Material Malfeasance: Trace Evidence of Violence in Three Image-Acts
By Susan Schuppli

In the immediate world, everything is to be discerned...with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisionist, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.
—James Rufus Agee

Materials generally register the imprint of violence through deformations of their structural composition, whether achieved through natural processes that can liquefy rock into lava and metamorphose limestone into marble, or unnatural acts of aggression that can pulverize concrete buildings into debris and riddle surfaces with ballistic scars. Photographic materials, by contrast, record the trace effects of violence through representations that reorganize the pictorial field. They may document the chromogenic forces of violence, have violence done to them through acts of image vandalism, or even "bruise the public eye" in their retinal viscerality, but rarely are they themselves subject to material transmutation as a consequence of such an encounter. This second-order of testimonial—violence once removed from its 'cherished' object—has none the less bestowed onto photography a legal role as a mechanism for truth-telling, which consistently supersedes the testimonials of other material witnesses.

Human eyewitness accounts are often perceived as too biased in their perspectives, rendering them unreliable. And infrastructure damage, to cite a typical example of materially-encoded violence, too fixed in its geographic locale, to enter into the juridical process as evidence of wrongdoing without some form of mediation. Granted, some photographs still require the intercession of the expert who is uniquely authorised to speak on their behalf, who can translate their image content to non-experts (recall Colin Powell's turn as art historian/image-analyst when testifying to the existence of WMDs before the UN Security Council in 2003). Yet these are arguably inadequate images whose representational status is ambiguous, resulting in anxiety about the nature of what kind of truth can be coaxed out of them.

The standing of the image as objectively congruent with a given reality on the ground holds within many contemporary discourses, even if it fails to convince the majority of photo theorists of its capacity to testify. My goal, here, is not to rehearse the contestation of photography's truth claims—a debate that is already fully crafted and mapped—but to reflect upon the provocations that modes of visual "witnessing" have raised for a series of contemporary image-practices. While I specifically eschew those practices that are self-identified as enacting the role of the "professional witness", which we have come to know through the phenomena of embedded journalism, I am interested in examining the shift from an image that merely records history to one that is itself an object of historical forces, capable of testifying on behalf of its own history to history. In particular, I would like to turn to three image-events that have been troubled by the evidentiary discourse around the limits of representation within conditions of violence.

ACT-ONE
Three days after the explosion and meltdown of Chernobyl's Nuclear Reactor Unit 4 on April 26 1986, Ukrainian filmmaker Vladimir Shevchenko was granted permission to fly over the site to document the decontamination efforts being carried out by workers (or liquidators, as they were called). What both surprised and perturbed the filmmaker were the small incandescent markings that mysteriously appeared upon the film when he developed his footage. Thinking initially that the film stock used had been defective, Shevchenko eventually realised that what
he had captured on film was the image and sound of radioactivity itself, as decaying particles moved through the exterior casing of the movie camera to remolecularise his film. When projected, a rapid series of tiny flares ignite the surface of the film. Sparking and crackling, they conjure a pyrotechnics of syncopated spectrality.

Although his documentary—a rather pedestrian one at that—transports us directly into the contaminated space of the disaster, its mediation allows us to remain at a safe and objective distance to it. However, the sudden distortion of its sound and image-flows, by the Geiger-like interference of radiation, displaces our initial confidence in its fixed representational status and installs a sense of dread that what we are witnessing on film is in fact real: an amorphous and evil contagion that continues to release its lethal discharges into the present and future yet-to-come. Such a disruption in the normative workings of the cinematic apparatus collapses the distinction between representation and the real, forcing a rethinking of the ontological nature of media matter as merely a fixed record of events that provides evidence of a moment captured in time (the mummy complex, as André Bazin famously suggested).

As an artefact exposed to radiation, capable of discharging its contaminates into the far distant future, Shevchenko’s documentary film should no longer be thought exclusively in terms of its representational status as an inert index pointing to an event that occurred outside of the picture-frame. It must now be understood as continuous with the event, which is itself subject to continuous deformation and change, given the extended life-span of radioactivity. While the damaged film sequence, inarchiving its immediate condition of contamination, provides trace evidence that can attest to that initial presence of radioactive particles, its chattering filmic matter speaks forcefully back at us, asserting its role as a material witness that can be called to face the tribunals of history. Shevchenko’s film, Chronicle of Difficult Weeks, became quite literally the most dangerous reel of footage in the world. It provided visual evidence of the massive scale of the disaster that directly implicated the Kremlin, as well as toxic material evidence capable of damaging all who came into contact with it.

**ACT-ONE, TAKE TWO**

In 2010 artists Jane and Louise Wilson travelled to the Ukraine where they shot a series of large-format photographs in abandoned sites throughout Pripyat, the atomic ghost town situated within lethal proximity to the Chernobyl disaster. This 30-square km radius known as the Exclusion Zone or Zone of Alienation marks the limits of a radioactive territory that is still considered too dangerous to support prolonged exposure (although thousands of people entered the zone each day to work in the three remaining nuclear reactors until December 2000). Areas of acute contamination, scattered throughout the zone, signal a subterranean terror of buried waste materials and equipment used during the cleanup.

While documenting the site, Jane and Louise Wilson met with the surviving members of Shevchenko’s film crew who informed them that his camera, obviously contaminated by the same doses of radioactivity that had mutated his film stock...
and ultimately his own chromosomes, was itself still interred somewhere underground. Their subsequent interest in trying to discover the exact location of the camera’s whereabouts, reminded me of radiation’s capacity to extend itself in space and through time, forging connections between past, present, and even the future-yet-to-come. While I had focused upon the ontological properties of the film, as harbouring trace evidence of the real, I had neglected to consider the camera’s own compromised afterlife. The metaphoric operations of picture-taking, which have often been theorised as a kind of violent image-assault onto the subject that it shoots and captures, was once again literalised as the material transformations induced by radiation converted the symbolic domain into reality. Shevchenko’s camera had become an actual lethal weapon, requiring immediate decommissioning and disposal.

**ACT-TWO**

Radiation, with its toxic time-scale, is a material that never truly becomes inert. It defies containment and its fallout cannot be divided into neat 30-km segments of uninhabitable/habitable terrain. Yet the concept of measurement is critical to the ways in which we deal with atomic materials today, as calculations pit levels of radioactivity against levels of acceptable risk. *Atomgrad (Nature Abhors a Vacuum)*—the project that resulted from the Wilson’s research trip to the Ukraine—was recently exhibited at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton. The concept of measurement echoes in each of the images, taking the form of a carefully placed, large black-and-white patterned ruler positioned in reference to various architectural features. This introduces an investigative element that we might recognise from forensic photography, where it is used to corroborate scale in a crime scene.

Incapable of detecting dangerous levels of radioactivity, what these measuring rods divine is the conceit of measurement. Science and risk management assessment produce calculations, not in order to save lives, but to stave off expenditures. The reappearance of the object as a physical entity within the gallery makes us pause, its presence gesturing towards Shevchenko’s contaminated film.

The inspiration for the wooden measuring sticks is sourced from photographic stills that Stanley Kubrick acquired from Ealing Studios, which he used as research materials for his unrealised Holocaust film *Aryan Papers*, a project that the Wilsons referenced in a previous installation (*Unfolding the Aryan Papers*) at the BFI in 2009. The "cruel radiance" of radioactivity had of course been deliberately used for purposes of extermination in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In *Atomgrad*, the discourse of violence is momentarily held at bay by the beauty of desolation that threatens to displace the residual menace of nuclear fallout. History appears to have stopped in its tracks, but of course this is a deception. The passage of time with its accrual of disintegration is coupled with the return of a repressed 'nature' (mould and vegetation) that seems intent upon covering over the traces of the original crime (lax safety at the plant and a delay in publicly acknowledging the extent of reactor damage). Together they invoke the romantic theme of the ruin that figures in most images depicting the deserted spaces of Pripyat. Yet something else is most certainly going on here: an unease pervades the eerie calm of this seemingly embalmed town.

The images of domesticated ruin in *Atomgrad* are not material witnesses to violence in the manner archived by Shevchenko’s ruined film or conjured by the intercession of the Kubrick-like object. Nor are they documentary representations that provide visual evidence of the enduring legacy of the nuclear. By activating multiple reference points (some factual, some fabricated, some conjectured) this imagemaking practice achieves a conceptual redeployment that makes explicit the transformation of Chernobyl from a radioactive fossil-bed into an increasingly refracted media event, one that calls into question the very possibility of bearing witness to a singular notion of Chernobyl.

In *Atomgrad*, the actual site of nuclear violence doubles as a prospective mise-en-scène for the Wilsons’ location shoot, which, in turn, gestures back towards another cinematic expression whose very subject was spawned by yet another technology of airborne violence: Zyklon B, the cyanide-based...
pesticide infamous for its use by Nazi Germany to kill human beings in gas chambers. How might non-empirical things, such as the photo-suite of Atomgrad, also testify convincingly to history without being reduced to mute simulacras, as Plato once accused the mimetic arts? Can a redistribution that manifests itself in the form of transactions between the real and its representations have agency in the world and be visible as evidence of its complex material realities? Rather than bracketing off reality from attempts to document it, Jane and Louise Wilson's project reminds us of the need to expand the narrative terrain in which all versions of events—including inferred and even fabricated forms of witnessing—operate in tension with one another to evolve new meanings and whose productive or disruptive potential can't necessarily be calculated in advance.  

**ACT-THREE**

During June 2008, artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin were embedded as photojournalists with British Army units in the volatile region of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. In lieu of standard photographic equipment (cameras) they travelled with a large sealed box containing a 50-metre length of unexposed colour photographic paper. As they moved along the frontlines of military sorties and patrols, this incongruous object travelled with them, transported by Hercules aircraft, Chinook helicopters, jeeps, tanks, and handled with the same logistical attention as other sensitive military cargo. The box became a MacGuffin-like entity, a structural device for forwarding the plot in the classic tradition of Hitchcock's espionage thrillers, in which all action is encoded violence more effectively as a surface play of chromatic intensities. Abstracted images are not liberated from their moral obligations to account convincingly for history and cannot remake their meanings with impunity. This is what I understand as the cautionary note that underwrites Broomberg and Chanarin’s photo-sequence The Day Nobody Died. What we witness when we peer into the deep-time horizon by their spectrum of explosive colours is the ontological fact of something having happened in an acutely particular way that charged itself directly into the material substrate of the photographic paper, but whose violent pre-conditions we don’t yet fully comprehend. As a result, we can’t completely reduce violence to a historical fact of having occurred somewhere else and in another, delimited time and place.

In as much as each project discussed records a material confrontation with violence, these three acts of image-making are, in effect, also prospective visual witnesses that testify to the persistence of the past within the present and future yet-to-come.

**Notes**

1 I was repeatedly told during a course on Crime Scene & Evidence Documentation for Human Rights Investigators (Tallahassee, FL, May 2011) that not only was the camera the singularly most important tool the investigator had at her disposal, but that ideally the image should be able to speak without any corroborating evidence or supplementary interpretation.

2 Vladimir Shevchenko died one year later of radiation poisoning, although his death was not added to the official Soviet tally of 30 in 1987.

3 Absorbed doses of radiation are much more harmful than airborne contaminants whose isotopes decay at a much faster rate, thus the prohibition against removing any objects from the zone, whereas low-level exposure (breathing the air of Pripyat) is considered 'reasonably' safe.

4 Donna Haraway has suggested 'redistributing the narrative field by telling another version of a crucial myth is a major process in crafting new meanings. One version never replaces another, but the whole field is rearranged in interrelation among all the versions in tension with each other.' Donna Haraway, 'Primate Logics Too: Politics By Other Means,' Feminist Approaches to Science, Ruth Blair (ed.), Pergamon Press, New York, 1986, p. 85.


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