

Other Green Worlds

Accident and articulation in Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, and Peter Greenaway's *The Falls*

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Introduction

There are many different approaches to the depiction of disaster in late 20th century literature, all joined together by the necessity yet inadequacy of representation. Maurice Blanchot, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, ruminates on these difficulties: ‘The disaster – experience none can undergo – obliterates (while leaving perfectly intact) our relation to the world as presence or as absence.’¹

Paul Virilio’s writings on speed, technology and perception frequently return to the idea of the accident. Progress and invention, as he sees it, creates an opposite effect that is inescapable. ‘When you invent a concept, an art, a sculpture, a film that is truly revolutionary, or when you sail the first ship, fly the first plane or launch the first space capsule, you invent the crash.’² The disaster is the necessary corollary to progress; the negative act that cannot be ignored when assessing absolute value.

In his exhibition *Ce Qui Arrive* at the Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain (2002), Virilio showcased archival footage of accidents to call attention to the role that catastrophe must play in art. From his introduction to the exhibition, he writes: ‘Faced with an accelerated temporality which affects mores and Art as much as it does international politics, there is one particularly urgent necessity: to expose and to exhibit the Time accident.’³

The accident is an interruption; the interruption affords one distance, which is a necessary component of perception. Virilio views *presentation* as having replaced *representation* in this age of ‘accelerated temporality’. As an example, he cites the footage of the World Trade Center attacks, broadcast repeatedly worldwide: beyond the attack on representation - the towers’ representation of global Western capitalism – the repetition of the footage becomes an ‘iconoclasm of presentation’: ‘This *tele-presence* in reality is an iconoclasm of real presence, because we only saw one thing’.⁴

The notion of progress fueled modernity, with art in forward motion, aesthetically reflecting advances in technology and society. This progress becomes impossible in the age of presentation. Speed, once an effect of progress, becomes the end to its own means upon the realization that it ‘enlightens the universe of perceptible and measurable phenomena’.⁵ Under tele-presence, the convergence of information becomes too dense to clearly articulate, and comprehension suffers from this acceleration. Art that recognises this failure has responded in different ways; nihilism, fantasy and denial loom powerfully as motifs in post-WWII art and literature.

It’s not surprising that the disaster has played a major role in contemporary narrative. Art, seeking a method to restore representation to its palette, can respond by introducing a state of emergency, a meditation upon reality that reflects upon cultural acceleration. The accident is the necessary interruption to pull back the camera and survey the changing shape of the world,

¹Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p.120.

²Sylvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), p. 88.

³Paul Virilio, ‘Foreword’, *Unknown Quantity*, Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain, <http://www.onoci.net/virilio/pages_uk/virilio/avertissement.php?th=1&rub=1_1> [2 September 2006]

⁴Lotringer/Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, p.25-26.

⁵Virilio, *Polar Inertia* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p.45.

restoring distance.

David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a curious post-disaster novel, written as the journal of a woman who is the last person left on Earth. There is never any explanation of what has happened; perhaps, as in the science-fiction film *The Quiet Earth* (1985), everyone has simply disappeared. Her stream-of-consciousness thoughts fill the book, which is barely more than a loose collection of musings on art and literature. Her wanderings are a study of creation and alienation, forcing a new perspective on the history of art through her solitary existence.

Wittgenstein's Mistress belongs to a sub-category of disaster texts: the *unarticulated disaster*. Choosing to dwell on effect rather than cause, these novels and films present new societies that exist in a post-accident sphere. The catastrophe is the catalyst of these works, yet is intentionally obscured, rejecting any attempts at understanding. The unarticulated disaster echoes Blanchot's writings by removing our connection to the world as we currently know it, creating an irrevocably altered mutation. Through a variety of devices discussed here, these texts attempt to restore distance and come to terms with the transformations created by the accident.

The accident, as Virilio sees it, is necessary for perspective; art that utilises this perspective can escape from the confines of presentation. However, the unarticulated disaster text moves beyond his focus on perspective. Change is a central theme of these texts, illustrating the failures of the pre-accident world while addressing the impossibility of assimilating information. Faced with uncertainty, these futures are predicated on the loss or restriction of knowledge. One's relation to this new world is then explored as an indirect means of articulation.

While some of the unarticulated disaster texts under discussion struggle to make sense of new ideas, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is obsessed with the detritus of western culture. The narrator moves through a lifetime of thought on art, literature and music. Through constant anecdotes about artists and writers, she looks for a way to understand the now-empty world. Here, art must populate a lonely earth, emphasizing the individual at the center of all creation, 'as if I have been appointed curator of all the world'.⁶ However, the summation of this knowledge leads nowhere, for 'culture is unstable and subjective', filled with mistakes and confusion.⁷

In Andrei Tarkovsky's diary from 1977, he writes: 'A person has no need of society, it is society that needs him. Society is a defence mechanism, a form of self-protection.'⁸ If the disaster text is to follow this, then the individual must be the focus of the work. Society cannot function as protection against the catastrophe, for it does not survive the transformation intact. The new society is an effect of the disaster; the text investigates the relationship the individual has with the changed society as a means to comprehend the incomprehensible.

The events that transform the societies of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, Peter Greenaway's *The Falls*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* are not explicitly articulated, extrapolating the problems of understanding that plague today's world. These texts offer mutations of progress, con-

⁶David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988), p. 227.

⁷Steven Moore, 'Afterword' from *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, p.245.

⁸Andrei Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time: The Diaries: 1970-1986* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1991), p. 145.

structuring art from accident and seeking alternatives to Virilio's 'monopresence'. They reject comprehension of both the disaster and the world it creates, yet explore the transformations through the lens of mystery.

Dhalgren: The ineffable catastrophe

The unarticulated disaster of Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* transforms a city into a mysterious labyrinth, positing an alternative result of the changing urban landscape of mid-1970s America. Set in the scarred, post-catastrophe city of Bellona, the novel itself becomes a jumble of streets and pathways, a literary echo of the city form. It is a society of drifters, where the majority of residents have fled. The thousand-odd that remain stay not out of desperation but curiosity, seeking to establish a new life in this dangerous, lawless state. As Tak Loufer explains in the opening section of the novel: 'You know, here, you're free. No laws: to break, or to follow.'⁹

It is never clear exactly what has happened to Bellona; the few references scattered throughout the book are deliberately vague, clues to an unsolvable mystery. Ambiguity dominates *Dhalgren*; even the title is a mystery, signifying a name and possibly character, appearing without explanation and only adding to the confusion. As Jean Mark Gawron describes it, Bellona 'is left to coruscate weirdly in our own 1970s America, in the perilous immanent present, where it becomes deniable (no such thing is likely to happen) and immanently dated'.¹⁰ The Kid, protagonist of the novel, is a mystery even to himself, forgetting his name and many of his actions. His amnesia reflects the accident through the unexplained pieces of his everyday life.

Virilio defines 'picnolepsy' in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* as the sudden loss of a fragment of time:

The absence lasts a few seconds; its beginning and its end are sudden.
The senses function, but are nevertheless closed to external impressions.
The return being just as sudden as the departure, the arrested word and
action are picked up again where they have been interrupted.¹¹

The momentary disappearance repeats throughout unarticulated disaster literature. Kid's amnesia is an extended form of it, occurring throughout the novel and leaving huge narrative gaps. There are missing sections of plot, and absent chunks of sentences, found in the poetic fragments that lace the found notebook (which presumably comprises the novel's final section). Yet the text marches on, deftly constructing the mutation of Bellona around the disappearances. The reader must attempt their own futile analysis, based on the remaining fragments that 'can only make us wonder what maddeningly special knowledge convinced him that, indeed, the ultimate and penultimate fragments once formed a breakless, breathless whole' (Delany, 663).

The most obvious omission is the disaster of Bellona; there is no explanation of its condition. It is an unspoken, collectively suppressed accident, all effect without cause. If the subject comes up in conversation among residents, it is passively dismissed as a taboo topic. What

⁹Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975; repr: 2001), p. 20.

¹⁰Jean Mark Gawron, 'On Dhalgren', in *Ash of Stars: On the Writing of Samuel R. Delany*, ed. by James Sallis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p.62-92 (p.70).

¹¹Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p.9.

has happened is too terrible to talk about, or perhaps no longer interesting. It is ignored by the rest of America, whose ‘papers don’t even talk about what’s happening here, anymore’ (12). Kid’s attempts at extracting testimony are futile, and he soon ceases to ask what happened, knowing ‘he didn’t want an answer’ (29).

In this culture of repression, Bellona’s residents live a transformed existence, struggling to survive, yet indulging in their new freedoms. Moral values have shifted; sexual freedom is abundant, and the persecutions of economics and law are no longer applicable. The accident has created the distance for perception missing from other parts of America – it has given perspective through ambiguity, paradoxically clarifying while confusing.

The major struggle of writing about disaster is properly representing it, which the unarticulated disaster sidesteps. Emerging from Virilio’s age of presentation, *Dhalgren* seeks to describe without describing, creating ‘a city without time’ (710). The effect of disaster is conveyed, with the accident itself as the catalyst, as a struggle to understand the transformations that follow. Change is at the root of *Dhalgren* as other texts, for whatever has happened to Bellona has altered the city socially, economically and physically. The novel, arranged around the residency of a mixed-race bisexual amnesiac, investigates these changes with a similar exploratory approach to *Stalker* and *The Falls* (discussed below). But instead of a spiritual approach or a scientific examination, Delany conveys the mutated metropolis through issues of identity, politics and communication.

the raddled and streaming dawn

Strange celestial occurrences place Bellona in a world where nature has mutated. The foreshadowing of environmental disaster, emerging from the consciousness of the late 20th century, hangs over the novel. Two moons appear, confusing the residents and implying a celestial warping outside of the realm of learned astronomy. Other unexplained actions appear in the sky, such as the ‘monumental ...disk? sphere? whatever?’ that positions itself above Bellona, a ‘portent’ of ‘miasmal pollution’ (490-91). Pollution, a variable form of accident, links the unuttered disaster with an ecological breakdown. The forced mutations of a post-nuclear fallout zone can create any number of unimaginable ‘natural’ events; Bellona’s unexplained atmospheric events can be read as effects of environmental damage. The bizarre behaviour of Kid’s memory may be an indication of illness, perhaps caused by radiation or some other invisible enemy.

There is no yearning for agrarian times in *Dhalgren*, as the novel celebrates city life. There is no sense of the pastoral, or any belief that beauty can exist in nature. There is nothing in Bellona to connect it with traditional green space; even the park, which Kid enters at the beginning of the novel, is undercut by broken glass. It is modeled after the urban vacant lot rather than a field, a ‘roasted park’ (24). The aesthetic beauty in Bellona comes from fire, explosions, and smoke; it is an urban nightmare, yet compelling through reinvented poetics.

The orchid is a reoccurring theme in *Dhalgren*; it is the name of the blade-like weapon that Kid is given upon entering the text-city, and inspires the title of his poetry collection,

Brass Orchids. The fragile flower, recast as a weapon, is an inversion of the environmental ruination brought on by the disaster (and by city life in general). Cast again as poetry, the orchid unsuccessfully attempts to explain the state of life in Bellona, attempting ‘to construct a complicitous illusion in lingual catalysis, a crystalline and conscientious alkahest,’ as Kid mockingly tells a reporter (640).

Like *Ulysses*, *Dhalgren* paints a city alive with human connections, communication and ideas; it builds from Joyce’s modernist foundation by connecting language with the urban sphere. The fragmentary natures of many of *Dhalgren*’s passages illustrate a text free from grammatical constraints, a breakdown of language to reflect the disorderly nature of Bellona. Through its isolation, Bellona is a space allowing creation without boundaries. Yet physical boundaries exist, though they may be unseen. Passage in and out of the city does not seem to be easy, an invisible counterpart to the walled defenses of medieval times. Interaction with the rest of America has been essentially eliminated, just as nature has been overtaken and choked.

The physical changes to Bellona are connected to the population dispersal, resulting in the empty economic plight. Money remains, but its value has disappeared; the infrastructure of goods and services is based mostly on trade or theft. There is no employment (despite Mr. Richards’ continued devotion to his nonexistent job) and the underbelly of bars and nightclubs has a casual, volunteer feel to it. Yet the city continues to function, a model neither capitalist nor Marxist, knowing that the supplies are finite.

Socially, Bellona has responded to this economic shift; the rudimentary forms of civic organization are based around a roving gang culture. Though their methods are violent, the Scorpions are the closest thing to law and order: they police while also being the criminals. Before joining them, Kid meets a variety of drifters, ranging from a hippie commune to a psychiatrist. Loufer sees that ‘we have a pretty complicated social structure: aristocrats, beggars—and Bohemians.’ Yet he goes on to describe it as an ‘illusion of an ordered social matrix’, ‘spitted through on all these cross-cultural attelets.’ It is the ‘saprophytic’ city, shattered by the accident to fragment social mechanics as the physical and economic sphere are similarly fragmented (668). The family unit is destroyed along with everything else, mocked through the desperate attempts of the Richards’ to cling to tradition. ‘Mother and Father, they were a rhythm’ in Kid’s recollections, but the Richards’ surreal charade is an unstable molecule, distorted through the prisms that populate the novel (55).

Written in the mid-1970s, *Dhalgren* is a product of social upheaval written from an outsider perspective. Delany, a gay black science-fiction author, taps into the spirit of social unrest spilling over from the Vietnam War, the hippie movement and the black liberation struggle. He lived in San Francisco during much of the time he was writing, and the countercultural attitudes of the Bay Area certainly filtered into Bellona. The most obvious aspect is the sexual elasticity of Kid, Lanya and Denny, with their 3-way relationship defying every tradition. Within this lifestyle, the relaxed attitude towards drug use is also unsurprising, with prose that feels at ease with these topics, rather than exploitative.

Discussing the phrase ‘What kind of street do they live on?’, Kid writes in his journal:

In the grammar of another city, that sentence would hold the implication: What kind of street are they more or less constrained by society to live on, given their semi-outlaw status, their egregious manner and outfit, and the economics of their asocial position? In Bellona, however, the same words imply a complex freedom, a choice from hovel to mansion – complex because every hovel and every mansion sustains through that choice some remnant of our ineffable catastrophe [. . .] We speak another language here. (754)

Kid's comments refer to the Scorpions, yet echo racial barriers in contemporary America. Race is a curious issue in *Dhalgren*; segregation is prevalent, but ambiguous, compounded by Kid's own mixed-race descent. The race divide in Bellona becomes slightly clearer as the novel progresses, with Kid's journaling in 'The Anathemata' discussing the Scorpions' primarily black makeup. Slurs and epithets are used frequently, though often without malice. It's impossible to judge whether Bellona represents a more progressive approach to race than the non-mutated society of 1970's America. The geographic boundaries certainly remain, with the majority of black residents living on the other side of Jackson Street. The interracial nature of June Richards' rape certainly contributes to its media attention. Despite open-minded attitudes toward social integration, Delany cannot yet envision a post-race society. Bellona is at best a benevolent dystopia, not a utopia. Violence lurks under the surface at all times, as Robert Elliot Fox sees 'an Ozymandian realm in which the pride of late capitalist society has been (at least within this particular "circle") shaken, if not yet fully humbled'.¹²

despair at textual inadequacy

Communication in Bellona comes primarily from conversation, as word-of-mouth delivery dominates the exchange of information. The newspaper, the city's only media, documents Bellona's news and culture as an ironic chronicling of these conversations. In the culture of repression, the *Bellona Times* (published by the enigmatic Roger Calkins) is the closest thing to authority. Simultaneously an authorial voice and a meta-textual specter, Calkins' paper does little to clarify the ambiguity of contemporary Bellona life. It prints satire, speculation and surreal jokes alongside actual news, with no demarcation between them. Printed daily, it appears to be freely distributed, and feeds back into the conversation flow by stimulating discussion among Kid and his companions.

This bizarre media presence is an effect of the accident, a return to antiquated forms. Journalistic methods have imploded, leaving a mockery of conventional reporting techniques. There is none of Virilio's tele-presence in Bellona; no television, film or visual media exists (beyond the posters of the rapist George Harrison). The newspaper, though we are only afforded fragments of its text, delights in the world of gangs, bohemians and lowlifes (in the absence of conventional business or society to report on). There is a twisted world of celebrity, fed by the paper as Harrison is endorsed, rather than reviled. His poster, cynically printed by

¹²Robert Elliot Fox, 'This you-shaped hold of insight and fire: meditations on *Dhalgren*', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 16:3 (1996), pp.129-35 (p. 129).

Calkins, becomes the biggest selling item in a city where ‘we have no economy’ (668). Kid’s own celebrity status follows his coverage in the newspaper, especially after his poetry collection is published by Calkins. The novel’s climax, a party thrown in his honor, finds Kid being interviewed by a reporter and mocking the proceedings.

When the second moon appears, the *Bellona Times* reports it without an explanation, not even attempting to understand the phenomenon. It cannot be ignored, but there is no proper investigation into the cause. The conventional themes of the disaster text – the struggles to understand and represent – are absent, victims of apathy and frustration. Confusion, post-accident, is the way of life, and there is no longer any impulse to comprehend. ‘Since life may end at any when, the expectation of revelation or peripity, if not identical *to*, is congruent *with* insanity,’ writes Kid in ‘The Anathemata’. ‘But I am interested in the art of incident only as it touches life. . . .’ (779-80).

The unarticulated disaster is one of temporal uncertainty; the post-accident world is often afflicted by a loss of continuity, made picnoleptic through authorial omission or deliberate confusion. One of *Dhalgren*’s defining traits is its fragmented timeline, destroyed through the missing segments of textual amnesia. Despite proceeding fairly linearly - actually cyclically- there is no clear indication when the accident occurred, or how long Bellona has suffered from its effects. The *Bellona Times* contributes to the temporal disorganization of the novel by arbitrarily choosing dates, jumping ten years ahead one day and backwards the next. The majority of the characters in the book enthusiastically follow this ridiculous measuring of time. Meetings are arranged based upon the reoccurrence of the newspaper dates, despite the random, unpredictable nature of Calkins’ whims. To the residents of Bellona, it doesn’t matter; no one minds waiting a few more days, as time is always slipping away anyway.

Kid’s amnesia is the most notable example of this slippage, and with the incomplete narrative voice, the reader can never be sure exactly how much time has elapsed between Kid’s arrival and departure. His own senses are unreliable, and there are blackouts of entire days that he cannot account for. As the novel progresses, the gaps become larger, and blackouts occur to the reader as well. The fragments of ‘The Anathemata’ are the completion of the Kid story, though completed through missing parts, a writing of negative space.

The opening sections of *Dhalgren* describe Kid’s first few days in Bellona, with his entrance and initial interactions. Eventually his encounters with the Scorpions lead to his unofficial election as leader, though none of this is explicitly described in the text. It is impossible to get a proper sense of duration from chapter to chapter - when we find that Kid has suddenly become head Scorpion, it’s not apparent how long he has been there. The final section of the book, ‘The Anathemata: a plague journal’, furthers the temporal breakdown through textual corruption. The repetition of some phrases throughout the novel adds to the disorientation, a literary *déjà vu*. The novel’s cyclical nature, tied together by a *Finnegans Wake*-esque loop, suggests repetition and eternity. Delany’s own revisions to the book, which are detailed in his collection of correspondence, have been numerous: each subsequent printing of *Dhalgren* is slightly different, with new corrections but also new mistakes. In a sense, each iteration

through *Dhalgren* is another slightly different journey.

Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster* of ‘the interruption of the incessant: this is the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing: interruption’s having somehow the same meaning as that which does not cease. Both are effects of passivity.’¹³ Kid describes his own ‘passive equivalent’ to a previous ‘active terror’ of nuclear disaster; a sense of dread fills him one morning, and his response is ‘I’m going to write something’ (420). In both writing and action, Kid is a passive protagonist throughout *Dhalgren*. His heroic gestures during the death of Bobby Richards are empty; he hesitates and only becomes laudable for his masculine presence in Mrs. Richards’ time of grief. As head of the Scorpions, he leads with a *passive authority*; he is largely ineffective at controlling the tempers of other Scorpions, yet retains authority (to his own surprise).

Kid’s own writing, in the poetry collection *Brass Orchids*, is never revealed to the reader apart from a few fragments. These glimpses of language echo Delany’s more free-form exposition, peppered throughout the book and never clearly specified as Kid’s voice or a narrator’s. This uncertainty leads to doubt as to whether Kid is the actual author of the poems, both for the reader and for Kid himself. The found notebook bears some resemblance to his poetry, and he writes alongside of the writing that was already there, causing Frank to question his authenticity at Calkins’s party.

The novel’s interest in illusion frequently casts doubt upon the actuality of its events. It is entirely possible the Bellona never suffered any physical accident, and the mass departure was due to some other factor, perhaps a collective hallucination. The citywide repression of the occurrence may follow from the lack of comprehension. *Dhalgren* is a text without faith, a platform of resignation. The mutation of Bellona cannot offer answers.

the plague in print

There is no concept of progress in Bellona. The aggressive, military-capitalist models of contemporary society are outwardly rejected, though they may be the cause of the catastrophe. Bellona’s hazy limbo-state is anarchist in nature, following no formal organizational pattern. There are communal living situations, sharing open attitudes towards sexuality, drugs and race. The free or bartered exchange of goods has replaced the market economy. Yet with dynamically altering ethics, haphazardly enforced by violence, Delany is not creating a utopian society. *Dhalgren* is a world where confusion reigns, ‘a city of inner discordances and retinal distortions.’ (14)

With the rise of apocalyptic science fiction after Hiroshima, *Dhalgren* positions itself as a text from an apocalypse that failed. The pathways of *Dhalgren* are anything but straight; the novel is an open map of the city, an investigation into psycho-geography without any set path. Delany’s structural form mirrors the disrupted content; through meta-textual devices, there is direct commentary as it proceeds. The numerous disparate plotlines in *Dhalgren* reflect a city in manuscript form, with avenues and alleyways running in every direction. It is described by

¹³Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. p.89

Jonathan Lethem as a 'city-book-labyrinth', where form has merged with content.¹⁴ Amnesia, one of the major themes of the novel, is reflected by the missing sections of text both directly (with the sentence fragments in 'The Anathemata') and through omission of the accident itself. The chapters are significant pieces in the chronology of Kid's stay in Bellona, but the space between them contains further information necessary for the complete story.

Peering into a possible future, Delany creates art from the unknown, reveling in mystery. The written format of the novel challenges non-articulation, but metatextual devices serve as a means to emphasise the obfuscation, drawing attention to the construction as artifice. The development of cinema as a method of fictional representation allows the author to introduce image and duration into these methods. *Dhalgren*, though epic in scope, must rely on a textual transformation to manipulate time. The cinematic form, however, allows a direct manipulation of time, space and sound, incurring more complexities into the representation.

The art of photography transforms the act of representation, using technology to construct its reality. Cinema and photography moves representation from the material to symbolic through the camera's 'program', as described by Vilém Flusser. Flusser's 'apparatus' of photography, as a form of technology, has a necessary counterpoint in the accident-sphere; this close relationship benefits the cinematic approach to the accident.¹⁵

¹⁴*Dhalgren*, front cover.

¹⁵Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion, 1983; repr:2000), p. 21-32.

Stalker: Water, sand and meat-grinder

In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection.

- Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* p. 58

Tarkovsky regarded time as the elemental material of cinema, and referred to his method of filmmaking as ‘sculpting in time’. The construction of illusion through temporal space has existed since the beginning of the cinema when Mèliès employed stop-motion action as the principle special effect of his films. For Tarkovsky, who rejected the montage, the image alone is not enough to be illusionist; cinema must be separated from the other visual arts through its incorporation of time with motion. In this process, editing becomes a form of sculpture, removing excess moments to leave only ‘what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image’ (*Sculpting*, 64).

The tradition of the montage, established by fellow Russian Eisenstein, relies on the viewer to create associations among images. This form has been so assimilated into 20th century televisual culture that it hardly seems revolutionary now, for the montage is the natural format for the rapid presentation of images in a compressed time-space. But Tarkovsky’s cinema is a different thing, characterised by Michael Dempsey as ‘slow, dreamlike pacing created with large, static tableaux, stately camera movements, and an extensive use of classical music’.¹⁶ This methodology instead emphasises the poetics of cinema, seeking an internal rhythm in the frame. His cinema sparingly employs cuts, which are a disruption of this rhythm.

The montage is a static gesture of cinema, composed of a series of separate film events. Though not actually still photography, the montage is nonetheless rhythmically static within the form of cinema. The montage takes the art of photography and translates it to the motion picture world, but in a manner of juxtaposition. Tarkovsky’s revolution is to see cinema as its own form, finding the ungraspable element that makes the whole greater than the sum of static pictures.

Bergson, in *Creative Evolution*, delineates a difference between sequential photography and cinema:

But instantaneous photography isolates any moment; it puts them all in the same rank, and thus the gallop of a horse spreads out for it into as many successive attitudes as it wishes, instead of massing itself into a single attitude, which is supposed to flash out in a privileged moment and to illuminate a whole period.¹⁷

The introduction of time into sequential photography is the catalyst of this transformation from journalism to art. Tarkovsky believed that cinema ‘turned aside from art’, failing to ‘exploit artistically the one precious potential of the cinema – the possibility of printing on celluloid the actuality of time’. (*Sculpting*, 62-63)

¹⁶Michael Dempsey, ‘Lost Harmony: Tarkovsky’s *The Mirror* and *The Stalker*’, *Film Quarterly* 35:1 (1981), pp. 12-17 (p.13).

¹⁷Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926) p.332.

Motion is the other technical element that separates cinema from sequential photography, and this difference is most clear in the studies of Edward Muybridge. When visually processing his projects, the viewer mentally assembles a construct of motion, yet it is an approximation and nothing more. Virilio tells the story of the meeting between Auguste Rodin and Paul Gsell, where they compared Rodin's sculpture to photographs which document motion. Figures in photography are 'struck with paralysis', captured without the 'gradual unfolding of a gesture'. To Rodin, 'It is art that tells the truth and photography that lies. For *in reality time does not stand still*...'¹⁸

This 'truth' is a moral assertion that follows the style of Tarkovsky's cinema, using the duration of the shot to smooth over momentary, picnoleptic lapses in perception. Time, in cinema, echoes the endurance of the mind in Bergson's theory of duration. Tarkovsky's 'internal rhythm' is a realization of Rodin's 'gradual unfolding'; the celluloidal printing of this time is treated as 'factual' (*Sculpting*, 63).

Mary Ann Doane writes that 'the cinema embraces narrative as its primary means of making time legible'.¹⁹ In an unarticulated disaster text like *Dhalgren*, the narrative is fragmented, disrupting this legibility. Tarkovsky approaches disaster from his own philosophy, sculpting time as an aesthetic of representation. Through his visual transformation from novel to film, he explores issues faith and knowledge using non-verbal means, hanging those themes on a simple narrative.

the oasis of accident

Stalker (1979) is comprised of slow-paced shots, an approach at odds with the velocity of the late 20th century. With a running time of just under three hours, the film is simple in terms of plot: three adventurers enter a mysterious, protected physical space seeking a room that grants wishes. Time is the critical element in the adaptation from the novel, *Roadside Picnic*, whose authors worked on the screenplay with Tarkovsky. Through a carefully controlled organization of time and an exploration of the possibilities of visual art, Tarkovsky transforms a science-fiction novel into a philosophical work of otherworldly displacement.

The shift in narrative styles is clear from the start, as the protagonist of the Strugatsky brothers' novel, Redrick Schuhart, is stripped of his name and given a less cutthroat identity. Tarkovsky actually discards most names, compositing several other characters into the roles of Writer and Professor. But the major focus of both the film and the book is the Zone – the geographical area of non-human origin that is explored by *Stalker* and his companions.

The term 'Zone' is plain, yet menacing, suggesting both grandeur and ambiguity. Readers of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* cannot help but connect *Stalker's* Zone to Slothrop's playground of the same name. Both Zones have uncertain boundaries, and a sense of continually changing geography. While the origins of Pynchon's Zone are not mysterious, both are disruptions of the normal world. Both Zones are filled with unexplainable items and events;

¹⁸Virilio. *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p 2.

¹⁹Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 67.

while Pynchon's are wrapped in the encyclopedic debris of European culture, the Stalker's Zone is an endless arcade of new mysteries.

The extent of the Zone's powers is unclear, but known to be highly dangerous. Schuhart is a former scientist that once studied the Zone; he has become a freelance stalker, illegally guiding patrons through the territory. Like the Solarists in Tarkovsky's other science fiction film, *Solaris* (1971), years of government-funded scientific investigation have yielded little results. Public interest in the phenomenon has dwindled, and the spectacle of the disaster has been largely forgotten, becoming a footnote of history. Again, the failure of science emerges through the unarticulated disaster, rejecting any belief in empiricism, and providing Tarkovsky with room for his 'celebration of human values and the power of love in an indifferent or hostile universe'.²⁰

Tarkovsky's adaptations of both texts disregard science entirely, seeking a human struggle within the science fiction genre, laced with his 'taste for cosmic mystery' (Dempsey, 13). The focus of *Solaris* is the emotional challenge of Kelvin's interactions with his deceased wife; the scientific explanations pursued by the other characters are obtrusive. In Stanislaw Lem's novel, the rational universe ultimately overcomes man's sense of self, displaying an atheistic reduction of human feeling. Tarkovsky, much to Lem's chagrin, was more interested in the human attributes of love, betrayal and guilt. The film celebrates man's connection with the natural world, suggesting in the final shot that such a connection can exist even if this world is false. In a discussion with Z. Podguzhets, Tarkovsky felt that the ending was not pessimistic:

The film ends with what is most precious for a person, and at the same time the simplest thing of all, and the most available to everybody: ordinary human relationships, which are the starting-point of man's endless journey [. . .] The fact that the ocean brought forth out of its depths the very thing that was most important to him – his dream of returning to the earth – that is, the idea of contact.²¹

Stalker inverts this dream, placing the Earth as the damaged world and the Zone as the dream-space. In the post-Zone world, science is broken and the natural world has been ruined. Tarkovsky's design of the Zone (and his use of colour) suggests that salvation only comes through mystery, with the Zone offering hope among its dangers. The non-Zone city, where Stalker lives, is bleak and miserable; his only 'contact' comes through his adventures in the Zone. Ordinary human relationships are no longer functional for him in the city; though he radiates with love for his family, he is unable to properly communicate with them.

His relationship with the Zone is non-human, yet functional, though it alienates him from society and creates the family difficulty. His daughter Monkey is mutated, as are all children of stalkers – though only crippled in the film, the novel finds her 'covered with coarse brown fur'.²² Salvation is found in the promise of the Golden Ball, a legendary object that grants

²⁰Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.102.

²¹Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time: The Diaries 1970-1968* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986), p.364

²²Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), p.140.

wishes. The novel finds Schuhart aggressively seeking the Golden Ball to heal his daughter, though the film transforms the Ball into the mysterious Room and removes Stalker's motive.

The novel attempts some theorizing as to the origins of the Zones - there are six in *Roadside Picnic* – taking its title from one such theory. Tarkovsky is not interested in explanations, only offering a few titles at the beginning of the film. The creation is potentially attributed to a meteor, though he's only concerned with the result: 'One way or another, our small country has seen the birth of a miracle - the Zone.'²³ Viewing incomprehensible change as a miracle, done ironically in *Dhalgren*'s landscape of violence, transforms the accident to an act of faith, Stalker's viewpoint. But Writer's theory is a 'breakdown at the fourth bunker', suggesting that the accident is military or nuclear in origin.

The invisibility of the Zone's danger echoes the obscurity of its origin; even Stalker, the expert Zone adventurer, finds surprises this time. His sense of caution borders on paranoia as the Zone is unusually benign; apart from Writer's painful moment in the room of sand, the travelers escape punishment for their carelessness. Part of *Stalker*'s power as a film comes from the way it conveys the dangers of the Zone to the viewer. The 'meat grinder' sequence is the most chilling in all of Tarkovsky's work, yet it contains no physical manifestations of fear. Likewise, Writer's agony in the room of sand is conveyed without any visual sign of discontent beyond the stop-motion bird, a gesture back to Méliès.

Tarkovsky manages to create this psychic horror through the manipulation of time. Maya Turovskaya writes: 'Tarkovsky regarded an infinitesimal dislocation of the everyday as more threatening and frightening than anything a cunning property-master or special-effects team could ever produce.'²⁴ The viewer can never be sure how long the three are in the Zone; daylight never ceases, even during their sleep, so it's possible they are only there for a few hours. It's also possible that the trip takes days, for temporal and physical spheres are impossible to empirically determine while in the Zone.

the aesthetic of decay

The internal rhythm found in all of Tarkovsky's work is maintained throughout *Stalker*; the dislocation of public time does not upset the rhythm within the shot. Slavoj Žižek writes of the 'heavy gravity of Earth that seems to exert its pressure on time itself, generating an effect of temporal anamorphosis that extends time well beyond what we perceive as justified by the requirements of narrative movement'.²⁵ This pressure, occurring throughout Tarkovsky's cinema, is most pronounced in *Stalker*. Even the most action-packed sequence in the film, where the travelers sneak into the Zone, uses long tracking shots rather than cuts. While the suspense increases, activities unfold naturally on the screen, with sound and motion creating the tension rather than a succession of quick jump cuts.

In the non-Zone scenes, camera movement is primarily along a 2-dimensional axis, most obviously in the flatcar entrance. Here the camera slowly pans back across the faces of

²³Tarkovsky, *Stalker*, 1979.

²⁴Maya Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema As Poetry* (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 111

²⁵Slavoj Žižek, 'The Thing from Inner Space', *ArtMargins* <<http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/zizek1.html>> [31 May 2006]

the three travelers as they make their entrance. Eduard Artemiev's stunning electroacoustic soundtrack serves the scene with a creeping anxiety, and the facial close-ups magnify the anticipation. Johnson and Petrie compare these close-ups to the cinema of Ingmar Bergman, which also 'creates a whole landscape out of the human face and body and is not afraid to let his camera linger and explore it' (*FoAT*, 155).

The scene is an echo of Burton's return to the city in *Solaris*, which occurs at a similar point in the narrative and also allows the soundtrack to take over. *Stalker*'s flatcar scene has the feeling of one unbroken shot that lasts for several minutes, though it is actually comprised of five. The cut is a momentary disappearance, the cinematic joining of two time-images. It is the filmic representation of the picnoleptic occurrence, and the unconscious activity while viewing is to smooth over the transition, supplying temporal continuity in the face of visual change.

Virilio suggests the term 'rapid waking' as the continual occurrence of these lapses, the opposite of dream state rapid eye movement.²⁶ By avoiding frequent cuts in *Stalker*, Tarkovsky practices a form of concentration, locking the viewer into extended dream (or extended wake). The disruption of the accident is privileged through the reduction of these editing disruptions. The temporal ambiguity in the narrative is more pronounced when focus is unbroken.

Tarkovsky discusses this in *Sculpting in Time*:

[In] *Stalker* I wanted there to be no time lapse between the shots. I wanted time and its passing to be revealed, to have their existence, within each frame; for the articulations between the shots to be the continuation of the action and nothing more, to involve no dislocation of time, not to function as a mechanism for selecting and dramatically organizing the material – I wanted it to be as if the whole film had been made in a single shot. (*Sculpting*, 193-94)

Inside the Zone, the camera moves with more freedom, introducing a third tracking axis. This creates a sense that the Zone is constantly shifting, with Euclidian geometry upset by impossible physics at work. While maintaining the steady pace of the narrative, the visual element fluctuates, utilizing the nature of the cinematic time to suggest fluid surroundings. Visual disorientation is created through slow moving camera work. Shots are of a long duration, with camera movement so gradual that it becomes almost imperceptible. As a result of this, the actors shift position so much through a single shot that the spatial boundaries of room, water or earth become uncertain. The first scene in the Zone, coming after the sepia tones of the first half hour, is visually overwhelming. As the three travelers discuss their journey and share their initial impressions, the viewer must become acclimated to the stylised landscape. The widespread green tones come as a shock, bold despite their muted hue. The rippling fields appear to bend, shimmering under the eye of the camera. Turovskaya describes this as 'the aesthetics of estrangement, of making the everyday seem unexpected [...] images are concrete, while the sounds are disturbingly abstract and strange: clangs, squeaks and rustles' (*Tarkovsky*, 110).

²⁶Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, p.15.

While the entry point for the Zone is an open, outdoor space, the viewer is never quite able to come to terms spatially with the set – a trick that continues throughout the film. There is no continuity of space, preventing the viewer from determining the orientation of the travelers. We see shots of foliage, rock, water, and a bizarre assortment of destroyed machinery, but one is never able to create a mental map of the layout. Fog is used almost continually in the outdoor scenes, and horizon behind it feels fluid. Our sense of direction, as viewers, is continually challenged. This dream-like visualization magnifies the surreal tendencies of the Zone.

Tarkovsky separates Zone and non-Zone through the use of colour. The regular world is filmed in sepia tone, shot with extremely crisp focus. The city outside is referred to by Stalker as ‘behind the barbed wire’, a playful inversion of the surrounding barricades, for the fenced-in Zone is the only place where he can be truly free. The grim sepia of Stalker’s reality sharply contrasts with the rich colours of Kelvin’s earth in *Solaris*. Physical pollution has taken over the world, emphasised by the power plant seen in the film’s final moments. *Stalker*’s reality is a world of concrete and asphalt, easily compared to *Dhalgren*’s Bellona. It’s not hard to imagine *Stalker*’s cold landscape as an Estonian sister of Bellona, whose opening sequences ‘exude bleakness, rattiness, stagnation like noxious fumes’ (Dempsey, 16). It is the ‘aesthetic of decay’ at work.²⁷

The shift to colour stock provides much of the impact of the Zone’s first visualization in the film, but unlike *The Wizard of Oz*, the palette is carefully chosen. Greens and blues dominate, yet with a washed out ambience. Foliage, rippling in the wind, begins to construct the illusion of shifting physical boundaries. The travelers are plunged headfirst into the accident, and it is aesthetically powerful. The most memorable part of *Stalker* to a first-time viewer may be this first impression, where the Zone achieves a strange pastoral calm before revealing its structures.

mysteries of rust

Despite being a deeply visual filmmaker, Tarkovsky’s science-fiction films avoid glamorous special effects. The scenes of the *Solaris* ocean look like microscope footage, and the psychological horrors of the Zone have no visual counterpart beyond a few skeletons. The compositional beauty is strangely celebratory of the Earth – Kelvin’s scenes at his father’s *dacha* at the beginning of *Solaris* eerily foreshadow the Zone. But while *Solaris* celebrates the natural beauty of the Earth, the Zone is a disfigured beauty that cannot be trusted. As the explorers progress, they encounter structures that suggest technological obsolescence, a theme that echoes throughout the accident-text.

Dystopian science-fiction films, such as Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), often present a future where the State has grown to a monolithic level, impeding technological progress. Technology is the creator of the accident, therefore its breakdown will ‘establish the opposite approach’, in Virilio’s eyes: ‘exposing or exhibiting the accident as the major enigma of mod-

²⁷Peter Green, *Andrei Tarkovsky: The Winding Quest* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1993), p.102.

ern Progress'.²⁸ In *Stalker*, the progression of technology is pushed into a new perspective, with mystery superceding discovery. The few scattered, discarded objects in the Zone follow the exhibition of the accident; they are relics, like the telephone that inexplicably rings.

A stalker navigates the Zone by throwing rusty machinery nuts, wrapped in bandages, as a guide to the unpredictable physical environment. These components of technology are recast as an ironic deconstruction of scientific accomplishment; in the post-accident world, a machine can only direct if dismantled. All of the technologies of the Zone are assimilated into the natural world; the tanks, overgrown with foliage, are integrated into the environment. Yet outside of the Zone, technology wins - a world of decaying industry throttles any natural beauty that tries to poke through, with the accident repressed.

Through the Zone, Tarkovsky takes us directly to the heart of the disaster, exploring its mysteries (yet offering no attempt at explanation). The heart of the accident is where it can be least understood; if time is the skeleton of this film, non-articulation is its circulatory system. Like the Zone, the principal characters in the film are often inarticulate; it is only Stalker's wife, at the end of the film, who is able to speak with freedom.

Writer and Professor talk throughout the film, but they are unable to completely articulate their purposes. Writer is the cynic, having lost faith in his writing; he is looking for something indescribable in the Zone, yet knows he won't find it. Nor does he want it – he declares that great writing is caused by turmoil, and fears that he will have no purpose to write if the turmoil is removed by the Room. The Professor masquerades his anarchist tendencies as science, arguing with Writer from an empiricist point of view. Presumably coming from the same organization where Stalker worked, he has ultimately concluded nothing after years of study. And when the Room is finally reached, neither is able to make a wish. Žižek sees the Zone's forbidden nature as 'what confers on it the aura of mystery'; this materialist reading of the film sees the failure of the characters to make a wish as their understanding of this 'Limit', leading to Stalker's true fear: loss of faith (Žižek, 8). While this reading casts the accident in a mythic quality, it denigrates the transformations into minor side effects. Yet at the core of Žižek's interpretation is the Limit as the unreachable self, an internal unarticulated disaster.

Stalker, whose inner Limit provides his motivation, is the most fascinating character of the three. He is a figure of leadership, yet continually undermined by the disobedience of Writer and Professor. His warnings go unheeded, and the dangers he promises are (mostly) absent. It is possible to read the entire Zone as a construction of his mind, as Tarkovsky suggests:

I am often asked what does this Zone stand for. There is only one possible answer: the Zone doesn't exist. Stalker himself invented his Zone. He created it, so that he would be able to bring there some very unhappy persons and impose on them the idea of hope. The room of desires is equally Stalker's creation, yet another provocation in the face of the material world. This provocation, formed in Stalker's mind, corresponds to an act of faith.²⁹

²⁸Virilio, 'The Museum of Accidents' from *The Paul Virilio Reader*, ed. Steve Redhead (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.256.

²⁹Antoine de Vaecque, Andrei Tarkovsky, *Cahiers du Cinema* 1989, p.108.

Despite Writer saying that he can see right through Stalker, Stalker is 'opaque and ungraspable'.³⁰ His motives are unarticulated, as is the origin of the Zone, which seems to change in response to him just as he has been changed by it. While Stalker's quest in the book is to wish for his mutated daughter to heal, Tarkovsky has removed this motive from the film, explicitly stating that the Stalker cannot enter the room. He is not looking for an explanation, like Professor, but for a justification of his devotion. He chose to become a Stalker, knowing it would strain his marriage and deform his children, yet he accepted that with the devotion of a martyr. Writer's accusation that Stalker acts only out of power and ego is false, sounding empty the moment he says it.

That the titular character is shrouded in mystery is appropriate, given the mysterious nature of the Zone that has created him. But the formal structure of the film is also enigmatic. Tarkovsky writes several scenes that reject easy interpretation, most famously the closing scene of the film. Stalker's daughter, Monkey, a physical representation of his suffering under the weight of the Zone, sits at a table with two glasses. After the recitation of a poem, the glasses move across the table through what can only be her telekinetic power. Although the scene has been debated numerous times by critics, it is clear that Tarkovsky wished to infuse the spirit of hope into an otherwise bleak film. The Professor sees this hope, calling the Zone 'part of nature', representing some chance for the polluted world. To Stalker, the room is the only hope.

Pollution is a gradual accident, a dark cloud that is commonly found in disaster text. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* introduces an unarticulated effect from a clearly defined disaster – a chemical cloud that shortens the protagonist's life by an uncertain amount. Living in an in-between state, Jack Gladney must continue his life without any sure answers, his body polluted by unseen chemical invaders. Though the idea of pollution usually suggests environmental connotations, the model of gradual, integrated accident is applicable in the realm of art.

Virilio, in conversation with Sylvere Lotringer, refers to advertising as a form of 'aesthetic pollution'; defining pollution as simply 'interference', he sees ecology as a 'global notion', a broader sphere than just organic matter.³¹ Pollution, as the flipside of industry and progress, is the necessary negative - the inevitable failing of a system. Unlike Virilio's accidents of art, pollution is a concrete realization of technology, the constant negative byproduct of progress.

the liquid dream-state

The failure explored in *Stalker* inevitably returns to pollution, both aesthetic and environmental. Tarkovsky, a filmmaker deeply reverent of the natural world, cannot help but cast the Zone as an ecological nightmare. Beyond the eerie naturalism of *Stalker*, Tarkovsky's films all employ cinematography that celebrates earthly beauty, often through elemental symbolism. Though fire plays a major role in the closing sequence of his final film, *The Sacrifice*, water is the most dominant motif in his work.

³⁰Mark Le Fanu, *The Cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), p. 85.

³¹Virilio/Lotringer, *The Accident of Art*. p.85-87.

One of his most powerful images is the rain falling on the window upon Kelvin's 'return' to Earth in *Solaris*. This is linked to the opening scenes, when Kelvin is caught in a sudden rainstorm at his father's *dacha*. As he placidly sits, letting the rain fall around him, he is bound to Earth through water in what is one of the most striking visuals of the film.

In *Stalker*, water is a metaphor for change, the key to the mutated universe. Outside the Zone is a damp, rainy urban world, where the travelers must ford a sizeable pool of water to capture the flatcar. Water is stagnant here, an inert obstacle that literally floods the screen, signifying ecological and aesthetic pollution. This malevolence is missing in the Zone, where water attains the same transformative, cleansing powers it has in the non-polluted cinema worlds of *Mirror* and *Nostalghia*. Here, the camera wanders over flowing water, celebrating its elemental status as a link between the old and new worlds. The room outside of The Room, staging for the Zone's final scene, is also filled with water. Though its construction is similar to the flatcar hangar, the water is no longer an impediment. The characters, despite the anxiety brought by the Room, seem comfortable in its presence.

The most abstract and lyrical sequence in *Stalker* comes in the middle of the film, a dream-like path of water over discarded objects. Shot in sepia tone to bridge the visual space between the old world and the Zone, this water is a cinematic verb, a current that creates something new. We see a needle, a religious icon, coins, fish, a gun, and a rusty spring; all symbols of humanity's debris, stripped of functionality and recast under the flow. Beginning and ending with *Stalker*, the scene is one cyclical shot, capturing the eternal substance of water both moving and still. It is a montage in one take, a simultaneous sculpting of image, association, movement and rhythm within time, presented with prophetic gravity. Though Johnson and Petrie see this scene as a reinforcement of Tarkovsky's Christianity, due to the Biblical quote in voiceover, the sequence can also be taken as a portent of a new era. Though it does make 'its own comment on a world dominated by transitory material concerns', it is concerned with destruction and rebirth, using the Book of Revelation to illustrate this (*FoAT*, 145).

This scene is the pivotal moment of the film, the point where beauty is pushed against terror. The meat-grinder sequence which immediately follows occurs in a dark tunnel, with a path of water throughout. Writer's gun, dropped in this water, is pushed in deeper by *Stalker*. He is offering the weapon to the Zone, where the water will render it inert, just as the needles and springs are stripped of their functions. Violence is prevalent behind the barbed wire, seen in the armed guards outside the Zone and the bomb that Professor smuggles in. *Stalker's* desire to disarm is another moment of hope, a rejection of speed and violence that the Zone can transcend.

The rise of disaster literature would not have been possible without the nuclear scenario hovering over the late 20th century. *Stalker's* disaster – and actually any of the disasters discussed here – can be interpreted as some form of nuclear nightmare, as pollution is inevitable in the nuclear realm. Mutations, though naturally occurring in Darwinian evolution, are multiplied by radiation and fallout; the Zone's alteration of time and physics can be read as a spatial mutation, a geographic mapping of a change from the atomic level. If man is going to tinker

with the elemental particles, the unarticulated disaster text is able to explore the consequences.

It is difficult to discuss *Stalker* without thinking of Chernobyl, the nuclear disaster which struck the Ukraine just six years later. Eerily enough, it was an explosion in the fourth energy block of the plant that began the crisis, recalling Writer's prophetic 'breakdown in the fourth bunker'. Chernobyl's cleanup crew allegedly referred to themselves as 'stalkers' and to the area around the disaster as the 'Zone of alienation', a testament to the popularity of the film in its own country. If the Zone was inspired by an actual nuclear situation, it was like the covered-up Mayak disaster of 1957, the second-worst nuclear accident in Russian history after Chernobyl. The prescience of *Stalker* is made more convincing by the penultimate scene of Stalker walking through the Estonian landscape, with Monkey on his shoulders. A nuclear power plant, visible in the background, is the catastrophic foreshadowing of Chernobyl realised in celluloid. The accident is not just the subject of art, but it is foretold.

The Falls: A reasonable cross-section

Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* (1980) is a three-hour fantasy that confronts the non-articulation of its own disaster head-on. The film investigates the Violent Unknown Event (VUE), a supernatural accident that struck the earth and forever altered many of its inhabitants. Presented as a series of biographies, the film explores the post-VUE world through its victims.

Though filled with absurdity and surrealism, the formal oration of *The Falls* follows the structure of contemporary documentary. Greenaway is highly influenced by the institutional model of filmmaking, having worked at the Central Office of Information for fifteen years. He developed his passion for classification and numerology at this time, which shows in *The Falls*, designed as a bizarre government film. The Committee investigating the Violent Unknown Event, authors of the film, are an anarchic bureaucracy, with contributions from numerous faceless employees. With so many 'authors' pulling in different directions, the organization resembles a Ministry of Information gone haywire.

The ostensible purpose of the Committee is to investigate the VUE, yet after 92 biographies the viewer is left with no probable hypotheses (beyond a few far-fetched theories). The joy of watching *The Falls* comes from the constant diversions into all manner of minutiae: linguistic footnotes, recitations of short fiction, and minor anecdotes populate these biographies. While the VUE hovers over the work, it serves as a launching point for Greenaway to explore ideas on flight, phenomenology, and the organization of knowledge.

Having learned the technical aspects of filmmaking making government films, Greenaway is able to incorporate a variety of techniques that almost lend an authenticity to the product, were it not for the absurd subject matter. *The Falls* can be viewed as a rejection of the tradition of British documentary film, a tongue-in-cheek jeer at the idea of social progress through filmmaking. 'According to the English school of filmmakers, documentary reality *is* reality,' says Greenaway in an interview with Michel Ciment. 'But we know that the pursuit of reality is a waste of time.'³²

The British documentary film movement, whose films left a great influence over the COI, saw filmmaking as an undisputable tool for social progress. Filmmakers such as John Grierson and Humphrey Jennings sought realism in their films, believing in the power of propaganda for furthering democracy. The residue of these ideals lingers in Greenaway's own work with the COI, seen most clearly in *The Sea in their Blood* (1976, remade in 1983). Though strictly speaking it is a formal examination of the English seaside, Greenaway has injected the film with his playful interest in categorization, reciting statistics in an absurd manner.

Greenaway's work continually rejects Grierson's belief in progress. Sarah Tripp sees *Drowning By Numbers* (1988) as representing 'the plight of the individual who is in the process of developing artificial systems which will guide the understanding of perception'.³³ Looking at Greenaway's 'rationalisation of nature' in this film and *A Zed and Two Noughts*

³²Peter Greenaway with Michel Ciment, 'An Interview with Peter Greenaway: *Zed and Two Noughts* (Z.O.O.)', in *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*, ed. Vernon Gras and Marguerite Gras (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. 35.

³³Sarah Tripp, *The Rationalisation of Nature in Drowning by Numbers, A Zed and Two Noughts and Darwin*. Glasgow School of Art MA Dissertation, January 1994.

(1985), Tripp concludes that Greenaway takes a post-Enlightenment approach to the natural world: 'These works are characterised by a complex, multilayering of references to and extracts from these structures within which the protagonists fail to find a singular answer to their question, frustration or bewilderment.'

Greenaway's approach is in clear contrast to the idealistic vision of social progress through filmmaking. If cinema, as Grierson believes, makes 'the world, our world, appear suddenly and brightly as an oyster for the opening',³⁴ then Greenaway's methods expose the impossibility of explaining this oyster. The fascinating bureaucracy of *The Falls* is a monument to this futility, for after numerous editions of the directory and copious research, nothing is scientifically concluded about the change in the human condition post-VUE. There are meticulously detailed descriptions of the symptoms and conditions, and a pedantic attention to geographic locations. Yet other aspects remain deliberately vague, such as dates and times. We are never quite sure if the VUE has only affected Europeans, or exactly how many of the 19 million victims are still alive. There is no indication as to when specifically the VUE occurred, or even which edition of *The Falls* we are reading (only that it is 'the most recent')³⁵.

indexing disaster

Because the VUE, described yet not described, is the center of so much research, Greenaway can run with his interests in artificial systems, classification, and numerology. Through the investigation of these realms, their substantive basis becomes irrelevant, with pleasure found in their structures. All of Greenaway's films follow tight organizing procedures, most obviously in feature films like *Drowning by Numbers* (organised along a number count from 1-100) or *A Zed and Two Noughts* (following the eight stages of Darwinian evolution). *The Falls* is grouped into the 92 biographies, a number that reappears throughout Greenaway's work, from the 92 maps in *A Walk Through H* (1978) to the 92 suitcases of his massive, encyclopedic *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2002-2004). It is the atomic number of uranium, 'elevated to the central element in the 20th century', with nuclear overtones carrying strong significance in the realm of accident.³⁶

Greenaway's feature films frequently come under attack from critics who misunderstand his intentions in displaying the artifice of the medium. His illusions are always portrayed in a manner that draws attention to the artificiality of their construction; the ironic voice through which he approaches his own films follows from his interest in structural/materialist filmmaking. The films he made just before *The Falls* are highly influenced by the structural film movement, which was at the peak of activity in the 1970's. This influence on illusion is clearly seen in Peter Gidal's definition of the movement: 'Structural/Materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist.'³⁷

Hollis Frampton is one of the few figures (along with Alain Resnais and R.B. Kitaj) that

³⁴John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1946; repr: 1979), p. 73

³⁵Greenaway, *The Falls* (1980).

³⁶Heidi Peeters, 'The Tulse Luper Suitcases: Peter Greenaway's Mediatic Journey through History', *Image and Narrative* 12 (August 2005) <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/tulseluper/peeters_art.htm>

³⁷Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film', *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976), p.1.

Greenaway has repeatedly acknowledged his admiration for. *H Is for House* (1973/1978) was considerably influenced by the alphabetical fixation of Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* (1977), and Greenaway's *Dear Phone* shares the disassociation of image and sound from time with Frampton's (*nostalgia*) (1971). Frampton is one of the quintessential figures in the structural film movement, and his own *Magellan* cycle resembles *The Falls* both in scope and in the way it attempts to combine ideas from earlier films into one massive work.³⁸

Greenaway's interest in structural filmmaking combined with his institutional background led to *Vertical Features Remake*, *A Walk Through H*, and ultimately *The Falls*. *Vertical Features Remake* (1978) attempts to reconstruct a lost structural film through several different bureaucratic organizations; it is simultaneously a tribute and a parody of the avant-garde, academia and the documentary tradition. Absurdity is first introduced to Greenaway's work in these films, a theme that peaks with *The Falls*. In various interviews, Greenaway has claimed that *The Falls* was composed out of the leftover materials of 92 unfinished projects, a 'compendium' of 92 different ways to make films'.³⁹ As a summation of every filmmaking method available to him at the time, it is the *Magellan* cycle of the first phase of his career.

Viewing structural filmmaking as a philosophy through which to investigate the nature of cinema, Greenaway is willing to work with its tenets, yet go further. The realm of illusion creates more space for trying out ideas than the strict bindings of non-representation, allowing room for games, experiments with aesthetics and a questioning of narrative in cinema. Throughout his feature-length films, he continually creates referential relationships between author, character, and viewer, perhaps climaxing in his misunderstood *The Baby of Mâcon* (1994). Greenaway is unwilling (or perhaps unable) to separate his illusions from the deep-rooted irony that affects his work. *The Falls* is the beginning of these games, still stuck in the documentary form but able to introduce the elaborate fantasy of the VUE into the rules.

Gidal discusses the nature of reflexivity as an integral component to the structural film:

Reflexiveness, self-reflexiveness or auto-reflexiveness, is a condition of self-consciousness which invigorates the procedure of filmic analysis *during* the film viewing event. Thus it is not merely a matter of reflection, or thinking, broadly taken. Reflexiveness, as a concept, can serve a meaning counterproductive to the direction Structural/Materialist film would give it. It can, for example, serve as a decoy, an alibi, the opening up of individual interpretation.⁴⁰

There are repeated occurrences of this 'analysis during the film viewing event' throughout Greenaway's work, with reflexivity a key to the self-aware artifice of his films (which often results in his categorization as a 'post-modern' filmmaker). Dismissed by some as irrelevant post-modern gestures, the script overlays in *Dear Phone* and *8 1/2 Women* (and the character auditions throughout *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* series) question the construction of narrative filmmaking akin to the way Michael Snow's 45-minute zoom in *Wavelength* (1967) looks

³⁸Sadly, Frampton died before *Magellan* was completed, with only about 8 of the intended 36 hours finished.

³⁹Robert Brown, 'Greenaway's Contract', in *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*, p.10.

⁴⁰Gidal, p.10.

at the fundamentals of the camera. But Greenaway breaks with the structuralists; the self-reflexive properties of his films actively desire to 'serve as a decoy, an alibi' and other such diversions. The multiplicity of ideas in Greenaway's work utilises these reflexive devices as a starting point for asking questions. When Van Hoyten says 'This is a film in eight parts, and we are currently in the third', he is referring not just to the David Attenborough *Life of Man* documentary that is inserted into *A Zed and Two Noughts*, but also to *A Zed and Two Noughts* itself.⁴¹ Structural/materialist principles may lie underneath his feature-length work, but instead of Gidal's 'illusionist, narrative, identificatory individualist mode of cinema' being 'represented, re-instated without a battle', Greenaway draws attention to form hoping to redefine and extend the possibilities of the medium. Rather than a reinforcement of illusion, he is attempting the same 'demystification of the film process' as the structuralists, though utilizing illusion toward its own downfall.

The self-reflexive elements of *The Falls* are everywhere, from the narration at the beginning announcing the film's format to the omnipresence of the Committee. The Committee's presentational methods frequently interfere with the task of biography. We often see the narrators in the studio, recording their voice-overs; we see the biography subjects who choose anonymity selecting their photographic stand-ins; we even see Greenaway himself, appearing for the first and last time in his work when interviewing Armeror Fallstag. This cameo fits Robert Brown's reading of *The Falls* as the realization that 'the only truth left to represent was his confession that, as the spurious inventor of self-consistent artifacts, he himself was a fiction' (Brown, 10). Perhaps biography 88, Erhaus Bewler Falluper, provides the biggest key to Greenaway's relationship to his own fiction. Accused of 'manufacturing fictions and deliberately confusing identities,' Falluper is celebrated by his supporters for 'his compulsion to draw maps, index disaster and break chaos into small pieces so that he might re-arrange those pieces in a different way, perhaps alphabetically'.

The Falls is analyzing itself throughout, seeking improvements for the next edition (for this is, at least according to the back cover of the accompanying book, the fifth). The struggle in representing disaster is brought to the forefront through these devices; there is an investigation of the investigation of the disaster, a metatextual awareness in the film.

converging to nothing

The difficulties in representing disaster are evident in all disaster literature, but in Greenaway's unarticulated VUE, his irony cannot help but mock. The disaster is confronted head-on, then studied, analyzed, and dissected in a ridiculously futile experiment. Despite the efforts, nothing is gained; knowledge remains missing, despite the enormous amounts of data that have been collected.

It is a witty film, constantly making humorous asides, puns and double entendres. The presentation of the biographies becomes a game, playing with tone and imagery; games play a major role in Greenaway's 'cinema of ideas', an interest he inherited from Alain Resnais.

⁴¹Greenaway, *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985).

Greenaway took many ideas from *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), including his fascination with light and tricks of memory. *The Falls*, while lacking the aesthetic grandeur of his later narrative films, has the feel of a great practical joke. The use of repetition emphasises the totality of the world he has created, bringing this fictional documentary closer to the presentational methods of contemporary television and institutional filmmaking. The story ‘The Cassowary’ is read twice in the film, cited by two different subjects as their favourite story by fictional alter-ego Tulse Luper, with both readings word-for-word identical. Footage of a man leaping from the Eiffel Tower is shown several times with conflicting descriptions, bringing together the cinema, flight, and death in a questionable historical record.

This form of presentation is an echo of our own world, with absurdly exaggerated methods of media and television used for extraordinary purposes. The Committee behind *The Falls* is without any central face, seen only as a collection of presenters, translators and narrators. The placid veneer of cable channel news presenters is foreshadowed here, endlessly broadcasting information seemingly without comment. The VUE is dissected without scientific methods, the breakdown in order unable to standardise its approaches. Some biographies are more lucid than others; some are sloppy, and others are skipped completely, dismissed as errors or the ‘pernicious inclusion of fictional character’ (*The Falls*, biography 80).

Nothing is concrete in *The Falls*; the title may be a pun on ‘false’, and the fiction of its material lies underneath every biography. The film is obviously pieced together from found material and aborted experiments, strung together with a ludicrous narrative. The structure of the film, like in *Vertical Features Remake*, is so emphasised that it threatens to overtake the actual content. Is *Vertical Features Remake* a film about the vertical features of the English landscape, or is it a film about the making of a film about the vertical features of the English landscape? Likewise, is *The Falls* a work of research into the victims of a freak supernatural disaster or is it a study of the research?

The challenge in this approach, similar to *Dhalgren*’s own self-referencing, is to reflect the changes wrought by disaster through metatextual elements. If, as Donald Barthelme claims, ‘art’s project is fundamentally meliorative’, aiming to ‘change the world’, then the transparency of the artifice must illuminate some aspect of the world to change.⁴² *The Falls*, with its endless and pointless struggles to comprehend something ungraspable, is one possibility of a world hurling in disparate directions. It may only be possible to study this new universe through a map, rather than direct examination of the world itself, the indirect approach being necessary to the unarticulated accident. But the disaster will wield its effects on the map too, fragmenting our conventional methods of reading.

Maps play a key role in Greenaway’s work. *A Walk Through H* is composed of 92 maps, perhaps the geographic equivalent of *The Falls*. Taking a collection of Ordnance Survey maps with mistakes in them as one of the beginnings for his hand-painted constructions, this cartographic vision illustrates how ‘mistakes are important to Greenaway’s vision’.⁴³ The art of the accident is key to these explorations – literally explored, in the journey through ‘H’. The

⁴²Donald Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* (New York: Random House, 1997), p.24.

⁴³John Wyver, ‘26 Things that I Know About Peter Greenaway’, from *The Framer Framed* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 1999), p.8.

map of *The Falls* is constructed through its 92 biographies, improbably interrelated beyond their common surnames. Characters from some biography reappear in others, suggesting a vast, unmappable conspiracy of bird-people. The map created by *The Falls* is impossible to comprehend, as Florence de Meredieu writes: ‘Une seule lecture ne peut donc permettre d’épuiser ses films qu’il faudrait, tout au contraire, voir et revoir, comme on lit et relit un livre, découvrant sans cesse des sense inaperçus et des niveaux de lecture plus profonds.’⁴⁴

The impact of *The Falls* comes from this scale – the VUE cannot be ignored as in *Dhalgren*, or closed off and guarded like the Zone of *Stalker*. The Earth, having been struck by such a colossal accident, loses all sense of time and scale. Temporality collapses upon itself, as the biographies of the victims fail to provide any sense of time. It is an eternal present, constructed from lifetimes of survivors. The influence of structural film is present through its duration; the unconventional length of *The Falls* is not unusual when compared to Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale* or against the *Magellan* cycle, but when introduced into the documentary form, the three-hour runtime contributes to the sense of temporal confusion in the narrative. Frampton’s view of duration as ‘something that is concretely measurable by counting the number of frames on the strip’ is the structuralist approach to time, a non-illusionist reduction to the elements of film.⁴⁵ The Tarkovskian approach, emphasizing rhythm and motion, has no place in Greenaway’s early work; disorientation follows from hundreds of collaged sequences staked out by the artificial intrusion of titles. Repetition plays a role in this cinema, directly reusing text and image rather than sculpting in time.

effervescent byproducts of compulsion

Greenaway’s VUE is an apocalyptic beacon, physically altering the majority of its victims – the sample represented by the FALL- surnames suffer from collapsed lungs, random intestinal blockages, increased pulse rates, and even immortality. The changes caused by the VUE cannot be ignored; there is no form of denial, yet there is no understanding either. As in *Stalker*, we are plunged into the heart of the VUE, meticulously studying it, to the point that the process of cataloguing it becomes a type of faith.

The ornithological obsession that runs through much of Greenaway’s early work manifests itself as the motif of the VUE. Victims are slowly turning into birds, or exhibiting bird-like physical characteristics. Ninety-two new languages have developed, many deriving from bird sounds, such as Capistan, the language that is ‘lazy and gentle and requires unusual amounts of saliva and an above average exposure of the tongue’ (biography 17). All of the victims have some relationship to the avian world, either before or after the VUE, often manifested through literature or art.

The new world, post-VUE, is certainly much more fascinated with birds and flight than the old. The text frequently refers to other institutions besides the Committee Investigating the Violent Unknown Event, such as the Society for Ornithological Extermination (curiously

⁴⁴Florence De Meredieu, ‘Le Peintre a la Caméra’, in *Peter Greenaway* (Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1987), p. 57.

⁴⁵Hollis Frampton, from ‘Interview with Hollis Frampton’ by Peter Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology* p.71.

acronymed FOX) and the World Society for the Preservation of Birds. Their dialogue comprises public discussion of the VUE, though it is mostly built around wild speculation and untested hypotheses. These institutions create an absurd political landscape, in which the people of *The Falls* live their post-event lives.

Greenaway's bird fixation can be traced to his father's background, but is also part of a long chain of 20th century works linking flight with death. In this case, the anthropomorphic aspects of flight are emphasised, though there are connections throughout with aircraft, motion and speed. The acceleration of technology, wryly undermined in *Stalker* and *Dhalgren*, is paralleled in *The Falls* by the development of the body as technology. While Greenaway's use of the body has been written about extensively, it's in *The Falls* that he extends it beyond human capacity. In *A Zed and Two Noughts*, Greenaway turns these mutations around, disassembling Alba Bewick while joining the twin zoologists back together. The body here turns in on itself, a theme that will re-occur in films like *The Pillow Book* and *The Belly of an Architect*. Yet in *The Falls*, the progression to bird-state is a literal mutation, a preternatural march toward death or transcendence.

While some of these changes are advantageous, the majority of them are debilitating, rendering many of the victims incapacitated, or trapped in systems of their own creation. Pursuing their obsessions, many meet their own demise, including Agostina Fallmut, whose theory of the VUE leads her to mental breakdown and death (biography 71). These indulgent, self-obsessed pathways may be a comment on art, perhaps an ironic reply to criticism of his work.

Despite the intensely visual nature of the project, we are never shown any footage of the actual VUE. Unfilmable, or perhaps just unfiled, the actual accident remains outside of the work itself, as in all of the texts discussed here. There are few visual remnants of the VUE in the film – no doctored images or special effects, just images of its victims, most of whom appear normal. Unlike *Stalker*, *The Falls* doesn't rely upon visual methods to convey the enigma of the VUE. Assembled at least partly from unfinished projects and found footage, the disaster is unrepresented, conveyed only through testimony. A jumble of images, quickly edited for an encyclopedic effect, replaces the detailed landscapes of the Zone.

Like Tarkovsky, Greenaway uses water throughout his work. Bathing and baths reoccur in his films, most notably in *Drowning by Numbers*, causing Alan Woods to comment on 'the extent to which water is contained'.⁴⁶ Though often used as a means to manipulate light, in *The Falls*, water is not just an aesthetic device, but a physical challenge to some VUE victims. Some, such as Wrallis Fallanway, suffered their VUE experience in a body of water (biography 13). Another victim, Clasper Fallcaster, becomes allergic to 'large expanses of water' and 'apprehensive of open-air swimming pools' (biography 50). Many have persistent dreams of water, categorised by the VUE Commission according to the nature of the dreams. One category is for victims who 'normally see water as blood' (biography 68). Two of the categories are closely associated with films, showing cinema as the collective unconscious of the post-VUE world. Category 1, Flight, makes the connection between water and the sky, a

⁴⁶Alan Woods, *Being Naked Playing Dead: The Art of Peter Greenaway* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 38.

dream ‘nearly always identified with the Bedfordshire Level Sequence from H.E. Carter’s film *The Last Wave*’ (biography 9). Excerpts of this film, although it is fictional (as is the film of Category 3, ‘*Draining Away* by Mazy Reynard and Boy Talbot’, biography 67), are shown in the appropriate sequences of *The Falls*, accompanied (as are all of the dream-categories) by a soundtrack from Brian Eno’s *Another Green World* (1975). This album, a dreamlike antidote to Michael Nyman’s staccato repetition, shares many themes with the film, such as the return to nature, curious environmental phenomenon, and a dislocation of time.

The environmentalist motives of unarticulated disaster show very clearly in *The Falls*. Presumably not a man-made accident, the VUE can be interpreted as an ‘angry earth,’ lashing out at Virilio’s hyper-accelerated world. The relationship between man and nature dominates films like *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, *Drowning By Numbers* and *A Zed and Two Noughts*, using devices like the draughtsman’s frame and the zoo to raise questions about control and presentation. The ironic narrative events of these films (and the reoccurring futility of comprehension) express an ecological ideology. While perhaps passive in terms of political commentary, these films yearn for a harmonious integration with a nature free from physical or aesthetic pollution. *The Falls* sets out these ideas through its creation of a world dominated by avian life, natural awareness and academic discourse.

There are few sequences of urbanity in *The Falls*, and they often return to the same locations, such as Goldhawk Road in London. Most of the victims of the VUE live in rural or semi-rural areas, which gives Greenaway the license to populate the film with scenes of countryside. His love of the English countryside is a theme throughout his work; *The Falls* presents a mutated universe where this landscape returns to prominence in cultural and intellectual discourse.

For a science fiction text, there is hardly any technology present. Apart from the mechanics of the filmmaking process, seen in the voiceover recording, there is nothing particularly modern about the scenery. Shots of planes and tall buildings appear, but not as frequently as scenes of cliffs, country houses, and the sea. Without even the broken technology of *Stalker*, the post-VUE world exists as a simpler world, where the inertia of tele-presence is subdued by the elegance of earth, sky and water.

Of course, Greenaway cannot even address his own ecological leanings without some degree of irony. Ostler Falleaver, the subject of biography 59, cannot be accurately identified from the VUE Commission’s work. With multiple people claiming his identity, all issue a statement denying any connection between the VUE and its supposed epicenter at the Boulder Orchard. Categorizing this connection as a ‘myth’, Falleaver declares that it can ‘appeal to those with a vested interest in ecology and a sentimental regard for Nature’. Delighting itself with the contradictions of myth, *The Falls* can only build on what is unknown.

Transformation of word, space, and time

What is there to conclude from texts that reject conclusive answers? In both *Solaris* and *The Falls*, the pursuit of understanding is relentless, yet futile. The scientific approach fails, focusing the narrative on the effects of transformation, rather than the cause. The post-accident world must build a new catalogue of knowledge, rejecting the traditions that are no longer valid. For Virilio, there is ‘continuous catastrophic information’ that is a ‘new knowledge, one that is hidden’.⁴⁷ In *Stalker*, this new knowledge is internalised, as the wealth of the Zone extends far beyond scientific study. *Dhalgren* also exists outside of accuracy, presenting a mutated society where people have stopped asking questions, knowing that logic will fail: ‘The miracle of order has run out.’⁴⁸

Yet disorder itself can be a ‘profane miracle’. This is a manner in which Virilio’s accident of art regains perspective:

It is a gift brought before the eyes so that one may believe, so that there could be some superior hope. Granted, the accident, in a certain way, is a miracle in reverse. It reveals something absolutely necessary to knowledge. If there were no accident, we could not even begin to imagine the industrial revolution, or the revolution in transportation.⁴⁹

The profanity of Virilio’s miracle has a natural place in the cinema, which is responsible for the ‘major accident of audiovisual speed [...] the pace of its “trans-border” ubiquity that disrupts the history in the making before our eyes’.⁵⁰

The fragmented aspects of these texts – *Dhalgren*’s endless prism refractions, *Stalker*’s incalculable physicality and *The Falls* data barrage – follow from the nature of their own subject, manifesting Blanchot’s ‘interruption of the incessant’. Yvonne Biró, in her study on iconoclasm, mythology and cinema, writes: ‘The true paradox is that the film takes us closer to global seeing by carrying out this fragmentary principle [...] Structure does not hide; rather it shows itself forth’.⁵¹ The inadequacy of language itself is the underlying problem in all disaster literature; by fracturing language, whether textually in Delany’s writing or Tarkovsky’s manipulations of the cinematic language, the unarticulated disaster can be paradoxically illustrative.

Linguistic disruption is central to Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker*, set in a post-nuclear Kent, where after a thousand years the world has yet to reconstruct society to a pre-war state. While a more overtly post-apocalyptic text than the others discussed here, *Riddley Walker* has similar themes of indirectness, repression and incomprehension. The novel follows the titular character as he journeys to the heart of the disaster. Like *Stalker*, everything converges on a room, the ‘womb’ of Canterbury Cathedral. It cannot be approached directly, like the Room in the Zone, but must be reached through a circuitous journey. In Riddley’s world, the war has

⁴⁷Virilio/Lotringer, *The Accident of Art*, p.106.

⁴⁸Delany, *Dhalgren*, p.96.

⁴⁹*The Accident of Art*, 63.

⁵⁰Virilio, ‘The Museum of Accidents’, p.258.

⁵¹Yvonne Biró, *Profane Mythology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p.123.

become a mangled creation myth, and his journey is an attempt to unravel it, just as *Stalker's* journey is an inarticulate form of worship.

Written in a post-English dialectical form, *Riddley Walker* takes the textual breakdown of *Dhalgren* even further. Hoban's fascination with language is rooted in its inherited, garbled traditions, passed down from our contemporary English over hundreds of dark years. Unlike the ninety-two new languages of *The Falls*, the new language is just a corrupted form of our own English; *Riddley Walker's* post-accident sphere is not a mutation, but a rather straight path of regression. With phrases like 'Eusa put the 1 Big 1 in barms then him & Mr Clevver droppit so much barms thay kilt as menne uv theart oan as thay kilt enemes,' Hoban's recast English confronts Virilio's 'crisis in perceptive faith'⁵². This linguistic reduction is an accident of language, bringing the challenge of reconstruction in Riddley's world to the reader by forcing distance, just as Delany's stream-of-consciousness methods set *Bellona* apart from the pre-accident era.

The spatial transformations created by the unarticulated accident must be conveyed through language in *Dhalgren*, where the powers of photography do not apply. While the accident of *Bellona*, possibly nuclear in nature, has left no overt signs of radiation poisoning or fallout, it has infused the city with a sense of desolation. The only destruction of property in the novel is self-imposed, and there are no descriptions of 'ground zero' areas. Yet the city, too large for its diminished population, is mostly empty; its corners become caverns, spaces that have become the 'negative monuments' of the museum of accidents.

The environmental undercurrent to the films discussed here is a function of these changing spaces, as their pastoral yearnings are emphasised by the alteration of the Earth via disaster. The Zone achieves a strange beauty through the shifting encapsulation of the natural world and technology, and the VUE's effects on humans reduce them to servants of an avian oligarchy. As a means to refute Virilio's 'dromology', the unarticulated accident text seeks the sublime in a modified natural world, yet without being an overtly political polemic.

The manipulation of time is crucial to these texts, active in both the construction and reading. All employ the technique of 'removing time' to maintain their mutations, whether its through omission in *Dhalgren* or editing the cinematic time-image. Again, the *dromos* of the pre-accident world is challenged in art; temporal continuity is a casualty.

The continued existence of humanity in the post-accident world is never doubted by these texts. Despite the nihilism of Delany's violent streets, the citizens cooperate and share resources. It is a vaguely idealistic world, with its people joined together through a sense of struggle. Greenaway's post-VUE portrayal finds joy in its impossible taxonomies, elaborate fantasies and overload of information. The absurdity of this world is endlessly entertaining, not just through humour, but via the many pathways suggested by its data.

Stalker, perhaps because its visual depiction is most like our reality, bears the greatest expectations. In Monkey's moment of telekinesis, Tarkovsky famously introduces a spooky optimism into the landscape of black rain and pollution. As Writer proclaims, 'the world is

⁵²Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980; repr: 2002), p.51; Virilio, *The Vision Machine* p.75.

ruled by cast-iron laws, and it's insufferably boring.' The unarticulated disaster, through its realignment of perspective and bending of these laws, offers hope in transformation.

Filmography

- 8 1/2 Women*, 1999. Dir: Peter Greenaway. Lion's Gate Films. 118 mins.
- A Walk Through H: The Reincarnation of an Ornithologist*, 1978. Dir: Peter Greenaway. British Film Institute. 41 mins.
- A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985. Dir: Peter Greenaway. British Film Institute/Channel Four Films. 115 mins.
- Andrey Rublyov*, 1969. Dir: Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm. 145 mins.
- The Baby of Mâcon*, 1993. Dir: Peter Greenaway. Channel Four Films. 122 mins.
- The Belly of an Architect*, 1987. Dir: Peter Greenaway. Channel Four Films. 118 mins.
- Brazil*, 1985. Dir: Terry Gilliam. 20th Century Fox. 142 mins.
- Dear Phone*, 1977. Dir: Peter Greenaway. British Film Institute. 17 mins.
- The Draughtsman's Contract*, 1982. Dir: Peter Greenaway. British Film Institute/Channel Four Films. 103 mins.
- Drowning by Numbers*, 1988. Dir: Peter Greenaway. Film Four International. 118 mins.
- The Falls*, 1980. Dir: Peter Greenaway. British Film Institute. 195 mins.
- H is for House*, 1973. Dir: Peter Greenaway. British Film Institute. 10 mins.
- Hapax Legomena I: (nostalgia)*, 1971. Dir: Hollis Frampton. 36 mins.
- L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961. Dir: Alain Resnais. Fox Lorber Video. 94 mins.
- La Région Centrale*, 1971. Dir: Michael Snow. Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre. 180 mins.
- Nostalgia*, 1983. Dir: Andrei Tarkovsky. Artificial Eye. 125 mins.
- Offret (Sacrifice)*, 1986. Dir: Andrei Tarkovsky. Artificial Eye. 149 mins.
- Omnibus: Peter Greenaway: Anatomy of a Film-maker*, 1991. Dir: David Thompson. British Film Institute. 60 mins.
- The Quiet Earth*, 1985. Dir: Geoff Murphy. CinePro. 91 mins.
- The Sea in Their Blood*, 1976/1983. Dir: Peter Greenaway. 45 mins.
- Solyaris*, 1972. Dir: Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm. 165 mins.
- Stalker*, 1979. Dir: Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm. 163 mins.
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- The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 2: Vaux to the Sea*, 2004. Dir: Peter Greenaway. Kasander Film Company. 108 mins.
- The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 3: From Sark to the Finish*, 2003. Dir: Peter Greenaway. Kasander Film Company. 120 mins.
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