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chernobyl: looking & listening

keith gallasch: merilyn fairskye, precarious



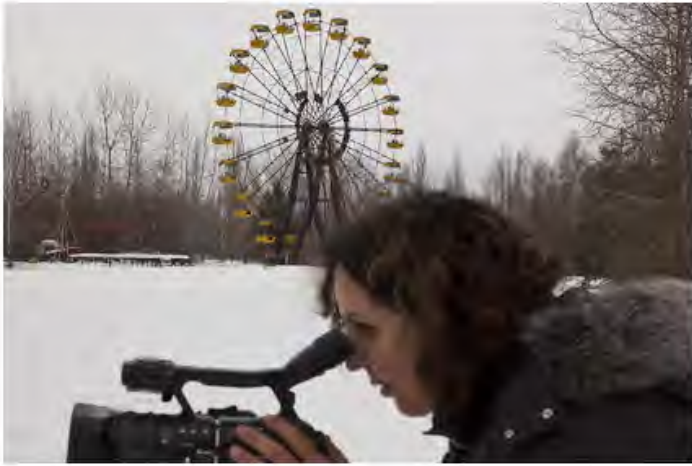
Precarious, Merilyn Fairskye

COMBINING A CINEMATOGRAPHIC FLAIR FOR MOMENTUM AND A PHOTOGRAPHIC EYE FOR THE MOMENT, MERILYN FAIRSKYE HAS, IN *PRECARIOUS*, HER FIRST FEATURE-LENGTH FILM, CREATED A CHILLINGLY BEAUTIFUL ACCOUNT OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR REACTOR DISASTER OF APRIL 26, 1986 IN THE NOW INDEPENDENT UKRAINE, BUT EFFECTING IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER LARGE PARTS OF THE POPULATION, ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY OF THE FORMER USSR. WE ARE TOLD IN THE OPENING TITLES, “OVER 600,000-700,000 PEOPLE KNOWN AS LIQUIDATORS TOOK PART IN THE CLEAN-UP.”

These people from across the USSR, along with the plant’s workers, locals and the citizens of nearby towns continue to be the victims of the Chernobyl catastrophe with an expected surge of cancer cases in 2011—25 years after the fire.

Precarious opens with a bleak winter landscape viewed through, but not visibly framed by, the passenger window of a moving car—dark, leafless trees and now and then apparently deserted houses glide by, the sky as white as the snow on the ground. We will learn later what this place is. The sense of desolation is reinforced by Robert Hindley’s haunting sound score (Fairskye had asked the sound designer to “put himself inside the reactor”).

Our gaze is focused on the landscape while we listen to five people—a former helicopter pilot, a scientist, a medical specialist, an information officer, a researcher and a former Intourist worker). They remain unseen and the filmmaker’s questions elided. Their accounts (in Russian and spare English, subtitled) of the event and its consequences are woven through the body of the film. One of them, a former newspaper photographer, speaks of his frustration at being denied access to the incident site during the crisis. An oncologist in Kiev speaks about his commitment to rehabilitation and the prevention of radiation poisoning. Another voice tells us that the layer of contaminated surface material in the region is buried in snow, making the place relatively safe in winter. The mesmeric ride through this grim landscape and these calmly spoken but disturbing testaments create the first of an increasing number of polarities.



Precarious, Marilyn Fairskye

We find ourselves on the boardwalk in Alushta gazing at the contaminated Black Sea, the movement now in the waves and the sound of their fall; the camera is still, framing the water, the immediate coastline walkway and buildings from various points. People amble by. One of the interviewees recalls “respectable men using means legal and illegal to get through the checkpoint,” to flee the disaster. Families, not trusting government assurances, soon sent their children away—sometimes “trainloads of children were turned back.” But many did go to other parts of the USSR. Alushta was now “[a] city without children...it was like an unpleasant science fiction film.” As for today, one interviewee simply says, “we’ve got to live; adjust somehow.” Meanwhile night comes on and sea and sky fill the screen, this time enveloping us with barely contrasting Rothko-ish deep and deeper grey-blue.

Taking in the elegant, elderly city of Yalta, we hear of the 8,000 workers who continue to flow into Chernobyl and the city of Prypiat for one-off three-week shifts and of the young firemen who battled the Reactor 4 blaze in 1986 only to “quietly disappear from life.” One of two eerie satellite images in the film closes in on the region, indicating the direction of the flow that will come with Spring of contaminated water from Chernobyl to cities and into the Black Sea.

In a grey Kiev the camera tilts to take in the golds, greens and blues of Orthodox churches and then fixes on a distant view of the city from a park as we listen to recollections of a warm, sunny, cheerful May Day parade. The government had issued no news about Chernobyl—there were only rumours almost a week after the event, only dignitaries sending their children away. And then came the news and advice: take charcoal and iodine and drink vodka. Kiev becomes a city inhabited only by men. The helicopter pilot speaks for the many liquidators: the job was an honour, there was no choice, “We were educated to be like this.”

Now we’re on the road to Chernobyl, on the edge of the Exclusion Zone where residents are banned from hunting, fishing and gathering berries and cannot sell their produce: “Ten years of our lives have been stolen from us.” Soon we’re inside the zone, the camera closing in on the rusting “sarcophagus” of Reactor 4, its new containment as yet still not built. An aerial view suspends us above the Reactor’s inadequate cooling pond. A line of trees is described as the Red Forest because after the explosion its summer leaves turned red—the soundtrack flutters as if to evoke in the distance “the crazy singing of Geiger counters” that one interviewee spoke of earlier in the film.

Within the Exclusion Zone we drift through the ghost city of Prypiat, its streets full of wild new growth stilled temporarily by Winter. But we know liquidators will be somewhere here while, around the city, displaced locals illegally search the zone for fish, animals and scrap metal. The helicopter pilot, like many others has received a Badge of Honour but his illness drives him away to Israel. The camera pans to rest on a never-to-be-used Ferris wheel, due to begin operating at the time of the fire, adding the faintest touch of colour, not to mention irony, to the otherwise black and white scene. In the Stills Gallery, a large, wide photograph of the wheel dominates our gaze as the film plays out on the mezzanine.

Precarious, says Fairskye at her artist’s talk, was “never planned, but came out of a Black Sea holiday [because] of a long term fascination—I had to go to the Crimea.” She went alone in 2009, staying in “an otherwise empty 5-star hotel in a deserted town [Alushta] on the edge of contaminated water.” There she picked up a silk map of the region, “once restricted information from 1947.” A name grabbed her attention—Chernobyl. She felt she must go there and, once through the checkpoint, found herself

“immersed in another world, faced with a remarkable opportunity and provided with an official driver and a guide heading into the heart of Prypiat,” 18kms from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and inside the Exclusion Zone. It was after being taken to see the Ferris wheel that Fairskye felt like she was “at the end of the world. There was not a sound. That’s when the film began to take shape. Before that I’d been shooting randomly and when I got home to Australia the material looked patchy.”

So, at exactly the same time a year later, Fairskye returned, this time with her Russian-speaking partner as interpreter and plenty of research behind her about the consequences of the Reactor 4 explosion in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. She was anxious that the promised new containment of the reactor might provide imagery quite different from that of her first visit, but the government had not followed through on its promised spending, “so, ironically, I got continuity.” All that can be done with Chernobyl is containment while 35% of the GNP of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine goes towards remediation, health and the 8,000 workers who manage the zone.

Fairskye thinks that “there’s a national state of mind that the site is a force that cannot be contained. At its centre is the so-called ‘elephant’s foot,’ 200 tonnes of festering fuel.”

For her interviews, Fairskye’s strategy was to ask a simple question or two and let people speak, which they did: “they wanted to tell their stories. But none of the speakers appears onscreen. I had no desire to be dramatic—we just listen and watch.” She found herself “humbled by the stoicism” of the people she spoke with, the effort evident in their tone “to be nice, to make things normal, even though there is no end in sight.” She was struck by the strangeness of Prypiat “taken over by dense curtains of foliage and vines,” and the heavy covering of snow—“snow and ice damp down the radiation, so the bleaker the landscape the safer.”

As for her filming, “I have a fondness for the pan—to take it all in and see what’s there.” In the car, “I had the camera on all the time, handheld, but I wasn’t looking through it.” She speaks of a sense of “looking out,” which we share with the people who wander through the Kiev scenes, like tourists. Sometimes she used a tripod, panning and not knowing how it would turn out. At times “it was a real nightmare, the camera and the tripod freezing in the cold, making some material unuseable.” Although shot in colour, the effect is monochromatic because of the Winter weather: “I’ve always admired Kieslowski’s Decalogue where he almost pulls out all the colour, but in this case it was natural.”

Was Precarious made as a statement about nuclear power and political irresponsibility, I ask. Fairskye is firm: “I had no political intention. I was just taken by it all. Life was tapping me on the shoulder, saying look at this.” Nevertheless, as Edward Scheer writes in his fine accompanying essay, “In the year of the meltdown at Fukushima [the film’s images] provoke some reflection, not only on the nuclear question, which is everywhere in the public discourse, but also on the status of the image to both reassure and to trouble the way we think about a disaster as fundamental as a tear in the fabric of the natural world.”

As the film speeds us away from this haunted zone, the sun appears low in the sky, partly veiled in swathes of grey and white cloud, an almost Baroque vision with an abstract expressionist overlay: trees blurring past, black verticals as if grimly brush-stroked in, apt accompaniment to the final sad sentiment as a woman quietly says, “We don’t learn from our mistakes.”

Precarious, conception, camera, editing Meryl Fairskye, sound design & mixing Robert Hindley, online editor & grading Greg Ferris, Plus+Minus Productions, 66mins, 2011, www.precarious.com.au; Stills Gallery, Aug 3-Sept 3, artist’s talk Sept 3

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