing the world in order and in service to man, on the contrary, here only illuminate the moral, if not literal, contagions such actions inevitably incubate. What is supposed to be a dead and isolated zone, devoid of life, is shown to be a porous reserve of wilderness – albeit a radiated one – where the ones who choose to submit to fate have, indeed, their phone lines intact. Life and death, sickness and health, order and chaos, are perhaps forever in conversation at opposing ends of the line.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter is a director, producer and cameraman, born in Vienna in 1972. In 1994, at 22 years old, he founded his own production company Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion which focuses on documentaries and auteur fiction. His award winning films include *The Year After Dayton* (1997), *Pripjat* (1999), *Elsewhere* (2001), *Our Daily Bread* (2005), *Abendland* (2011) and *Cern* (2013).

Joana Rafael lives and works between Porto, London and Milan. An architect practitioner and theorist, her research interests cut across fields from Critical Theory and Geography to Technology, Logistics and the Arts. She is currently conducting analytical research for an architecture office and design gallery, where she is consultant, as well as lecturing in histories and theories of architecture.

Architecture on Film is curated by Justin Jaeckle for **The Architecture Foundation**.

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