

# *Objects In Mirror Might Be Closer Than They Appear*

*Violeta Burckhardt, 2016*

On April 26, 1986 reactor number 4 at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station in the former USSR, melted down followed by an explosion in the reactor that released large quantities of radioactivity to its surroundings. This radioactive, relentless cloud extended to much of the Soviet Union and most of Europe, largely affecting the immediate zone where the reactor was located, a territory which is now shared between Belarus and the Ukraine. In the city of Pripyat thirty-one people died that same day, but the death toll and dangers associated with long-term exposure to radioactivity are still being investigated.

As a result of the disaster a large exclusion zone was created, where an invisible force threatened to attack all those who entered. Over 100,000 people were permanently evacuated and all large animals found within the perimeter of radiation were captured and slaughtered in an attempt to control the contamination, leaving nothing but a sterile and dystopian post-nuclear wasteland. But the vast emptiness in the area did not last long. Soon, animals, plants, bacteria and fungi, fully unaware of the almost infinite life-span of the radioactive lurking force, began to slowly creep back into the zone, firmly taking back what was taken away from them. The invisible cold hand of radioactivity, meaning nothing more to them than the absence of humans and the opportunity for a new kind of life. And so, a thriving involuntary natural park was created.

Today, most radioactive isotopes have already decayed to stable levels while floods and rain have scattered the radioactivity deep into the soil. The new park has been refurbished through new energetically charged life, creating a unique ecosystem based on radioactivity: a radioactive ecology which is a product of human interaction, but one that does not enable humans to interact with it. This culturally-generated landscape resembles an ancient time, a projection of a primordial state of nature onto the ruins left by human's quest to get closer to his own future.

Without farming, agriculture, industrial development coupled with the absence of hunters, these animals have found, in what for man is considered a nightmarish and decaying context, a new home and ground for future development. Jim Smith, leader of the international study team wy8cy has gathered evidence of the booming wild life in the area argues that this cultural disaster, which stands for one of the most catastrophic in human history, has actually helped the proliferation and expansion of old, pre-established, original ecosystems in the zone. A new order, based on mutating life forms, which have since then been spreading through this “new” territory. Life forms like fungi, which even through their physical form allude to the energy and nuclear power that they hold inside of them.

The project seeks to understand the exclusion zone or *involuntary park*, a term coined by science-fiction author Bruce Sterling, to describe places previously inhabited

by humans and that due to economic, political, or environmental reasons have been able to come back to their original or feral state, through the perception and point of view of the animals that have re-conquered the territory.

A camera will be mounted on the antlers of a deer and directed toward its eye. What we then see is the reflection of the images projected from the landscape onto the animal's retina. A mixture of an invisibly decaying but thriving natural ecosystem and the ruins left by the humans that once dominated this space, rejected infrastructures of a forgotten nuclear past. The deformed image, and direct product of the curvature of the animal's ocular perception system, serves as a metaphor to an altered present, an altered environment in which these animals now live. The eye becomes a living interface through which we perceive this altered reality. An instrument which at the same time separates not only us from the animal, but the animal from his environment. A door of perception and a tool for projection that works both physically and psychologically.

The technique used for the project relates to an ancient photographic device or projector that was used during the nineteenth century in order to display and reproduce landscapes, otherwise known as Lorraine mirrors or Claude glass. The device consisted of a slightly convex and oval in shape black mirror. The curvature would allow for a wide-angle view of the scenery, while the dark color simplified the tonal values of the images. Through the dark coloration of the animal's eye, a similar effect is created. The reflected image of the landscape onto the dark colored eye of the animal turns the image into a ghostly projection of an uncanny universe created by man and only inhabited by these animals: visions of the imagination, landscapes of a dream.

This sensual perception is closely linked to movement, not only through the mechanical reproduction process of film through which it will then be portrayed but also on a physical level as it is through the physical displacement of the animal that new uncharted nuclear territories unfold. At the same time, more subtle movements can be experienced even as the animal is completely still. The heartbeat creates pulsations at particular intervals, generating rhythm. It is through the small alterations in this breathing rhythm that tension is created in the film. A sound that follows us as spectators but also the animal on its journey through this involuntary park. The breathing can be alluded to both excitement, tranquility as well as stress and fear. An ambivalence symbolizing the oppressive ghost of culture and the slow decomposition of radioactive isotopes upon the animal.

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