Consuming dark sites via street art: Murals at Chernobyl

INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of tourists visiting places associated with death, tragedy, disaster or danger (Lennon & Foley, 1999). Although visits to such places can overlap with, for example, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, or urban exploration (Bingham, 2020; Kennell & Powell, 2020; Light, 2017; Dobraszczyk, 2010), they are frequently considered from the perspective of dark tourism. The concept of dark tourism has been used to suggest a unity between a diverse set of tourism practices and products, and this has most frequently been explained using a gradient of increasing 'darkness' as an explanatory device. Recently, dark tourism research has begun to interrogate dark tourism experiences and to move away from definitional and exploratory studies to develop deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of dark tourists (Sun & Lv, 2021; Xie & Sun, 2018).

Despite rarely posing objective danger to tourists, dark destinations have immense power to disturb, or in some way provoke, those who encounter them. Stone (2019, p. 9) has explained these 'contemporary deathscapes' as 'locales of calamity and difficult heritage'. They may trigger strong emotional reactions, and even cause moral panics (Biran, Hyde, & Johnston, 2013). Dark tourism sites are often purposefully constructed and presented to provoke such reactions (Martini & Buda, 2020). They also encourage visitors to experience appropriate responses to underlying tragedies, or create more emotionally intense tourist experiences around an otherwise dry offer (Lacanienta et al., 2020). Despite this, research into the existential aspects of dark tourism is a relatively new development, as the field evolves from necessary early descriptive and exploratory approaches, along with the 'emotional turn' (Zheng et al., 2020). Emotional responses in dark destinations prompted by experiences of mortality salience (Prayag, Buda, & Jordan, 2020) or ontological insecurity (Biran et al., 2013), phenomena that cause individuals to reflect on their relationship to their own death, can be particularly profound and are an emerging area of dark tourism research, to which this study aims to contribute.

One such destination is the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine. Restricted access to the area was established following the environmental catastrophe caused by the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on 26th April 1986. The cause of the explosion was human error; incompetent management and dated equipment contributed to self-destruction. The latent danger and destructive power of nuclear technology was subsequently made accessible to the public. Perceived as a place of industrial death and disaster, the Zone was opened for tourism in 2011, actively conveying broader political narratives whilst the utopian ideals of the former Soviet Union are exposed within its ruins (Stone, 2003).

The Zone is an example of dissonant heritage, occupying an 'indefinable' place in Ukrainian culture for its history, ambitious socialist architectural projects and the significance of the natural environment of the Polesie region (Banaszkiewitz, Kruczek, & Duda, 2017). It is viewed as a site of remembrance, and as a post-apocalyptic landscape. Chernobyl's associations with a post-apocalyptic, dystopian world provide resources for dark tourism development (Pimentel Biscaia, & Marques, 2020). The notion of dystopia is used to describe political systems, both fictional as in Orwell's (1953) *1984*, or in reality, such as the Soviet system, which imploded not long after the Chernobyl disaster. Due to radiation, the planned-utopian town of Pripyat in which it was then a privilege to live and work, was transformed

into a dystopian nightmare, leaving national legacies of psychological trauma and radiophobia. People's lives were forever changed over-night, leaving them in states of uncertainty, grief and fear of the unknown.

Despite the prevalent negative connotations associated with the Zone, Chernobyl is not a mere petrified ruin (Dobraszczyk, 2010). Rather, it is a place from which we can learn (Yankovska & Hannam, 2014); it is a delightful, mysterious, sublime place full of life (Farkic, 2020); it is a secret world which "might challenge existing certainties and provide liberating alternatives" (Dobraszczyk, 2010, p. 372). Light (2017) argues that dark sites are a type of cultural 'text' which visitors 'read' and interpret, depending on their positionalities, knowledge and experience, arguing that structural categorisations of dark tourism supply (Stone, 2006) do not help to explain the interpretative dialectic that takes place when these sites are encountered by tourists. The power of many 'dark sites' lies in their "locational authenticity" which may provoke empathy and anxiety in tourists, along with other emotions and existential states. Because of its entanglements with fear, death and mortality, dark tourism can act as a lens for a deeper interrogation and interpretation of human existence: meanings, values and purpose of life. To this end, visiting dark sites may prompt interrogations of the human condition; such experiences are claimed to be transformative, profound, and existentially meaningful.

It is not rare for art to be created in this abandoned environment to which access is strictly controlled (Ross, 2016). The murals in the Zone emerged as a response to nuclear catastrophe; today they represent an inseparable part of its aftermath. As a visual artistic form, murals contain both political and existential messages, and act as *lieux de mémoire* for communal identities (Nora, 1997). They serve as a reminder of the world's biggest nuclear catastrophe, and as an illustration of existential anxieties that dominate the modern world. They are contributions of commissioned artists as well as illegal visitors, the so called 'stalkers', who visit the Zone to spray-paint the walls. Now part of a tourist attraction, they are interpreted by guides, and consumed and photographed by tourists. Owing to digitisation, their visibility is further increased through visual media, including in the photos of tourists, who share them online. Although attention has been paid to murals in heritage, political and cultural studies, their role within tourism remains underexplored (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017).

This paper aims to explore tourists' experiences through their embodied encounters with murals in the Zone. We start by exploring the ways in which dark sites are interpreted, followed by a critical discussion on existential experiences in dark tourism research. This is then followed by an exploration of the intersections of street art and dark tourism. Answering the call for the utilisation of participative visual methods in tourism research (Winter & Adu-Ampong, 2021), we lay out the episodes of a methodological journey to explore the existential aspects of dark tourism experiences in the Zone. In doing so, we place an emphasis on the feelings, states and emotions the place of disaster may stir up within tourists, thus contributing to this emerging field of enquiry.

Existential dimensions of the tourism experience

The explorations of the early existentialists, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger or Sartre, probed the depths of human existence, of which anxiety is the underlying condition. Their fundamental concern was the construction of meaning. Sociologists, too, have long explored anxiety as a social condition. While Beck (1992) pointed to the invisible hazards threatening humanity, Giddens (1991) spoke of ontological security as a stable mental state with an absence of anxieties. Following these propositions, Bauman (2000) acknowledged anxiety as a condition of contemporary society living in a 'time of fears'. Jackson and Everts (2010, p. 2793) defined it as "a physically embodied state involving mental and emotional distress, combined with a more diffuse sense of uneasiness about a coming event".

More recently, tourism researchers have turned to studying the ways in which meanings are constructed through tourism practices (Pratt, Tolkach, & Kirilova, 2019; Sharma & Rickly, 2019: Kirilova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Focusing on the concepts of existential anxiety and existential authenticity, scholars such as Kirilova and Lehto (2015) have explored agency within lived experiences in the process of the construction of authenticity. Existential anxiety has been often linked to the broader idea of alienation (Kirilova, 2019), which has been primarily discussed through the alienation/authenticity dialectic (Wang, 1999; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Vidon & Rickly, 2018). Recognising the lack of studies into alienation within tourism, Xue et al (2014) highlighted the importance of existential authenticity, extending Wang's (1999) seminal work and more substantially exploring interactions between tourists' alienated status and their achievement of authenticity through engaging in tourism practices. Xue et al (2014, p. 195) called for more robust analysis "of the role played by tourism in the reduction of social tensions and personal unhappiness associated with alienation in modern society". Likewise, Vidon and Rickly's (2018) study on tourist anxiety as an embodied alienation, which saw both these qualities essential to tourist motivation and experience, called for their explorations in relation to wellbeing, the psychological state so critical in the contemporary, alienated world.

Despite the supply side playing an important role in designing and developing the dark tourism product, scholarship has largely ignored the existential experiences of tourists, which may contribute to our understanding of the ways in which dark places are constructed and consumed. The lived experiences of tourists who engage with places of death, conflict or disaster, have been hitherto explored in a limited number of studies (Podoshen, Andrzejewski, Venkatesh, & Wallin, 2015; Sharma & Rickly, 2019; Buda, d'Hauteserre, & Johnston, 2014; Farkic, 2020). To better understand the human experience and to better meet tourists' needs, Podoshen et al. (2015) called for more robust phenomenological explorations of dark tourism. Thus far, scholars have theoretically explored ideas of death, mortality, ontological security and anxiety as existential dimensions of the tourism experience, yet few studies have provided empirical evidence for such theorisations. Pratt et al. (2019) suggest that the liminal nature of tourism experiences may offer tourists a freedom and license to interpret and relate to death in ways that would not be possible in their more quotidian experiences at home. This may mark tourist experiences of death and the phenomenon of dark tourism as something different than the encounter with death through other leisure practices, such as watching films (Rieger et al., 2015) or visiting haunted houses (Goldstein, Grider, & Thomas, 2007)

Martini and Buda (2020) draw on affect theory to conceptualise dark tourists' experiences and to suggest ways in which the atmosphere of dark tourism places can stimulate affective

reactions that tourists attune to and negotiate through their emotional responses. The 'turn to affect' (Wetherell, 2015) in the social sciences and in tourism studies (Tucker & Shelton, 2018), and in particular in social psychology, is concerned with attempts to understand embodied experience of emotion. Social and cultural studies of emotions have found the concept of affect to be both useful and powerful in explaining the 'ongoing flow…of forming and changing body-scapes, qualia (subjective states), and actions' (Wetherell, 2015, p.147) associated with our emotional engagement with social phenomena. However, the emphasis on intersubjectivity and the embodied immediacy of experiences in affect theory meant that it was not seen as central to this research, which undertook to carry out a more existential and reflective consideration of a dark tourism site and its setting. The following section introduces a unique aspect of the setting of the Zone, the presence of dramatic murals which form a part of the tourist experience of the site.

Intersections of street art and dark tourism

Street art is rooted in urban culture and is a descendent of the graffiti revolution. This 'counter art' began as an underground, alternative, appropriation of public surfaces, becoming a major part of the visual spaces of cities around the world. Historically, it has been viewed as a form of vandalism and a criminal act which is often pseudonymised to conceal, but also to construct, artists' identities. Sometimes it is referred to as 'extramuros' (Irvine, 2012) and 'secondary art' (Manco, 2002), denoting art forms produced outside the walls of conventional art institutions. While there are different forms of wall paintings, from ancient cave paintings to contemporary artwork in public spaces, this paper is concerned with murals as a street art-form.

Murals are works of art on any vertical architectural surface, which are integrated into their surrounding environment (Heidenry, 2014). Painting murals is a way of commemorating and communicating aspects of the culture and history of a place. Their importance comes from how they rejuvenate landscapes, convey messages or express political opinions, specific to the place and community in which they are produced. Many murals are political as, through their art, the artists give voice to the disempowered, oppressed and the silenced (Howze, 2008). For this reason, acts of such expression have been termed 'political muralism' (Campos, 2016). While the messages that the images aim to convey may be political, some go beyond it: they may be nostalgic, disturbing, inspirational, or existentially charged and strongly felt by their observers.

Murals have been explored from historical, cultural, anthropological, geographical, as well as marketing and management perspectives. Anthropology, however, has been a dominant lens through which murals have been studied (Coffey, 2012; Vargas, López, & Martin, 2009), because of their relationships with communities and places, and the complex messages that they can communicate in this regard. Although murals often act as tourist attractions, they remain under-researched in this context. This was addressed by Skinner and Jolliffe (2017) who claim that the primary purpose of mural production is not tourism consumption, rather, they are public expressions of political opinion, often depicting imaginations of a better world, becoming visual instruments for overcoming nostalgia.

Some murals, as cultural artefacts interpreting ‘dark events’ or ‘dark pasts’, have morphed into dark tourism attractions. For their locational attractiveness, political messages and photogenic attributes, they draw tourists to gaze upon them. Some of the most well-known images can be observed in the cities of Belfast and Berlin. The Berlin wall, notable for its absence, rather than presence, has been commodified largely due to its disappearing. Vandalism, bad weather, and the ravages of time have led to its gradual decay (Saunders, 2009). In the past, it acted as a physical and ideological border between West and East Germany, however, after its fall in 1989, the remaining parts were turned into the East Side Gallery as an international memorial of freedom.

Similarly, Belfast is awash with the most famous political murals in Europe (Rapp & Rohmberg, 2012). The most famous stretch of the wall lies between the nationalist Falls road and the unionist Shankill road, running through a working-class area of Belfast. The remnants of the Troubles have been touristified. The area boasts many political murals which depict the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland, appealing to both the local community and tourists (Rolston, 2004). Tourists can take a tour through west Belfast or guided walking tours around the peace lines of the Troubles. Local guides interpret and politicise these places by talking about tragedies and presenting them through personal narratives while tour attendees are engaged in ‘gazing-in-walking’ practices (Skinner, 2016).

Murals are therefore place-specific (Irvine, 2012). Their importance as street art comes from their role in everyday visual culture, situated in places through which they are imagined, re-imagined, created and re-created. They are embedded in landscapes “unlike other spaces of heritage consumption as museums or shrines” (Korstanje, 2020, p. 220). The aesthetisation of place through murals occurs not only within cities, but also takes place beyond inhabited settlements. They are produced in abandoned, remote or decayed places too, in which street artists find their inspiration. Murals in such contexts have the power to blend into otherwise marginal places, to unveil their historical significance, and to rediscover the meanings, histories, or identities of past and contemporary local communities. The meanings of murals, however, are neither transparent nor expected (DuBois, 1997, p. 8).

Chernobyl is a place off limits, largely abandoned and deserted. Often referred to as a living museum, it is dotted with relics from the past and various forms of artwork, such as stained glass, mosaics and various symbols of the communist era, which comprise part of its authentic setting. They together make the place which is “lived out in visceral movements and mobile activities of the people who use them” (Heywood & Sandywell, 2017, p. 162). The murals in the Zone are arguably political. They are unique records of the interior life in the Zone, and together they make up the memory of and give immediacy to the disaster. At the same time, they mystify and clarify the mood surrounding the event; they portray presences and absences in collective memory and identity. In this vein, their “philosophy is rooted in the desire and demand to remember, or, more poignantly, to not forget” (Heidenry, 2014, p. 126). Conceiving of the murals as visual artistic displays which form part of the material culture of the Zone, we now turn to their empirical exploration.

Methodological approach

Tourism researchers have increasingly shifted their attention to explorations of existential aspects of the tourism experience (Farkic 2020; Pratt, et al., 2019; Sharma & Rickly, 2019). What is common for these studies is their grounding within existential phenomenology, a philosophical area initially conceptualised by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These early existentialists were primarily concerned with mortality, authenticity and the meaning of life and death, trying to understand the dimensions of the existential human condition, such as anxieties or fears. What is distinct for this philosophical area is the attention to the lived experience of the individual and their own values, rather than exploring social norms, whilst nonetheless taking into account the relationality between them. At the heart of phenomenology is cognition, explained as "dynamic, multi-dimensional, affective, embodied, and intricately connected with our engagement with the world" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.191). Phenomenological studies are normally idiographic, using detailed analyses of single cases, offering insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon. In aiming to explore in detail how an embodied, situated person makes sense of their personal and social worlds, we therefore embraced an existentialist phenomenological approach to studying the tourist experience of the Zone.

Akin to self-reflective autoethnographic (Ellis, 2004) or hermeneutic phenomenological studies (Smith et al, 2009), which foreground the researcher's subjectivity and connect the personal with the social, this study gives voice to a single participant. De Jong (2017, p. 131) suggests that "attention to one participant's experience omits any possibility of suggesting a uniformity of experience. Yet, this is the very reason why intense focus on one participant is of interest". This argument suggests that it is just as important to explore one person's perspective in depth, as it is to do a representative study, which allows for the breaking down of normative understandings of tourism phenomena. Smith and Osborn (2003) claim that phenomenological studies should be valued according to their meaningfulness, rather than their number of participants. To this end, we make the case for learning from the experiences of an individual (Smith, 2004). In exploring the ways in which the Zone was encountered and experienced, insights that were gained from the perspective of a single participant can tell us how researchers' attention could be shifted to more nuanced ways of understanding not only tourist sites and past events, but also the existential human condition.

Fieldwork for this study was carried out by the first author and a single participant, William. They possessed previous knowledge of the Zone, and shared interests in post-communist countries and their histories, industrial heritage and abandoned places. William's narrative serves as the focus of this paper. The author did not bracket themself out of the research context, however; they were an active agent in the process of collection and interpretation of both visual and textual material and the production of knowledge with the participant. While interrogations of a single participant may be criticised, the depth and richness of the empirical data that were elicited from this approach should also be taken into account as credible and deeply insightful.

Method

This study adopts photo elicitation as a visual method hitherto not utilised within dark tourism research. To date, common qualitative techniques within dark tourism research have been observations and interviews (Podoshen et al., 2015), although the Delphi method (Kennell & Powell, 2020), visual analysis (Goatcher & Brunsden, 2011) and interpretive

phenomenological analysis (Farkic, 2020), have more recently helped to diversify this empirical base. Although visual methodologies are not new, they have gained increased recognition within tourism scholarship (Michelini, King, & Tung, 2021; Winter and Adu-Ampong, 2021). Matteucci (2013) proposed that photo elicitation "should be adopted by researchers as a fun, creative and multi-sensory alternative to conventional approaches" (p. 196). To date however, photo elicitation has mostly focused on the interpretation of still photographs and other visual material, marginalising more creative and participatory methods which can bring richer insights into the experience of those who produce them (Rakić & Chambers, 2010). This prompted us to follow Winter and Adu-Ampong's (2021) call, and include of participant-generated data in the interview process, giving attention to photographs of the murals that the participant either created or selected. Instead of being a research subject, the participant themselves generated visual data while exerting greater control over the research process (Winter & Adu-Ampong, 2021).

In the context of Chernobyl, Goatcher and Brundsen's (2011) study is thus far one of only two to interpret tourist photographs, providing a cultural sociological analysis of the cultural conditions under which these images emerged. The authors claim that capturing the experience of horror through photographs alone remains futile, as "they may be limiting means of seeing and representing" (p. 132). However, the photographs aim to depict more than the visual surface of a scene, while their unphotographable frames carry the weight of disaster, and remain beyond our grasp. Sun and Lv (2021) take an embodiment perspective on the visual aspects of the experience of the Zone, using a mixture of tourist-posted photos and those encountered by tourists on tour operators' websites. They used the concept of mind-body synchronisation to analyse the bidirectional relationships between the experience of darkness as an aesthetic quality and feelings of darkness, primarily focusing on the implications of this embodied visual perspective for managing and marketing dark destinations.

In this research, we aim to extend these studies through exploring the power of murals as artistic expressions to provoke our thinking beyond what is seen and probe deeper into what is experienced and imagined. The interpretation of murals is therefore not considered through an evaluation of their aesthetic merits, but instead with their observer's 'emotional and affective investment' and reflection on the experiences constructed through their lived interactions with them (Graburn, 1976, p. 4). Mirroring the interpretation of subjective tourism experiences, the interpretation of art is unique in its own right; what is felt and perceived cannot be replicated and the emotion that it stirs up is highly individualised.

Situating the participant

Tourists arrive to the Zone with their own sets of historicities, idiosyncrasies and situated knowledge, which affect their perceptions of the different ways The Zone is presented (or not) to them. Here, we seek to illustrate the uniqueness of William's position to decode the nuances and complexities of visual representations of a disaster and its aftermath. In avoiding normative judgements about Zone experiences, we create space for unpacking the context-specific ways in which the Zone was consumed and interpreted – mobilising William's idiosyncrasies to construct knowledge.

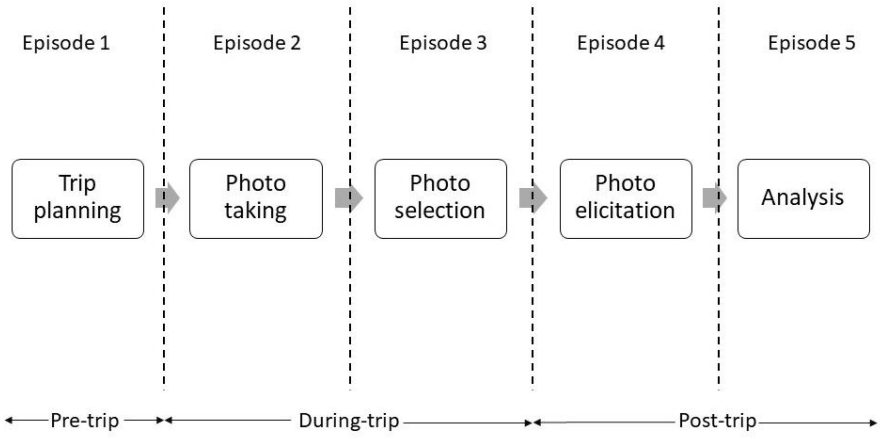
William is a British middle-class male, currently residing in a small town near Oxford, UK. At the time of the research William held a degree in music and was in his late twenties. While his formal education had little in common with his fascination for world history, William learns about and often travels to better understand historical sites and events. While he had not previously visited Chernobyl, his curiosity for the historical aspects of the disaster prompted him to purchase the journey to Ukraine. The first author, who had known William for a number of years, joined him in this endeavour.

William's journey to Ukraine primarily focused on visiting the Zone. Although travelling together with the first author, William engaged with the site in his own, unique, introvert way, whilst processing information through his own habitus. Not revealing much during the visit, it was difficult to interpret how he experienced the multiple aspects, layers, representations of and stories about the Zone. In summarising their impressions after the visit, however, both William and the researcher agreed that the murals within the Zone, although they were mentioned by guides, were not sufficiently represented in their narratives. Furthermore, their occasional presence and not always obvious visibility along the tourist route gave them a unique power to influence the visitor experience 'from the margins'. For this reason, they were neglected artistic artifacts to which, they felt, more attention should be paid.

Research episodes

Recognising the power and value of the Zone murals, William agreed to take part in photo elicitation that would focus specifically on visual material and its interpretation. Rich empirical material was collected in a systematic way over several research episodes, each of which involved specific methodological steps, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Research episodes and methods



The first episode involved planning the trip to Chernobyl. The researcher and the participant met in Kiev (arriving from Serbia and the UK) on 26th April 2019, which coincided with the day Ukraine commemorated the event on the 33rd anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster.

Undertaking a journey to arrive at the research site, they attuned into tourist roles. Equipped with DSLR cameras and smart phones, they crossed the border of the Zone with an organised tour in the early morning of 28th April.

The second episode involved their embodiment in the research setting. They followed an established route through the Zone led by a certified guide and took a series of photographs. They were "actively involved in the research process via the creation and interpretation of visual materials" (Rydzik, Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2013, p. 286). Of 215 photos that the participant took, 178 represented various aspects of the Zone, while 37 captured street art. The photographs alone had no power to reproduce or interpret the bodily experience of being inside the Zone. Rather, they were taken "to frame, visualise and bring to attention significant moments in the experience" (Dobraszczyk, 2010, p. 384), and were used in the research episode that follows.

The third episode occurred after the visit. The participant reviewed and arranged the photographs, searching for rhythm, connection and interrelatedness among them. He eventually sorted them in such way to be connected in content and an intuitive ordering in diptychs emerged. The murals were understood in relation to each other and to the broader context of the physical space in which they had been produced, as well as in relation to prior knowledge and the experience of the visit. Through this, a resonance was created, which allowed for meanings to emerge. The particular strength of this participatory visual approach is allowing the participant to take control over producing the photos, reflecting on and narrating their lived experience in relation to the visual material (Ridzyk et al., 2013). As Winter and Adu-Ampong (2021, p.3) opine, "we need to consider the photograph as a result of an inherently subjective process, representing the participant's own subjective understanding of the reality of the world." Through the selection of the photos representing the murals, the participant's experience was contextualised, re-enacted and articulated through a reflexive process.

Although visual material gathered by participants can be treated as secondary data (Matteucci, 2013), it is here treated as primary data as it was produced by the participant during his visit to the Zone. However, this data was supplemented by secondary data also generated by the participant, to increase the scope of the analysis. The participant sourced online photos of murals that he had been disappointed not to access in person, as they were off the tourist route (located at the highest floors of buildings in Pripyat or inside the nuclear power plant). These images, however, had a forceful influence on the participant's photo selection process and their interpretation, and were therefore among the five photos that were eventually included in the analysis.

The fourth episode was photo elicitation, which involved "inserting a photograph into a research interview" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). This involved the participant's selection and interpretation of the photos to the researcher during an unstructured, conversational interview after the trip (Rydzik, 2013). Richard and Lahman (2015) explain that photo elicitation in interviews provides additional insights into phenomena under investigation as it "offers a visual dimension to the unobservable thoughts, feelings, experiences, and understandings" (p. 4). Photographs served as a tool which allowed for familiarity between the site of the visual data collection, the participant and the researcher. The dialogue was stimulated by their

shared experience of the Zone, while the researcher was able to prompt the participant to share his knowledge, experiences, imaginations and emotions.

The fifth episode began with transcribing the interview, and the subsequent scrutinization of the verbatim text through thematic analysis. To analyse the data, we used double hermeneutics, a phenomenological approach which assumed "making sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). In other words, it was a dual interpretation process. Initially, William articulated his experiences and gave them meanings, after which the first author decoded these meanings to make sense of his meaning making (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The process of careful rereading of William's answers allowed them to code the data, group them together and subsequently import theory to provide context for their discussion in broader tourism contexts (Eatough & Smith, 2008). To increase the trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017) of the analysis, another author reviewed the photographs and the thematic analysis of the discussions from the photo-elicitation stage, to reduce bias as far as possible and to enhance the credibility of the approach. The themes eventually distilled in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts related mostly to existential being: death, anxiety, fear, distrust, panic or the impermanence of life.

What follows is the presentation of the encounter with the Chernobyl murals through the process of photo elicitation. Instead of presenting the findings in a standardised way, before we move on to their discussion, we aim to re-create the interview encounter as an event that unfolded in a specific way (Bissell, 2014). To achieve this, we lay out and shed light on parts of the conversation in which William indicated the strongest affective resonances and expressed concern for the human condition more broadly. The researcher did not impose the existentialist discussion on William during the interview. Rather, they prompted the conversation by asking neutral questions, for example, what impact a certain mural had on him. Such questions had powerful agency in prompting reflections on existential aspects of the human existence, bringing to the fore the participant's sensibilities, affectivities and frequent rhetorical questions, all of which saturated the space in between the interviewer and interviewee, and of which sense was to be made.

The unfolding of existential concerns through the process of photo elicitation

William immediately associated some of the selected murals (Figures 1 and 2) with *The Scream*, the iconic painting by Edvard Munch, in which the artist, through the expression of horror on the androgynous face, illustrated his feeling of existential anxiety.

Figure 1 Screaming woman (Source: Chernobyl-city.com)

To him, the inaudible scream depicted in Figure 1 strongly suggested the emotions of disarray, fear, angst, alienation and dread. He also placed emphasis on its physical context, which augmented the meaning of the murals. He argued that, taken out of this context, they would have not been imbued with the same meaning:

> Cartoonish images of terror not out of place in comic fiction for example, perhaps viewed without the reactor in the background they would have a different meaning. It reminds me of a figure from Picasso's Guernica. An image depicting the carpet bombing by Franco and his German allies of a city in Spain during the civil war. Though the artist was unlikely thinking of this particular image – the face is too detailed and realistic – it does convey a similar message of horror and chaos in a facial expression, perhaps the unbelieving nature of the event, almost photo-journalistic in that sense. This one depicts angst and horror, or perhaps grief of one of the firemen's wives…

William's association of the war-time scenes in *La Guernica* led him to bring the documentary film about the history of nuclear weapons, *The Bomb* (DeNooyer, 2015) into the discussion. He explained that its narratives on nuclear weapons, nuclear war, global (in)security, self-destruction and the silent presentation of drawings of scenes from Hiroshima engendered an eerie feeling of post-apocalyptic emptiness and meaninglessness. Looking through the images and reflecting on the guide's interpretation and his experience of being in the Zone, William then began to talk about the post-apocalyptic world and the danger of the destruction of humanity in a single nuclear blast. The other photo that he had chosen, depicting a shriek on a baby's face (Figure 2), William interpreted as nightmarish, alluding to the consequences of one such disaster:

> […] the wild, unfettered screaming one might see in a nightmare, perhaps the artist also wanted to talk about the impact on children as well.

Figure 2 Crying baby
(Photo: Hans Neleman; Source: Getty Images)

Reference to the impact on children reminded William of the spy-thriller movie set during the cold war confrontation between the USA and the USSR, *The Coldest Game* (Kośmicki, 2019) and the way it ended by quoting former US president Ronald Reagan making his promise: "Our moral imperative is to work with all our powers for that day when the children of the world grow up without the fear of nuclear war". Reflecting on this movie further led into wide-ranging discussions around espionage, surveillance, nuclear warfare, global insecurity, religious tensions, proxy wars, the race for power and dominance at any cost, which continue to underpin human lives and our collective moods. This prompted the researcher to bring fear into conversation, asking what he thought the humans dread the most. William responded:

> Fear of death, fear of no legacy, that's existential dread. […] It was Uranium from Congo that was used in the first atomic bomb made by the Americans whose existential dread was later in the form of communism. Maybe it's the death of 'civilization' and society people dread the most. For without it how else can we justify consuming everything and everyone before us without consequences or repercussions? While ignoring the fact of our own demise of course.

In William's answer, human death was linked to the decisions related to destruction of the other, as well as the potential self-destruction of humankind. He then reminisced about taking a short break on the road between the two power plants in the Zone, when the guide mentioned a mural located inside reactor five. It was the image of a man in the state of a shock, potentially a scientist, a doctor or even a power plant worker (Figure 3). It is the representation of the consequences of the Soviet's race for nuclear dominance which resulted in a large-scale disaster, prompting the shock and fear on the man's face.

Figure 3 Mural in the nuclear reactor 5 (Source: Street Art United States)

William found in his online search that the author of the original photograph, a Ukrainian photographer Igor Kostin, documented the disaster as it happened. He spent many years of his life documenting the clean-up activities, sacrificing his health and communicating the dangers of nuclear accidents to the world. To commemorate his efforts, one of his photographs was recreated in the mural by an Australian street artist, aiming to make viewers reflect on what was lost and the causes of this. William shared his take on this particular mural:

> The image of 'experimentation' and mad scientists, mutants are created both by accident and design. Though, obviously these impressions give way when the true meaning of the figures is known, though, it is still linked in so far as 'mad scientists' are concerned. This accident was, after all, created by the mad experiment that was Soviet Russia. An experiment that had a multitude of ill effects, this one in particular, Chernobyl, contributed majorly to the destruction of the 'lab' itself.

Figure 4 Child in play (Author: William)

The next photo (Figure 4) that William chose for discussion depicted a playing child. This particular photo was illustrative of all the murals representing carefree childhoods in Pripyat. William elaborated on this:

> Some images are about play and childhood and in turn – the exploration and discovery associated with that part of growth – it is a stage interrupted, caught in the moment of death, innocence lost, imprinted forever on the landscape because of the playful discovery and use of nuclear energy. They are both reminiscent of the shadows left behind by the victims of Hiroshima.

The researcher prompted a discussion on the impact that such images had on him. William explained that the murals enlivened the site, adding to the sense of both hauntedness and playfulness of the place. They depicted the disruption of people's carefree lives and the leisurely atmosphere in the town of Pripyat, before the disaster. They also provoked emotions and empathy in visitors, through which the place was better understood, particularly whilst observing the murals of children in the face of a nuclear explosion.

Figure 5 The unborn children (Author: William)

To further the discussion on the interruption of life, he then chose the photo (Figure 5) of a mural in the main square in Pripyat, which illustrated unborn children. He explained that the often-repressed consideration of death, or prevention of life, as an inevitable feature of human existence and its certain outcome, has been dreaded in most societies. Hence, a discussion on existential angst was then prompted by the researcher. In the attempt to explain that this is caused by the fear of death, William opined:

> I think that existential dread really boils down to an atheistic fear of death and people trying to find a place in the totally unnatural environment of the modern world. We have comfort, jobs, bills to pay, houses, politics all these things, basically irrelevant when you scratch below the surface. These are things we just made up to fill our time between birth and death, we call it society and we use it to elevate ourselves above nature.

To conclude the interview, the researcher asked for examples in support of this opinion. William retorted:

> We must go and force Christianity for example on the uncultured 'black race' because it'll make God happy. Just as we must strive for the atom, for ever higher and further things, regardless of the consequences. What is the half-life of ethnic cleansing? That's an interesting question. There is an existential crisis in everything when you look at it that way. An existential crisis, caused the scramble for Africa, caused the Second World War, caused the Soviet Union, caused five-year plans and quotas, caused the Cold War, caused an explosion at Chernobyl.

Murals, human existence and hope for the future

In viewing street art as art and (photos of) murals as text, we aimed to deconstruct the tourist encounter with and experience of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Following Tribe's (2008) proposition that "art extends our insights beyond the literal and more easily allows the symbolic, the impressionistic, the imaginative, the ironic and the surreal to challenge and extend our thinking" (p. 941), we contribute to interpretivist approaches to tourism research and provide novel readings of phenomena in question. In moving beyond the realms of representation we accessed non-representational aspects of the tourist encounter with murals, and probed into the embodied, sensual and emotional experiences of one tourist, William. Here, we discuss how the murals that the participant selected for discussion were given meanings through his own, unique interpretation of art, which provoked deep, existential thinking of meaningfulness and meaninglessness of human life.

Street art, like all art, has the immense power to provoke a myriad of feelings, emotions and states in the viewer. By way of example, in the iconic Munch's painting, with which the participant compared some murals, the world is depicted as unstable, threatening and potentially dangerous. The Zone murals stirred up similar feelings in the participant. The ones that made strongest impression on him depict sadness, grief, panic, anger or surprise in the face of nuclear explosion. To him, the murals of screaming people, their silhouettes, and unborn children, reflect our common existence, and at the same time act as a warning of impending dangers.

Through the encounter with the murals, William understood the Zone not only geographically, historically and culturally, but also existentially. The idea of existential authenticity (Wang, 1999) assists us in understanding how William thinks that conforming to the cultural and social norms is not a way to live life. Staging lives and adopting values that are not true to our existential being may have catastrophic consequences for individuals, society and humanity. Inspired by murals, William also questioned the authenticity of our living as serving the system, by paying bills and meeting deadlines, the routines in which society is clogged up. Here, the existentialist element of avoidance is obvious; rather than confronting the realities of existence, people often choose to distract themselves from them, which results in inauthenticity (Canavan, 2019). Furthermore, analysing murals which depict people trembling with anxiety due to high levels of radioactivity, existential dread was brought up. Rooted in a "practical consciousness of the meaningfulness of our day-to-day actions" (Giddens, 1991, p. 36), ontological security and utopian life were jeopardised by threats from the technological advances of modernity. In the context of Chernobyl, the sense of meaningfulness of ordered social life was "threatened by the angst of disorder or chaos" (Stone & Sharpley, 2008 p. 581) whilst people's anxieties were the result of "a dystopian world/utopianism gone awry (Podoshen et al., 2015, p. 324).

Wars and atomic weapons, the themes William often brought into discussion, have long been a synecdoche for distrust of the modern world more generally. Furthermore, doubt and loss of

confidence were the emerging psychological states of the Soviet nation and the way they started to think and feel in the years post-disaster (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009). Its consequences were embodied in existential anxiety, disintegrated community, distrust in government, science or doctors, as well as fears of uncertainty. Through his interaction with the murals, William experienced a symbolic encounter with horror, pain and death. He referred to popular culture to explain how insecurities are part of our everyday lives. The Zone is not only surreal and reminiscent of the mysterious setting of the prophetic science fiction movie *The Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979), but also reminds visitors of our atomic reality, which could be at any time "yawning before humankind" (Hopkins, 1993, p. 97). The murals have the power to recreate the "intense confusion, anxiety, and even terror which are frequently experienced by individuals before signs of their own mortality" (Giddens, 1991, p. 160, cited in Stone & Sharpley, 2018, p. 583).

During the visit, death was approached from a safe distance, as part of a tourist group, and led by a guide. However, it was nonetheless possible "to confront the truth about the chaotic nature of life and certainty of death" (Kirilova et al., 2017, p. 13). From death being an abstract 'thing', William was able to become conscious of it and make sense of mortality, not only in relation to others as victims of this disaster, but also as part of human life (Sharma & Rickly, 2019). Whilst observing the photos of unborn or screaming children, he was able to reflect on notions of death and interrupted life, particularly in the context of "problems which society […] attempted to conceal from public consciousness" (Stone & Sharpley, 2008, p. 582). While facts are largely silenced in the Zone, fear of the threat of nuclear annihilation nonetheless remains present (Dobraszczyk, 2010). William explained that the 'playful exploration' of the country's nuclear potential poses a great threat to the ecosystems of which humans are part, directly playing on people's existential anxiety. He further explained the notion of 'atheistic fear from death' as an existential dread imposed on humans through the requirements of modern life.

In depicting panic and horror, the murals not only truthfully express collective feelings about the meaning of life and closeness of death during the Cold War, but also act as a warning for the present. As Edensor (2005, p. 15) proposed, they challenge "ideologically loaded versions of progress, embedded within cultures of consumption and industrial progress". Similarly, William opined that people are trying to find a place in the totally unnatural environment of the modern world. As he explained, "we have comfort, jobs, bills to pay, houses, politics all these things, basically irrelevant when you scratch below the surface", directly addressing the issue of existential authenticity. Humanity might therefore need to rethink our 'mission' on this planet and interrogate the meanings of life and the goals we want to achieve. Is it power, profit and dominance, or happiness, meaningfulness, and belongingness to the natural, as opposed to technologically advanced and digitalised, world?

Currently, we live in a time of crises – environmental, economic or health, which are all, essentially, existential crises. Resolving these requires the transformation of consciousness, which Sheldon (2019, p.2) suggested "creates more self-awareness, more self-inquiry into the purpose of life, living by a higher set of values, and making greater contributions to others". While freedom to live according to our own beliefs and values is something that many of us wish to attain, for some the idea of being responsible for their own actions may be harder to achieve. We live in an indifferent and regulated society and because of this we may wish to try to shelter ourselves from the responsibility of finding our own truths. Existential authenticity and personal transformation, however, require a sustained shifting of one's thinking, doing, believing, or sensing (Sheldon, 2019). We must rethink the meaning and purpose of our own existence, find the way to construct inherent values and meaning in life. Our inability to find any in a purposeless, meaningless or chaotic and irrational world may

lead us to absurdity. Do we want to live absurd, hyperreal, inauthentic, alienated life, or should we make an effort to create a better future for the humankind, in which 'the world will live as one'?

In moving beyond understanding the nuclear disaster through the interaction with murals, we argue that the murals of the Zone prompt us to respond to Heidegger's famous question: what does it mean to *be*? Whilst the murals represent a tragic disaster, they at the same time present depictions and imaginations of a better world (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017). We can not only learn about the conditions under which they emerged, but also use them to think existentially about the conditions under which we live in the present, and the future. They can transform us as tourists, and as humans, and help us redefine our vision of the *World* (by World we also mean *Being*) (Heidegger, 2010[1927]) across spatial and temporal horizons.

CONCLUSION

Through framings of Chernobyl as a dead or forbidden zone, dystopic, heterotopic or apocalyptic place, scholarship continues to explore its broader political narratives and contested past, as elements of a dark tourism product. In guided explorations of the Zone, tours with Geiger-Muller counters have become mainstream among tourists, however, we may come to understand that there is more a place like Chernobyl has to offer. Adding artistic depth to dark tourism debates, we shifted attention to the interplay between tourists and murals, and the ways in which they affect experiences of the Zone. In doing so, we trouble more normative conceptualisations of the interpretation of 'dark sites' and offer fertile ground for thinking about murals as a powerful resource that can attract, educate, transform, or even disturb tourists (Sather-Wagstaff, 2016).

Murals, through their 'silent narratives', can bring emotional tensions, political frictions and existential anxieties to the surface. They are silent and still, however, being afforded by the context, they have the power to impart strong messages for those who consume them. Through their activation or interpretation by guides, they come into being and not only render past events palpable, but also trigger tourists' understanding of the existential human condition. In recognising this, we showed how understanding the personal meanings and perceptions of murals can assist us to unpack existential dimensions of the human experience. To achieve this, we utilised interpretive, participatory visual methods, which offered a critical lens through which to interrogate the tourist experience, answering the call for innovative and unconventional approaches to studying dark tourism phenomena from existential phenomenological perspectives (Podoshen et al., 2015).

In the future, more substantial interrogations of diverse artforms may add depth and richness to dark tourism research. Visual art has the power to open new cognitive spaces, to trigger emotions, feelings and imaginations of the viewer. It is languageless, however it communicates strong and powerful messages. While this study aimed to intersect street art and dark tourism studies, tourism researchers may find interest in exploration of place through other artistic forms, as well as considering interpretations of experience through the visual culture framework.

Finally, in blurring the line between past, present and future, presence and absence, reality and science fiction, classical and alternative art, we showed how murals play on senses, emotions, imaginations and associations. They have the power to bring tourists closer to existential realities and make us question the universal conditions of humanity. Novel

understandings opened up new spaces to search for meanings, for thinking about our own existence, for questioning the ways in which we *are* in the timespace between the moment we arrive on this planet and the moment we depart from it. Art continually reminds us and asks questions. In this particular study, it prompted thinking on whether we are really capable of controlling the forces we unleash? This, however, leaves much room for our 'advanced' society to try and answer a very simple question: to what end?

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