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# The Phenomenon of Dark Tourism and Images of Death in Media Culture

### Abstract

The study explores how death has become commercialized and commodified, presenting an anaesthetised, entertaining image primarily mediated through by media communication and consumer-driven narratives. This phenomenon is exemplified by dark tourism, with the Chernobyl nuclear disaster serving as a key case study. The paper highlights the ethical, cultural, psychological, and moral implications of transforming sites of tragedy into tourist attractions, where curiosity and excitement often overshadow remembrance and respect for victims. In recent years, dark tourism has sparked growing interest, not only as a form of entertainment but also as a means of interpreting history, trauma, and collective memory. Sites like Chernobyl act as reminders of human tragedy while simultaneously becoming destinations for thrill-seekers. Media play a crucial role in shaping this perception, often emphasizing eerie atmospheres and adrenaline-fueled experiences over historical context and emotional gravity. Furthermore, dark tourism raises questions about the

commodification of mourning, as past tragedies are repackaged into consumer experience. The ethical implications are complex, with blurred lines between education and exploitation. Through an analysis of Chernobyl, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on balancing remembrance with commercialization, while also examining the voyeuristic tendencies dark tourism can encourage. Using the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as a case study, it analyzes tragedy tourism through the lens of so-called stalkers and radioactive hunters, whose activities highlight the complex interplay between curiosity, commemoration, and exploitation in sites marked by historical tragedy.

### Key words

Consumer Culture. Dark Tourism. Images of Death. Media Culture. Radioactive Hunters. Thanatourism. The Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster.

### Introduction

The exhibition of death has a magnetic effect on the human eye – it is repulsive, but at the same time irresistibly personal. Images of death, as videos and photographs documenting death

and digital media. Popular culture thematises death in depersonalising ways, which are particularly evident in young people through humour and the “entertaining” of phenomena that should normally evoke an emotional response. At the same time, the media industry

to death – on the one hand fear, on the other its attraction. The fascination with death and suffering manifests itself in the caricaturing, trivialisation or “pornographisation of death” (Gorer, 1955), leading to indifference, reduced sensitivity and the commercialisation of violent death.



**Figure 1: Day 6. Chernobyl. Series of photographs “Chernobylite”**

Source: 9Luna9 (2008)

in intimate contact with departed life can be called, are often sought by the media. Reflection on one’s own mortality through abstract experience or direct confrontation with the death of a loved one can be a source of crisis, leading to its systematic displacement.

At the level of society, death is instead exhibited, made amusing and commodified through traditional

pushes boundaries, detabooing themes including death and dying. This tendency is documented by Kvetanová and Radošinská (2023) in their study “Taboo topics in limited series offered by Internet-distributed television”, where they summarize the detaboo themes in contemporary series production and highlight their ability to mirror the complex reality of hypermodern society.

A special category is the phenomenon of “dark tourism”, which captures the fascination with death and its irresistible horror. This phenomenon reflects man’s paradoxical relationship

Death becomes a commodity not only in the funeral industry, but also in the form of necrotourism, which Moravčíková (2013) defines as “the commercialization, detabulization, and exploitation of death in the media of mass communication” (p. 100).

The research problem of the study is to identify the coordinates of dark tourism as an example of phenomena related to the detabooization of death in media culture. We view dark tourism as a phenomenon that reflects people’s ambivalent attitude towards death. The aim is to analyze this phenomenon using the example of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as a type of *tragedy tourism*, focusing on the activities of so-called *stalkers* and *radioactive hunters*.

### 1 Dark Tourism, Thanatourism (Ethical, Social, and Cultural Contexts)

The term “dark tourism” was first used by Foley and Lennon in a special issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (Seaton, 1996) and later in their publication *Dark Tourism: The Attraction*

<sup>1</sup> Authors’ note: No changes have been made to the figure.

of *Death and Disaster* (Foley & Lennon, 2000). Dark tourism can be broadly defined as the act of travelling to places that present death, suffering, or macabre themes. These are visits to sites associated with tragedies caused by natural or human factors, historically significant deaths, or brutal acts of an individual or mass nature.

Due to media interest, the emotive label “dark tourism” is currently used for this phenomenon. The combination of the terms ‘dark’ and ‘grief’ with the concept of tourism, which traditionally implies relaxation and leisure, creates an attractive lure for the

general public. However, the term “thanatourism”, which eliminates the negative connotations and more accurately captures the essence of the phenomenon, is appearing more and more frequently in academic literature. Thanatourism can be defined as “travel to sites motivated in part or in whole by a desire for a real or symbolic encounter with death, especially but not exclusively violent death” (Stone, 2006, p. 149). Dunkley et al. (2007) further elaborated on the concept of thanatourism, highlighting its broader historical dimension and its overlaps with other types of tourism, such as educational tourism and cultural

heritage tourism. According to the categorisation of thanatourism put forward by Dunkley et al. (2007), a visit to Chernobyl can be categorised as “tragedy tourism”. This category includes tourism associated with tragedies, disaster sites and accidents of a global and local nature that have affected individuals, groups or entire population masses.

Mass media, digital global platforms, social networks, films, literature, etc., contribute significantly to stimulating interest in places associated with dark tourism. This phenomenon is related to the issue highlighted by Pravdová



**Figure 2: Fiancés in gas masks in front of the iconic Ferris wheel in Pripjat, captured in a surreal and dark atmosphere. Aesthetically uniform photographs of the Ferris wheel most often used by tourists as a dramatic backdrop (not only) for a “selfie” photo**

Source: OpenAI (n.d.)

and Hudíková when they argue that “the phenomenon of media hedonism represents in contemporary media production a preference for specific themes, modes of execution, the emergence of new programme formats and the hybridisation of genres. Media creators offer their recipients the pleasure of experiences full of emotions or impressive scenes” (Pravdová & Hudíková, 2022, p. 75).

The materialisation and mediatization of death through dead bodies, their remains, relics, visits to places associated with death and suffering, as well as watching dying ‘online’, arouses a specific fascination. This attraction is related to the socio-cultural coordinates of consumer society. Homo consumericus, as sociologist Bauman (2002) argues, is not primarily oriented towards social distinction, but towards the immediate fulfillment of personal needs, encompassing emotional and spiritual dimensions. It is the need to experience the present moment that supports the phenomenon of mobility – tourist expeditions, hedonistic travel, low-cost trips or nomadic wandering, including dark tourism. Jakubovská (2023) emphasizes in her study that “wandering manifests itself as an instinct driving us towards the other, the unknown, the different. We are excited by everything that is ambivalent, everything that incites adventure, in all the areas it can penetrate” (Jakubovská, 2023, p. 57).

**2 “I’m Afraid to Say It, but We... We Love Chernobyl. We Fell in Love with It.”** (Alexijevič, 2017, p. 238)

One of the most striking examples of dark tourism is a visit to the site of the largest nuclear disaster in history, the so-called Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. This destination, famous not only for its historical events but also for its pop culture references, is a place where sensationalism and interest in morbid symbolism reach new dimensions.

On 26 April 1986 at 1:23:58, the inhabitants of Ukraine, Belarus and other affected areas of the former Soviet Union unavoidably made history in connection with the Chernobyl disaster, which assigned them the stigmatising label of ‘Chernobyl peoples’. In the words of the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexijevič (2017), Nobel Prize laureate in Literature and author of *The Chernobyl Prayer (Chronicle of the Future)*, “the name of my tiny country, lost in Europe, about which the world knew hardly anything until then, rang out in all languages; it turned into a devilish Chernobyl laboratory” (p. 34). The panopticon of horrific myths and legends about the contaminated territory, sick, ‘infected’ people, children being born disfigured, eliminated to a minimum the perception of the given space as a place in which the ordinary life of ordinary people took place. People who in an instant lost not

only their homes, their lives, their health, but also their identity. Alexijevič (2017) commented on this eloquently by saying “this book is not about Chernobyl, but about the world of Chernobyl. Thousands of pages have already been written about the event itself and hundreds of thousands of metres of film have been shot. I, however, am concerned with what I would term as forgotten history, the erased traces of our existence on earth and in time. I write and collect the mundanity of feelings, thoughts, words. I try to capture the everyday of the soul. The life of ordinary people on an ordinary day. Only here everything is extraordinary: both the circumstances and the people, what those circumstances forced them to be as they breathed life into a new earth. For them, Chernobyl is not a metaphor or a symbol; it is their home. How many times has art rehearsed the apocalypse, offered different technological versions of imagined worlds, but we now know for certain that life is far more fantastic.” (Alexijevič, 2017, pp. 33-34)

Alexijevič (2017) ends her book with a chapter (“Instead of an epilogue”) that directly addresses the problematized, controversial topic of dark (extreme, nuclear) tourism. To quote the author: “...a Kiev travel agency offers tourist trips to Chernobyl... A route is prepared that starts in the dead city of Pripjat, tourists look around the abandoned multi-



**Figure 3: Between heaven and apocalypse - the abandoned Chernobyl power plant**  
Source: Pixabay (n.d.a)

storey houses with blackened linen on the balconies and baby carriages. A former police station, a hospital and the town's party committee. Here, slogans from communist times are still preserved; even radiation doesn't want those. [...] The tour of the building of the Cover, or more simply - the sarcophagus, is considered to be the highlight, or as the advertisement says, the "icing on the cake". [...] When you come back, you will have something to tell your friends about. It's not like a trip to the Canary Islands or Miami... The

excursion ends with a photo session at the memorial in honour of the fallen heroes of Chernobyl, to give you the feeling that you are participating in history. (Alexijević, 2017, p. 309)

Thus, a strong travel motivation is not to get acquainted with another culture, history, typical architecture, culinary traditions, customs, and customs or specifics of the local cultural region. The interest and effort to understand the culture and cultural traditions, the way of life is mostly absent. In the case of Chernobyl, this

statement is more alarming. Travel agencies are creating a specific incentive programme as is typical for experiential tourism. In short, thanatotourists demand real and authentic experiences, not just symbolic ones.

### 3 Radioactive Hunters

Tourist interest in Chernobyl is heightened by the constant presence of radionuclides, which evoke a sense of danger and at the same time undermine the illusion of immortality. Each visitor can choose his or her own level of risk, with the



**Figure 4: A doll in one of the abandoned buildings of the Chernobyl zone - one of the most popular photo-objects**  
Source: Pixabay (n.d.b)

limits often determined by individual instincts of self-preservation. Tourists, often equipped with dosimeters, visit iconic sites such as the Ferris wheel or decayed baby doll cribs, (Figure 4) to create visually appealing photographs that are then shared on social media. This phenomenon underlines the question of ethics and morality. Young visitors, often referred to as *radioactive hunters*, risk their health in pursuit of authentic experiences and visual material that will appeal to their audience on digital platforms. Social media and media content are significantly influencing the demand

for Chernobyl. Following the airing of the miniseries *Chernobyl* (Maizin et al., 2019), the number of visitors to the travel agency CHERNOBYLX.com increased from approximately 70,000 in 2018 to 100,000 in 2019 (Paulík, 2019). At the same time, however, illegal exploration of the area by so-called *stalkers* persists. These individuals infiltrate closed zones, sleep in abandoned buildings, and visit places off official tourist routes, exposing themselves and the surrounding area to additional risks.

There is also a controversial aspect of the phenomenon of dark tourism

in Chernobyl. Social media platforms such as Chernobyl exclusion zone by stalker's eyes or Chernobyl Memes (@hbochernobyl.memes) are emerging, which thematise the area in an inappropriate or even mocking way. Moreover, visits to sites associated with the nuclear disaster are often accompanied by the creation of insensitive visual content, including half-naked photographs, wedding photo shoots (Figure 2) or other staged moments that lack respect for the victims of the tragedy.

As a result of the ongoing military

conflict in Ukraine, tourism to the Chernobyl area is severely restricted, although not completely halted. In the context of dark (in the broad sense of the word) and war tourism (in the narrower sense of the word), a specific phenomenon of so-called *frontline tourism* can also be observed, where visitors purposefully seek out locations in close proximity to battle lines, thus trying to get as close as possible to the reality of the armed conflict. This type of dark tourism, offered by around ten companies, is a marginal but growing phenomenon. Dmytro Nykyforov, co-founder of the War Tours travel agency, does not consider the organisation of these tours unethical; on the contrary, he stresses that it is not primarily about the financial aspect, but about the preservation of historical memory (Pravda, 2024). The phenomenon of undying interest in extreme forms of experiential tourism, known as dark tourism, was aptly commented on by Svetlana Alexijevič: “nuclear tourism is in great demand, especially among Western tourists. People travel for new and powerful experiences, which are already scarce in the world; the world is already too populated and accessible. Living is already boring. Something eternal is desired...” (Alexijevič, 2017, p. 310).

As Gabašová (2014) points out, dark tourism leads to the ‘entertaining’ of death, its anaesthetisation and pornographisation, resulting in a culture of death characterised by indifference and resistance to the media’s thematisation of death. This trend also underlines the need to

raise questions of ethics, authenticity and moral responsibility in the context of tourism, which widens the gap between enjoyment and respect for historical and human tragedies.

### Conclusion

Dark tourism reflects contemporary man’s ambivalent attitude towards death – while death is personally avoided, it is often present and commodified in the media and marketing. The fascination with death has historical roots, but today the motivation for seeking it out is changing. Media images of death undermine the ability to see it as something precious or sacred. Pragmatic approaches to death, tragedy and suffering, including travel to encounter death, are pushing the boundaries of ethics and morality. Death becomes a marketing tool, while the search for violence and the exploitation of tragedies for profit are pathologies that need to be highlighted. Visits to ‘dark places’ should be accompanied by respect for life and death. Dark tourism can encourage a reassessment of moral values and provide an opportunity for dialogue about contemporary society. Critical reflection and ethical responsibility are essential in shaping attitudes towards ‘dark’ places, where it is necessary to respect the spirit of remembrance and respect for life and death, while at the same time being aware of the banality of the evil and horror that can hide behind the mechanisms of power, ideology or indifference. This phenomenon can be a means of self-knowledge and spiritual transformation for individuals, thus taking on a significance beyond the mere fascination with death.

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