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## The Transgressive Approach to the Dark Tourism Experience: Stalkerism in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone

*Abstract:* The aim of this article is to present the phenomenon of stalkerism (a kind of illegal tourism) in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The article investigates the specificity of the stalker experience through the concept of transgression (Kozielecki 2007). The article broadens the perspective on the tourism experience by using a psychological concept that has not so far been widely used in tourism studies, even though it refers to classic ideas (liminality, rites of passage, transformation). The genesis and specificity of the phenomenon of stalkerism in the context of the development of organized tourism in the Zone are presented. Then the transgressions of stalkers during exploration of the Zone are described. Lastly, the article shows how stalkerism contributes to the transformation of tourism and the development of the Zone's heritage.

*Keywords:* Chernobyl, dark tourism, dissonant heritage, transgression, tourist experience

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the phenomenon of “stalkerism,” that is, illegal tourism in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) was established on the territory most affected by radioactive waste after the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine in 1986. Any residential, civil, or business activities in the Zone are prohibited by law (the only exceptions are the functioning of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and scientific installations related to it) (Про правовий режим). However, since the early 1990s, the Zone has been visited by people fascinated with its uniqueness. Since 2011, visiting the Zone has been legal and takes place according to rules set by the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management (SAUEZM).

Beginning in 2016, there has been a gigantic increase in tourist interest in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.<sup>1</sup> Over the last three years, the Zone has been visited by a quarter of a million tourists from all over the world. The tourist boom of 2019 (over 124,000 visitors), which especially involved non-residents, can be attributed to the huge popularity of the HBO and SKY series *Chernobyl*. Among foreigners, the largest group of visitors were the British (in 2019 almost 18,500 people); the second place was occupied by Poles—around 10,500—and third place by Germans, with 9,000 visitors. In total, the number

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<sup>1</sup> The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is the area on the territory of present-day Ukraine with a radius of approximately 30 kilometers from the power station, which has been most heavily contaminated by radioactive waste. People are not allowed to live in the area, and businesses or food production are also not allowed.

of foreign visitors exceeds domestic tourists, which proves what an important “brand” the Zone is for Ukraine. Since 2019, the Zone has officially had 13 tourist trails, five water trails, and three air routes. It is estimated that profits from hosting tourists in 2018 brought SAUEZM 150 million Hryvnias (the Ukrainian budget received “only” 38 million) (Асадовский 2020).

“Stalkers” operate in opposition to organized tourism, although it is a feedback-type relationship—illegal and legal tourism interact, inspire, and condition each other. This paper takes the innovative approach of using the concept of transgression (Kozielicki 2007) in order to investigate the specificity of stalkers’ experience. Transgression is defined as “actions and acts of thinking—usually intentional and conscious—that cross the boundaries of previous material, symbolic, and social experiences and achievements to become a source of new and important positive and negative values” (Kozielicki 2007: 20). The approach is novel because, first, it broadens the study of the tourism experience by using a psychological concept that has not been widely used in tourism studies so far, although it refers to classic ideas (liminality, rites of passage, transformation). Second, the stalkers’ commission of transgressions leads to the development of a heritage community, and this in turn contributes to sustaining and transmitting heritage to future generations. Third, the approach contributes to understanding the dynamics of the illegal exploration of heritage, which leads to the development of new forms of tourist practices. This article will present the genesis and specificity of the phenomenon of stalkerism in the context of the development of organized tourism in the Zone, describe the transgressions of stalkers in exploring the Zone, and show how stalkerism contributes to transforming tourism and the development of the Zone’s heritage.

### Conceptual Framework

Tourism in the CEZ is defined by various terms. The most commonly used term is “dark tourism” (Dobraszczyk 2010; Stone 2013; Duda 2020; Steinecke 2020). Dark tourism is a phrase that has come to be used to depict travels to sites of death, disaster, and suffering, or in some association with these (Lennon and Foley 2010; Stone 2012; Light 2017; Stone et al. 2018). Although the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is considered to be one of the most characteristic examples of dark tourism sites, the uniqueness of the experience of being in the Zone does not consist solely in contemplating the death of people in connection with a historical event (disaster) which has its consequences to this day (medical effects, cultural trauma) and carries a universal message (the cost of nuclear energy for peaceful or military use). Being in the Zone also involves some risk-taking or even confronting a threat to life due to radiation or the poor material condition of the buildings.

Yankovska and Hannam (2014: 932) complement the idea of dark tourism with the concept of toxic tourism, emphasizing that this form of exploration “can provide a strong educational experience, raising awareness about current environmental issues and the polluted environmental conditions around us” (Yankovska and Hannam 2014: 937). In the case of CEZ, two points are particularly highlighted. First, the specificity of the space: for instance, Stone compared the unique exclusiveness of the Zone’s space to Foucault’s

concept of heterotopia (Stone 2013). Second, the unique tourist experience resulting from this specificity: Goatcher and Brunnsden (2011) propose using the term “sublime tourism” (see also: Dobraszczyk 2010). Consequently, a visit to the Zone can be called “exclusion tourism” (Banaszkiwicz and Skinner 2021, forthcoming). Light (2017) indicates that dark tourism is most often defined through a prism of practices (the act of visiting particular types of places), motivations, and less often, a type of experience. Some researchers conclude that dark tourism is even a form of “dark leisure,” which does not have to be related to death (Biran and Poria 2012; Pratt, Tolkach and Kirillova 2019). Tourism in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is the best example of the difficulty in defining dark tourism, because tourists’ fascination with Chernobyl goes along with the growing popularity of disaster tourism (Neef and Grayman 2018), nuclear tourism (Mazeikiene 2021), and even film-induced tourism (Beeton 2016). The processes of virtualization and mediatization play an increasingly important role in making the CEZ a tourist attraction (Banaszkiwicz and Duda 2019; Hannam and Yankovska 2018). For several years Pripjat has been a classic example of a contemporary ruin (Dobraszczyk 2010) and has been visited by massive numbers of urban explorers.

Issues related to transgression appear in the scholarly literature on poetry, art, philosophy, and politics (Stallybrass, White 1986; Gournelos, Gunkel 2012), but are rarely found in reflections on tourism (Briggs, Tutenges 2014; Chapman, Light 2016). Moreover, use of the term does not seem to imply any reference to a specific academic concept of transgression. Use rather follows the dictionary meaning and is not supported additionally by theoretical considerations or empirical exemplification. Transgression is mostly understood as an act that goes against a law or code of conduct. It is a form of crossing social and cultural boundaries. On the other hand, considering the tourist experience as a rite of passage has a long tradition in tourism studies (Cohen 1979; Cohen 2003; Graburn 1983; Graburn 1989; Turner 1969; Turner and Turner 1978; MacCannell 1976).

Researchers highlight the transformational potential of the dark tourism experience (Kirillova et al. 2016), which is not only an opportunity for self-reflection, but can even become a life-changing experience (Zheng et al. 2019). Morten et al. (2018) explicitly use the example of Chernobyl to describe “Foucauldian dark tourism” as “packaged dark tourism” that “occurs at locations filled with juxtaposition, with chronological significance, in some way representative of the space outside and contained within a clearly recognised system of barriers that are physical, psychical or social”—unlike non-obvious places in which “Deborian dark tourism” is an intrinsically personal process of meaning-making conducted in a regular, non-heterotopic space, where dark associations emerge from a private system of knowledge, memory, experience, culture, and preconceptions. The following considerations will show that the nature of experiences in a specific place—in this case the CEZ—cannot be described by one of the proposed terms, because the spectrum of people’s experiences depends on each person’s relationship to heritage on a cognitive, emotional, and ethical level.

The notion of travel as transformation is as relevant as it is problematic, because every physical mobility is associated with a change. According to Staiff, Waterton and Lean (2016: 14), there is still a shortage of properly conceptualized studies of the transformation

processes associated with travel (see also: Pearce 2011: 109–134). However, the synergy of research in the field of heritage studies and tourism studies turns out to be particularly valuable. On the wave of the performative turn within tourism studies (Edensor 2001; Bærenholdt and Haldrup 2004; Haldrup and Larsen 2015), the approach to heritage visitors has also changed. Approaching heritage as a performance or cultural process focused on negotiating, constructing, and reconstructing cultural memories, values, and meanings (Smith 2006, 2011; see also: Hall 2005; Hall 2011) is exceptionally significant in the case of stalkers, who act as purposeful, questioning agents, actively engaged in acts of meaning-making and self-making.

As Stone argued, referring to Foucault's description of heterotopia, the more the CEZ is a non-place, a space unlike any others, the more the liminal landscape is excluded from the "normal" microcosm. Liminal landscapes, that is, places on the margins (Coleman and Crang 2008; Hetherington 1998; Shields 1991; Thomassen 2012), provoke confrontation with borders and limitations in a special way and thus lead to transgression (Ninnis 2016: 50). Places are the constructs of social spatialization. Therefore, one of the constitutive elements of the experience of staying illegally in the Zone is crossing borders: those that exist physically, those that involve one's own limitations, or those that are social. What is important is that in the case of stalkers these are deliberate actions, hence it is reasonable to talk not only about change (which may be an accidental consequence of experience) but also about transgression, which becomes the source of new and important values. Józef Koziński's (2007) concept of transgression will be used to better understand the specifics of the stalkers' experience of the Zone and the resulting sense of responsibility for the Zone's heritage.

According to Koziński, although every person has the potential to be a *homo transgressivus*, the majority of people confine themselves to protective measures that primarily help maintain homeostasis (in this case, not traveling). Transgression requires creative thinking, high motivation, and fortitude. The specific socio-cultural conditions (like exploration of the Zone) provide particular space for transgressive activities: external transgressions, which are actions in the world (material, cognitive, social), and internal ones, which happen through introspection. The research questions resulting from such theoretical assumptions are as follows: What aspects of transgression can be found in the stalker's experience? What is the relationship between transgressive exploration and the sense of being part of a heritage community? What are the probable consequences of stalkers' activity for setting the general trends of Chernobyl tourism?

### Methods and Data Collection

For this study, the research team adopted an ethnographic, multi-method approach to allow for an in-depth interpretation of data. The material on stalkerism comes from a larger research project conducted with Anna Duda and Tomasz Róg in 2018–2019. The first part of the project focused on content analysis of posts in the main group uniting stalkers on Facebook: "the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone through the stalkers' eyes" (Chernobyl group). After conducting desk research and content analysis of the most popular websites and

social media groups, the most active users (leaders) were selected for interviews (three men and one woman agreed). The remaining respondents were selected using snowball sampling (reaching the number ten, which is about 10% of the group of the currently most active stalkers).<sup>2</sup> The material presented in this article is based on in-depth, partly structured interviews conducted at the end of 2019 in Kyiv and Krakow. The key themes were connected with the identity and practice of being a stalker: the respondent's personal story of becoming a stalker, the specificity of exploration, characteristics of the stalker community, stalkerism's relationship with tourism, and perceptions of the CEZ as heritage. Each interview lasted about 1.5 hours on average. Most of the interviews were conducted in Russian or English, but two were conducted in Polish. The recorded material was transcribed and then, in the case of the Russian and Polish, translated into English. In order to maintain the anonymity of the respondents, they were identified only by initials.

### Analysis

Stalkerism can be defined as a type of sightseeing that originates from urban exploration and is practiced illegally in the CEZ. It consists in independently organized expeditions to visit particular areas and objects of the Zone. The main motivation of stalkers is a desire to escape from civilization, to find peace in the post-disaster world regained by nature, and to experience extreme adventures. An important part of what the stalkers do is to take pictures and make movies, which are then posted on social media, blogs, and portals devoted to stalkerism, the Zone, and urban exploration. On Youtube, dozens of amateur videos on illegal exploration of the Zone can be found. They are published not only by the stalkers themselves but also by tourists who took part in illegal expeditions (e.g., "Illegal Freedom: Journey Across Chernobyl Exclusion Zone"). The activity of stalkers has also become a subject for documentary filmmakers: for instance, the film *Stalking Chernobyl: Exploration After Apocalypse* (2020) is a documentary directed by Iara Lee, who examines the underground culture of stalkers.

The term "stalker" was first used in the science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (Rus. *Пикник на обочине*) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, published in the Soviet Union in 1972. Andrei Tarkovsky contributed to the popularization of the term with his 1979 film *Stalker*. Both works gained renewed publicity after the launch of the first-person shooter game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, whose plot is set in the CEZ (it is actually a series of three games: "Shadow of Chernobyl," 2007; "Clear Sky," 2008; "Call of Pripjat," 2009) (Степанец 2017: 379).

The first wave of illegal expeditions to the Zone dates back to the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. At that time, they were not of a touristic nature: the Zone's border was crossed mainly by looters and scrap-metal prospectors. To a certain extent, they can be compared to the stalkers in the Strugatsky brothers' novel, who specialize in finding strange artifacts in the Zone. The second wave of Chernobyl stalkerism began after 1996, the tenth anniversary of the disaster, when legal visits to the CEZ started to be organized,

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<sup>2</sup> There are around 100 stalkers who visit the Zone several times a year and another 100 who explore the Zone sporadically.

due to the lowered radiation levels in the Zone. Stalkerism developed in parallel with official organized tourism, and despite the objections to the former type of sightseeing, both had a lot in common from the beginning.

Stalkers are defined as “illegal wanderers crossing the Zone” (Степанец 2017: 29). The same source adds that today’s stalkers call themselves “illegal,” “radioactive/nuclear tourists,” or “atomic romantics.” One of the stalker portals provides the following auto-definition (Polessky): “These are people who have experience in independent expeditions, know the area perfectly well, [and] can stay in the Zone for a few days or even a week, using only their food and water supplies. They carefully select their equipment and prepare for the expeditions for a long time, preparing for various emergencies that could happen during the trip. They have their own routes and hiding places within the Zone. They have sufficient knowledge to operate dosimeters. They know the types of radiation, permissible doses, ways of measuring them.”

The basic difference between tourists and stalkers comes down to the legality of their presence in the Zone. Tourists enter the Zone upon payment of an appropriate fee, and thus receive an appropriate pass under which they can legally move in certain areas of the Zone. Stalkers cross the borders of the CEZ illegally, usually at night, and explore its space without staying on safe routes. If they are intercepted by patrol services of the Zone, they can be fined, and in the case of violating other rules (possession of weapons or removing objects from the Zone) even criminal liability can be incurred.<sup>3</sup> The stalkers move around the Zone on their own and their goal is to explore abandoned places, which makes them more like urban explorers. The difference between stalkers and other groups specializing in extreme urban experiences is primarily their attitude to security considerations (their aim is not excitement through risk) and to media popularity (VikaPolesskaya). According to Stepanec, the stalkers act rather “intrinsically,” since making their exploration public entails the potential risk that the sites will be closed completely, even for legal expeditions. Stalkers are primarily fascinated by exploration of the CEZ, not by urban exploration *per se*. All the interviewed stalkers stressed that the community of stalkers is very diverse. One of the few women in this group—the stalker J.—said,<sup>4</sup> *There are definitely more men. That’s for sure. And across the board, it seems diverse to me. From very young people to much older people. It’s cool because it’s universal [...] But as a rule, they are very relaxed people, who do not really need much to be happy, because—let’s say it—this is not a trip to the spa, with a swimming pool.*

The stalker S. provided the following characteristics of stalkers:

Generally, stalkers are young people, between 20 and 30, although there are also those who are even 40. Based on my observations, I can distinguish several types of them, although of course these categories intertwine and overlap.

- The secret stalker—an admirer of conspiracy and all possible precautions. Sometimes they are mocked for being too cautious. He or she despises others for their frivolity. For this type of stalker, getting caught by the police is an honor. He or she pays great attention to being unnoticeable, so he usually wears camouflage or

<sup>3</sup> Article 46-1 (Infringement of the requirements of the radiological system), Article 267 (Infringement of the rules on the handling of radioactive material) and Article 267-1 (Infringement of radiological safety requirements).

<sup>4</sup> The group of stalkers is dominated by men, although it happens that girls/women become stalkers, following in the footsteps of their partners. This is how the most famous stalker Victoria began her adventure with the Zone.

dark-colored clothing. Even any reflective elements on their jacket or back will be ripped off or painted over. I'm one of these kind of stalkers myself.

- The tactical stalker—considered to be a poser. He dresses from head to toe (including underwear!) in camouflage; of course he or she goes on an expedition only with a military backpack. He loves all kinds of military and guns. I don't want to condemn or praise anyone; if they like such disguises, let them have one. However, these props are completely useless during the march.
- The rotter stalker is a hooligan and a pest. They have piles of rubbish, broken windows, and burnt houses on their conscience. The most important thing for them is to write on every wall that they were there. Those who are more drunken are particularly eager to take time for vandalism.
- The homeless stalker—he or she tries to save on equipment at all costs, so he dresses for the expedition in ordinary clothes, which he doesn't want to damage. To some extent, this could be considered a feat.
- The stalker drunkard—these are the largest group. They go to the Zone for a picnic. For them an expedition without alcohol is inconceivable and impossible. As far as I can judge of their motivation, the most important thing for them is good company to drink with at the end of the expedition. They're cheerful and sociable people; they don't make a cult of the Zone.

The above characteristics ironically highlight the heterogeneity of the group of people who illegally cross the border of the Zone. Their motivations are different and so are their behaviors. However, beyond ignoring the formal aspect of crossing the border of the Zone, the main difference between tourists and stalkers is their attitude toward the heritage of the Zone. Stalkers can be perceived as the “new heirs,” since heritage, as well as being inherited, can also be adopted.

The cultural heritage of today's CEZ is not only related to the power-plant disaster and its aftermath (Petryna 2002; Mycio 2005; Brown 2019) but also to the rich yet forgotten multicultural heritage of the area (Paskievich 2020). In addition to the culture of rural and urban settlements that reach back to the Middle Ages in the Polesia region and are a melting pot of cultures and religions (Poles, Ukrainians, Jews), it is worth remembering the culture of the socialist modernization project, which was implemented through the introduction of kolkhoz, or of modern urban centers like Pripyat (Higginbotham 2019). The heritage of the CEZ is a dissonant one (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). It is a heritage of pain and shame (Logan and Reeves 2009) and is to some extent comparable with other types of unwanted, rejected, uncomfortable heritage (Macdonald 2009, 2013). First of all, for Ukrainians, who are still the largest group of people entering the Zone, Chernobyl as an event produced cultural trauma, and consequently the Zone is a place of difficult memory, connected with suffering, but also with sacrifice—it is a place of pride in regard to those who gave their lives to save others after the Chernobyl disaster (Arndt 2012; Hundorova 2019). The rich heritage of this area, due to the displacement of the inhabitants, is heirless—the rightful heirs were deprived of the ability to decide the fate of their legacy. Even the possibility of visiting that legacy is regulated (Hannam and Yankovska 2017). For stalkers, the CEZ has become an adopted heritage, in accord with the interpretation of a new type of heritage that the Faro Convention promotes—a broad, living heritage aligned with a sense of place. Stalkers can be treated as a heritage community that values specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to the future (Faro Convention 2005). In simple terms, they take care of the Zone as if the Zone's heritage were their own legacy. For this reason, vandal stalkers who destroy the material tissue of the Zone are treated as deviants and are ostracized by other stalkers.

As Koziellecki (2007: 39) states, transgression involves

[...] crossing the boundaries of previous experiences and material, social, or intellectual achievements, going beyond who the perpetrator is and what they have. They break the boundaries that no one has broken before them to gain or create new values. They expand their territory, make inventions and discoveries, carry out economic reforms, invent new educational methods, deal with amateur painting, break taboos and moral rules, try to harden their characters. They shape new forms and destroy outdated structures.

In other words, transgression means not only crossing borders, but setting new rules of conduct in relation to newly drawn values. Expansionary transgressions aim at mastering external reality, for instance, by conquering new territories, controlling nature, or extending personal freedom. In the case of stalkers, the pursuit of expansion is very clear, taking the forms of intra-group competition, competition with one's own limitations, and attempting to achieve set goals. This is why stalkers take up the challenge of setting new routes, exploring new buildings, or breaking records for length of stay in the Zone:

*I wanted to prove to myself that I could really survive that long. Five days in the Zone is a lot, but I think anyone can survive those five days there. I wanted to prove to myself that I could be there a month. (St.)*

According to R., stalkers may have different motivations, but their fascination with the CEZ space must be long-lasting, and the exploration should involve not only physical space, but also deepening their knowledge about the Zone: *Stalkers are such a diverse group that they cannot be clearly described. Every stalker goes to the Zone for his or her own reasons. There are those who only need to visit the Zone once. See Pripyat, take a picture. This is where their interest in the Zone ends. However, they are not stalkers but rather tourists. A stalker loves exploring new paths, new places. And they are interested in the history of these places.*

Also, discovering the Zone cannot be limited to the most famous, iconic spaces of abandoned Pripyat: *If someone goes only to Pripyat or Duga, he or she is not a stalker. The stalker walks all over the Zone (St.).*

Effort, suffering, and crossing the boundaries of physicality make stalkerism an extreme activity. The necessity of overcoming difficulties, both physical and mental, is an inalienable element of every expedition to the Zone: *The stalkers are united by their love for a world without people, where there are abandoned buildings and their attempt to explore these guarded but abandoned objects [...] A stalker is a man who likes pain and is ready to suffer (St.).*

Transgressions result in an increase in creativity, which finds expression in artistic activity. As some of the stalkers claim, the Zone has a stimulating effect on them: *When I'm in the Zone, I feel alive. [...] I gain strength for life and creative enthusiasm (the stalker J.).* The effect of this fascination takes the form of photos, narratives, and films, which the stalkers present on social media.

As was mentioned before, transgressive experiences have a two-way form. External transgressions are actions in the world (therefore, the physical crossing of the Zone's border is an important moment for every stalker); internal transgressions take place through introspection. In the case of stalkers, it seems that making external transgressions stimulates inward movement (a parallel, internal "going beyond"). S. admitted that before he became a stalker, he had had a hard life and health problems, and the fact that he reached the Zone was symbolic proof of overcoming adversity. The experience of being in the Zone

stimulates development: *I define a stalker as someone who likes adventures and has an open mind for walking to new places, someone who likes danger, adrenaline, and is not afraid to get dirty and wet. The only barrier is your mind. All you have to do is keep an open mind, and then you can be who you want to be and do what you want* (M.).

However, not all transgressions should be seen as positive, as some have destructive effects on an individual or society. This is what happens when the individual's purpose is to destroy others or themselves. The question then automatically arises of whether stalkerism in general is not an action of this kind, as illegal explorers are exposed to threats to their health and life. In exploring abandoned buildings, stalkers expose themselves to much higher doses of radiation than do legal visitors. However, they try to preserve some principles of common sense by using a dosimeter to measure radiation in the places they go or by observing basic rules of hygiene (this is why it is so important for them to have "safe" water, which they store in various hiding places). Radiation seems rather "ordinary" to them, but it does not play the role of an attraction in itself, even if there is a well-known stalkers' saying: "No dosimeter, no radiation." However, exploration of the Zone is also associated with other types of danger. Stalkers try to protect themselves against the possible negative consequences of their actions. Stalker S. gave the following example: *As for buildings, if I am alone, I try to avoid climbing ladders and strange structures. But I entered School No. 1, which was partially collapsed. I had never been on the upper floors of this building and I wanted to see them. But I was alone—so I wrote to a friend on Facebook right away and informed him that I was entering this building and that if I don't let him know by tonight that I'm alive, he knows where to find me.*

It is not solely exploring ruins that can be dangerous. The threats are mostly wild animals and... people: *I try to keep an eye on people in Zone, because you can never be sure who you will meet—a policeman, a junkie, a runaway recidivist or a stalker* (J).

Stalkers, experiencing extreme situations, which often even pose a threat to life, become—as they themselves admit—different people. In the opinion of R: *The trips to the Zone certainly increase my self-esteem. Thanks to the Zone, I have learned to look at many things differently, to appreciate good things such as heat, water, and asphalted pavement, which usually go unnoticed. The best sign that it's time to go to the Zone again is when I see that I'm starting to take them for granted again.*

The feelings of strength and self-confidence are two things that stalkers "take" from the Zone. All the interviewed stalkers admitted that the Zone triggers positive feelings in them and contributes to their transformation. St., when describing the experience of being in the Zone, used a comparison to A. Tarkowski's film: *For me, Chernobyl is an escape from everyday life. Then it does not matter what happens in Poland or in the outside world. As you may remember, the first scenes of the Stalker movie are in sepia, but as soon as the characters enter the Zone shown there, suddenly everything starts to be colorful. It's the same with me. Sometimes when I am fed up with everything I go to the Zone, which, although associated by everyone with being monotonous and gray, paradoxically becomes colorful for me.*

Two other stalkers compared the experience of being in the Zone to the feeling of being in a well-known place, where we feel like ourselves and are as safe as at home. Thanks to their stay in the Zone, the stalkers feel fulfilled and have the impression that they "live

more.” The stalker R. put it this way: *I feel more organized in the Zone. I almost always know what to do, which I cannot say about ordinary life. Here the goals and methods of achieving them are simple. Here I feel the master of my destiny. I feel at home.*

For stalkers, the Zone has become the center of their values, a space in which they “live truly,” like Cohen’s existential tourists (Cohen 2003). Although it is not possible to stay permanently in the Zone, the stalkers create a substitute for “houses,” as the Zone is what they identify themselves with. Therefore, contrary to what was supposed, for the Chernobyl stalkers, fictitious stalkers are not really idols for them, because the most important thing is a real stay in the Zone and such a stay is not comparable to anything else: “They call this space the Exclusion Zone, but for me it’s a zone of finding myself, a comfort zone” (I.)

If the Zone can be compared to a home, the stalkers treat the other stalkers as their family. They help each other while in the Zone. As a rule, they leave drinking water and uneaten food in boxes referred to as “shelters.” Thanks to this mutual help, the stalkers feel part of a community, and random relationships established in the Zone move outside it and are strengthened by further contact (usually virtual). Stalker J. openly admits that—*The Internet now solves everything. There are many communities where you can learn about the Zone, through our group we also contact our fellow stalkers and share current information from the expeditions. It’s important to have this current information about how the police work, and where there could be an ambush.*

Expeditions to the Zone involve certain types of behavior which have a symbolic meaning, emphasizing the uniqueness of the experience of being in the Zone, both on an individual and group level. First of all, elements of an initiation ritual can be observed among stalkers. One of the respondents, the stalker P., mentioned that after their first trip to the Zone, a newcomer receives a nickname, which they can later use for example in contacts via social media. This applies to stalkers “introduced” into the Zone by others. Stalkers’ habits are an expression of symbolic interaction with a space that then becomes tamed and domesticated (Tuan 1977). For some stalkers this relationship is even intimate: *My wife says ‘goodbye’ loudly to it and ‘thanks for the hospitality’ when we leave the place, and I in turn always greet the place, ‘hello, Mother Zone’* (S).

Some stalkers associate in smaller groups, for instance, the Korogod group or the Kliwiny group (the names are derived from the routes they prefer). The members of these groups write the names of the routes they took to reach Pripyat on the doors of apartments and internal walls of buildings. This need for being a part of a specific group is also manifested by patches on clothes, for example, the Polessky couple and their friends wear a patch with the acronym ЧЗГ (чернобыльская зона глазами stalkера—the Chernobyl zone through the stalker’s eyes). Individual stalker groups develop their own “traditions,” for instance, one of them has the habit of having a drink called Revo just before leaving the Zone.

For the stalkers, transgression manifests itself both at the level of the physical overcoming of limitations and through an internal transformation under the influence of exploring the Zone. Thus, the transgressions of stalkers have a physical and intellectual dimension, but the social dimension is particularly important for the relationship with heritage because it leads to the creation of a sense of belonging to a community that identifies itself with the heritage of the Zone. For stalkers, the Zone is an adopted heritage,

and by establishing an emotional bond with the space they explore, the relationship is transformed into stewardship.

The Zone is a space of unique experiences, valued as distinctive microcosmos that should be cared for and protected. This relationship is particularly visible in the context of the commercialization of stalkerism, which is related to the commodification of the Zone's heritage through mass tourism. One of the interesting consequences of the growing popularity of the Zone is the blurring of the boundary between tourism and stalkerism.

Table 1  
Tourists versus stalkers

	Tourists	Stalkers
Status of visit	Legal	Illegal
Number of visits	Single	Multiple
Length of visit	One day	Few days
Form of visit	Organized sightseeing	Exploration off the beaten track
Position	Individual in a group	Member of a community
Relationship with heritage	Observer	Steward
Experience	Consumption	Transgression

Social media is a valuable source of information for those who wish to visit the Zone for the first time. It has contributed to the avalanche of illegal expeditions to the Zone. Newcomers who manage to win the trust of the more experienced stalkers may ask to be included in an exploration group, and thus their first trip to the Zone will be organized by someone else. Since websites and social media profiles are constantly infiltrated by the police and the Zone's security services, the authors try not to write directly about their activities. It is the stalkers who decide whether or not to take someone with them, although they are generally open and kind to newcomers. R. stresses, however, that he has—...*no ambition to get as many people into the Zone as possible. Indeed, I'd like to show it to some of my friends, but not everyone likes that kind of recreation. Besides, I don't mind giving advice or even offering some newcomer a place in my group, but certainly not everyone and not always.*

Safety considerations during the first expedition are the most important argument for going with someone more experienced, *I wouldn't suggest that anyone go to the Zone alone. This is not the video game S.T.A.L.K.E.R. For a person who has never gone on an expedition or to the mountains, who cannot survive on their own, I would recommend going on an official trip to Chernobyl so that they wouldn't risk their health or even life (J.).*

Stalkers are often recruited from "ordinary" tourists who decide to visit the Zone once again, differently, now illegally. This was the case with the stalker J., who, as she claims, travels a lot, usually to "non-obvious" places: *I was going to go once. I went a little by accident the first time. Legally. And I just, you might say, fell in love.*

Increased interest in the Zone and requests from newcomers are an attractive opportunity to earn money through your own passion, even if, from the perspective of some seasoned stalkers, it is a distortion of the rules: "Nowadays being a guide is a great business.

But I don't like it very much, because it destroys the values of our movement. I personally took people to the Zone, but I always did it for free.”

First of all, there is an accusation of the commercialization of what should be publicly available: *I'm just not convinced about making money from it. I don't really see anything wrong with it, but they're commercializing it a little. And I don't really like commercialization either. Although it's nice that they also allow somebody to see the Zone on an illegal basis, but on more controlled terms, I suppose. I think they must have a deal with somebody. That it's no coincidence that they do it overtly and nothing happens to them (J).*

The stalker refers to the fact that stalkers offer their illegal services on the Internet in a more or less veiled way. More and more people with stalker experience are starting to cooperate with officially operating tourism companies (one of the stalkers who initially promised to give an interview withdrew because she started working legally as a tour guide to the Zone). It is difficult to determine the exact number of stalker-guides, as not all of them will admit to their stalker past. An example is K., who has been working as a guide for some time, both for illegal and legal groups: *Two years ago the Zone was a paradise for me, the place of my dreams, of relaxation, meditation. It used to be some kind of adventure, danger, wildness. It was the world of my dreams. Now, unfortunately, I've lost my dream. You need to make money somewhere, and here's the deal.*

K. works in a small tourist company which organizes legal trips. When asked about tourists, he said that, *some of my tourists want a legal trip. They look for new emotions. There is a big difference between visiting the Zone legally and illegally.*

K. tries to ensure that the illegal groups he takes are no more than four people, as a larger number increases the risk of detention. He has already taken tourists from Poland, Russia, Germany, and even Australia and New Zealand for illegal expeditions. It is not uncommon for visitors who first go to the Zone with an official tour to go then on an “illegal” tour with him. When asked about the scale of the phenomenon, he admitted that he knows at least 10 stalkers who operate as he does. Understanding the tourists' need to experience something new and extremely different, the stalker J. also expressed regret that the effects of the fashion for the Zone will lead to its inevitable transformation: *From my perspective, I'd prefer there to be fewer people, because it would just be better. From the perspective of these people, I understand them, because more and more people have dared to see the Zone and it's cool that people want to see it. But it's a bit of a pity this place has become a bit of a funfair.*

On the one hand, the transformation of stalkers into guides (legal and illegal) shows how organized tourism tempts people with the vision of financial benefits and leads to the commercialization of what was previously amateur, spontaneous, and non-utilitarian. On the other hand, it reveals how much demand there is for innovative product solutions, opening new opportunities for unique tourist experiences. Commercial stalker expeditions are therefore both a gray market of tourism and a periphery of illegal expeditions organized solely out of passion and not for material gain.

An intriguing thread that appeared in the interviews is the sense of responsibility towards the Zone's material heritage, which is characteristic of at least some stalkers. As in the case of urban explorers, the guiding principle followed by stalkers is to leave the places

they've been intact. The stalkers who gave interviews agreed that there is an unwritten code of stalker behavior. As K. put it, apart from helping each other, *First of all, you should leave Zone the way it was.* R. described his rules in detail: *Each stalker's rules are different; they may even be mutually exclusive, because stalkers are different too. My rules are: be quiet; don't litter; protect the forest from fire; be careful in buildings and flats; if possible, close windows in houses to make them last longer. Time and nature inevitably destroy the products of human civilization. But most importantly, do not expose people—stalkers—who have shared secret information with you (think about what and to whom you are talking).*

The stalkers make an effort to care for the Zone's material tissue: *I'm proud of every new place that we'll secure so that people I trust or who just get to it by themselves can stop there. I'm proud of trying to take care of the buildings we stay in; I want to believe that thanks to me they will survive longer. Once, my wife and I managed to put three dozen posters with the faces of some liquidators on a memorial plaque not far from here, in the "Energetyk" community center (R.)*

Stalker St. also thinks in similar terms: [...] *as far as possible, I'm trying to fix something there, or to take some object found on the street to the building, so as to protect it for longer. [...] My dream is for people to refer to the Zone as a sacred place and not to destroy anything there. So that there are few illegal tourists and that only those who do not destroy the Zone remain.*

Stalkers regularly undertake actions to take care of, or even revitalize, the material heritage. Their actions, such as painting one of the rooms in a kindergarten or reconstructing the space of one of the apartments to return it to its condition in 1986, may be thought incompatible with the spirit of authenticity, but they were done (in addition to active participation in social media) to sustain the memory of the Zone, the catastrophe, and its inhabitants. Therefore, vandalism, or disrespect for the material tissue of the Zone, is condemned by experienced stalkers: *There are those who come to the Zone to destroy something, break windows, write on walls, leave a pile of trash. I don't want to have anything to do with such things and I condemn such things in my publications as a waste of our small community—so that newcomers are not attracted to such things.*

In R.'s opinion, there is no doubt that the further development of tourism will lead to destruction of the Zone: *Currently, there are initiatives in the Zone administration to expand the activities of legal tour operators in the Zone. As an illegal, I'm very negative about this. More people means the faster degradation of those objects that remained in the Zone.*

The commitment to care for the Zone's material heritage, as well as for the memory of its inhabitants, seems to indicate that the stalkers have exceeded the dichotomy characteristic for the development of tourism in heritage sites: visitors, unlike the local community, which "is," only "happen"—they come and go, which makes their sense of responsibility for the site usually much smaller than that of the residents (Gawel 2016).

## Discussion

The collected research material indicates that the stalkers create a specific bond between themselves and the heritage through their transgressional experiences. Stalkers are people

from outside who are not “natural” heirs of the Zone, and yet they are the ones who take action to protect it from destruction and the harmful effects of tourism. They treat the Zone as adopted heritage. As Gawęł (2016: 18) points out, the key to understanding the relationship between people and heritage is the dimension of freedom of choice, “if a person does not accept a heritage as their own, it is not a heritage, it is a reminder of the past.” Transgressive exploration of the Zone takes place on three levels of experience, which are shaped in relation to various values: (1) personal experience—a confrontation with oneself (curiosity, courage), (2) group experience (honesty in regard to stalker rules, responsibility for others, brotherhood), and (3) the experience of the place (respect for the remains of human settlements, caring for nature, caution in regard to its wildness). According to the group’s self-definition, the stalker is not someone who crosses the border of the Zone illegally, but someone who explores it in order to better appreciate it and consequently to preserve it. The community of stalkers is therefore a community with specific values that have become a model: for instance, for tourists who use the commercial version of illegal exploration. The popularization of stalkerism (which was stimulated recently by *Chernobyl* or *The Dark Tourist* series) seems to be a phenomenon of the kind J. Koziński describes as being a conventionalization of transgression. Transgressive behaviors are becoming more and more widespread; as the number of people who engage in them increases and time passes, these behaviors are becoming the norm and are being gradually incorporated into ordinary life. This is due to the commercialization of stalking trips or to social media activity. Stalkers include others in their world to show that it is not the world of the post-apocalypse, but a living heritage that they care for—that is of value to them. This study has made it possible to conclude that the spectrum of experiences within “dark” tourism is very wide and requires further reflection from a phenomenological perspective. The Zone cannot be classified as either “Foucauldian” or “Deborian” dark tourism. Transgressions can take place in the same space where organized, mass consumption occurs. It seems justified to pay attention not so much to the visitors’ relationship to death, but to their relationship with the heritage and the process of commemoration that results in “inheritance” of the past.

### Conclusions

The research project was limited in terms of the universality of its conclusions, mainly due to the dynamics of the development of tourism. The experience of stalkers can be treated as symptomatic of the exploration of exclusion zones, but it is also strongly conditioned by external circumstances, such as strengthening control of the Zone’s space or the development of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The above study, although limited in terms of sample and scope, indicates universal premises for further research. First, it proves the failure of the dichotomy between legal and illegal tourism and argues in favor of a spectrum of behaviors that inspire each other. In many places around the world, mass tourism develops the patterns of activity of people who question what is socially acceptable or even legal. Moreover, the study shows the need to redefine the very concept of a “heritage visitor.” As Light (2015: 154) admits, “Numerous visitor surveys have established that heritage visitors tend to be white, middle-class, and

middle-aged.” The study contributes to research on the experience of visiting heritage sites—a phenomenon that Smith finds under-theorized and poorly understood (2012). As can be seen from the example of stalkers, the bond with heritage is established as a result of an “extreme” form of heritage exploration. Transgressive behaviors create a unique bond between people and place and between people themselves. Therefore, the concept of transgression helps to better understand the social dimension of creating a heritage community, which takes place through exploring a heritage site. The inclusion of others (non-stalkers) is gradual and is not as obvious as the simple dichotomy of the legality and illegality of visits.

Third, the research shows that contesting the law does not automatically mean negation of the heritage; on the contrary, it can contribute to its better protection. Stalkers undoubtedly actively engage in acts of meaning-making. The exploration of heritage leading to the creation of a new community means a revision of the valuation of the heritage site—from unwanted to desired, from abandoned to protected (as evidenced by discussions about the possibility of including at least some part of the CEZ on the UNESCO World Heritage List).

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