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Paper

The Ethics and Aesthetics of the Imperial Sublime: Digital Afterlives of Abkhazia's Ruination

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Abstract In this paper, I examine how imperial motifs endure across eras and genres, and how these aesthetic forms mediate memories of mass violence. Taking a viral YouTube video of the abandoned mining town of Akarmara in the partially recognized state of Abkhazia (*de jure* considered part of Georgia) as my point of departure, I trace a diachronic constellation of aesthetic strategies that frame landscapes of conquest as sites of sublime transcendence. Turning to Walter Benjamin's dialectical wish image and Gilles Deleuze's crystalline narration, I ask whether the formal properties of this video—its suspension of linear time, its aestheticized decay, its displacement of human presence by landscape—risk transforming violent histories into depoliticized dream-images, while also asking where they might carry traces that enable more engaged forms of witnessing. The paper moves through three overlapping "zones": the imperial sublime of Pushkin's Caucasus poetry, which cleared discursive space for Tsarist Russia's conquest of the region through its fusion of nature and spiritual exaltation; the contemporary remediation of Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker* into a transnational subculture of urban exploration; and the contemporary digital circulation of post-conflict images as commodified spectacle. Across these zones, I argue that paying critical attention to form is important for understanding how imperial aesthetics shape memory and remembrance.

Résumé Dans cet article, j'examine comment les motifs impériaux persistent à travers les époques et les genres, et comment ces formes esthétiques médiatisent les mémoires de violences de masse. Prenant comme point de départ une vidéo virale YouTube de la ville minière abandonnée d'Akarmara, située dans l'État à reconnaissance limitée d'Abkhazie (considérée *de jure* comme faisant partie de la Géorgie), je retrace une constellation diachronique de stratégies esthétiques qui positionnent les paysages de conquête comme des lieux de transcendance sublime. En m'appuyant sur le concept d'image dialectique chez Walter Benjamin et sur celui de narration cristalline chez Gilles Deleuze, je demande si les propriétés formelles de tels médias—leur suspension du temps linéaire, leur esthétisation de la décrépitude, leur déplacement de la présence humaine par le paysage—risquent de transformer les histoires violentes en images-rêves dépolitisées, ou si elles pourraient porter des traces permettant des formes de témoignage plus éthiquement engagées. L'article traverse trois « zones » qui se chevauchent : le sublime impérial de la poésie caucasienne de Pouchkine, qui a ouvert un espace discursif pour la conquête de la région par la Russie tsariste à travers sa fusion de la nature et de l'exaltation spirituelle ; la remédiation contemporaine du film *Stalker* de Tarkovski de 1979 en une sous-culture transnationale d'exploration urbaine ; et la circulation numérique contemporaine des ruines comme spectacle marchandisé. À travers ces zones, je soutiens qu'une attention critique à la forme est importante pour comprendre comment l'esthétique impériale façonne la mémoire et la commémoration.

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Keywords Cultural memory; Caucasus; digital media; Pushkin; ethics; Walter Benjamin; Russian imperialism

Introduction

A black screen fades out and a river valley appears, surrounded by hills covered in lush green forests. The camera's point-of-view perspective moves to the rhythm of the camera operator's footsteps, which are headed towards a brick tunnel on an overgrown railway track. The video then fades to a shot of a different tunnel, and a flashlight blinds an emaciated cow. The bell around her neck briefly breaks the ambient background music as she makes way for the visitor to pass. After a minute of wading through thick vegetation, the town of Akarmara appears, rising from the forests, the flat roofs of nearly all its buildings covered in vegetation. Close-ups show trees escaping from doors and windows, next to walls whose bricks seem to be falling out in irregular patterns. As part of the video's virtual audience, I am unsure of whether I am a witness or a spectator to the abandoned and overgrown panel apartment blocks as they accumulate more detail the longer the camera rolls.

"An epically magnificent cemetery of civilization," reads one of the top comments of *Road to Akarmara, Ghost town in Abkhazia* (Ninurta 2016), whose view count on YouTube stands at 32 million ten years after its original posting in 2016.[1] Other comments under the video—writing primarily in English and Russian—express their awe at nature's reclamation of man-made structures, and praise Ninurta, the video's creator, as their favorite 'stalker,' in a direct reference to Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 existential sci-fi movie of the same name. Thanking Ninurta for leading them through the 'Zone,' users are referring to *Stalker*'s landscape *Zona*, as well as to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, the perimeter placed around the land contaminated by the 1986 nuclear disaster. These 'stalkers' have grown into a decentralized network of 'urban explorers' documenting often-remote places of ruin and abandonment across the former Soviet Union.[2]

[1] YouTube comments are cited with handles omitted due to the ambiguous public character of 'public' online boards (see also Markham 2012).
[2] 'Urban exploration' is the term used for the practice of investigating and documenting abandoned, ruined, or off-limits man-made spaces (High and Lewis 2007). See Pavesi (2025) for an overview of the 'stalkerism' subculture of urban exploration in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

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Figure 1: video still (Ninurta 2026, 03:07)

The video's brief caption recounts a distilled history of the mining town of Akarmara. It notes that Akarmara is part of the city of Tkvarcheli/Tkvarchal, that it was built by German war prisoners after World War II, during the Stalin era, and that eventually, the town was destroyed by the violence of the 1992–1993 Abkhaz-Georgian war (see also Dale 1997, Peinhopf 2021). Tkvarcheli/Tkvarchal, then an Abkhaz-held city, was besieged for an entire year by Georgian forces.[3] After its power plant was destroyed, residents of the city suffered a prolonged crisis due to a lack of basic resources such as food, water and electricity. Ninurta further mentions seven current residents and writes of the town's 'depopulation' following the war, which concluded—according to the caption—with the Georgian population having "left the country". The conclusion of Ninurta's description reads that "Akarmara has become an attractive place for tourists and fans of post-apocalypse" (Ninurta 2016). But where the surreal sight of apartment blocks rising from the forest might indeed be reminiscent of fictional post-apocalyptic cinema, critical voices express in the comments that "left the country" is the wrong term to use concerning the forced nature of the exile that concluded the active war between Abkhaz separatists and the Georgian military.[4] Referring to Abkhazia as a 'country' is equally

[3] Both the Abkhaz and Georgian-language place names are used throughout this essay, "that signifies the contested name of these places, without privileging either" (Toal 2020, xviii).
[4] The war led to 250,000 Georgians being forcibly displaced from Abkhazia, nearly all of whom remain in exile to this day. The exception is the 45,000-60,000 Georgians who informally returned to the Gali region, whose legal status and living conditions are marked by precaritization, discrimination and legal limbos (Aydemir-Kundakci 2022). I use 'forced displacement' rather than 'ethnic cleansing' due to the way in which the latter term contributes to a discourse of 'sanitization,' and "engaging with the term 'ethnic cleansing' […] normalises and contributes to justifying primordialist understandings of 'our' ethnos and 'purity' which needs to be 'cleansed' from 'their danger" (Tabaković 2024, 23). This is, however, not a negation of the ethnicized character of the conflict.

contested. Its recognition as a sovereign state was recognized first by Russia in 2008, after the Russo-Georgian war, and the Russian Federation has kept a military presence in the de facto republic since the 1990s war.[5]

Besides Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) and post-apocalyptic fiction, the video's form is reminiscent of an older aesthetic tradition; less explicit in narrative, but telling in its evocations. The video shows a continuous interchanging of ruination and mountainous landscapes, images of a fast-flowing river, deep gorges and steep hills interspersed with buildings that are saturated with traces of past violence. This juxtaposing of military violence (or traces thereof) with 'wild' nature echoes motifs from 19th century Russian romantic literature, which represented the Caucasus simultaneously as a sublime natural landscape inhabited by supposedly dangerous and uncivilized peoples. As poets including and after Alexander Pushkin "presented Caucasian peaks not as the home of poetry alone but as the wider realm of 'higher things,' where a traveler experiences spiritual uplift and a sensation of escape from the vanity of the world" (Layton 1994, 48), poetic narratives of spiritual communion with nature were mobilized to obscure military conquest while simultaneously legitimizing it as part of an imperial civilizing mission (53).

This paper is a reflection on the ways aesthetic conventions travel across political formations, across media and across time. This reflection includes a larger inquiry into how audiences are implicated as spectators and/or witnesses, in line with Rothberg's (2019) 'implicated subject,' i.e. someone who is neither the perpetrator nor the victim yet is still positioned within the structures that perpetuate violence. My inquiry into this wider constellation of imperial violence and aestheticization starts with Tsarist Russia's literary imaginations of the Caucasus and extends to 'stalker' urban explorers. I conclude by looking at how certain 'traces' in the video shape the ongoing ethical process in which relations between people, places and their histories continue to be recomposed through the everyday (inter)actions of viewing and spectatorship. After Veena Das's (2007) work on the event "as a historical construct that constitutes a rupture" but becomes increasingly complex in its ongoing relation to the everyday (223), I understand ethics not as a value statement of images being morally 'good' or 'bad,' but through the forms of relation they make possible, and their affective resonances.

I argue that the aestheticization of landscapes with violent histories runs the risk of depoliticizing them through mnemonic reconfiguration. Through a (both implicit and explicit) remediation of aesthetic conventions, *Road to Akarmara* presents a war-ruined landscape as detached from time and consumed as an aesthetic object, thereby

[5] As of 2026, the UN members besides Russia that recognize an independent Abkhazia are Syria, Venezuela and Nicaragua, after Nauru withdrew its recognition in 2026. The Russian state has remained ambiguous in its claims of military support in these forced displacements, and there is a dominant (albeit contested) interpretation where a Pyrrhic Abkhaz independence is "Russian neo-imperialism, with the Abkhaz as mere pawns" (Toal 2020, 101). During two months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with walking guides in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, this interpretation came up without exception whenever guides were asked about the de facto republics of the country.

mediating the memory and remembrance of war.[6] Despite its brief acknowledgment of the town's history in the caption, the video's detachment is shaped through its combination of visual language, pop-culture and disaster allusions, combined with its 'ghost town' framing. However, rather than claiming that Ninurta is an agent of empire or assuming that urban exploration in the former Soviet Union is a conscious reproduction of imperial ideology, this paper is concerned with form and the conditions under which form circulates, more than with authorial intention.

Guiding this paper's analysis of imperial aesthetics and their role as mnemonic mediators is Walter Benjamin's (2002) concept of the dialectical image as a happening in which fragments of the past and the present suddenly come together; it is not a matter of the past illuminating the present, or vice versa, as if it were a unidirectional dynamic. It is, rather, "that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (462). Respectful of Benjamin's non-linear historiographical approach, I consider imperial aesthetics here to be a constellation in which older forms become legible in new ways through new media forms. Within that constellation I distinguish, following Buck-Morss (1989), the wish image—the collective dream-form in which utopian desire is stored in the outdated and the discarded— from the dialectical image, i.e. the moment in which that dream is interrupted and its contradictions become legible.

Evoking an Imperial Sublime

"How much work, money and human energy was invested into this Republic by the entire Soviet Union," ("*Kak mnogo truda, deneg i chelovecheskoi energii bylo vlozheno v etu respubliku vsem Sovetskim Soyuzom*").[7] Amongst the Russian-language users engaging with the video, certain comments express a specific indignation. The comment brings to mind the opening lines of Bruce Grant's 2009 *The Captive and the Gift*, an archival and ethnographic study of the afterlives of the imperial Russian literary trope of the 'good' prisoner in the Caucasus. Grant shares a snippet of correspondence with a Ukrainian friend he met while studying in Moscow, who wrote: "We gave them so much, and yet, everywhere you looked, you could see what they had done with what we gave them. It was clear how things turned once they decided that we were no longer needed," (2009, ix) coincidentally or not, also talking about Abkhazia.

It is unclear whether Grant's friend's "we" is referring to the same "entire Soviet Union" the commenter mentioned. While the dissolution of the Soviet Union has made shared sentiments of "we" across the union's expanse increasingly harder to find, both comments do relate, in part, to a longer lineage of interrelations between what is today the Russian Federation, and the lands to its south which its imperial predecessor annexed. This relationship of imperial continuity still remained prominent within what

[6] In this instance one that has been relegated to a 'frozen' status, where active fighting has ceased but peace agreements have not been signed.
[7] All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

used to be Soviet borders, where the union's ideology proved unable to make a full and radical break from the Tsarist Empire it replaced with regard to the regions and peoples its tsars conquered.[8] Under Soviet *korenizatsiia* ('indigenization' after the Slavic root *koren'* meaning 'root') in 1923, with Stalin as the People's Commissar of Nationalities, a state logic was formulated in which "the Soviet state would maximally support those "forms" of nationhood that did not conflict with a unitary central state. This meant a commitment to support the following four national forms: national territories, national languages, national elites, and national cultures" (Martin 2001b, 10–11). This ethnoterritorial logic eventually made Abkhazia an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, on the premise that each ethnic group belongs to a specific land, a logic that collided with the linguistic and cultural diversity of the actual population (and led to intense campaigns of forced deportations across the entire region, see also Yemelianova and Broers 2020). The violence that broke out shortly after Georgia became an independent nation-state in 1991 came forth—at least partially—out of struggles for linguistic rights and cultural preservation (see also Toal 2020, 131).

Complicating this imperial hierarchy is that the Caucasus has historically occupied a contradictory position in European and Russian racial imagination. In the 18th century, the people living in the region simultaneously provided Blumenbach with inspiration for his infamous term 'Caucasian' while, in the Russian Empire during the same era, "the Caucasus had to play the role of the secondary domestic Orient and acquired additional demonized features by being coded by the Russians as Islamic and Asiatic" (Tlostanova 2008, 101). In the decades after Blumenbach wrote his racial theory, Tsar Alexander II's armies engaged in violent deportation campaigns of populations of the northwestern Caucasus. These deportations of Circassian and Abkhaz peoples towards the Ottoman Empire happened from the city of Sochi as well as from various cities along the Abkhaz coast and were part of a military campaign that would eventually culminate in the 1864 Circassian genocide (King 2010; Richmond 2013; Jaimoukha 2001).[9]

From the north, imperial expansion had already started back in the 18th century. Under Catherine the Great ethnographers had mapped out, taxonomized, and mapped out the mountainous region, which contemporary historians argue was to pay lip service to Tsarist desires (King 2010; Suny 1994) and resembled—rather than truthful empirical description—a "cabinet of curiosities" (Grant 2009, 61). These historical-fictional hybrids found their poetic counterpart in the budding tradition of romantic Russian poetry. Alexander Pushkin wrote his 1821 poem *Prisoner of the Caucasus* after spending time

[8] See Tlostanova 2014 and Mamedov 2008 on the racialization of Caucasians during imperial expansion. See also Reeves 2014, who, in a monograph on Central Asia's Ferghana Valley, outlines the Soviet idea of '*konfliktogennost*,' i.e. "that ethnic heterogeneity is inherently destabilizing and that the normative order is the (mono-)national state" and that "the presence of minority populations outside their titular homeland are deemed inherently destabilizing" (91).
[9] Due to lack of official Kremlin recognition—official narratives emphasize the 'difficult process of the integration of the Caucasus into the Russian Empire,' or as voluntary migration—Circassian activists mobilizing for transitional justice tend to be widely marginalized by state authorities (Catic 2015). Into the 20th century, deportations in the region would continue under Stalin, see Martin 2001a.

exiled in Pyatigorsk, at the northern foot of the Caucasus mountain range.[10] The poem is cited as the literary work that put the Caucasus on the map of the Russian public imagination, and scholars go so far as to state that it 'invented' the (literary) Caucasus (Hokanson 1994; Layton 1994; Ram 2010). With it, Pushkin launched a literary tradition that inspired an 'armchair tourism' fascination among the wider public (Layton 1994).

In Pushkin's poem—and in those of the poets who came after him who rendered Abkhazia, Kabarda and Dagestan as interchangeable "mountain country" (Layton 1994, 47)—the 'sublime' mountain peaks, vast gorges, perilous rivers, and 'tribalist natives' function as affective and aesthetic vehicles for the self-fashioning of the Russian iteration of a Byronic, poetic self, only able to spread his wings after the indigenous populations' 'bloodthirstiness' was confronted (Hokanson 1994). Through an encounter with an 'other' that is either hostile to or a love interest of the poem's heroic, suffering self, Pushkin's prisoner finds his identity while in captivity.[11] According to Grant (2009), this particular Caucasus prisoner trope "generate[s] a symbolic economy of belonging in the Caucasus. [Authors] entered a physical place, found a mythic place, and generated a narrative place" (94).

"Allegorical expression itself enters the world with a strange interlacing of nature and history," writes Benjamin (1998, 175). This "strange interlacing," mediated through poetry, creates its own kind of ahistorical landscape, made to carry utopian promises of spiritual transcendence that nonetheless "had first to be cleared by the tsar's armies" (Ram 2010, 9). The literary Caucasus' poetic "terror and grandeur" served not as a return to primal nature but as a springboard for Tsarist Russia to assert its colonial dominance and territorial claims (Ram and Shatirishvili 2004, 10). Harsha Ram (2010) has called this appeal the 'imperial sublime,' made possible through the material and symbolic work of imperial expansion, where the language of spiritual uplift and sublime experience transformed an imperial geography into a space of spiritual and aesthetic escape. In Pushkin's invocations of the Caucasus the landscape becomes phantasmagoric as a place both terrifying and exalting, an object of both fascination and abjection, and the historical violence is explained as part of a sublime communion with nature. The poem's epilogue in particular lures the reader into an explicit and unambiguous imperial register:

> "And I will celebrate that glorious hour,
> When, having felt the bloody attack,

[10] See also Hoisington and Arndt 1988. Pyatigorsk is a resort town that is generally considered to be somewhat to the north of the Caucasus mountains rather than inside of the region. It was the furthest Pushkin had been south of Moscow (Layton 1994, Lotman 2015).

[11] A trope Edward Said (2003) would later theorize in his seminal Orientalism, albeit as the specific Orientalist conceptions the Russian Empire projected onto its conquered lands in the south, rather than the east-west directionality Said is usually read through. Tlostanova (2008) calls this "secondary Orientalism," and writes "Orientalist constructs in this case [of Russia's double relationship to western Europe as well as to the Caucasus] turn out not only more complex but also built on the principle of double mirror reflections, on the copying of western orientalism with a slight deviation and necessarily, with a carefully hidden, often unconscious feeling that Russia itself is a form of a mystic and mythic Orient for the West" (1).

Upon the indignant Caucasus
Our double-headed eagle raised itself"

(Pushkin 2005)[12]

I do not mean to place the imperial load of Pushkin's poem and Ninurta's video on a single line, nor do I want to present either form as somehow unambiguously imperial. Pushkin had a troubled relationship with imperial authorities, having been sent into forced exile more than once, and his writings are far from devoid of criticism of the empire. Even the poem's epilogue, while explicitly celebratory of expansionist violence, in between the lines laments how "contact between the empire and the Other leads to the destruction of [the Other's] way of life" (Lyles 2014, 235). Despite these lamentations, the video finds the road to sublime transcendence already cleared, and the Other seemingly overtaken by forest and ruins. Contrary to Pushkin's verses, *Road to Akarmara*'s narrative does not feature local inhabitants as objects of danger.
The video makes its appeal to a sublime awe by offering spectators a gaze from above, inspiring contemplation by dwelling on images of fog-covered mountains, seen from afar. Mary-Louise Pratt (2008) had described a similar relationship between literary perspectives and the mediation of power relations in *Imperial Eyes*, calling it the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" (197).[13] To be sure, these stylistic conventions are not exclusively the domain of Russian imperialism, but echo rather a wider pan-European romantic poetic era, which is also from where they travelled to the Russian Empire. These conventions eventually found their way into the video, in which spiritual transcendence and awe are made possible *because* it is shown as unpeopled and *because* it allows the viewer such a monarch view.

I cannot speak to Ninurta's intentions, but the possibility of the practice of stalkerist urban exploring being a way for younger generations to make sense of the debris that surrounds them and that has accumulated since the Soviet Union's dissolution might not be far-fetched. However, this does not change the dynamic of aesthetic forms that were historically entangled with empire recontextualizing and circulating through other media and political formations, where they can nonetheless reproduce relations between viewer and landscape that enable an imperial gaze. Many 'explorers'—a Youtube search of 'Akarmara' offers dozens of results with videos similar to Ninurta's—have made their way to Tkvarchal/Tkvarcheli, to the point that in the years following the video's publication, residents posted signs on doors informing tourists not to "barge into the house." that "People live [here]." And to "Move along…" ("*v dom ne lezt'! liudi zhivut. Prokhodim mimo…*") (Földi and Salat 2019).

[12] Roger Clarke translation. See Lyles (2014) for a re-reading of Pushkin's epilogue.
[13] Pratt writes, about British colonial-era travel literature: "in the end, the act of discovery itself, for which all the untold lives were sacrificed and miseries endured, consisted of what in European culture counts as a purely passive experience – that of seeing" (198).

Otherworldly zones

"*Life after humans. This series on Abkhazia is truly magical. It's on a poetic level that is breathtakingly sublime. Although there is no one there, I can imagine millions of people wanting to visit it. I hope they don't. Love the animals roaming around. This is a fantastic channel and I really appreciate the effort it has taken to produce it. Many thanks."* (one of the top comments on Ninurta's video)

Why does the video evoke for many of its viewers an affective impression of a static sanctuary out of our shared time, as evidenced by this comment under the video? Deleuze (1989) in *Cinema II* calls an image 'crystalline' when the past and present can no longer be distinguished from one another, so that what is perceived is time itself rather than action unfolding within it. *Road to Akarmara* has no plot in the conventional sense, is absent of any kind of chronological cause-effect structure, and is historically framed solely in a brief, semi-historical description. Rather than resolution, the audience is witness to *duration*.

In muted colors, the video goes on to show seemingly abandoned cars parked next to dilapidated buildings and treads deeper into the town. Ninurta comes across a case containing a *kislorodnyi ingalator* (an oxygen inhalator) and shows it to the camera before entering one of the apartments. In a unit still filled with the scattered belongings of the former residents, a yellow floral curtain lets in daylight while Ninurta rummages through shelves. We learn little of whose belongings we are looking at, the only clue being a leather-bound book titled *Abkhazskii nartskii epos*, Abkhaz Nart Sagas, the pre-Christian and pre-Islamic cosmologies of peoples in the North Caucasus, an old lifestyle magazine with the title *Vyzhit' v mire*, ("surviving in the world"), and a few analog photographs.[14] From there, we are shown a box of *Dimedrol*, a generic antihistamine, and several vials of *Analgin*, an over-the-counter painkiller. The absence of the apartment's inhabitants is augmented by the ambient soundscape sounding increasingly ominous, layered with the sound of rivers, rain and chirping birds.

Here, duration consists of a "set of non-localizable connections," with "elements borrowed from interacting planes" (Deleuze 1989, 122). The objects, while deeply personal, have no remembering subject in the narrative to anchor them. Marked by a disconnect between time and action, the person shooting the video wanders in unknown and heterogeneous time, where histories interact and resonate in the present (or fail to do so). Without a formal plot or dialogue, understanding such a visualization of place through imperial ruination becomes "a circuit where the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible" (Deleuze 1989, 127).[15] The actual here is the objective reality of Abkhazia's post-war ruins, sparsely inhabited by people who live through a conflict that never really ended. The virtual is the presented absence, the abandoned homes and possessions of

[14] On the Nart Sagas, see Colarusso 2002.
[15] Following Stoler (2008), I use imperial ruination to denote the active and ongoing process of imperial formations, both in their remains as in their (contested) reconfigurations.

neighbors who left or were exiled, whom the video never identifies, and the affects these enable for the audience. Their past is present in the apartment, which the viewer gets to place as a self-contained time, out of our time. Although, as I discuss below, some viewers in the comments are skeptical about whether certain objects in the video are truly abandoned.

Where its echoes of Pushkin are implicit, the visual language of *Road to Akarmara* refers more explicitly to Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*. Both follow a slow movement through overgrown ruins, with no conventional plot, and both use duration to make the landscape feel suspended outside ordinary time. Released in the late Soviet period, Andrei Tarkovsky's film portrays a world that contains a mysterious and alien 'zone,' that reputedly appeared after a meteor crashed into the landscape. Deemed unsafe and guarded by the military, the Zone is rumored to contain a room at its center that grants a person their deepest, subconscious wishes. Stalker, the movie's protagonist, guides two unnamed others, known simply as 'Professor' and 'Writer' through this zone, and they make their way through the unpredictable, shifting landscape. As an audience we are witness to their contemplations and debates on ungraspability and faith, on human will and power, and of the tense and contradictory interactions between the three characters, each engaged in their own existential debates. Despite reaching the room after an anxious trek through the overgrown and ruined landscape Writer and Professor ultimately hesitate to enter, fearful of confronting the true nature of their desires.

The spiritual sublime in Tarkovsky's film is one that has a fundamentally different relationship to power and memory than the imperial sublimes of 19th-century poetry. *Stalker*'s landscape remains opaque and quasi-sacred and attempts at conquering it end up being futile. The Zone is not meant to be an object of mastery; it mocks those who assume power over it. According to Deleuze (1989), what Tarkovsky succeeds in is "fixing time [in its signs] perceptible by the senses" (43). The film's protagonists anxiously explore the Zone's shifting terrain, unsafe to dwell in for too long; an affect evoked through the use of duration as a narrative device. Where Pushkin's verse appealed to motifs of danger tied to military heroism, the danger in *Stalker* lies in confronting human unknowability: "an area of unaccommodated traces, the residue of time" (Radović 2014, 118). *Stalker*'s sublime is less grandiose, and the landscape of the Zone, even if devoid of humans, is not a *terra nullius* for new civilizational ideals to settle in but one that, as per the character *Stalker*: "demands respect [of its visitors], otherwise she punishes (*ona karaet*)" Tarkovsky 1979, 56:17).

Both *Road to Akarmara* and *Stalker* organize movement through landscape as an encounter with a space whose temporal and ontological status is uncertain and haunting. The Zone in *Stalker* has a militarily imposed order not to enter and has no (human) inhabitants. Any other entity living inside its borders goes beyond what human beings could wish to grasp. Framing Akarmara as a 'ghost town,' however, means making the unsettling inference that emptiness is the most compelling way of (re)presenting the town. Akarmara has fewer restrictions on curious visitors coming to document its ruination. Far from abandoned, Abkhazia receives over a million tourists each year,

predominantly citizens of the Russian Federation coming to enjoy the affordable Black Sea beaches (Bachelet et. al 2025). All the while, families displaced from the region face significant restrictions on returning to their former homes.[16]

The video's visual language might be reminiscent of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, but in its stance it does quite the opposite of the film by portraying a landscape destroyed by war as if it were a dystopian sci-fi setting. Where the Zone demands respect from those who enter it, the video offers its ruins as something to be looked at, without asking viewers to reckon with the real-world stakes of what they are witnessing. As a spectator of the video, one becomes implicated in the invisibilizing of both the current population of the breakaway region, and of the Georgian population still in exile—echoing, perhaps, the problematic Soviet-era idea of relating demographic heterogeneity (rather than political economy) to conflict (Reeves 2014).

Itself a constellation of cultural forms, *Stalker* has become part of a template for a transnational subculture of urban explorers known to trespass into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and other abandoned sites in former Soviet republics (Pavesi 2025). These 'stalkers' borrow directly from Tarkovsky's cinematic universe and blend it with imperial detritus and digital aesthetics into a new visual (and virtual) imaginary. Through this remediation, a self-referential constellation emerges and evolves (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is likewise the title of a video game series, set in a fictionalized Chernobyl). This meta-universe is one in which 'Zone,' Chernobyl, Soviet ruination and the figure of the stalker repeatedly encounter and reshape one another. Consequential upon the self-referentiality of these new virtual forms, the narrative of Tarkovsky's film undermines itself in how it (re)circulates. A language takes shape in which virtual layers in *Road to Akarmara* can float as haunting fragments that perhaps evoke memory and loss, but in "a chronic non-chronological time which produces movements necessarily 'abnormal,' essentially 'false'" (Deleuze 1989, 129). Its crystalline indeterminacy points to possible pasts, could potentially be generative, but by not explicitly committing to any, it "stands for its object, replaces it, both creates and erases it" (126).

To English-speaking audiences, British photographer Darmon Richter is one of the better-known 'stalkers.' Richter rose to a modest level of fame after publishing his 2020 travelogue-cum-photography book *Chernobyl: A Stalkers' Guide*, in which the power plant's exploded reactor four stands in for the room in Tarkovsky's film. On venturing into Pripyat without a guide, Richter writes: "The Zone possesses a humbling power that's hard to describe. It was never quite like this with the tour bus—an umbilical cord that kept us attached to the modern world" (Richter 2020, 120). Richter's uttered desire to get away from 'modernity' raises the question of which time it is, then, that he is searching for. Literary critic Miles Orvell (2023) praises Richter as a flesh-and-blood manifestation of Tarkovsky's spiritual pilgrim, as being on a search for absolute 'truths,' with "a drive to see it all, to get as close to the reality of the Chernobyl experience as possible" (10).

[16] See Aydemir-Kundakci 2022, Toria et al. 2019, Brun and Fabos 2015

What is important here is the word *experience*, meaning not simply observation but affective proximity through what Richter seems to frame as temporal abstraction. Orvell suspects this is a wish to get away from commercialized mass culture, although Richter's many invocations of sci-fi films throughout his book might reveal a desire for something that is more 'out of time' or in 'suspended time.'

Erika Robb (2009), who engages in anthropologies of dark tourism, warns that the combination of profit-and-attention-driven practices with "something as unintelligible as genocide" (54)—or, in this case, ethnicized violence and one of the worst nuclear disasters in history—is an unlikely avenue towards an engaged consciousness of violent events, as it might "render it aesthetically pleasing or even beautiful" (55). In a more unequivocally critical analysis, historians High and Lewis (2007), in the context of urban abandonment following North American deindustrialization, make the analogy between this kind of 'exploration' and a form of colonial conquest, of "stories of discovery and possession" (50). Richter, despite the counter-commercial ends he is cited for, leads paid tours ('Ex Utopia') through the worlds he produces in his travelogue and thus has a financial incentive to present them through an entertainment lens, rather than solely through spiritual exaltation. By further playing on the 'failed utopia' narrative, the region's material remnants are presented as proof of an aberrant, dead-end path that does not challenge modernity as much as it implicitly confirms liberal 'end of history' tropes. Notwithstanding Richter's quest for 'the heart' of the Zone or Ninurta's 'ghost towns,' their narratives, and their commodification, add to their depoliticization. A commodity form rewards affective spectacle over context, where the ruined landscapes are mourned, while the reasons for its ruination are "almost never questioned" (High and Lewis 2007, 60).[17]

Traces in the zone

A question that remains suspended above all of this is what kind of witnessing one engages in when watching, liking or sharing a haunting 'ghost town' video. Can one take on the memory of another as if it were a new limb, as Alison Landsberg (2004) suggests, or does it add to a compounding of the erasures that enabled the town's ruination? Could *Road to Akarmara* carry potential to bring about empathy with audiences? Or might empathy remain a "wish feeling," to use Sara Ahmed's (2004) words, "in which subjects 'feel' something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels" (30). To feel someone's pain as if it were one's own is, according to Ahmed, a displacement of the pain of another to the self. Comments expressing sadness, grief, or shock inadvertently lean towards a more generalized "how terrible for

[17] See High and Lewis (2007): "the term "explorer" is freighted with historical and ideological baggage. It is associated with European voyages of discovery and the possession of the "Orient," "Darkest Africa," and the "New World" (43).

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them," without questioning who *they* are and in which context this violence took place, only to remain suspended in depoliticized lamentation.

Contrary to Ahmed, Veena Das articulates an ethics through a desired anthropological commitment, as a "devotion to the world" to allow "oneself to be marked by the pain of the other" through sustained relations (2020, 16). In between these two seemingly opposite positions, what I have tried to foreground is that neither of these applies as such to a viewer with no obligations towards what the image represents. The form of relation the video makes possible between viewer and landscape might not be one marked by cultivated proximity in Das' sense, but there is, however, a sustained relationship of evolving imperial spectatorship. My own ethical commitment towards these continuities is to refuse the notion of absolute erasure in landscapes marked by historical violences. Traces will always be left behind within the "social field of forgetting, repression and marginalization" (Napolitano 2015, 48), and, as Ann Rigney argues, it is "a lack of unanimity that keeps memory alive" (2008, 346). Buried amongst the slew of comments under the video, a user points out the bell on the cow's neck from the beginning of the video and another writes that a close look reveals laundry hanging from windows. Rather than marked by an other's pain, pointing out these details is then part of an ethics of spectatorship that might bring the landscape back into shared time.

Another user comments: "passports, photos, clothes, entire belongings left. Like they just vanished." This remark is answered by another user's noticing of "the closeup of the medicine [Analgin]" which showed "the [expiration] date of 2016," inferring that the footage was taken somewhere else, or otherwise staged. The box with vials of medicine shows the address of an *otkrytoe aksionernoe obshchestvo* in *Respublika Belarus*, an open joint-stock company (a corporate structure absent from the Soviet economic system) in the present-day republic of Belarus, and an expiration year that suggests the batch was made well after the 1992-1993 war. As a viewer, it is impossible to tell whether the objects belong to a current resident, were somehow present in the apartment, shot elsewhere, or brought along by the video's creator. It does point certain users to address the crucial reality that Akarmara is not, as the video's title suggests, a 'ghost town,' but the home of approximately thirty-five—and not the seven mentioned in the video's caption—residents, who express having an uncomfortable relationship with the recent influx of 'stalkers' and post-apocalypse tourists (Arshba 2024, Földi and Salat 2019). And while its coal mining industry never revived, more recent crypto mining operations briefly made the news in 2023, as it speaks to unequal resource allocation and rumors of corruption (JAMnews 2023).

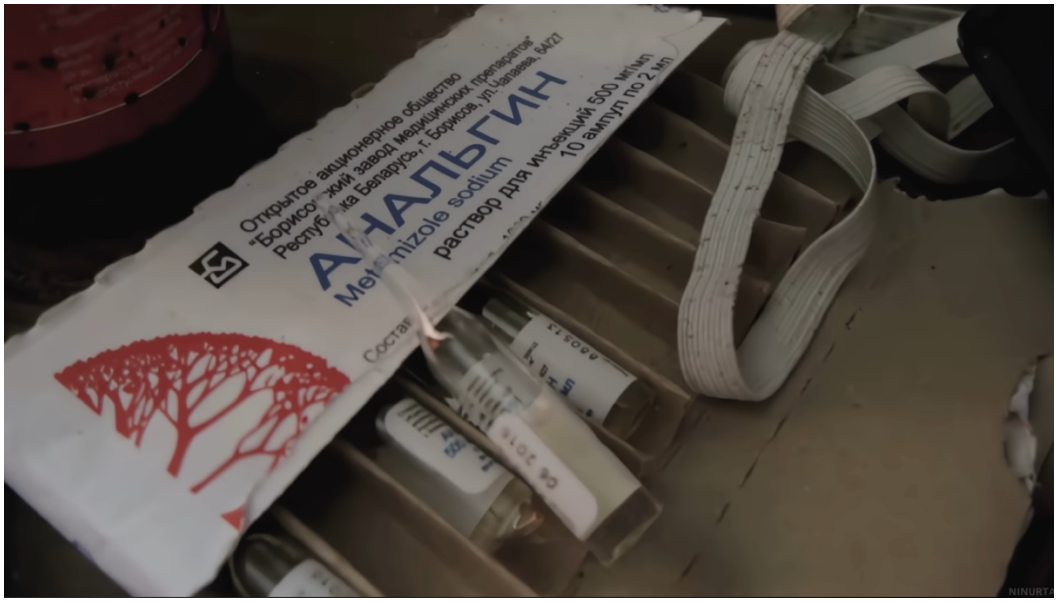


Figure 2: Video still, Analgin vials (Ninurta 2026, 05:31)

I do not wish to reduce the Zone's appeal for subsequent stalker subcultures to an aesthetic fascination with ruins, as entering abandoned and contaminated spaces might be part of a sense-making of the material remnants of a future that also, through its detritus, remains suspended in time. However, if real-world places are portrayed and mediatized as if located in a non-time it becomes hard to feel a sense of political urgency or to consider how violent events from the past might reverberate in the present. Ninurta's presentation of Akarmara's ruins as mysterious and alien separates them from the shared present of ongoing ruination, as if they belong solely to a finished past or—in its mobilization of post-apocalyptic affect—point to a hypothetical future removing the connection of that future to Akarmara's past. The video travels through circuits of digital media and freezes historical fragments into a detached spectatorship, a 'claim to eternity' (Buck-Morss 1989, 157) in which the audience often remains unaware of or indifferent to its aesthetic falsifying. The aestheticized, commodified, wish image becomes an end in itself as reified melancholy, circumventing the critical, political awareness Benjamin associated with recognizing the dialectical image.

Walter Benjamin's wish image often appears as rubble infused with hope: wish images might appear allegorically, in art, as utopian desires stored away in the detritus of modernity where "new forms "cited" the old ones out of context" (Buck-Morss 1989, 108). The wish image of Abkhazia's ghost towns seen through the lens of self-proclaimed stalkers functions as a mnemonic vehicle where historical desires appear to return, albeit in a distorted (and aestheticized) version. 'Stalkers' such as Richter and Ninurta do seem to cite the past out of context and reframe it as dream-images of another time. Benjamin (2019) writes that "[o]ur image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (254). Read through Benjamin's (2002) wish image, the video's redemption

becomes a search for historical 'fullness' to replace the fragmentation that has migrated onto images of the discarded and the ruined. In this case, a utopian promise of the Soviet past flashes up in its ruined, decayed form in the now.

I have made the comparison between imperial poetry, experimental Soviet cinema and present-day urban exploration content creators not to cite a straight genealogy but have connected them in an effort to consider the different relationships between form and witness in regards to landscapes marked by history. My earlier framing—questioning whether consuming stalkerist videos fosters political awareness or compounds historical erasure—is perhaps, then, too binary a question to ask. The video's ambivalent oscillation between erasure through aestheticization and preservation through documentation might not be so easily captured in an either/or moral choice. *Road to Akarmara*'s 'plotless,' ambient 'scape' narrates through fragments and traces that could, perhaps, rupture the dream-image and expose the gap between aestheticized abandonment and ongoing political realities. Yet at the same time, it would be reductive to consider these traces as by definition redemptive as their narration is, still, marked by the prevalence and staying power of hegemonic (imperial) narratives. If a story about loss is told and received without acknowledging what has been lost, and why, what ends up mattering is simply the fact that it *is* lost.

The afterlives of imperial aesthetics in the digital age raise new questions about memory and implicated spectatorship (Rothberg 2019) and about the specific ways in which this commodified 'stalkerism' shapes remembrance of a 'frozen' conflict that never really ended. When media carries traces and evidence that can both be used to enact as well as negate erasure, perhaps it is more a matter of inquiring into how earlier aesthetic frameworks are digitally remediated, commodified, and in turn shape the visibility of past violences in landscapes such as Akarmara's. Documentation can be truthful at the level of individual images in the sense that the town is indeed destroyed. At the same time, at the level of the whole, a 'ghost town' framing produces a misleading historical imaginary, and the meaning of images is constituted along with acts of interpretation in the comments rather than through visual form alone.

Claiming a viewer as either a witness or a spectator would then be too reductive. Even a seemingly detached viewer becomes implicated in, or by, these histories of violence. And a politically uncommitted documentation is still fully political if it lets a viewer stand in a site of ethnicized violence without having to reckon with it. When such images are treated as timeless, the 'wish' for historical redemption through an affective engagement with ruins transforms places such as Akarmara into a playground for a detached melancholia. At worst the digital ecology of production and consumption of such videos becomes a widespread enactment of negation, and so-called 'ghost towns' become monuments of imperial amnesia. Residual traces, however, might counter the fantasy of post-apocalypse by turning the wish image into a dialectical one, and might mean that depoliticized awe need not be the end of the 'Road to Akarmara.'

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