

## “Chernobyl and the stories of Knowledge”

*‘UNKNOWN FIELDS: From the ATOMIC to the COSMIC’ Forum, Architectural Association, London (July 11, 2011)*

---

### 1. Introduction.

Finnegas, an old poet, fished for seven years in a pool where a certain Salmon swam. Whoever ate that Salmon would acquire all knowledge. At last he caught it and, rejoicing, gave his young apprentice, Finn, strict instructions to cook it just right and not, on any condition, to taste it.

*[Finn is an excellent name, isn't it, for someone in a story about a fish?]*

Now, being a boy, Finn daydreamed, staring into the dark woods. A blister rose on the fish. Terrified of failing his master, he pushed a thumb against the blister, to press it back in. Three hot drops of salmon oil dripped onto his thumb which, instinctively, he thrust into his mouth. And so Finn, the boy – not Finnegas, the old poet – gained wisdom.

= An ancient reflection on the nature of knowledge and knowing.

= Metaphorical-mythical rather than rational.

The notion of Finn sucking his thumb can conjure for us childishness, or child-likeness. Either way, we're collectively in charge of the Salmon. Stories like this are a kind of metaphysical **alarm clock**.

---

### 2. General diagnosis: obstacles to insight and change; the corrective role of creativity/ art...

Our civilisation suffers from four, seemingly incurable diseases....

(i) **Destructive Memes** [Richard Dawkins] (*validity of memes can be contested*)

- **Meme:** a self-replicating unit, a splinter, of culture.
- **Propagates from generation to generation** (via imitation), often mutating as it goes.

(ii) **Radical Inertia** [my own idea, but a modification of **Ivan Illich's** thinking]

Resistance to change, encountered when a way of doing or seeing things is deeply ingrained. *Not just ideas – infrastructure, laws, etc.* Radical Inertia would kick in if we tried to abolish schooling, TV or nuclear power. Our weak response to the imminent depletion of oil is largely due to Radical Inertia.

(iii) What I call the '**Framed Question**'

- A question with **an agenda**, posed so that **only certain 'answers' are possible**.
- Arises because **many social assumptions are invisible to us...**

“Shall we build 5 or 10 nuclear power stations in our term of government?”

“How can sustainable energy meet our target of 5% growth in the energy sector?”

(iv) **UNACCOUNTED POSITIVE FEEDBACK** [*my idea & coinage*]

e.g. **E-mail** and the **paperless society**. But consider the total picture for e-mail....

- Widespread shifts in **user expectations**
- Vast increase in **traffic**
- **Printing out** of e-mails

- **Computers, computer operators, network servicing** and... **ELECTRICITY!**
- E-mail ethos entrenches and expands a high-turnover, **quick-click mentality**

So, is e-mail an overall brake (**negative feedback**) on resource use, as many assume, or is it an accelerant (**positive feedback**)? The latter would be a case of *Unaccounted Positive Feedback*. = When something *seems* to help, but *actually* doesn't. Is nuclear energy in this category [waste, etc.]?

**KEY:** socio-economic DENIAL is a **synergy of all these four factors**. **Art as a remedy, of sorts?**

\* Because art transforms, it dents **Radical Inertia**. It can challenge the reigning **ideology**.

\*\* Great art opens us to wider truths, reveals ourselves to ourselves, can support what we need to break up the **Framed Question**, can shed light on **UNACCOUNTED POSITIVE FEEDBACK**.

\*\*\* Great art tends to be **meme-proof**, because it can't be pinned down to one-eyed meanings: that **charge of the Cyclops herd**. Economics and advertisements want herds; good parents (and astute lovers!) want individuals. Good art **has plurality as a heart**. Australian poet, **Les Murray**: “Only poetry recognises and maintains the centrality of absolutely everywhere”.

\*\*\*\* Art can highlight the detailed **texture of perception**. It can make perception more *personal*.

\*\*\*\*\* Art can assist **participation, social insight and reflection**. Our economic and military systems are mostly **monologues**; creativity generates **dialogues**.

\*\*\*\*\* Art can operate on **several levels at once**, and across **boundaries & dimensions...** making **connections** and challenging **assumptions**.

\*\*\*\*\* Art's **unique selling point**: augmenting the **unique Self**.

\*\*\*\*\* Art can work fruitfully in **uncertainty, danger, paradox**. [Keats: 'Negative Capability'.]

\*\*\*\*\* Art generates the '**WHAT IF?**' **Bertolt Brecht**: “Our theatre must encourage the thrill of comprehension and train people in the pleasure of changing reality. Our audiences must not only hear how Prometheus was set free, but also train themselves in the pleasure of freeing him.” [quoted in: *The Necessity of Art* p.18] **TV and cinema** are now mostly about **spectators rather than participants**, in spite of any number of 'reader-response' theories. But be careful!!! What if one sets Prometheus free to burn down the world? If an artist isn't deeply **aware of the memes of her time, she will probably be subject to them and perpetrator of them**.

So, **artists and poets need to get cracking**. But they face considerable challenges. **Ernst Fischer**: “A highly complex society with its multiple relationships and social contradictions can no longer be represented in the manner of a myth.” [*The Necessity of Art* p.22]

That said, if the world does go into an eco-tailspin, or as more Chernobyls threaten (Fukushima), it might be art that helps us {quoting **Fischer** again} “**to bear it**”.

\*\*\*\*\* **Great art reboots consciousness**. If not revolution, it favours (at least) revelation.

### Some problems....

Art in **constant crisis**: we've seen how it can work both ways – *away* from memes or *towards* them (e.g. art in propaganda). Art must create **dis-ease**; i.e. shouldn't it trouble and shake us? There's also **social** resistance to art: **Woody Allen...** “Life doesn't imitate art, it imitates bad television.”

### 3. Sustainability: a sticking point. *Major incompatibilities between sustainability/ economy:*

- \* The **near-term view** embodied in our economic and political systems.
- \*\* Economic models *still* founded on assumptions and values of the **free market**, where (apparently) we're all motivated by scarcity and competitive self-interest.
- \*\*\* **Cost-Benefit Analysis** as a key means to make socio-economic decisions (where the not-so-distant future can get discounted to almost zero monetary value). [*Long term and the Nuclear.*]
- \*\*\*\* The need in economics to reduce all value to **currency equivalent**. [A new branch of economic theory is needed – '**Metaphoric Economics**'? – a better way of valuing 'Intangibles' than \$?]

<b>Art can remind us that:</b>	<b>observation</b>	is more than <b>measurement</b> ;
	<b>valuation</b>	is more than <b>pricing</b> ;
	<b>understanding</b>	is greater than a <b>statistic</b> ;
and	<b>response</b>	is more complex and subtle than a <b>policy</b> .

---

... **Nuclear power is subject to all of these more general issues.** *Now home in on Chernobyl in particular...*

---

### 4. Chernobyl: Intellect and (not vs.) Imagination...

- (a) **Imagination reified (negative imagination?)** No such thing as a 'detached' machine or idea: each object we create is an extension of our imagination. Chernobyl isn't merely something that went wrong or that happened *to* us, but a material expression of the collective human Self, of what makes us *us*. Chernobyl reminds us: knowledge is as much **qualitative** as quantitative.
  - (b) In understanding Chernobyl, **intellect can only ever provide one tool**.
  - (c) Art **bears witness**. But it can also help with **future scenarios** that have no precedent, so we actually **experience** possibilities as *real*. This needn't be apocalyptic! **Denise Levertov**: "The poets must give us/ imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar/ *imagination of disaster...*"
- 

### 5. Chernobyl and Art/ Poetry/ Language: experience and alertness...

- (a) Language/ art as a **parallel** rather than substitute experience (and one that is implicated in human transformation). *Was Finn's Salmon a poem?* The **language** of Chernobyl is crucial.
  - (b) **John Dewey** ('Art as Experience'): "The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind". Both scientist and artist, in their respective ways, **pay the world full attention**. And awareness, paying attention, is what art (in the end) is really all about. **Through art, a civilisation stays awake**. Chernobyls and Fukushimas are less likely to happen if society is awake.
  - (c) **Interfaces** between science and art hold 'alertness nutrients'. Chernobyl = '**malnutrition**'?
  - (d) '**Re-membering**': effectively, the putting back together of sundered or broken parts. This is a civilised and civilising act, even when understanding or focussed activity are in short supply. An example in art would include, I hope, the *Heavy Water* poem or film {+ *symposium examples?*}.
-

## 6. Chernobyl and the Self; *distractions, destructions, transformations...*

- (a) Chernobyl is still (destructively) active **psychologically** as much as materially.
  - (b) Our reliance on – or is it need for? – **anniversaries**. Distraction or opportunity?
  - (c) The first call is not to save the world but to **save the Self**. The destructive creativities of science come about through failing to engage the entire Self. Art inoculates us against the temptation to short-circuit the Self, which is what happens when we sink our responsibility and vitality entirely into the formal, the technical, the industrial response.
  - (d) **Konrad Lorenz**: “I believe I’ve found the missing link between animal and civilized man. It is us.”
  - (e) **Einstein’s** ‘environment’: “Everything that isn’t me”. Let’s say instead: “**The environment is everything, including me**”. Like ecology, Chernobyl isn’t ‘out there’. We all now have it *in* us.
  - (f) **David Bohm**: “Studying the distractions is part of the process”. Many industries are adept at distracting us from the central issue: empowered, engaged Self. ‘**Nuclear spin**’ (PR, cover-ups, etc.).
  - (g) **Eric Hoffer**: “Every new adjustment is a crisis in self-esteem”. For pro-nuclear lobby too?
  - (h) **Transformative potential of tragedy**. On some plane exists the chance to transform Chernobyl from **wound to opportunity**, to move from scientific progress measured scientifically to human progress whose values are rooted firmly in creation and compassion.
- 

## 7. Closing thoughts...

- (a) I am among the world’s **beneficiaries of industrialism**.
  - (b) We must challenge ‘**business as usual**’ sustainability.
  - (c) **Industry and commerce** are every bit as adept at creating powerful stories/images as the bard, novelist or filmmaker. This applies to Chernobyl as much as anything else.
  - (d) **Scepticism expanded**. Let us be sceptical, too, about our doubts. I have often doubted whether that warm April night in Pripjat precipitated anything other than a horrific instance of needless suffering, scheduled for repetition, over and over, in the future. But in that narrow corridor of ‘doubt doubted’, a door – several doors – may open. One such door leads to vulnerability and, with it, honesty. Think about the way vulnerability is often greeted by our institutions and media... this doorway can feel draughty and uncomfortable.
  - (e) **One can voice a ‘Yes’** even if one is not quite sure, yet, what the ‘Yes’ represents. It may begin like something childlike, instinctual, reflex: the sucking of a thumb.
  - (f) **The stories of knowledge are, in the end, all one story**. Chernobyl swims within that story.
- 

Show **excerpt** from *Heavy Water* film (or read some **poetry**).... [end]

---

**Further information:** [www.mariopetrucci.com](http://www.mariopetrucci.com)

**Further materials:**

HEAVY WATER: a film for Chernobyl  
HEAVY WATER: a poem for Chernobyl  
HALF LIFE: Poems for Chernobyl  
VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL

[www.seventh-art.com](http://www.seventh-art.com) (2006)  
Mario Petrucci (Enitharmon Press, 2004)  
Mario Petrucci (The Heaventree Press, 2004)  
Svetlana Alexievich; tr. Antonina Bouis  
(Aurum Press, 1999) [Dalkey Archive, 2005]